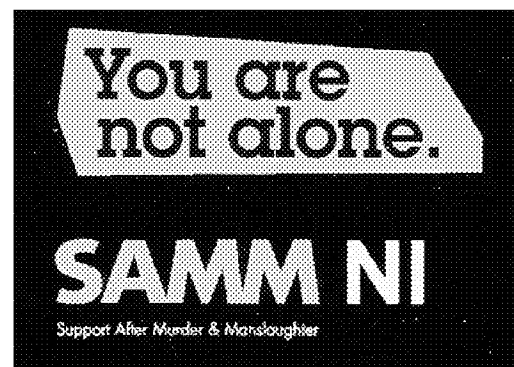
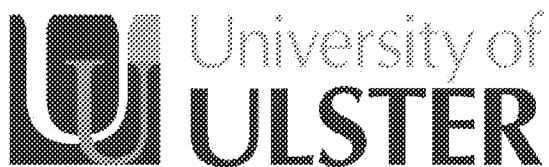


# **An Exploration of Media Reporting of Victims of Murder and Manslaughter in Northern Ireland**

A Research Report for SAMM NI by University of Ulster



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## Acknowledgements

The researchers were humbled to be asked to undertake this important and unique piece of research and at the outset we would like to thank all the families who participated in this study. At no time did we underestimate the emotion and difficulty involved by each of you telling your story. We would also like to thank Pam Surphlis of SAMM NI for her unwavering enthusiasm and support for this research to be undertaken.

Great care has been taken to protect the anonymity of the families who participated in the study. The report that follows are the views and thoughts of the families as told verbatim to us. We hope the content of the report may go some way to ensuring that the media rethink their approach in how they report on cases of murder and manslaughter in the future.

## Executive Summary

The primary aim of this study was to explore how the media report on victims of murder and manslaughter in Northern Ireland. Two methodological approaches were employed in order to realise this primary aim. Indeed, the study utilised a research framework which drew heavily on a qualitative approach for data gathering. When considered collectively the data provides an insight into the experiences of bereaved families on how the media reported on the death of a loved one.

This study has investigated two key issues. First of all it identifies and examines the relationship between newspaper journalists and the victims' families. Secondly, it explores the impact of media reporting on family members of those bereaved through murder and manslaughter in Northern Ireland. It emerged from the study that the participants felt that the media were intrusive and insensitive in their approach which exacerbated the trauma felt by the families of losing a family member.

The tactics employed by the journalists to make contact with the families was a fundamental issue that emerged from the interview findings and one that each of the families had various experiences of. Some respondents voiced the opinion that the journalists were extremely persistent; some felt they had been deceived while other respondents noted the journalists were just ruthless in their approach to them. None of the families interviewed voiced a positive experience during the initial contact with journalists and indeed commented that the insensitive nature of the journalists approach added further upset to them at this already distressing period in their lives.

The impact of this reporting on the families' lives was difficult and upsetting. The families reported feeling a variety of emotions stemming from their experiences with the news media. Overall, these emotions had quite negative connotations with the families reporting feeling 'used', 'powerless' and with some more extreme descriptions of feeling 'besieged' and 'neglected'.

It is suggested that journalists reporting on these sensitive cases need to adopt a more humane approach when interacting with the bereaved families and they must take much greater care in what they report, ensuring that the information is accurate to prevent further distress. A number of salient points emerged regarding issues of consent, permission and respect and overall the

families agreed that there should be some form of Code of Practice for journalists to follow.

Whilst the authors acknowledge that the Press Complaints Commission has since issued guidance for families on dealing with attention from the media after the death of a loved one, the research findings contained herein suggest that this guidance does not go far enough and is reliant on the journalists re-evaluating how they interact with the bereaved families. However, it is ambiguous what measures will be put in place to ensure that this will happen. Therefore, it is unclear at this stage how effective this guidance will operate in practice.

