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Blame and the Messengers: Journalists as a Puritan Prism for Cultural Policies in Britain

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Blame and the Messengers: Journalists as a Puritan Prism for Cultural Policies in Britain

Abstract

This study proposes that legacies of Puritanism are reflected in the way journalists cover a range of events and processes. The consequences are ambiguous: sometimes they may be harmful, other times they are laudable. Media coverage of the death of Peter Connelly (Baby P) in 2007 is chosen as an example of the social production of cultures of guilt and blame. In particular, journalists' productive efforts perform significant and active roles in colouring public responses to events. Thereby journalists may reflect in their secularised ethics the hidden influences of nineteenth-century Evangelical traditions and earlier Calvinist ones. Following the analysis of Weber, the paper argues that media approaches to rationality also reflect an impress of lingering Puritan structures of thought. The argument contrasts journalism with the Bohemian writing traditions, which were perhaps suffocated by more urgent Calvinistic approaches alongside the development of industrial capitalism. The paper concludes that newsroom practices and values amount to implicit or covert cultural policies of their own.

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Introduction:

The following argument is presented with considerable caution and must be regarded as exploratory. It does not set out to prove a case, but makes suggestive remarks about patterns, correlations and trends that are intended to provoke reflection on some of the standard explanations of the development of UK journalism. Even if elements of the associations identified below between news

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and religious cultures appear empirically tight, it has also to be admitted that the thesis as a whole cannot be conclusively made with material evidence alone. These and other substantial objections to the thesis will be given attention during the discussion.

The second and linked assertion to be developed is that the institutions of journalism produce implicit cultural policies of their own. They do so, arguably, in the way they can collectively project a fairly consistent image of social processes towards a public (MacGregor, 2009). It is not controversial to suggest that news values are not neutral (Hall et al, 1978). The discussion extends such insights by suggesting that the value structures of mainstream UK journalists can be reconceptualised in terms of implicit cultural policies.

The context of blame

When a child of 17 months was killed by his mother and two male associates, the media took the literate British public into an apparent orgy of soul-searching, recrimination and blame. The child, Peter Connelly, was on the 'at risk' register of the social services in the Borough of Haringey, in London. He had been tortured. His spine was broken 'like a hinge'. He was covered in bruises, starved, and eight ribs were broken. Only two days before he died in 2007, his terrible injuries had been missed by a consultant paediatrician in St Ann's Hospital in Tottenham. This was the shocking case of 'Baby P', the second high-profile incident of violent death after abuse in Haringey in seven years.

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Both cases were accompanied by a national media frenzy. The media exposure reached a significant proportion of the UK population. It helped focus diffuse desires onto particular remedies, consequences, and even specific policies well in advance of official and more measured reviews, such as were conducted by Lord Laming on Victoria Climbie, the first Haringey child death scandal, in 2002.

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The impact of the case of Peter Connelly ('Baby P') resulted especially from the orchestration of a public outcry against social workers. How the media formulated particular values and transmitted specific judgments to audiences and politicians is the focus of this discussion. To a liberal conscience, there are questions to be asked about the tone of the coverage and the case leaves the impression that social workers bore an unfair share of blame. A general comment endorsing this viewpoint was given by Guardian columnist Madeleine Bunting: she discussed a Labour government policy involving 'intermittent bouts of *intense media hostility* to social workers' and, on the part of the Labour government minister Ed Balls, a 'collusion with *the witch-hunt* of Sharon Shoesmith, Director of Children's Services in Haringey in 2008' (Bunting, March 22, 2010; my italics).

My argument aims to suggest a hidden influence of Puritan ethics on representations like that of the Baby P tragedy and thereby to illustrate their persistent influence on modern British news journalism. The covert impress of quasi-religious attitudes on a secularised discourse arguably affects the portrayals of both emotion and rationality.

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Attempting to define a movement such as Puritanism and combine it in some way with journalism foregrounds questions of method and technique. These roughly reduce themselves into three parts: first, general historical frameworks and definitions in which parallels are sought and discussed; second, a more detailed look at episodes that empirically help validate the historical generalities; and third, a test case from contemporary journalistic practice in which the suggested psychological parallels between news production and aspects of Puritanism can be applied to current events.

It is then asserted that the same mental traits that are exhibited in such a journalistic ethic produce in effect an implicit cultural policy. The ethic helps in a covert way to shape, or by omission to prohibit, the formation of certain public attitudes, traditions and ways of living together (Bennett, 2006: 124). Whether a collection of influential attitudes that are shared by journalists can be called a policy is contestable, especially as the so-called policies are often made without premeditated purpose. As informal objects, they occupy an interesting conceptual area, being much more diluted than 'propaganda,' but still collectively able to convey editorial content that is often coherent, themed, and perhaps persuasive. They sometimes reflect, but are not confined to, uncritically held prejudices. They might be termed pre-cultural or latent cultural policies. The fact that they are not consciously framed as policy defines them as implicit; they constitute cultural policy because, although they are not devised as such, they have some direct 'non-trivial cultural effect' (Throsby, 2009: 179). Undoubtedly they perform a strategic role as they determine the way ideas are transmitted and absorbed, or perhaps rejected, by a variety of publics.

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'Journalism' as a collective ethos and questions of cross-national variation

One general point needs initially to be made. For those unfamiliar with their profession, it may come as a surprise to learn that the behaviours of journalists are strongly circumscribed by accepted but largely unwritten practices. Unlike the professions proper – law, medicine, or accountancy – journalism has few encoded regulations. Yet there are vastly far more affinities of practice and precept between the journalists of the tabloid Daily Star, the Guardian, and the BBC news than the casual consumer might suppose.

