

Delimiting Deviance: Visual and Verbal Representations of Scandal on British TV News

Jon Eilenberg
City University London

Abstract

When moral boundaries are defined, TV news storytelling plays an important role. This paper explores the visual and verbal markers that construct the categories of right and wrong, normal and deviant, us and them. By stressing the bonds between 'the media' and 'the public', TV storytellers assume the legitimacy to frame and represent social reality. Traditionally, the media have pointed out deviance among the lower strata of the population, but powerful individuals and institutions are increasingly identified as wrongdoers.

Using the Mid Staffs hospital scandal as a case study, this article examines how TV news employ scandal to describe deviance in the higher echelons of society and the exposure of the wrongdoings to 'us', the public. This process takes place on several levels, from visual and verbal storytelling to shifting cultural and social structures. How these moral tales and social shifts influence each other is a central part of the discussion here. The boundary between normal and deviant behaviour is changing, influencing both the way people think about themselves and the societies they live in.

Keywords: deviance, scandal, news, media, television

Media and deviance

Most people do not have much personal experience with crime or serious deviance, and they therefore rely on the media to tell them what the problems

are, how widespread they are and who the responsible people are. That process is a part of how morality and deviance is constructed socially, which is the subject matter of this paper. This sociology of deviance has previously been described by researchers such as Jock Young (1971), Stan Cohen (1972) and Stuart Hall et al. (1979), whose studies focussed on drugtakers, mods and rockers and mugging respectively. In the 60s and 70s, the media identified youth and minority cultures as threats to the established social order. The mediated moral panics were fuelled by exaggeration and stereotyping with subcultures broadly labelled as deviant. According to Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1987; 1988; 1991) and Jewkes (2004), the marginalisation of certain groups has since been observed time and again in modern Western societies.

The media play an important role when moral boundaries are drawn, and by identifying social problems, they mark the differences between right and wrong – or deviant – actions and behaviour. In this media reality, ‘we’ – the normal citizens – belong to one category, whilst ‘they’ – the criminal transgressors – belong to another. The media’s ‘us’ is most often national and refers to an abstract sense of belonging to a public or an imagined community (Seaton, 2007: 77-78). This ‘us’ is defined by what it is not: ‘them’, and ‘they’ can be criminals, enemies or certain minorities. What these different groups have in common is that they are placed at the bottom of society, marginalised by both society and media (Ericson, Baranek and Chan, 1987; 1988; 1991; Hall, et al. 1979; Jewkes 2004; Seaton 2007). The media, in turn, legitimise themselves by stressing their bonds with this public; in journalistic self-understanding, terms such as ‘informing the public’ and ‘public interest’ are central, and such references to the public consolidate the media’s own position of power in contemporary society (Coleman & Ross, 2010; Lewis, Inthorn, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005).

Particularly national broadcast news has played a role in forming a sense of belonging. Historically, broadcasting has been an important part of building and disseminating national identities which, according to Jean Seaton, is a role they still play in contemporary societies (Seaton, 2007: 77-78). In the UK, broadcast news is regulated by Ofcom, which sets out to ensure Public Service principles are met so that broadcast news can be apolitical and fair in their storytelling (Smith, 2006). This has meant that British TV news is widely considered as impartial and balanced (BBC, 2013). In spite of its nation-building role – or perhaps because of it – TV news is by far the most popular and trusted source of news in the UK (Ofcom, 2013). This makes TV news influential. Moreover, when TV news tells its stories, it uses both visual and verbal elements: images and words are carefully put together in a time consuming process, which makes the production of TV news far more laborious and expensive than publishing newspapers. TV news thus conveys meanings through both images and audible words to enforce an overall message (Cushion, 2012).

However, in the general news landscape the ‘us’ is no longer just defined against the marginalised ‘them’, the powerless on the bottom of society. As society changes, so do the perceptions of deviance. Yvonne Jewkes (2004) notes that patterns of media and deviance are changing rapidly and that this

needs to be addressed. The present paper sets out to examine how British TV news tells stories of scandal, institutional failure and power abuses from a transdisciplinary perspective, which draws on research from both the Humanities and the Social Sciences.

