Stabbing News: Articulating Crime Statistics in the Newsroom

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Abstract: There is a comprehensive body of scholarly work regarding the way media represents crime and how it is constructed in the media narrative as a news item. These works have often suggested that in many cases public anxieties in relation to crime levels are not justified by actual data. However, few works have examined the gathering and dissemination of crime statistics by non-specialist journalists and the way crime statistics are gathered and used in the newsroom. This article seeks to explore in a comparative manner how journalists in newsrooms access and interpret quantitative data when producing stories related to crime. In so doing, the article highlights the problems and limitations of journalists in dealing with crime statistics as a news source, while assessing statistics-related methodologies and skills used in the newsrooms across the UK when producing stories related to urban crime.

Key words: Crime Statistics; News; Journalism; Objectivity; Media; News Sources

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Statistical data has an important role in facilitating public understanding of social issues (Dorling, D. and Simpson, S., 1999; Porter T. M., 1996). Understandably, an accurate and critical dissemination and representation of quantitative data by the media is paramount for both the public in general as well as policy makers in particular (Spirer, H. F.; Spirer, L.; and Jaffe, A. J., 1998; Utts J. , 2003). In light of this, as some authors have pointed out, there is a urgent need to present quantitative data in a simpler and more accessible form to the public, one that nevertheless incorporates a more comprehensive and critical understanding of the theories behind the data and how they relate to their research methodologies (Zuberi, 2001, p. 176). This, we argue here, is the case of the reporting of crime statistics, which has had over the years a profound influence on both public attitudes and public policy towards law and order (Dowler, 2003; Lowry, D. T.; Nio, T. C. J.; & Leitner, D. W., 2003).

Overall, there is a comprehensive body of scholarly work regarding the way in which the media represents crime (Chibnall, 1977; Ericson, R., Baranek, O. and Chan, J. , 1987; Hall, 1975; Jewkes, 2010; Sparks, 1992) and how it is constructed as a news narrative (Rowbotham, J.; Stevenson, K.; and Pegg, S., 2013; Schlesinger, P., Tumber, H. and Murdock, G., 1991; Schlesinger, P.; and Tumber, H., 1994; Sparks, 1992). Some of these scholars have gone to suggest, for example, that public anxieties in relation to crime levels are often not justified by actual data (Ditton, J. and Duffy, J., 1983, p. 164; Williams, P. and Dickinson, J. , 1993, p. 40; Schlesinger, P.; and Tumber, H., 1994, p. 140), which undermines and distorts policy formulation and implementation.

One part of this body of work has looked at how the media disseminates crime statistics (Feilzer, 2007, p. 290; Gomes de Melo, 2010) and has indicated important limitations in the access, use and reporting of crime statistics among journalists and news editors (Martin, 2010; Utts J. , 2010; Wilby, 2007). One well-studied cause for these limitations concerns the moment data is gathered and transformed into statistical information (Koch, 1990; Zuberi,

2001). This because it is a process that remains largely opaque for many journalists, who have little knowledge about the methodologies that underpin statistical gathering an analysis in relation to 'reliability' and 'validity' of the data that they use in their own stories. This is further problematised by the fact that these journalist find that 'quantitative data can be overwhelming, both due to their nature and their proliferation' (Lindgren, 2008, p. 93).

This piece aims at providing additional insight into the way quantitative data on crime is gathered and processed by journalists, while helping us assess statistics-related methodologies and approaches used when producing stories related on crime. We believe that in so doing we can help elucidate the essential criteria and characteristics of news gathering and dissemination not only in this but also in other news beats as well as highlighting the key issues that need to be addressed.

This article uses the reporting of knife crime statistics as case study given its role in shaping public perceptions (Hohl, K., Stanko, B., & Newburn, T., 2013; Levi, M., & Jones, S., 1985) and influencing the construction of social reality in general (O'Keefe, G. J.; & Reid-Nash, K., 1987, p. 147). We also believe that is an appropriate case study to show how news is constructed with reference to these statistics while allowing us to highlight more general problems and limitations regarding the management of quantitative data in the newsroom.