## Background to Research and Introduction

Public fascination with crime and justice continues to grow; this is partly because most people have limited direct contact or experience with these matters and rely on media reports to gain their knowledge (Jewkes, 2004). Many studies have identified that crime reporting is particularly ‘newsworthy’<sup>1</sup> and a ‘staple’ of the media machine (Ericson *et al.*, 1991; Williams and Dickinson, 1993; Jewkes, 2004; Marsh and Melville, 2009), with the news media selecting, defining and explaining events that comprise ‘the news’ (Eldridge, 1995 cited in Jemphrey and Berrington, 2006). Currently much academic work has been concerned with how certain ‘categories’ of offenders are portrayed by the media, such as women (Wykes and Gunter, 2004), children (Marsh and Melville, 2009), and even the elderly (Collins and Bird, 2006). There has however only been a little academic work undertaken on how victims of crime are portrayed by the mass media (see Wardle, 2007 and Marsh and Melville, 2009). This glaring omission of work on the portrayal of victims could partly be explained by the fact that crime news prior to the 1980s focused on offenders, but increasingly in recent years there has been more emphasis on victims (Katz, 1987, cited in Greer 2010) which parallels the increasing centrality of victims in the criminal justice system, criminology and even crime fiction (Cumberbatch and Howitt, 1989).

Wherever a victim exists a crime has been perpetrated and crime stories are the biggest sellers across the media, in films on television, in the Press, and in books. If it ‘bleeds it leads’ is often an accurate description of the way in which news is deemed as newsworthy. The idea of the victim is compelling and television ratings and newspaper sales often rely upon the regularly gruesome descriptions of victims of crimes. However, the media offer highly variable levels of sympathy for victims reflecting the specific context of their deaths, often distinguishing between a ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving victim’, with the former ‘deserving’ the label of victim, for example a child, whilst a death in custody may be represented as an ‘undeserving’ victim and thus undeserving of public sympathy.

Much journalistic practice is routine, with stories sought and reported in accordance with pre-constructed news templates, only the names, dates or locations change. The resultant outcome of such reporting is that journalists all too often produce easy explanations or simplistic ironies too quickly to

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<sup>1</sup>Newsworthiness is a term that encapsulates the perceived public appeal or public interest of any potential news story. Newsworthiness is determined by news values; that more news values a potential story conforms to, the more newsworthy it is perceived to be (Jewkes, 2011:285).

summarise violent acts, with the industry accused of lacking in patience and humility (Cote and Simpson, 2000). To overcome this Buchanan (1987) suggests that journalists should adopt a more 'humane' style of reporting, this style of reporting requires a new set of assumptions about the family who suffer the trauma and new thinking about how to apply these ideas to the staple work of journalism. The most important of these assumptions is that traumatized families have become different people emotionally. If news practices take trauma into account their stories could actually help the families of victims (Cote and Simpson, 2000). There is little doubt that better reporting about trauma can help readers gain empathy for the suffering of victims and their families and enrich everyone's awareness of the powerful role that trauma plays in peoples' collective lives.

It is against this background that SAMM NI (Support After Murder and Manslaughter, Northern Ireland) commissioned the University of Ulster to undertake a study on how the media report on victims of murder and manslaughter in Northern Ireland. The outputs of this research have produced empirical evidence on the style of newspaper reporting that exists around sensitive and traumatic events and what the families of those victims think about the current style of reporting on victims of murder and manslaughter. This enhances our understanding of the relationship between journalists and victims' families and has also yielded recommendations on how these sensitive stories should be reported to minimise further trauma to the families of victims. These recommendations are in addition to the guidance published by the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) earlier this year on dealing with attention from the media after the death of a loved one (PCC, 2011). As mentioned previously newspapers and magazines regularly publish stories about people who have died, particularly if the death has happened in unusual circumstances as these stories are particularly 'newsworthy', they are generally entitled to do so, provided that they abide by the terms of the Editors' Code of Practice. However, media interest can cause distress to those grieving families. The new practical guidance that has been issued forms an attempt by the PCC to ensure the interests of members of the family are protected. Copies of this guidance are available online at <http://www.pcc.org.uk/news/index.html?article=NzE5OQ> and also available in appendix 1 of this report. Importantly too, the local members of SAMM requested that this research was commissioned because they want to tell *their* story, and to be involved in helping shape robust guidelines for how journalists should treat and interact with the families of victims of murder and manslaughter. This study is unique and innovative and adds significant knowledge to an under researched area.

## Research Approach

### Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research was to explore how the media report on victims of murder and manslaughter.

This study has investigated two key issues. First of all it identifies and examines the relationship between newspaper journalists and the victims' families. Secondly, it explores the impact of media reporting on family members of those bereaved through murder and manslaughter in Northern Ireland.