Scandal: Deviance among the Powerful

As argued by Durkheim (1964), deviance is an integrated part in the process any kind of society building. However, the transgressions of the powerful are often hidden from the general public unless it is revealed, e.g. by scandal. In his analysis of American political scandals, Thompson defines scandal in the following way:

- ‘1 their occurrence or existence involves the transgression of certain values, norms or moral codes;
- 2 their occurrence or existence involves an element of secrecy or concealment, but they are known or strongly believed to exist by individuals other than the involved (...);
- 3 some non-participants disapprove of the actions or events and may be offended by the transgression;
- 4 some non-participants express their disapproval by publicly denouncing the actions or events;
- 5 the disclosure and condemnation of the actions or events may damage the reputation of the individuals responsible for them (...)

(Thompson, 2000: 13-14).

Thompson thus sees scandal as the disclosure of a moral transgression that the involved individuals have tried to conceal. In this process, the media play an increasingly important role in drawing the boundary between the scandalous and the normal. The media expose the transgressors to ‘us’, thereby forming and confirming notions of moral and deviance.

Mediated scandals come in many forms: they can involve individuals such as celebrities or politicians as well as organisations such as public institutions or - more rarely - businesses (Allen & Savigny, 2012; Gamson, 2001; Lull & Hinerman, 1997). The definition of scandal readily applies if the transgressors are powerful and the transgressions are exposed and widely condemned. The present paper will focus on institutional scandal and the individuals involved.

When an institutional scandal is exposed, the case often becomes complex and contradictory. Accusers, accused, witnesses, experts and journalists all tell different stories about what happened, which can lead to a trial by media, as described by Greer and McLaughlin (2012). In trials by media the cases are laid out in newspapers, on TV and online. Newspapers in particular often run

campaigns that resemble trials with evidence, arguments and verdicts. However, the media do not adhere to the same standards of due process as legal courts, and trials by media are thus inherently different from court trials. For example, in trials by media only certain witnesses –with their statements edited - are heard, while journalists play the role of both lawyer and judge, meaning that the question of guilt has often been determined from the outset. Although trials by media have no legal authority in and of themselves, they can lead to ruined careers and lives, arrests, legal trials and convictions.

The UK is notorious for its high-profile scandals, often helped by a media sector bent on exposing every transgression among the rich, famous and powerful (Greer & McLaughlin, 2012; Greer & McLaughlin, 2013). In terms of institutional scandals several recent examples stand out, but for the sake of examining how scandals can define moral boundaries in detail, one particular case has been chosen here. The Mid Staffordshire scandal involved mistreatment and death of hundreds of patients at Stafford Hospital between 2005 and 2008, which led to the dismissal of staff, significant pressure on NHS (National Health Service) managers and new laws aimed to criminalise wilful neglect and enforce a duty of candour. As such, the Mid Staffordshire scandal involved both institutional and individual wrongdoing, and it was extensively covered by the media from 2009 until at least 2014.

The Mid Staffordshire Scandal

The Mid Staffordshire scandal initially broke when a report was published in March 2009 which described how patients at the hospital – which had an over-mortality rate of up to 45% - were not given food or drink and lay in soiled bed sheets (The Healthcare Commission, 2009). In the media coverage of the scandal, only the managers at the local hospital were initially accused of moral transgression, but as the scandal spread top leaders of the NHS and politicians were targeted as well. The print media - with political overtones - blamed the wrongdoings on a defunct and morally corrupt NHS leadership. In the course of the scandal, the NHS as an institution was increasingly blamed as well, and the trial by media was held across several news outlets at the same time, putting individual NHS managers and politicians as well as the NHS as an institution in the dock.

The Mid Staffordshire scandal also got quite a lot of TV coverage in the years following the break of the scandal in 2009, and the present paper will now turn to examining this coverage in more detail, using examples from a story broadcast on the BBC News at Ten on the 6th of February 2013.

Considering the visual side of the TV news coverage of the scandal, some patterns emerged. Regarding shot sizes, these ranged from Extreme Long Shot (ELS) to Extreme Close Up (ECU), depending on the distance between the camera and the subject being filmed. Many of the shots used were of hospital buildings and car parks, and usually these were shot in ELS to connote distance. A sense of inactivity was also created through the camera's movement as the lens was either still or slow-panning, such as it happened in a series of shots showing the Stafford Hospital buildings in the story from February 2013.

The shots of hospitals were influenced by NHS filming policies which dictate restrictions regarding who and what can be filmed, so getting dramatic or visually appealing shots can be a challenge.