Some academic scholarship tends to reveal a rough uniformity of the professional ethos of journalism across Europe and even across the world (e.g. Sparks and Splichal, 1994; Esser, 2008). The matter is highly controversial and, to be sure, many studies highlight cross-country variations in journalistic role perception across Europe or between the US and Europe (Donsbach and Patterson, 2004; Esser, 1999; Quandt et al, 2006). Differences, however, usually concern matters of emphasis rather than premise and are centred on specific news contents rather than formalities and ethics. Pfetsch and Esser (2004: 16) sum up a complex issue with the view that 'there are significantly more similarities than differences across European news systems and also a consensus on the fundamental duties of journalists.' So it is, rather remarkably, often possible to talk about news journalism practices as one thing even though each newsroom is indeed subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) different both between countries and between each other. Indeed the durability of fundamentals in this unwritten, partly autonomous

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newsroom ethos, dating back to the nineteenth century, is noteworthy compared to other socially transmitted practices found in the professions proper, or education. The generally perceived similarity across geographical space has enabled extrapolation of a body of descriptive 'attributes' of news journalism, including qualities of factuality, objectivity, balance, and its quest for 'truth' (e.g. Weaver et al, 2007). They often over-ride the differences that newspapers cultivate to ensure distinct branding, although, as will be seen, there is some significant regional and national patterning that distinguishes one form of journalism from another. 'Under the bonnet', many of the processes and practices are the same, while the variations are at times cosmetic. In fact many freelance journalists swap nimbly day by day to titles that in the eyes of the public seem poles apart in style and ethos. In the news agency market it is commonplace to sell the same story to all types of newspaper or broadcasting station by slight alteration in presentation. Another factor influencing conformity of the UK press in particular lies in the backbone of agency writing that underpins much national and regional media output. Nonetheless, while registering these broad commonalities in journalism, some scholars have compared individual national journalism styles, and cross-national models and outputs, and tried to assemble them into patterns of affinity and difference. Few writers, however, have paid more than passing attention to an imprint on the ethics of typical journalists' day-to-day labour that might be directly or indirectly derived from religions.

Such quasi-religious influences on the psychology and enculturation of the journalist are worth exploring for the way they may be setting a tone that in itself promotes an implicit cultural policy. Traces of Puritanism arguably persist in the

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outputs and the framing of issues in the secular world of journalism. The Puritan behavioural ethic was absorbed into the formation of UK newspaper journalism, and its values have, disputably, helped to colour the representations of attitudes to public and cultural issues – even though the current tenets of journalism owe nothing conscious to imprints of religious habits of mind. As Hallin and Mancini (2004: 151) identified, however, “there is probably a story to be told about the Protestant ethic and the spirit of journalism.”

If this case can be sustained, then the implications are far-reaching. The presence of a specific ethic framing issues in the media would constitute an informal but pervasive cultural policy operating without acknowledgment. A set of attitudes would be informing journalism as it is written, recorded, filmed, and presented across many matters of public concern, influencing the selection and treatment of agendas from arts to arms, from community beliefs, to the representation of science. There is a connection to social direction, choice, and definitions of acceptable futures.

The Baby P episode demonstrates a particular moment in the crystallising of attitudes in sections of civil society. The media outcry against social workers shows an effect of long-term implicit cultural policies promoted in the media, modelling mentalities which lead to demonstrable focussing of opinion. I will argue that this channelling of attention can be directly observed. From it can be extrapolated that, at a reduced intensity, implicit cultural policies in the media are at work most of the time as low-level undeclared influence. In the Baby P case, a mini-moral panic was engendered, which was also a result of such media-

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produced 'policies' working on wide populations over longer periods. The process mirrors a hegemonic effect reminiscent of Gramsci's analysis (Simon, 1991). If these media prisms are shaped to whatever degree by a Puritan ethical afterglow, such a residual influence of religion is worthy of attention.

The traits under discussion include those of intense individualism – as regards both the journalistic conscience and the accountability of the individual agent in society – and of particular representations of 'sin', which appear in secular terms as error and blame; these link to the quality of the desire to punish; the quest for signs of remorse; and the absence of tolerance or 'forgiveness'. Together these are the ingredients of a culture of blame.

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At an epistemological level, journalists in the UK arguably harbour rather literal attitudes towards 'truth' given the pragmatic relativism of narratives that flourish in other discourses. For some aspects of journalists' work, truth is often a single discoverable entity, enshrined in the 'fact'. The slogan 'telling truth to power' encapsulates the position. It is feasible to suggest that such certainties were imparted in complex ways in northern Europe by the Calvinist and Lutheran emphases that all definite truth was based on texts of scripture (Evans, 1987: 273). That is to be contrasted with the Catholic view of the mystery of the sacraments, the place of miracles, and the reliance on priestly authority which the reformation subverted. It seems tenable to say that an assertively text-based outlook took hold in Protestant countries and helped nurture confidence in 'fact' as a basis for the critical purchase on reality that still defines one strand of journalism today. It is as though this quality first diffused through the Protestant society and then

perpetuated or even intensified itself in the secular ethics of the newsroom. As Hallin and Mancini (2004: 151) note: "Protestantism had, in some forms at least, a close affinity to the rationality of the enlightenment, with its emphasis on debate and critical reasoning."

Puritanism as a movement

Before exploring this, it is well to situate 'Puritanism' among other ways of seeing things. As a religious movement the Puritans are descendants of the Swiss theologian John Calvin whose views stressed the omnipotence of God and predestination. His *Christianae Religionis Institutio* reached its definitive form in 1559. From Geneva where Calvin's sect was founded this severe set of doctrines spread across Europe and influenced many denominations including aspects of English Protestantism, starting from within the Church of England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. In England the Puritans gained power in the revolution, but left the Church of England after the Restoration of 1660.