The key objectives were:

1. To review literature on newspaper reporting of crime, specifically on how victims are represented
2. To undertake a thematic content analysis of newspaper reporting of murder and manslaughter in Northern Ireland
3. To examine the relationship between newspaper journalists and the victims' families through the voices of the familial experience
4. To uncover how families of victims feel about how the media report on cases of murder and manslaughter
5. To utilise the findings to make further recommendations on how these sensitive stories should be reported to minimise further trauma to the families

### Methods

The research involved a variety of research techniques including:

- Conducting a literature review of academic and other sources
- Undertaking a thematic content analysis of newspaper reporting on cases of murder and manslaughter to provide context for the research
- Primary research in the form of semi-structured interviews with a sample of the victims' families.

Recruitment for the victims' families was undertaken through SAMM NI. An advertisement was placed in the SAMM NI support magazine asking for



participants who would be willing to take part in the research. A sample of those who responded to the advert and who were willing to volunteer to become involved in the study were contacted in writing by the researchers. Participants were provided with an information sheet; interview schedule, list of support groups and a consent form.

In addition to the interviews, newspaper reports were provided by the participants which helped to contextualise the study. Thematic analysis of these reports<sup>2</sup> plus the participant's interview responses led to the identification of a number of substantive themes which are developed throughout the remainder of this report.

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<sup>2</sup> We have deliberately not included the headlines or content of the reports in this study to protect the anonymity of the families.

## Substantive Themes

As mentioned in the preceding section a number of clear identifiable themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews and from the newspaper reports.

These were:

- The initial contact the family had with the journalists
- The content of the newspaper reports
- Recommendations and guidelines for journalists who report on these sensitive cases

### Initial contact the family had with journalists

This theme is concerned with how the journalists initiated contact with the families. Overall the participants felt that the media were intrusive and insensitive in their approach which exacerbated the trauma felt by the families of losing a loved one. How the journalists made contact with the families was a fundamental issue that emerged from the interview findings and one that each of the families had various experiences of. Some respondents noted that the journalists were extremely persistent; some felt they had been deceived while other respondents noted the journalists were just ruthless in their approach to them. None of the families interviewed voiced a positive experience during the initial contact with journalists and indeed commented that the insensitive nature of the journalists approach added further upset to them at this already distressing period in their lives. The quotations below summarise the feelings of the families interviewed. They demonstrate that the journalistic approach must be radically altered as to how bereaved families are approached by the news media.

*Every time we went in and out of the gate they were huddled there screaming at us...*

*They started to bombard me at home with phone calls...looking for an interview*

*Someone from [local radio station] posed as a member of public to get information he 'put himself as someone who knew us*

*He told my granny he was a friend of the family and said I'm here for your family, what happened?*

The new PCC guidelines appear to have taken account of the aforementioned issue as they stipulate that journalists must not engage in harassment and in cases involving personal grief journalists must approach the grieving family with sympathy and discretion. This clearly places the responsibility on the journalists to adopt a mature and sensitive attitude in attempting to secure a 'story'. If the family do not wish to speak to reporters the PCC advise that an email should be sent to them to help to prevent further unwanted approaches from the Press (PCC, 2011). However, it is also acknowledged by the researchers that distressed families would be unaware that they could take such action as they would have no reason to be familiar with how to deal with the media, or even what the role of the PCC is. Therefore if the family feel they have been treated unfairly by the media then SAMM NI could provide guidance on how to report the specific journalist or newspaper to the PCC.

### **The content of newspaper reports**

Within the broader theme of the content of newspaper reports a number of distinct sub-themes emerged which require separate attention. These include the sensationalisation of the tragic events, inaccuracies regarding the victim and/ or their family, inappropriate published photographs or images and the families' experience of the media content.

#### *Sensationalisation*

Many of the families voiced their shock and embarrassment at how the circumstances of such a tragedy could be sensationalised. They felt that this detracted from the circumstances of the incident and left them feeling powerless and that their wishes and interviews had been abused by the journalists. Two of the most commonly expressed words were 'salacious' and 'cheap' and it was suggested that sensationalisation will help to make a report on death more 'newsworthy'.

The following quotations from the respondents highlight the aforementioned troublesome issue of sensationalisation.