When people are filmed for TV news the shot sizes are usually quite close, and most people, including the journalists themselves, are shot in medium close up (Orlebar, 2013). In the case of the Mid Staffordshire scandal it was the victims and their relatives – with some notable exceptions – who were shot in close-up to give a sense of proximity and intimacy. Furthermore, while NHS staff and managers were usually shot in hospitals or offices, victims and their relatives were filmed in their homes, adding to this feeling of familiarity.

Finally, there is the gaze: the looking direction of the people shown in the shots. The majority of people on TV looks to either the left or the right of the frame, not down the lens, a practice that holds for TV news as well. The only people to look straight into the camera lens are journalists. This establishes a connection between the person on the screen and the viewer. Through the use of this device, journalists connect with the viewers which, combined with the established familiarity with the victims, creates a bond between viewers, journalists and victims.

Looking at the verbal side of the TV news stories enforces these impressions. The NHS and its work were accused of systemic failure, putting corporate self-interest first and betraying public trust. This is illustrated by the following quote from the BBC story from February 2013: ‘This report laid bare the shame of Stafford Hospital, where public trust was betrayed, appalling suffering was caused by lack of care, compassion, humanity and leadership, and a careless tolerance of poor standards led patients to suffer.’ These institutional characteristics were ascribed to individual NHS leaders and managers, whilst NHS staff were described as ignoring suffering, anger and distress. Both on the institutional and individual level, the NHS and the people working in it were thus portrayed as failures.

Victims and their families were described as sobbing and humiliated people who had been exposed to appalling suffering. There was a moral side to these characteristics, suggesting that these people had been wronged. In their descriptions of the scandal and its victims the journalists usually placed themselves on the side of the victims by pointing to the conditions they experienced at the hospital. For example, in the sentence ‘George Dalziel was *grossly* neglected after an operation. Not washed or fed properly and, most shocking of all, given no proper pain relief’, the use of adverbs such as ‘grossly’ and adjectives such as ‘shocking’ and ‘proper’ suggest a moral stance in favour of the victim. Both the visual and verbal elements of this report therefore aimed to form a bond between victims, viewers and journalists.

The ‘us’ that was constructed in this report included the viewers (or the public), the victims and their families and the media themselves. ‘We’ were the victims of the scandal and the people working to expose it. On the other side of the ‘us’-‘them’ divide, ‘they’ were the people working in the NHS - particularly the managers - and, in some cases, politicians. Furthermore, the NHS as an

institution was connected with untrustworthiness and moral corruption through the representation of the institution and its staff as wrongdoers who were unable or unwilling to serve 'our', the public's, interests.

Shifting Moral Boundaries

The role of the media's storytelling in defining deviance has several dimensions. The traditional deviants on the bottom still exist: criminals such as drug dealers, gang members, or home-grown terrorists still serve to define normality by their opposition to it. In addition to this, external threats such as Islamic State, Boko Haram or Russia constitute threats to 'us' and 'our' society. Sexual, racial and religious minorities unfortunately still serve to delimit the sense of who 'we' are. The result of this demarcation is the construction of an imagined community, but also stereotyping and marginalising the people whom the 'we' is defined against.

Furthermore, the media do not only form an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy between the public ('us') and deviants on the bottom, but they also delimit this 'us' from the deviants on the top. Through stories of scandal, deviant behaviour is identified among powerful people and institutions whereby politicians, high ranking civil servants, media bosses and business leaders are increasingly being labelled as deviants. Their deviance is exposed through scandals, which is becoming a popular topic in media storytelling. This identification of deviance serves to construct an 'us' and the upwards demarcation of otherness can lead to a decreasing level of trust in public figures and the institutions they represent. The Mid Staffordshire scandal is a good example of this. Not only were individual NHS staff and managers visually and verbally portrayed as deviants, but the trustworthiness of the NHS as an institution was questioned as well. These doubts had political consequences and governance of the NHS was a central theme in the 2010 and 2015 general elections, while the present and future state of the NHS continues to be a part of the political agenda.

Telling stories about individual and institutional transgressions risks undermining trust in central public institutions such as Parliament, the NHS as well as the media themselves. This process reflects shifting cultural and social structures, where deference to authority is gradually becoming less prominent. The moral narratives of the news media is a part of this development, and the shifting boundaries between normal and deviant behaviour have the potential to significantly change the way we as citizens think about ourselves and the societies we are a part of.

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Biography

Jon Eilenberg is doing a PhD at the Department of Sociology at City University. His work focusses on media and deviance from an interdisciplinary perspective. He holds an MA in history from the University of Copenhagen and an MA in International Journalism from Brunel University.