Methodology and approaches

This study triangulates qualitative and quantitative research strategies. In so doing, it incorporates content analysis of news items produced by journalists in UK newspapers. To delimit the scope, this analysis looked only at news on knife crimes s in the UK and reported by the British press. This sample contained within the Guardian, the Times, the Daily Mail, the Independent and the Scotsman from 2007 to 2014 (including their Sunday editions such as the Observer) as they are representative of the 'quality press' in that country (Conboy,

2001). Following this, we investigated news articles that mentioned or made reference to statistics on knife crime in the lead paragraph of the news item and we looked at the nature of the sources used by the journalist(s) writing the story. This gave a total of 501 articles that focused on knife crime statistics, allowing us to do a longitudinal analysis.

Content analysis was used in order to analyse the way statistical data had been reported by journalists, which by means of measuring allows for the inference of knowledge "as to the production/reception conditions (inferred variables) of these messages" (Bardin, 1977, p. 44) and because it is an empirically grounded method, 'exploratory in process and inferential in intent' (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 1). Following methodological conventions, we used coding to group different elements contain in the news articles and turn this into quantitative data that showed the most relevant characteristics in relation to practice. We used unique codes mostly to highlight frequency and were: (1) year of publication, (2) newspaper, (3) by-line, (4) type of news, (5) total number of sources quoted, (6) number of primary sources quoted, (7) number of secondary sources quoted, (8) nature of main source, (9) nature of source who provided the statistics, (10) main emphasis in the headline, (11) main emphasis in the article, (12) did it include statistics, (13) nature of statistical source, (14) who presented the statistics, (15) nature of statistics provided, (16) nature of statistics, (17) presentation of statistics, (18) type of test performed, (19) statistics were used to, (20) time scale of the statistics used. The idea was thus to use content analysis to scrutinise the association of statistics and methodologies used by journalists when reporting crime and how this is reflected in the final outputs.

Following the content analysis we also performed a close reading of a stratified sample of 186 articles from the total universe in order to perform a mindful and disciplined reading in order to understand the deeper meaning of the object of study (Brummett, 2010, p. 28). This close reading follows a more literary tradition that gives relevance to narrative, genre and

persona in relation to the management of social and political issues. We used this technique as it has allowed in the past other researchers to produce a critical understanding of what the media says in terms of intentionality while enabling scholars to deconstruct news media outputs in a diversity of ways (Rubin, 1987).

This technique was complemented with semi-structured interviews carried out with a small group of journalists in London and Edinburgh as to achieve an in-depth understanding of practices and methodologies used in the newsrooms to deal with data. These interviews followed standard practices as to explore context for practice based on the individual's experiences (Josselson, 2013, p. 169). To do so, we set a series of standard questions to all the participants to provide information in some areas such as common practices, while allowing them free range in others such as to clarify on particular problems and limitations. We gave discretion to the interviewees to present their views in anonymise manner or not. We interview a total of four journalists, which we considered sufficient as to examine more qualitatively the issue.

This multi-layered analysis was carry out as to take account of actors and other aspects that serve as sources of information and which consequently affect the media representation of crime statistics. This due to the fact that portrayals of social problems, such as knife crime, in the media are unavoidably dependent on the inclinations and opinions of those who produce and shape information as well as their sources (Schlesinger, P.; and Tumber, H., 1994). Hence, the deconstruction of journalistic discourse must take into account precisely these two discursive interventions: (1) the sources interventions and (2) the journalists' interventions (Carvalho, 2008, p. 164)

The main question explored in this research was: how do non-specialist journalists in newsrooms access and manage quantitative data when producing news stories that relate to crime? Our research question is relevant in the current context whereby the process of public

policy design and implementation seem to be influenced by public opinion and media representations (Banks, 2005, p. 184; Kidd-Hewitt, D. and Osborne, R., 1996, p. 12) more so than in the past (Manning, 2006, p. 62) and since the reporting of crime statistics seems to feed the process of policy making (Hope T. , 2004, p. 287).