As it evolved, Puritanism became a label signifying an ethic as much as a doctrine. It has a good pedigree as a collective term for an outlook on life (e.g. Hilton, 1988, Weber, 1933; Florida, 2002; Grana, 1967). Puritanism is often also associated with the term 'bourgeois' (Grana, 1967, Weber, 1930) as both so-called mentalities supposedly share an enhanced sense of duty and the utilitarian 'work ethic'. 'Bourgeois' in this case defines a class that combines material interests, activity, self-improvement, discipline, and duty. Hilton (1988: 7) describes Evangelicalism in a comparable way as "a distinctive middle-class piety …[that]…fostered new concepts of public probity and national honour

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based on ideals of economy, frugality, professionalism and financial rectitude." Weber (1930), in developing a controversial thesis on the way the movements were entwined, saw Protestantism as an ascetic, self-denying ethical movement whose adherents suffer a kind of paranoia deciding whether they are among the elect. Skirting the controversies on cause or effect, Grana (1967: 64) neatly connects the Protestant and bourgeois types as sharing 'a moral and cultural atmosphere'.

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The term 'Puritanism' covers a multitude of doctrines as it reinvented itself in successive generations. The movement blossomed into a spectrum of denominations. For the purposes here, the Church of England is speculatively included (see McGuigan, 2009:14), especially its nineteenth-century Evangelical wing, but many other denominations as well – Presbyterians, Methodists, Unitarians, Nonconformists, Evangelicals, Quakers, the Church of Scotland, and the 'Wee Frees'. Weber (1930: 95) focussed on four Puritan types, the Calvinists, Baptists, Methodists and Pietists. As Hilton (1988) says, all the definitions are 'frayed at the edges' while Hill (1972) points out that the character of the Puritan alters from country to country. He considered that the English version was marginally less dour than its stereotypical American counterpart. Whatever the fluidity and the variety of doctrines, the qualities these radical Protestant sects have in common, relevant to this thesis, are:

1. The essential focus on sin, recognised as a precondition for salvation;
2. An admiration of work (and its corollary, duty) as a sign of election;

3. Individual responsibility for sinful action (laying the foundations for a culture of individual blame);
4. Public expectation of remorse and repentance for sin;
5. Rationalist criticism of worldly powers;
6. A perverse egalitarianism, despite the theology of the elitism of the elect;
7. A tendency toward vindictiveness (Wilson, 2002);
8. A confident self-righteousness and indignation aroused by conscience;

There are significant differences between the different denominations, of course. Opinions were divided on the place of emotion. Calvin viewed emotion as a self-indulgent illusion (Weber, 1930), while the Evangelical movement gave emotional experience a holy status. These contrasting positions will be included as factors that influenced journalism, although why Evangelicalism in Britain shed some Calvinist roots on its way to embracing emotion cannot be debated here. As Weber (1930: 140) remarked, talking of Methodism:

> This emotional religion entered into a peculiar alliance containing no small inherent difficulties, with the ascetic ethics that had for good and all been stamped with rationality by Puritanism.

Attitudes to rationality itself, as the quote above suggests, united Calvinists and Evangelicals. The faculty is emphasised in Puritanism and is also a key part of the Evangelicals' crusading armoury, rather in contrast to the Catholic faith which has had a greater tendency to depict reason as inherently flawed.

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It is to be suggested here that all the above characteristics echo through aspects of northern European journalism – sometimes to a greater extent than was typically mirrored in general social life. It is possible to argue they are more emphasised in Protestant than Catholic countries (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), though regional differences cannot be ascribed only or definitely to religious influence. Dissimilarities in technological infrastructure, political histories and traditions, rates of democratisation and national wealth must account for the variation too, although many of these bear latent or active religious traces. It is easier to quantify technology than religion, but that should not determine the decision on how they are balanced. One empirical contention, however, is that Evangelical emotionalism particularly coloured the formation of the nineteenth-century campaigning press in Britain.

Exploring further the fifth point above, activism and the heightened individualism of the Lutheran and Calvinist doctrines may have fostered a spirit in journalism that overtly criticises and scrutinises worldly power. Protestantism helped give a value to public activism that particularly assisted the formation of democratic drives in Northern European journalism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Hill (1972: 76) suggests that institutions were judged and critiqued by reference to sacred text and Puritans argued from that straight to political science. Early Protestants could read the Geneva Bible, could interpret its text, and thereby formed a private relationship with God. Their 'political' attacks focussed on the perceived arbitrariness of papal and monarchical power in this world (Evans: 1987). As it was later absorbed into journalism, this self-confident outlook probably helped, alongside Enlightenment thinking, to foster an ethos of criticism.

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Also Calvinism assigned a new value to work, as a sign in itself that its possessors belong to the elect. The cultivation of the idea of the good citizen was linked to this work ethic (Weber, 1930), and in Northern Europe this probably in some way influenced journalism so as to promote democratic concerns (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). As they were absorbed into journalism, especially in the north of Europe, these tendencies might be seen as quite admirable from the democratic pluralist perspective.

I realise that this summary is almost anti-historical in its simplification, but aspects of the actual processes of this osmosis can be pinned down at certain times, as will be seen.

Puritanism in Britain was, initially at least, tightly bound to insurrection, reform, and the critical ideologies that underpin some worthy ideals of journalism. The defence of free speech and the removal of censorship accompanied the early part of the English seventeenth-century revolution. In the evolution of ideas, these psychologies and conditions facilitated a critical spirit in the media. In addition Puritans and Presbyterians played a significant part in their contribution to literacy and printing. How their ideas relate to secular politics is not easily defined, but it is clear that most disestablished denominations actively engaged in social critique at many points in their development. It is tempting to link them essentially to activist radical politics as they often were in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, in recent times, the 'neoliberal' reforms of UK Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher owed a conscious debt to Puritan values, which

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were reflected and supported in the Press (Wilson, 2002). The political manifestations are thus open to wide re-interpretation.

