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The News Values of Court Reporting

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ABSTRACT

Reporting the courts on behalf of the public is one of the traditional tasks of local newspapers. Yet in the UK, twin financial crises affecting both the local media market and the criminal justice system have led to concerns over the sustainability of court reporting. Furthermore, the practice of reporting to the courts has arguably been under-explored, especially when set against media coverage of crime generally. This article seeks to establish insights into the quality and quantity of contemporary court reporting in the UK's local press. It analyses content published on the websites of six prominent daily newspapers, using Steve Chibnall's 1977 work on crime news values as a framework. The article finds that daily court coverage remains widespread, especially at key titles owned by the UK's largest newspaper publisher, Reach, potentially challenging narratives around the decline of public interest journalism in the local press. It also develops a list of the news values of court reporting, as distinct from crime reporting, for the first time.

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Introduction

"Justice must not only be done, but should manifestly and undoubtedly be seen to be done". (*Rex v Sussex Justices; Ex parte McCarthy* [1924] 1 KB 256). Lord Chief Justice Hewart's pithy phrase has often been quoted in the century since he uttered it, while quashing a conviction for dangerous driving over a conflict of interest involving a law clerk. Hewart was himself a former journalist, for the *Manchester Guardian*, so it perhaps is not surprising media scrutiny of legal processes would be of interest to him. Since Hewart was on the bench the role of journalists in reporting on our courts has only become more important. There has been a long-term decline in public attendance at court hearings in the UK (Lemmings 2012; McBarnet 1981; Mulcahy 2011). This means citizens depend on the media to relay details of cases (Marsh and Melville 2014; Moran 2014; Tilley 2014). Reporting the courts has long been considered a central way in which the media can fulfil the normative function of acting as a watchdog (Nerone 2012) by scrutinising institutions such as the local justice system (Matthews 2017; Rodrick 2014). In England and Wales, national guidance describes open justice as a

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default position and clarifies courts should have dedicated press seats in courtrooms and private spaces for reporters to work where possible (HM Courts and Tribunals Service 2022). Yet while the UK's written press has broadly maintained a commitment to covering the daily activities at local criminal courts, it is now the only part of the media that regularly does so (Jones 2021). Even then reporters are seldom seen covering the everyday proceedings of the lower magistrates' courts, where all cases begin and most end (Chamberlain et al. 2019; NUJ 2022).

We may not see all justice being done but local journalism offers us a glimpse. With court coverage at a premium, how and why those reporters who remain on the beat choose to publish one story and not another is worthy of further inquiry. Classic studies of news production (eg Epstein 1973; Fishman 1980; Gans 1979; Tuchman 1978) revealed news companies as operating in the service of profit and efficiency, rather than democratic knowledge. They generally portrayed journalists as caught between wanting to achieve the normative functions of journalism amid the pressures of media workplaces, especially the structure of a working day and the vital importance of deadlines. Drechsel (1978) identified time as the key obstacle to thorough court reporting too, with reporters focusing mostly on fast turnaround one-off stories rather than broader legal issues and their implications.

The relevance of those studies has waned as technology has changed the way journalism is practiced (Cottle 2007; Stonbely 2015). Speed has increased with reporters under pressure to be "always on" through their mobiles and laptops (Anderson 2013; Robinson 2011), publishing stories more regularly to help their news brands be prominent online and remain a relevant part of the local news ecosystem (Usher 2018; Wheatley and O'Sullivan 2017). The problem of identifying news values in court reporting has been further complicated by a succession of crises in both the UK's local media and its justice system. Legacy newspapers have faced uncertainty amid financial decline and mergers, leaving dwindling editorial teams to service burgeoning websites and social feeds alongside print products (Cairncross 2019; Nielsen 2015). In England and Wales, two tranches of court closures since 2010 left many towns without a criminal court, obliging all involved to travel to centralised complexes and potentially making local justice less accessible (Adisa 2018; Jones 2021; Townend and Welsh 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic led to almost overnight digitisation of many court functions with reporters able to dial into hearings remotely, depending on both technology and sometimes laborious processes (Bowcott 2020; Reardon et al. 2021; Townend and Magrath 2021), although there was a wide variation in ease of accessibility between courts (Bar Council 2024; PA Media 2022). The article examines the news values of court reporting amid this challenging professional context and synthesises the data to generate an original set of values specifically applicable to court journalism.