Moreover, when constructing itself as a "mirror of reality", the media has developed a powerful tool to mobilise public opinion (Mindich, 1998; Kaplan, 2009) using this phenomenon as a way of attracting and then commodifying audiences. By analysing the relationship between news coverage, interpretation and meaning of statistical-based and statistical-related crime news, we were able to examine agencies and interactions of individuals in the articulation of news stories and its impact on policy.

Theory and background

Statistics are arguably one of the most important legitimising elements in the construction of social reality (Dorling, D. and Simpson, S., 1999); they confer power to shape our understanding of the world (Boyle, 2000; Devlin, 1998; Fioramonti, 2014; Karabell, 2014; Porter T. , 1997). In this sense, 'cold statistics' and purportedly 'value-neutral' numbers seem to lead to moral issues in policy (Eberstadt, 1995, p. 26). Therefore, the notion that one must 'travel mathematical roads in order to arrive at objectivity in the real world' (Davis & Hersh, 1986, p. 276) is essential in understanding the important role statistics play in the production of news.

Actually, journalistic over-dependency on official sources in general and acceptance on face value of the statistical data in particular is intrinsically linked to the doctrine of objectivity. These numbers are seen as 'neutral' and 'unbiased' and most of the public tends to forget, at times, that they just represent a convention or agreement among groups (Fioramonti, 2014, p. 33). In point of fact, 'numbers, pure and precise in abstract, lose precision in the real world'.

That because, if a number 'has been counted, it has been defined, and that will almost always have meant using force to squeeze reality into boxes that don't fit' (Blastland & Dilnot , 2008, p. 15). Something that journalists tend to obviate too often when using them to articulate their stories.

Numbers saturate the news and for good or ill, they are today's pre-eminent public language (Randall, 2000) – and those who speak it rule the world of 'facts'. In the case of journalism, numbers give us a "revealing albeit oblique, slant on the traditional who, what, where, when, why and how of journalists craft" (Paulos, 1996, p. 4). To be sure, for a long time, many have come to believe that 'good journalism should entail the practise of the highest scientific virtue' (Lippmann, 1922, p. 49) for which 'comment is free, but facts are sacred' as CP Scott, the then editor of The Guardian, wrote in 1921.

Accordingly, statistics need to be understood as a powerful narrative which is part of a wider positivist discourse that dominates the profession (Durham, 1998; Martinisi & and Lugo-Ocando, 2015). Indeed, 'objectivity' is perhaps one of the most enduring notions shaping liberal journalism (Schudson, 2001, p. 149) and therefore often referred to as a 'universal norm' (Maras, 2013, p. 226). To be sure, objectivity has been the key concept in journalistic vocabulary and newsroom guidelines since the beginning of the 20th century. This is a worldview that infers that news should be produced as to present facts and events independently of biases, subjective methods and personal views.

It is this notion of objective reality, based on the appreciation of facts over opinions, that allows journalism to play the role of mediator of sense and meanings. They do so by using what some authors have defined as 'the web of facticity' (Tuchman, Making News, 1980, p. 82). That is by claiming to be scientifically driven in their approach, therefore able to speak 'truth' to the public. This 'truth' is considered one of the fundamental elements of journalism as it confers it power derived from public trust. Concurrently, most journalists have as an

objective of their own work the clarification and exposition of factual 'truth' to the public at large.

It is because of this that statistical data is widely considered by journalists as one of the most prominent legitimising tools in the construction of news. The appetite for 'facts', characterised by positivist thinking, underpins journalists' need to favour certain types of news sources that can confer credibility to their work (Frankin, 2011; Manning, News and news sources: A critical introduction, 2001; Tuchman, Making News, 1980) and statistics, by all means, make the case for this. Regarding this point, it is important to remember that statistical facts 'are inscribed in routinized practices' (Desrosieres, 1993, p. 1), which provides a commonly accepted language that helps ratify verisimilitude of the picture depicted.