If Protestantism did make any mark on journalism, it is worth wondering what alternatives there already were to invest practices of writers. Grana (1967) discusses established literary traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, suggesting various intellectual currencies available for public writing. The broad term 'Bohemian' is how he describes many viewpoints and styles. Florida (2006) expressly sets up the Bohemian as an antithetical type to the Puritan. Among its attributes are hedonism, flamboyance, and the exotic (Florida, 2006: 195). Creative and disdainful of pedantry, Bohemians see themselves as elite and superior to mere economic drives. Unlike the Puritans, they identify materialism with spiritual poverty and their aim is about 'experiencing and appreciating what life has to offer' (Florida, 2006:192). Grana selects Baudelaire, Stendhal and Flaubert to exemplify the Bohemian camp with its literary tradition of critical commentary. Oscar Wilde in Ireland and England would fit in the general sway of the libertarian Bohemian outlook. Sin is to be embraced, as a path to essential progress of the human spirit and to self-knowledge. His aphorism that the best way to be rid of temptation is to give in to it captures the contrast between the Bohemian and Puritan conditions.

Attested historical connections

Traceable links at specific historical moments between Puritan forms of religion and the press can be suggested especially in the seventeenth, nineteenth and

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twentieth centuries in Britain – even if the character of the influence will always be uncertain. In the nineteenth century, which really saw the development of the mass press in Britain and parts of northern Europe, there are many examples of direct influence of religious outlooks and ways of thinking. Goldsworthy (2006) identifies the provincial press in England as constituting a moral battleground which bled religious attitudes into the evolution of campaigning journalism. The tone of outrage in the coverage of the Bulgarian atrocities of the 1870s was entirely based on the moral complexity of the editor of the Northern Echo, W.T. Stead. He was subject to semi-religious feelings of torment transformed into a missionary desire to shock his readers into action.

> I had a terrible afternoon. It was like Divine Possession that shook me almost to pieces, wrung me and left me shuddering and weak in agony of tears. I went out and determined to do this and nothing else until such time as my mission was revoked. (Robertson Scott, 1952, p.104)

He followed his words with a vivid outpouring of fact and sentiment on the fate of Christian women at the slaughtering hands of the Turks. It was the first modern newspaper campaign.

Like many editors and journalists, Stead was ‘a son of the manse,’ his father being a nonconformist minister from Yorkshire. His long career influenced

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aspects of journalism for subsequent generations by his example and by personal influence on his protégés (Goldsworthy, 2006).

Goldsworthy suggests there was a 'natural affinity' between the ministry and journalism for many ambitious sons of nonconformist clergy, who were steeped in a religious tradition that valued the power of the word above all. Many of the press people, including editors, were Quakers, Presbyterians and Unitarians. C.P. Scott, editor of the Manchester Guardian, was one of the latter. The Leeds Mercury, the Bradford Observer and the Sheffield Independent were distinguished, according to Binfield (1977) by the nonconformism of their editors and proprietors. Thus we can see, in Goldsworthy's evidence, that there was a direct influx of nonconformism impregnating early mass journalism. Furthermore, we see that there was an untypically high number of nonconformists engaged in the formative stages of editorial cultures in newspapers.

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Wilson (2002) generalises further, saying no visitor from another age could make sense of modern British journalism with its 'prurient, self-righteous, spiteful, and pompous' qualities unless they traced its origin to nineteenth- century nonconformism.

This can be extended. Journalism probably borrowed more than it has ever been acknowledged from the rhetorical style and methods of the Puritan preacher. They were, after all, the first mass media communicators. Their hallmark was 'simplicity of language and clarity of ideas' (Crowell, 1967). Goldsworthy highlights this too. Perhaps more could be made of the communicative practices of the nonconformists in Britain and their promotion of plain speaking. This style

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was elevated by preachers to a great art, with its specific traits being the link to homely detail, simple moralism, emotional power and illustrative narrative – the self same components found in modern tabloid journalism. 'Dumbing down' started with the Puritans. As Crowell (1967: 275) notes in a study of three 'plain speakers' in Stuart England, John Preston was given this praise by a contemporary:

> Though he was of higher elevation, and straine of spirit than ordinarie, yet out of love to do good, he could frame his conceits so as might sute with ordinary understandings.

The Puritan Richard Baxter set out the theory that "the plainest words are the profitablest oratory in the weightiest matters." (Quoted in Frederick Powicke's A Life of the reverend Baxter: Boston, 1924: 282). For another view of the topic, Boswell, in his Life of Samuel Johnson, quotes the latter, who was a seminal observer of the English language:

> I talked of preaching and of the great success which those called Methodists have. JOHNSON: "Sir, it is owing to their expressing themselves in a plain and familiar manner, which is the only way to do good to the common people, and which clergymen of genius and learning ought to do from a principle of duty, when it is suited to their congregations." (p 173)

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Blame and the Messengers: Journalists as a Puritan Prism for Cultural Policies in Britain

The emotional context set by Evangelicals has a corresponding echo in the journalistic psyche. Bebbington (1982: 16) describes the emergence in Victorian Britain of the Evangelicals' culture of agitation, enshrined in 'indignation meetings' intended to 'stir up the minds of the populace to create a healthy discontent.' This went hand in hand with the cultivation of conscience, but Bebbington also notes how 'nonconformist attitudes on social questions often seem repressive' (p 59). All too often their outrage dwelled on wrongdoing without proposals for social remedies. The indignation outlined here matches the spirit of many strands of modern journalism – and arguably part of its emotional and campaigning temper derives from the religious movements. In this vein Wilson (2002: 476), rather critically, claims Puritanism lent Victorian journalism a spirit of 'righteous indignation, and the essential vindictiveness of the elect when contemplating the more enviable sins of their fellow-mortals'.