*[They picked] out the juiciest bits to sensationalise*

*I refused to buy [the newspapers] because of the salacious crap...every day of the trail it was made out, highlighted, pinpointed.*

*Too much emphasis is placed on getting the story – newspapers out to sell newspapers – so many assumptions made; you are inclined to believe what the newspaper has written*

*People believe what they read*

*If the death had been attributed to conflict or paramilitaries there would have been more media coverage, but because it wasn't, there wasn't.*

*The style of reporting was very impersonal*

*It's just that you feel kind of stupid, you sort of feel that you are cheapening the whole episode because you are talking to a newspaper about it. Maybe that's because we are like that but I felt cheap and I felt that I shouldn't be doing this and then the police came in and we were surrounded by people we didn't want to be surrounded by it was constant all the time it never let up*

*The headlines are just crazy some of the headlines read like Agatha Christie*

#### *Inaccuracies*

Overall there were some discrepancies between the families on how accurately the media reported on the death of their family member. Generally families either thought that the media reporting was 'fairly accurate' or a completely inaccurate portrayal. With regard to the former, a few of the families were satisfied that the information they had given to the journalists was accurately presented in the newspaper. However, many more families commented that many inaccuracies were printed; these included the family details of the victim, their age, and even their background. The printing of such inaccurate information was particularly distressing for the families and the researchers feel that greater care must be taken by journalists to ensure that simple factual information is accurately represented.

The following quotations serve to illuminate the discrepancies regarding the accuracy of media reporting.

*I would say that nine times out of ten if not ten out of ten these reports are taken and someone else does the writing I think that is where the insensitivity comes in they don't double check with the person who took the notes and they could say*

*well I'm not really sure about this wee bit so I'll just make this bit up without realising that an inaccuracy can be really upsetting*

*The inaccuracies made me mad. When people rung up I said I didn't want to hear it. It was so terrible the way that things had happened that I just felt I couldn't take anymore. It was very distressing, people who have phoned and said I just want to warn you, don't lift the paper*

*What was in the paper was fairly accurate and I know they didn't have all the details because he did a whole lot more...than what was printed. And I'm glad they didn't go into detail that way*

*If the family have provided an interview it should be given to them before it is printed because accuracy is everything nobody has the guts to challenge them and they think they can get away with it*

According to the PCC Editors' Code of Practice, the Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information (PCC, 2011). That said, the researchers feel that greater care must be adopted by the journalists to prevent inaccurate information being published, especially because this is something that is very easy to get 'right' if the families have taken the time to provide the information in the first place.

### *Images*

This sub-section is concerned with the imagery contained within the media reports. The main areas of contention reported by the family members was the harassment they suffered in the journalists' quest to obtain pictures of the grieving family; the lack of permission to publish pictures, or awareness that the pictures were going to be published in the papers and the upset that this caused.

*She took the photo at the grave which I took exception to because...I just felt like you know we weren't those type of people we didn't like sensationalism and it made us feel cheap I just felt it cheapened us as a family, I thought it made it look like we were yobby types getting our photo taken anywhere, it was done to sensationalise it and I thought it was awful.*

*Even whenever the church doors opened there was a mass of snapping went on*

*Whenever we were coming out of the church they were there standing across the road and the next day there were photos in the paper*

*Look at those photographs, they are disgusting. We didn't even know they were being taken and the next day our phone never stopped with people ringing up in fury*

*I gave them one photo – I don't know where they got the rest*

*[The photo] showed [the victim] being brought out of the house in a body-bag*

*I don't want to open my paper and see someone lying dead*

In order to safeguard family members from harassment by reporters attempting to take pictures of the deceased or their family, the new PCC guidelines state that journalists must not engage in intimidation, harassment or persistent pursuit; they must not persist in...pursuing or photographing individuals once asked to desist; nor remain on their property when asked to leave and must not follow them (PCC, 2011). If requested they must identify themselves and whom they represent. It is hoped that this guidance will go some way to ensuring that other families will not be subjected to the same insensitivity.

### *Experiences*

The families reported feeling a variety of emotions stemming from their experiences with the news media. Overall, these emotions had quite negative connotations with the families reporting feeling 'used', 'powerless' and with some more extreme descriptions of feeling 'besieged' and 'neglected'. Furthermore, the following quotations also highlight the impact that the media intrusion had on the family during what was already a particularly stressful and upsetting period.