This explains why statistics are almost revered by journalists and editors as a 'neutral' source of information that bring closure to contested debates. As such, they act as an acceptable convention for the collective, against the subjective perceptions of the individual (Parker I. , 1999, p. 86), allowing journalists and their editors to quantify uncertainty and scrutinise the consequences of that uncertainty in society. For a profession that normatively aims at providing answers, the use of statistics is assumed as a panacea for truth.

This power of statistics to legitimise news, resides in their external appreciation as an objective and quasi-scientific sources of information, which is able to provide consensus among the audiences while setting the parameters for conventions among those publicly debating policy and social issues. The ability of those using statistics to underpin socially constructed reality is such, at least among journalists working with the mainstream news media, that one is perhaps inclined to set statistics apart from any other news source.

To be sure, journalists constantly use statistics to generate, substantiate and/or legitimise their news stories. They see them as scientific tool to scrutinize government and society. Indeed,

great weight is accorded to statistical findings seeing that they are usually disseminated by reputable scholars and so 'look and sound' scientific (Zuberi, 2001, p. x). Therefore an official document or access to a dataset is considered by many journalists as a news source in itself (Kapuscinski, 2002, p. 44). It is in this last category in which we can place statistics as a news source, which in terms of articulating news is -in the mind of many practitioners- both 'a source' for information and a legitimate set of 'facts'.

This double role, we argue, makes statistics an atypical source of information in journalism practice. For example, and contrary to what occurs with other news sources, they are seldom crossed-referenced to be verified and they are more often than not taken at face value. Moreover, due to what some authors describe as increasing pressures and limited resources in the newsroom (Davies, 2011, p. 394), these editors and journalists also tend to accept uncritically the interpretations and explanatory frameworks provided by those who produce these statistics and their spin doctors: something that is detrimental for public policy scrutiny –a fundamental role of the press- as isolated data has no meaning or worse, 'can be made to mean anything' (Robert & Zauberman, 2009, p. 8).

In addition to this, we are confronted with the issue of credibility of the news sources, which is pivotal in allowing us to understand the role of statistics in the legitimisation of news. Credibility is considered to be the extent to which the source is perceived as possessing a expertise relevant to the communication topic, therefore being able to be assumed as trustful and objective when communicating a message or supporting an opinion (Goldsmith, R. E., Lafferty, B. A., & Newell, S. J., 2000, p. 43). To be that, the news source has to have perceived characteristics such as trustworthiness, expertise, respect for privacy, honesty and neutrality. Statistics seem to comply with all of these attributes and consequently news people see them as a legitimate and credible source of information.

The appreciation of statistics as a credible sources has led the news media to constant search

for data to legitimise their stories. This in turn has created a demand for government officials and a variety of institutions to produce statistical information (Higgs, 2013) regardless the area or the pertinence of carrying out quantitative measurement. All in all, in the journalistic imagination, statistics is the ultimate 'fact' in assessing public policy as they are the 'science of the nation' (Desrosieres, 1993). Accordingly, statistical data guides the analysis of all other possibilities of expression, as well as its variations, as a means to attempt to assimilate the effort put into this search for the imposition of meanings (Fisher, 1996).

Moreover, as statistics is often studied as an exact science, one that can be quantified and retraced, they secure themselves and those providing them a unique sense of credibility and legitimacy in what they say or express as news. Consequently, statistics are perceived as 'expert' evidence from which news people are allowed to legitimately infer from as they, presumably, reflect general trends in society. Finally, as they are normally accompanied by a technical explanation of how they were gathered and processed, they are also conceived as a 'neutral' element from which journalists can draw 'honest' conclusions and 'anyone who understands [mathematical] terms will agree to its truth' (Davis & Hersh, 1986, p. 57).