This sensational style, dubbed the New Journalism by Matthew Arnold, set the underlying tone for the development of newspapers. Protestant influence was not however confined to the newspapers in the following century. Lord Reith, who dominated the BBC as its first Director-General, was a child of the manse. Programming in the early BBC was defined by a particularly strong attitude to religion. Some critics contended the BBC was firmly in the hands of the churches (Wolfe, 1984: 93). State-sponsored it might be, but the BBC and its staff drew heavily from the Church of England religions and formulated religious policies that were unusual, even for their time. They had a powerful church committee that vetted and organised programming. Aware of the pressures of commercialism from the American media spreading to Europe, the BBC set out to protect religion

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(Street, 2002; Scannell and Cardiff, 1991; Wolfe, 1984). The 'Sunday policy' was set up to defer to religion, to honour spaces and times for devotional practice, and expressly to avoid competing with church worship.

Whether this temper found its way into editorial culture is not documented. For its news journalism, the fledgling BBC tried to turn over a new leaf (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991). When the corporation formed, its staff wanted to avoid the 'errors of trained journalists' and hired fresh faces. They desired not to provoke controversy or sensation. They let news practices arise 'pragmatically' (p.106), while at the same time trying to speak as a national institution without sectional interests. With such a heavy moralistic disposition of many senior staff, including Reith himself (who avidly read the bulletins during the General Strike), it is hard to imagine the background radiation of religious outlooks and attitudes were absent from news judgment. This might have intensified as the dependence on externally provided agency copy was reduced from the 1930s. In contrast to the newspapers, though, the tone of deference – to government and more generally to good taste and respectability – predominated (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991). The BBC did not emulate the lavish emotionalism of some newspaper journalism but adopted a tone of neutrality and distance, that can so easily verge on self-righteous superiority.

Thus, so far, an historical contemporaneity can be observed between the emergence of Puritans, nonconformity, and the development of mainstream journalism. They appeared at the same time – and sometimes shared the radicalism and focus on rights that ultimately stemmed from Puritan

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parliamentarians in the English Civil War. True, the parliamentarians were the bourgeois side of radical – their idea of liberty included respect for individual property (Hill, 1972). Even so, the activist temper was transferred into later denominations and revivalism and helped to invigorate nineteenth-century mass journalism. There were many parallels in ideas and values, especially in the cultivation of a certain type of conscience (Goldsworthy, 2006). As suggested above, these were transmitted through direct contacts and influences at the level of personnel over several decades in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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But how can such religious influence be differentiated from any other religious influence, and why did Puritanism carry more weight than, say, Catholicism? How can we distinguish the individual imprints on journalism of Catholic and reformed Christianity in Europe? To be sure, historical links to many faiths can be shown to have arisen with the co-evolution of journalism and the modern state in Europe (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). A few ideas must suffice. First, Protestantism in one aspect is more rational in its basis than Catholicism and allowed more scope for reason as a divinely given tool. Its undermining attitudes produced a material and sceptical attitude towards the miracle of the mass (Hill, 1972: 71). Miracles in general were scorned as part of the rational temper of religious radicals which then combined with the eighteenth-century rationalistic tradition of natural theology (Hilton, 1988:108). According to the radical poet Milton, faith in reason – which might seem to encourage unwelcome earthly discord – actually amounted to faith in a further discovery, sooner or later, that everyone was aiming towards the same single truth. (Hill 1972:81).

A second Puritan quality perhaps shared with journalists is a tendency towards self-righteousness and certainty, stemming from a belief in 'absolutely valid norms', as Weber puts it. In this mentality, dogged self-belief is often coupled to the tenacious refusal to disobey private conscience in order to right a wrong. True for Puritans, sometimes true for the investigative journalist such as Stead. For Protestants, intellectual positions were supported by interpretations of texts: 'He who desires to be self-righteous is righteous' said John Downame (Hill, 1972: 128).

Thirdly, the Catholic cycle of sin and forgiveness through confession is broken by Protestants since the 'periodical discharge of the emotional sense of sin was done away with' (Weber, 1930:106). Puritans intensified the sense of sin, making its acknowledgment a condition of possible redemption through grace. Appreciation of the inescapable consequences of sin lends itself in a modern setting to othering and blame, without any compensating redemptive mechanisms. From the nineteenth century on, it laid the ground for the media 'witch-hunt'.

Parallels in international journalism styles

Another approach to help decide if any of these qualities is specifically due to Protestant influence, rather than Catholic or Orthodox, can be taken by analysis of journalism typologies and models. Hallin and Mancini (2004) indeed make a case that journalism styles differ between regions of Europe. Notwithstanding the kinds of commonality of journalistic practice identified earlier, they outline a

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divide in styles of journalism, defining the north as Democratic Corporatist and the south as Polarised Pluralist, while defining the case of Britain and the U.S. as Liberal. Many of the qualities outlined above are less pronounced or even absent from southern (Catholic) countries. Effectively, the authors say, the northern journalism is more rational-minded, critical, and factual than its southern counterpart, and less literary in its style. It is also less closely allied to state power. These qualities tally with some rational characteristics outlined so far, reflecting perhaps the Protestant mentality of the north compared to the regions of the south. The north-south divide on such lines is partially supported by the discussion in MacGregor et al. (forthcoming) of online newspaper journalism.

According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), these characteristics arose principally through different institutional and political histories of the various nation states. Though they do not attribute much of the difference directly to religion, they do note some likely influence of the 'Puritan spirit' on the formation of northern European journalism. It does indeed seem more than coincidence that these supposed differences occur in regions where the religious complexion of the majority of citizens often diverges.