*A part of me didn't want to read them but I became bloody obsessive with buying every single newspaper I could find to see if there was anything in it to see what lies they were telling this time. I would rather see for my self than have someone say to me did you see such and such because someone would read it and maybe take a different slant on it, so I needed to see things for myself but they did compound the hurt and really, really devastate the family*

*Every bit of the house was locked*

*They need to be more accurate, they give themselves a bad name. Then they hound you and just shove the mic in your face. They lie and they've no call to lie. They just make everything so much harder.*

*The other paper portrayed the offender as a great guy with picture of him with a smiling face. That was the hardest, I was so cross – I wrote and said why? There was no consideration and no response*

*My name was never mentioned and I was never once asked for an interview. I was just a sibling, I didn't count*

### **Recommendations and guidelines for journalists**

One essential component of this research was to discover how the journalists and bereaved families interacted with one and other. From this interaction, we the researchers felt it fundamentally important that those families should be afforded a voice in how journalists and the news media generally should deal with traumatic and sensitive news reports. As mentioned in the Introduction to this report and prior to this research being concluded the PCC did issue guidance on dealing with attention from the media after the death of a loved one. However, this research suggests this recently published guidance does not go far enough from the viewpoint of the family members. Additional suggestions and recommendations for how the journalists should engage with bereaved family members are illustrated in the following quotations.

A number of salient points emerged regarding issues of consent, permission and respect. Overall the families agreed that there should be some form of Code of Practice, however, the guidance published, as mentioned earlier, fails to take into account some of the following suggestions. The researchers feel the guidance should reflect some of these concerns and comments to mitigate the sense of trauma that the families will already be experiencing during this difficult time.

*Yes a code of practice...I think if journalists contacted the police through the family liaison officer and that police officer contacted the family and asked if they wanted to talk to the Press ...but I think if that there some sort of code of practice of something a way of working to standard but then journalists will break it anyway but if we don't try...*

*I don't honestly think they need to interview families at all why not just say this tragedy has happened to this family and report the facts under the circumstances of the death has occurred and that's it, why do families, why do we have to talk about it*

*I think they should contact the likes of us [family] about whether we want anything reported or not rather than just put it in. But it's not good that they contact you immediately because you aren't thinking anyway, but maybe down the line to have the option, but I would have to say they have never bothered me. But I know some people would have problems where they are getting to them and things like that*

*The way the journalists report this is completely all wrong. I was the next of kin, because we didn't want any publicity, we know who the person was and we know what their wishes would have been and he would not have wanted that rubbish told to the paper. There should be guidelines and it should be what the next of kin want. Immediate family should have a say of what goes in the paper*

*There needs to be an ongoing relationship with the family, they [journalists] shouldn't be as abrupt and nasty, if the editor Okays the story, the family should get a copy – we're in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all they have to do is email it. The Press should be asking if it is okay to publish stories and pictures*

*Let people see it before it is printed*

*Families [should be] given an opportunity to decide whether they want anything in the papers, [and] to what extent*



## Conclusions

As described in the Introduction to this report crime reporting is a 'staple' of the media machine, this is because reports concerning death, particularly in sudden, or unusual circumstances are particularly 'newsworthy'. However at the centre of such tragic circumstances are a bereaved family, who are experiencing a particularly distressing and upsetting time in their lives. The findings of this research suggest that journalists in many cases need to be much more sensitive and humane in their approach and dealings with the families and they must take much greater care in what they report, ensuring that the information is accurate to prevent further heartache. As noted earlier by Cote and Simpson (2000) if news practices take trauma into account their stories could actually help the families of victims because the better reporting about trauma can help readers gain empathy for the suffering of victims and their families and will increase everyone's awareness about the powerful role that trauma plays in peoples collective lives.

The families who were interviewed as part of this research process undoubtedly had varying negative experiences of journalists and the media in general and it is not the intention of this report to criticise the media machine as a whole, rather it serves to highlight that the journalists and news media need to take much greater cognisance of the fact that reporting on cases of murder and manslaughter, the bereaved families have become different people emotionally and are attempting to deal with shock, immense upset, and intrusion into what are normally their very private lives.

Whilst we acknowledge that the PCC has since issued guidance for families on dealing with attention from the media after the death of a loved one, the research findings contained herein suggest that this guidance does not go far enough and relies heavily on the journalists re-evaluating how they interact with the bereaved families. It is unclear what measures are put in place to ensure that this will happen. Furthermore, some of the suggestions proposed by the families interviewed may be usefully incorporated to this guidance as they themselves have already had firsthand experience of dealing with such media attention, and are best placed to make a valuable contribution to these new guidelines.

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## Appendix