As a consequence, statistics in the news play a pivotal role in the construction of social reality as those who use them exercise 'a very specific power over society and the interpretation of society' (Ernest, 1997). Let us not forget that "all sources of statistical information about crime reflect social construction of the phenomenon under study" (Van Dijk, 2009, p. 14) in a way that is far from deprived of ideology. In this sense, Pierre Bourdieu (1998) said that placing the public at large in this recipient end of this phenomenon creates a cycle of fear and collective insecurity, 'which promotes policy measures that end up violating constitutional covenants and creating an increasingly more and more punitive state'. This suggest that the use of crime statistics is in fact a covenant for political conservativism, as it intrinsically leads

to news that makes the public increasingly at easy and in favour of a 'crime and punishment' approach.

As our own analysis suggests, most official figures published by journalists in their stories reinforce the views on crime as those depicted by law enforcement agencies, politicians, spin-doctors and prosecuting attorneys rather than those held by social workers, parole officers, academics and offenders. Crime surveys, for example, tend to reflect the situation as viewed by the public at large (Van Dijk, 2009) which tends to widely reinforce victimisation, fear of 'others' and moral panics.

Because of this innate 'conservativism' the understanding of the dynamics and processes that take place around the news reporting of official statistics needs to be examined more critically. Particularly considering that crimes statistics are recorded by the police itself and therefore well-known to be affected by inbuilt limitations (Van Dijk, 2009, p. 13) and biases of authority: something that has been highlighted by the UK Statistics Authority which has refused to certify the data generated by most police authorities in the UK for their lack of compliance with the set standards.[1]

Thus a more critical and sound analysis on the way in which these statistics are reported is needed in order to improve the process of policy formulation and decision; one that provides a better understanding of the role of the media in fostering public anxieties that create unnecessary pressures and distortions on the process of policy making. We know, for example, that many officials and segments of the media have used statistics in past political campaigns to mobilise voters (Gest, 2001; Lee, 2013).

This is a matter of increasing concern given the fact that successive governments have used crime statistics to promote and legitimise their ideologies on crime while calling it 'research-

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[1] As explained by Andrew Dilnot CBE, Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, during the Knoop Lecture, Numbers and Policy, at the University of Sheffield on November 11, 2014.
http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/economics/events/knoop/14 [accessed on May 12, 2015]

lead policy' (Hope T. , 2008, p. 46). One of the best known examples of this practice is that of former New York Mayor, Rudy Giuliani who used statistics in order to advance his own political career, something that has been well documented in both scholarly work and the news media (Greene, 1999; Harcourt, 1998; Newburn, T., & Jones, T., 2007). In relation to this, Battersby (2010) argues that critical knowledge and awareness is necessary not only to understand the data given but also, and perhaps most importantly, to distinguish useful information to deceptive ones.

General findings

Our initial expectation was that knife crime statistics would be mostly reported in terms of 'hard news' style as this is the prevalent genre in news reporting (Rudin & Ibbotson, 2002, p. 52). This was in fact confirmed by the findings as over 82 per cent of the news containing crime statistics were published as hard news stories; this because most of the news stories were produced the same day that the crime statistics were released by officials and published or broadcast the next day. This despite the fact that these statistics reflect past events rather than current ones. This suggests that the 'newness' that prompted publication did not come from the data itself, but from the performance of releasing them to the public.

This suggest to us that crime stories are considered in the newsroom a peculiar type of news. What makes them a 'hot' topic, despite reflecting past events, is that crime statistics are perceived to be a measurement of the degree of success of a government in terms of justice and crime policy. Its release to the general public is used by officials and by those in opposition to assert narratives of failure or success of the incumbent government and therefore is carefully staged by the PR machinery of the Home Office.