Now, turning to markets, it might also be objected that all the traits isolated above could be attributed to market influences rather than religious ones. The commercial position of journalism certainly cannot be removed from the discussion. Most journalism scholarship gives markets a central position. However the relationship between markets and other cultural factors is rarely explored. Markets are often regarded as autonomous mechanisms that over-ride cultural elements of the superstructure. In historical reality, of course, although

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markets and religion are perceived in radically alternative ways, they are entangled, and from the eighteenth century onwards commentators noted the affinity of the Protestant religions to capitalism. Stendhal, for example, thought there was a connection between the Protestant personality and business acumen (Grana, 1964: 97). "Love of money was the great lesson of Calvinism," he said. The most emphatic one-way tie between markets and Puritan religion is made by Weber (1930). For him the force of the Puritan ethic stimulated capitalism – especially in systematic economic activity, ascetic work ethic and its justification of wealth creation. Benjamin Franklin's quip that 'time is money' epitomised the new outlook of Calvinism implying that for Puritans, getting money was socially acceptable. For journalism, time dependent and materialistic, these outlooks often harmonise. Stead actually commented on the urgency of time imprinted by his Puritan upbringing. "Everything that tended to waste time….was regarded as an evil thing." (Wilson, 2002: 463).

But even if markets, money and religion are generally almost impossible to disentangle, Goldsworthy does note that the campaigning journalism of the nineteenth century was not motivated by the desire for newspaper circulation and revenue but to stimulate public action.

In the mutual tangle of influences on journalism, including both the market and cultural influences such as religion, one feature sticks out – that of negativity. Few news analysts would deny that one hallmark of news is its dwelling on adversity (e.g. Ericson,1987; Galtung and Ruge, 1965) – but it does not seem clear why this should 'naturally' emanate from markets. Why should market

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journalism focus darkly on negative news? Social impulses of the negative sort do not necessarily follow from economic imperatives and the drive for profits. Quite the reverse, in fact. Bourdieu (1984) argued that the bourgeois press was neutered and made bland by its need to please or placate the widest spectrum of opinion. On the other hand pessimism is surely a defining mark of the Calvinist theology of individual sin, damnation, and predestination, and might be identified as a suspect for helping the tilt towards negative psychological predilections.

If political and religious psychologies might have affected the practices of news journalism, as is being suggested, that is not to say current practitioners are normally aware of a vestigial religious legacy on what they do. Instances of self-conscious debts to the Puritan tradition do exist however. In his autobiography, the journalist Andrew Neil, former editor of the Sunday Times newspaper in Britain, overtly describes himself as a "Scottish Presbyterian" (Neil, 1997:52). He is admitting an undercurrent in his secular psyche rather than anything literal. In a conversation with media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, who, he says, was considering turning to Catholicism, he responded: "Since we both come from the same Scottish Presbyterian stock you can hardly expect me to be over the moon at that prospect" (Neil, 1997:212). It is interesting to consider that Neil regards Murdoch a Presbyterian in his moral fibre, and to reflect how much this global entrepreneur must have moulded editorial styles and psychologies through his influence on selection of senior editorial staff.

The last objection to be dealt with is that journalists are self-evidently flamboyant, egotistical and dissolute pleasure-seekers. Analysis portrays a different reality. Collectively these workers in Britain lead frugal lives, drink much less alcohol

than their public image conveys, and are relatively faithful in partnerships. A survey by Delano and Henningham (1995) can be used as evidence of a much more sober lifestyle of the typical British journalist than is often supposed. The Bohemian self-image of some journalists is not generally backed up in studies, and is probably confined to magazine sectors or untypical individuals.

Portrayals of a modern tragedy

Now, for a modern test-case, some recent journalism can be discussed – to illustrate in an exploratory way any imprint of Puritan psychologies in the social production of cultures of guilt, blame, and negativity. Different news topics might have been selected to portray a common interpretative framework that amounts to an implicit or latent cultural policy. It is not fatal to the whole argument if the points made below leave room for doubt or disagreement. They surely will. Also, perhaps, the study might have investigated the representation of another body of workers or type of social activity, such as charities in general, or the armed services, to reflect on modern news values as components of implicit cultural policies.

The case of social workers and Baby P was taken as an example because they seem exceptionally prone to negative media assessment (Parton, 2004; Kooijman and Wattam, 1997), and their treatment reflects evolving cultural attitudes to culture, care and children. The ten days after November 11, 2008 were chosen from a protracted episode that began in August 2007. The court case on Baby P had just ended, and therefore free media comment became legal, while the court itself revealed detail of the history of the case. The articles examined included a

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mixture of analysis, comment, and breaking news, as the political furore escalated to Prime Ministerial level. The controversy prompted direct action by Ed Balls, the then Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families.

Clearly there was very complex moral evaluation taking place in the media discourse, especially tensions between private rights, child and parental rights and duties, and the limits of state interference. There was also a secondary level moral discussion in the Press concerning the social reactions to the journalism itself. This work is not judging the assessments made or the coverage, but trying to reflect on whether the criteria of criticism used reflect modern versions of lingering Puritan psychologies discussed above.

One hundred and six articles collected from database Factiva were examined – mostly from the UK national press. The references and angles of the stories were sorted according to themes that potentially betray characteristics linked to a Puritan mindset – the focus on sin and blame (who was blamed and analysis of the fault); the degree of personalisation of blame, as opposed to generalised blame (No. 3 in the list above); the stress on guilt and expectation of remorse (No. 4); critical use of statistics (No. 5); failures to perform duty (No. 2); and any strain of vindictiveness (No. 7).