The prevalent use of 'hard news stories' as a journalistic genre to disseminate crime statistics also reflects the fact that they are presented to the public in a certain manner.[2] To be sure, the release of crime statistics is orchestrated by the authorities as 'media events', which by nature are exercises of 'hegemonic manipulations' (Dayan, D. and Katz, E., 1994, p. vii). In so doing, the agenda on crime statistics is set by those who provide the statistics in the first place rather than by the journalists or news media outlets. What should be a reflective process of public social analysis derived from the analysis and processing of numerical data becomes instead a descriptive reproduction of assumptions made by others. Only in few occasions we found in our sample in-depth critical analysis produced by journalists (less than 12%) that was published in times in which the data had not been released the same day by official sources. These pieces were mostly produce on weekend editions and published as feature articles.

Our study also shows that the Home Office in London was the main source providing the statistics in most news stories. It not only provided the statistical dataset but also complementary information packages with analysis, press releases and other elements to support and facilitate the work of journalists. One exception being The Scotsman in Edinburgh, which follows instead the agenda set by the Scottish Government rather than the Home Office. However, even in this case the gathering and production of news followed similar patterns; that is publishing the day after the Scottish Government had released the data.

Overall, the access to news sources in terms of who provides the statistics indicates that in 73 per cent of the cases, the statistics were from government sources, while in 24.5 per cent of the cases the source of the statistics was not mentioned (although in many of them one could

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[2] All the interviewees agreed with this statement.

infer that it was also from an official source). As mentioned above, the news source mostly quoted is the Home Office which is also the main provider of these statistics,

Table No. 1

Who presented the Statistics?

		Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Home Office	43.9	43.9	43.9
	National Office for Statistics	2.4	2.4	46.3
	University	4.9	4.9	51.2
	Other	7.3	7.3	58.5
	Unknown	41.5	41.5	100.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	

This data confirms something that has been observed in other news beats; journalists over-reliance on official sources to articulate news stories (Brown, J. D., Bybee, C. R., Wearden, S. T., & Straughan, D. M. , 1987; Goldacre, 2009; Manning, News and news sources: A critical introduction, 2001; Lewis, J., Williams, A., & Franklin, B. , 2008).

Likewise, close reading suggests that most sources consulted by the journalists were either the officials providing the statistics or other voices offering a human dimension to the story. In neither case did these 'alternative' sources refer directly to the numerical data or question its validity and reliability. In only few cases we found cases of stories that incorporated other sources contradicting or questioning the data itself (less than 5% of the entire sample). On this, our interviewees have a consistent explanation,

> In truth, the only access we have to the most current crime statistics is by the Home Office. I mean... *the*y give us this data and to be honest is such volume of data that at times is difficult to handle. *I simply don't* have the time as I have also to produce a couple of stories for that same day too. Before, we were three people in this beat, now it is only me and sometimes an intern. To me to include two or more sources more would *require a couple of hours that I simply don't have. I am being totally honest here*.[3]

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[3] Sources anonymised by request of the interviewee on November 14, 2013 in London.

Other of the interviewees also pointed out at time pressures and limited resources as the main causes for the lack of variety,

> When I do other stories, I tend to double check by phone. I call two or maybe three *people by phone. Nowadays, you know... one has little time to go there in person,* particularly in a city like London where you can easily waste a couple of hours going from one part [of the city] to the other. But with crime statistics is different, I would have to sit down face to face with an expert because we would have to look at it together. It simply wouldn*'t* work by phone, I have tried it.[4]

Our content analysis confirms this practice as in 56.1% of the cases there was only one or none primary sources, which we define here as 'one that is personally researched by the journalist' (Rudin & Ibbotson, 2002, p. 32).

Table No. 2

Number of Primary Sources Quoted

		Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	One	29.3	29.3
	Two	17.1	46.3
	Three	9.8	56.1
	Four or more	17.1	73.2
	None	26.8	100.0
	Total	100.0	

Indeed, most journalists interviewed said that they tended to use a fewer number of sources than in other news beats mostly because 'time pressures',

> Normally we get the statistics and have to work with them all day. In some bigger newspapers you tend to get support and time to deal with that news story on the day. However, that is not our case. *We are a medium size newspaper struggling. We don't* have enough staff so I have to single-handed produce the whole story with what I have while often having also to write something else that day. I am lucky if I managed to include one additional source[5]

This lack of diversity of news sources is further problematised by the over-dependency on official sources, which as we have discussed is a characteristic of journalism in general, but

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[4] Sources anonymised by request of the interviewee on November 15, 2013 in London.
[5] Interview with Michael Cowie of *The Scotsman on February 12, 2008.*

that in this case seems even more challenging. In fact, we carried out comparative close reading of published news against press releases made available by the Home Office on the same day. In many cases we saw that news stories refereeing to crime statistics basically reproduced these press releases to a great degree or where very similar in terms of news angle and data used to the press release of the day. This is not a surprising finding given the over-dependency of journalists in current times on public relations, which has come to fill the information deficit produced by diminishing resources (Davies, 2011; Lewis, J., Williams, A., & Franklin, B. , 2008).

Our close reading of the sample also showed that there is a lack of investigative reporting around knife crime statistics and there is hardly any indication that journalists engaged in more advance ways of using statistics to develop a more in-depth analysis of crime and society. To be sure, very few of the articles (only 8) showed explicitly or suggested implicitly any type of test related to regressions, correlations or factor analysis. This indicates that in most cases the journalists did not explore in fully the potential of the data to inform about policy and outcomes.

When asked about this lack of 'tests' in the sample three of the journalists interviewed claimed time pressure and other prerogatives in the newsroom as the main reason behind it. However, one of the interviewees pointed out lack of knowledge,

> To process that type of data in that way, I would probably need additional training in both using the software and developing the analytical skills necessary to process them. Otherwise, I would have to seek expert advice and there is simply not time to do that under the current pressures we are under. I have covered this beat now for a couple of years and frankly I know any of my colleagues who could do that ... *no one* that I know working on this beat would know how to do these tests.[6]

All of the interviewees agreed that more training is necessary although they all did recognised the need to use better the data made available in the newsroom,

> We do need to make a greater effort in the newsroom to assess better this data, even if that means breaking the cycle of having to publish everything on the day. As a [Home

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[6] Interview on March 21, 2013. Identity of the interviewees withheld at their request

Affairs] correspondent I believe that we could do a better service if we did that. No*w...* I am not sure how would that be possible under the current situation, perhaps, reflecting on ourselves we are too fixed to the idea that these statistics have to be published tomorrow. Perhaps... I think, we could agree among the media to [impose an] embargo [to] *the news as to give us all more time to digest them (...) I don't know if that is* possible, but perhaps it is an idea.[7]

When asked why their own newsroom did not spend as much time and resources in examining crime statistics as they do with election polls, they all said the same thing; one is considered more important than the other and therefore the coverage of elections is allocated far more resources than the crime beat. As one of the interviewees put it,

You cannot compare the two things! An election is a huge event you know... all the newsroom stops in order to cover that. Resources are poured into making sure that we *don't miss anything, particularly what the polls says about who is going to win. In my* own place [of work], they cleared an office for two experts they brought... *and it wasn't* even part of the rest of the open space. The office was our meeting room, we have to meet in one of the corridors. That tells you how important it is. That would never happen in million years in relation to crime statistics.[8]

Additional close reading of the sample points out that knife crime statistics are mostly accessed by journalists and news editors by means of 'media events' (Dayan, D. and Katz, E., 1994), which are staged and managed by officials with vested interest in spinning news. Instead, only a small number news stories on knife crime are contextualise historically as most of them tend to focus on snapshot data provided in these media events by officials.