The coverage was observed for its styles of rhetoric and any emotionalism, which is noted by Wilson (2002) as an Evangelical influence on the Press. Media coverage stirring up Evangelical 'indignation' (No 8.) was also taken into account. To avoid the charge of selective interpretation, certain 'non-Puritan' themes were

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examined: the wider history of child care and context; the overwork of social workers; reform proposals; and a miscellany of moral attitudes.

The nexus of blame

First of all, an overwhelming number of the stories focus on responsibilities, duties, and blame. Of all the groups involved – doctors, health care workers, local authority managers, Government, the Police and Crown Prosecution Services - the most significant proportion of stories infer blame on the social work department or personnel. The Director of Children's Services in Haringey Sharon Shoesmith attracted the most scathing attention. Over one dozen articles contained references to calls for Haringey Council to sack her, or themselves called for her resignation. She infuriated commentators in failing to apologise.

> If a person in a position of responsibility such as Ms Shoesmith will not take the blame when such a thing happens on her patch and during her watch, who will? (Daily Mail, 2008, November 13)

She was described as arrogant and 'spectacularly cynical' (Western Mail, 2008, November 14). Her comment placing ultimate responsibility for the deaths on the mother and her housemates was widely vilified. Even social workers are reported to have been calling for her scalp. Her crime and that of social workers in Haringey was failure of duty of action. Bloodlust ran high. "Not one social

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worker will lose their jobs", said the Daily Mail (2008, November 12). The social workers' sin was failure of professionalism, the 'Puritan' call of duty.

Apart from specific social workers and department heads, Haringey Council attracted significant blame for poor management, failure to sack Miss Shoesmith, and for its lax regime of care. Government likewise took a smaller share of blame for setting the framework of child care, and for instigating a bureaucratic 'tick-box' mentality tying social workers to their desks. The Government specially failed to heed the cry of a whistleblower who had resigned in 2006 warning of malpractices in Haringey child care.

An interesting contrast in the blame game comes with the fate of the doctors in the Press. Statistics stack badly for the medical profession, after the first correct referral by a concerned GP, whose efforts led to Baby P being placed on the 'at risk' register. After being seen by 19 different doctors who could have raised more alarm, medical lapses culminated when the paediatrician who saw him a day before death did not spot a broken back. She sent him home with a report that he was grumpy. Why and how did the negative coverage concentrate so exclusively on social workers?

One possible explanation is the place of remorse and the degree of penitence that was shown. In some nineteenth-century Puritan theory, remorse is the prerequisite of redemption. So it was by showing a proper weight in the scales of public remorse – the public display of contrition – that the medical actors were allowed to slide more easily from the limelight. Dr Zayyat, the culpable paediatrician who

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missed the broken back, publicly apologised. All the papers analysed ran the statement that she was 'deeply affected' by the catastrophe. It seems to have defused the public outcry and even engendered some sympathy (Evening Standard, November 19). The ability to show some remorse seems to have dimmed the vindictiveness of the journalists. By contrast, even when Haringey Council 'finally' offered an apology, the headliners individualised the event back onto Miss Shoesmith for showing 'no remorse' (Evening Standard, November 13, 2008). The number of times she refused to apologise assumed a life of its own in the coverage. Of course, since Dr Zayyat had been punished by the medical profession, she had less to lose than Miss Shoesmith, whose intention was still political survival for herself and some of her workers.

Statistics are worthy of attention because they conjure such a vivid rhetoric of their own. Statistics were driven in Press reports to deadly effect: Baby P died of 50 wounds, he was visited by care workers 60 times in 17 months. He was seen by 19 different doctors and health workers on 33 separate occasions after he began to suffer abuse. Typically the Press combined statistics in an emotive phrase such as: "He was seen by 28 different social workers, doctors and police officers before he was tortured to death." (Daily Telegraph, November 19, 2008) The tally of numbers is allowed to define the story, arguably driving nails into possibility of finer judgments. This is the endpoint of the elevation of rational 'fact' as a proof system which is allowed to determine meanings. Is this the literal-minded Puritan in another guise? Are we witnessing rational techniques to support 'the essential vindictiveness of the elect when contemplating the sins of fellow mortals' (Wilson, 2002: 476)?

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The pictures of Baby P used in court appeared for the first time in this ten-day period. They were widely run and elicited comment not only in their denotative meaning, but raised cultural questions of taste and ethics of journalism. On one hand, they ran as visually shocking proof of torture, working on the public psyche and arguably inflaming 'the glow of righteous indignation' of the Puritan (Wilson, 2002: 475). On the other, they began to raise Press disquiet – indeed eliciting an overt comparison with nineteenth-century sensational journalism. Janice Turner worried in the Times (November 15, 2008) that the lurid images and salacious details of Baby P 'distance us from suffering by turning tragedy into a modern Penny Dreadful'. She noticed that those reading it said one thing but their eyes were 'lit by emotions of glee and titillation'. Again, Wilson labelled this the 'pornographic thrill' of Stead's modern style of journalism, that titillated 'while professing to deplore what it describes'.

If the Press emotion of indignation signals a legacy of the Puritan Evangelical tradition (Wilson, 2002), the Baby P case gives ample demonstration of its uses. Not only is the undertone of nearly all the stories based on 'stirring up the minds of the populace to create a healthy discontent' (Bebbington, p16), but the case boasts a campaign of spectacular vindictiveness run by the Sun newspaper. By 2009 it claimed 1.6 million signatories to a petition delivered to the Prime Minister. Boasting it was the biggest campaigning event in journalism history, the populist Sun launched a petition demanding all social workers in the case be sacked. Its stories also named an individual social worker particularly to be blamed for negligence. The media coverage was efficient in stirring up a public

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demonstration outside Haringey Council on November 20 with placards of social workers who should be sacked.