Table No. 3

Time Scale of the Statistics Used

		Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Longitudinal Data	26.8	26.8	26.8
	Cross Sectional/Snapshot	68.3	68.3	95.1
	Not specific	4.9	4.9	100.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	

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[7] Interview on March 21, 2013. Identity of the interviewees withheld at their request
[8] Interview on September 3, 2012. Identity of the interviewees withheld at their request

In other words, journalists tend to concentrate on statistics that refers to what is happening 'now', making it difficult for the public to see trends or understand their relationship with specific circumstances and policies. Journalists interviewed contested these findings,

> But we do offer historical perspective! We use crime statistics from longitudinal datasets. *I myself always try to compare today's statistics with yesterday's, particularly in relation* to previous government. Well... *I wouldn't go as far a ten years, because that doesn't* make sense. Our readers want to know what is going on today and certainly they are interested in what this data says in relation to last year. I might include a decade [of data], but as part of larger piece not on that day.[9]

In other words, they believe that they do provide context by interpreting short longitudinal data as 'historical' while dismissing longer historical sets as irrelevant for their audiences.

Another important findings from the close reading is the lack of follow-ups as few stories tend to link with previous explanations or are contrasted with past policy. In our sample, it was the Guardian and the Observer which made more follow-ups to the initial stories and these titles were also at the forefront in developing stories based on knife crime statistics that were independent from the agenda set by the release of statistics by Home Office. However, even in these cases, it was only a few stories (only 12 in the whole period) that were re-assessed by other sources, contrasted against a distinctive set of evidence or compared to what officials had said in previous years.

Overall, news on crime statistics rarely have a follow-up the next day. That is not to say that news on knife crime did not appear for several days as a news theme in the same newspaper but they did so either as a campaign or independent (although somehow related) stories. Only a tiny proportion of stories based on crime statistics received the type of fallow-ups, scrutiny or historical contextualisation that stories from other beats get (less than 4%). Moreover, looking at these findings, one can categorically suggest that historical context -in terms of longitudinal data analysis, news follow-ups and policy assessment- is the great absentee in the reporting of crime statistics.

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[9] Interview with Jamie Beatson, editor of Kingdom News Agency on January 22, 2013.

These findings are particularly significant in light of prevalent news cultures among journalists which assumes that these type of shortcomings can be corrected the next day (Bugeja, 2007, p. 50). In other words, there is an understanding in the newsroom that if a story is somehow incomplete, slightly inaccurate or something else needs to be said, journalists and editors can always correct this the following day. But, as we have seen here, this does not happen. This, to us, is indicative of one of the great paradox we found: that when it comes to scrutinising statistics and cross referencing the sources that produce them, the traditional procedures paraded as part of pragmatic objectivity and which demand cross-referencing and contextualisation are rarely applied, this despite the aura of scientific truth that journalism claims for itself.

Conclusions

Overall, the news media tends normatively to presents itself as the 'mirror of reality' (Broersma, 2010; Mindich, 1998), as it claims to offer a factual representation of the world out there that is as comprehensive and as unbiased as possible. However, by looking at this sample, what we find is a very different picture. One that that is largely dominated by the sources producing the statistics and by the editorial dynamics, prerogatives and agendas of the news media itself rather than by a system of checks and balances of public policy. What we see here is that the statutory duty to produce these statistics and present them to the public in a democratic society as to foster self-criticism is instead a practice done in ways that reinforce prevalent discourses and particular agendas.

What we were also able to see here is how contrary to the assumptions of objectivity and factuality that journalists bear on crime statistics, these numbers are instead subject to the same type of agency and power games which are pretty much present in other news beats. More important, we were able to highlight how the lack of criticality towards statistics opens

the possibility for official sources to use news people to advance their own agendas in manners that serves their own interest rather than those of society as a whole.

There also seems to be, based on our findings, a faster pace of information, which creates repetition in a sort of mimicry within the general news media of what those in power want them to say. Information provided by the sources, in the format of press releases and information packages, is then replicated –almost unchanged in some cases- by media outlets. It is in this context that the reporting of crime data rather than an exercise of accountability for public policy in order to assess current circumstances in society seems to have become instead a repetitive ritualistic performance in which journalists covering crime statistics pretend to be reporting objectively and authorities pretend to be fulfilling their obligation of informing the public. Thus both journalists and officials are ill serving a society that so desperately needs to dissipate the fog of moral panics that crime reporting has created over the years.

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