Now, in contrast to the comments so far, themes without echoes of a Puritan-linked ethos are infrequent. One clear non-Puritan motif is to exonerate social workers because of pressures beyond their control for which they could not be blamed. Only a tiny number of the stories focus on this critical perspective, especially the over-work. That staff on the ground were arguably hindered by a system of procedures is almost overlooked. Adverse factors mentioned include overwork, the form-filling culture, posts left vacant, and so on. The culture of compliance, with its distracting bureaucratic demands on staff, is rarely used to modify the attacks on social workers but rather deployed as a way to twist the knife deeper into the Government.

Coverage that explores the social workers' points of view is mostly confined to the Guardian and Independent newspapers, which give space to social workers or their sympathisers. The Guardian highlights a 'witch-hunt' and the chief executive of the British Association of Social Workers gets column inches to claim the Press is judging all performance on child care in relation to one case.

Framing the issue in the context of social care history did not appeal to the media writers either. Buried deep in the coverage, normally far from the lead angles, are significant details – for instance that in the most stressed urban areas, 30 percent of social work posts are sometimes unfilled. Miss Shoesmith revealed in January 2009 that Haringey had 47 percent of posts unfilled at the time of the tragedy…in

other words each of the Haringey social workers had a double load. A few reports mentioned that the social worker Maria Ward on the Baby P case was double-loaded. Such compensating perspectives rarely warrant coverage when the focus is on guilt, blame, and the desire to see victims abase themselves with remorse.

The balanced long-term statistical perspective on child abuse death in Britain is hardly mentioned. One story headlined 'Baby P death is tragic but rare', (Evening Standard, November 14) touches the issue. Polly Toynbee in the Guardian pointed to the excellent record on declining rates of child death in the UK. But in 106 stories, at an emotive phase of the publicity it is true, there is barely any version of events placing Baby P in a wider continuum of death rates due to abuse in Britain. Academic work suggests England and Wales show strong improvements over 30 years in child death rates compared to other developed nations. They have some of the lowest rates and, by inference, some of the best child protection systems. From being the 4th worst of 22 developed nations, England and Wales come 15th equal – and abuse death rates are 'the lowest on record' (Pritchard and Williams, 2009). Measuring evidence since 1974-6 they say:

> No [western developed country] had greater reductions of combined violent [abuse death] than England and Wales, who had significantly bigger reductions than Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the USA.

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Shoesmith herself lambasted sensationalist media and the blame culture that turned a local tragedy into a national catastrophe. This paper argues that she and her fellows became targets of a set of media techniques that owe something to Puritanical traits in the processes of reporting. Almost all the care deficiences were put down to *failures of duty* coupled to the repressive solution that protagonists should *lose their jobs*. The journalists took a superior and condemnatory tone aiming to stir passionate indignation in the public. They latched onto 'fact' and numbers, and desperately sought *signs of remorse* in their targets, especially the social workers.

Rather echoing the verdict on nineteenth century nonconformists, (Bebbington 1982) the Press rarely proposed reforms or positive remedy. It is true, there could hardly be anything but a negative verdict on the care services in the Baby P case, but its exceptional nature is underplayed especially for the social workers (Pritchard and Williams, 2009).

Naturally none of these psychological traits belong alone to religion or Puritanism so no certain case of persistent influence can be unequivocally sustained. Many Evangelical experiences are omitted – joy, hope, conversion, and so on. I have not dwelled on the difficulties to the argument of variation in coverage between one newspaper title and another, or the BBC. The Guardian particularly stands out for its much more self-analytical journalism and advocacy of the social workers' case. It would take a separate study to fully evaluate such matters let alone explain them, though clearly ownership would be a factor. As a general case, the formation of public structures of feeling, shared or intensified by journalists, owes

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debts to a range of distant or proximate cultural influences and it would be silly to exclude religion, even when its overt influence is waning. This is especially true when, in terms of transformations of mental outlooks, it may arguably take centuries for some traits of public psychologies to alter. It might be objected that such diffuse and long-term impressions rely on our readings of history which, in turn, depend on subjectivities of the observer and sources, devaluing the interpretations that result. Such reflections are doubtless fair, but beg the question whether academics can legitimately approach themes with broad historical dimensions or, instead, should always confine themselves to the micro-period, and the 'measurable' small effect. Such a position has inherent dangers of its own.

Journalism has its own specific codes and procedures, but does not chart its course alone. Journalists in Britain strongly reflect aspects of a national psyche that itself still derives some of its emotional and rational structures from legacies of the Protestant religions discussed. Of course, the secular society of the twenty-first century in Britain must owe much to those 'Judeo-Christian' centuries from which it has been only partly and inconsistently released. This story outlines only one professional group where, it is contended, some aspects of Puritanism may have survived.

It is not disputed that the traits here depend on journalists' mutual relationship with the audience. Nor is it deniable that the types of emotionalism and rationality seen in the Baby P case will not be exclusive to a latter-day Protestant environment. This is an argument of degree and intensity, and perhaps ideally the case study could have looked at a selection of countries for parallels. But that is deep water with unavoidable pitfalls and several local or national contingencies

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that complicate direct comparison (Esser and Pfetsch, 2004). To have presented an exploratory case in a one-country study at least lays out key elements in the matter, even if the force and legacy of the Protestant ethic may vary from country to country. Indeed, generalisations on European journalism typologies were recently re-formulated by Hallin and Mancini. As seen above, if anything they correlate with the supposition that religions were among the influences on the way different journalisms evolved, with some characteristics in the south being less pronounced than in the north .

Why journalism in Britain developed this way, rather than towards more literary, intellectual, or Bohemian forms is not always clear. The overarching 'explanation' of market forces driving news journalism to a convergent formula deserves correcting nuances, one of which might speculatively include religious complexions and legacies. Protestant psychology has close parallels to the secular rational and rhetorical subtexts that play out in much UK journalism – so close that they are unlikely to be accidental.

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