Literature Review

Academic studies of news values are often traced back to Galtung and Ruge (1965). They identified 12 factors including frequency, unexpectedness and references to elite nations and people, which make an event more likely to become a published story. Yet as Parks (2019) argued, lists of news values were already a regular feature of textbooks, with categories such as timeliness, proximity, prominence, unusualness, impact, human interest

and conflict having a “consensus” quality. De Maeyer (2020) countered the proliferation of criteria proposed by scholars has served to obscure how events become news, precisely the thing such interventions are supposed to illuminate. However, Mast and Temmerman (2021) banged the drum for news values, prefacing a special issue of *Journalism Studies* by describing it as a solid and productive research tradition, involving key scholarly questions such as what constitutes news and how it comes about.

As implied by De Maeyer’s critique, the Galtung and Ruge list has often been refreshed and challenged. Shunning the news values approach, Shoemaker (1996) considered we are “hardwired” to find certain types of bad news of interest, as we have an innate desire to know what threats may exist in an environment. Harcup and O’Neill’s widely cited *Journalism Studies* paper from 2001 argued some of Galtung and Ruge’s list had lost resonance, highlighting “frequency” as a value rendered artificial by the growing power of modern public relations techniques. They produced a list of 10 values and followed this up later (2017) with 15, aimed at further updating the criteria with new qualities such as “shareability”. They also put “exclusivity” at the top of their later list, echoing Schultz (2007) who noted getting a story first is sometimes given priority over all other news values. This reflects an apparently growing importance for “scoops”, as the search for surprising and exclusive news becomes ever more significant within journalism (Stromback, Karlsson, and Hopmann 2012).

UK local newspapers moved away from publishing reports of public events verbatim to presenting articles in a fashion more recognisable to modern eyes during the early twentieth century, with selection criteria and news values such as “conflict” and “drama” shared informally among journalists (O’Reilly 2022). Similarly, while court stories had traditionally been grouped on inside pages (Soothill 2009), both court and crime news became more prominent with sensational stories commonplace in the local press (Engel 1996; Roodhouse 2018). The trend for focusing on eye-catching crimes has, if anything, intensified as cuts have led to increasing pressure on staff time (Aldridge 2007). Harcup (2020) argued crime news is an area particularly at risk of being packaged at the convenience of time-poor journalists, keen for a guaranteed exclusive, with less focus on stories of greater normative value. Yet Engelmann, Luebke, and Kessler (2021) suggested the increasing tracking of stories online by newspapers mean we may be amid a further shift in editorial news production towards stories most relevant to the audience. This might be expected to lead to an increase in crime and court coverage, given the traditional centrality of such stories to the local news agenda (Franklin and Murphy 1991; O’Neill and O’Connor 2008; Røssland 2007; Usher 2024; Walker 1996). More recent research (Jones 2021) and industry perspectives (NUJ 2022) have underlined the continuing popularity of court stories online. However, Wilkinson et al. (2021) found “crime” was one of the topics of least interest to audiences, potentially undermining that traditional importance.

A key contribution to news values remains Steve Chibnall’s *Law-and-Order News* (1977). Although focused on crime rather than court reporting, Chibnall’s typology of “professional imperatives” offers the deepest academic examination of news values as they relate to journalism on matters of criminal justice. No similar exercise has been attempted specifically on the courts. This is surprising given the traditional importance of court reporting to “public interest” normative accounts of journalism, especially local journalism. This is especially so when noting other journalism beats, from sport (Lee and Choi

2009; Sherwood et al. 2017) to travel (Cocking 2018) and local journalism in general (Hess and Waller 2016) which have been given the news values treatment. It is time for the courts to take their turn.

Methodology

Arising from this gap in specialised knowledge, three research questions were formulated for this study.

RQ1: What characteristics can be identified in contemporary court reporting by local UK newspapers?

RQ2: What news values can be identified in this court reporting?

RQ3: How do these news values compare with those identified by Steve Chibnall in the 1970s?

Two forms of analysis were carried out on articles published on the websites of selected UK local newspapers, one quantitative and one qualitative. Before outlining those methods, I will explore how the relevant titles were chosen.

In the UK, the terms “local” and “regional” are used interchangeably to describe non-national media outlets. Journalism online is widely produced and read across and outside traditional geographical boundaries. Local news brands routinely publish national content based on general trending topics with little obvious local connection. This helps attract page views from readers elsewhere leading to extra advertising revenue which, although valuable, remains far below the sums being earned by the technology platforms which dominate online advertising (Mediatique 2018; Ponsford 2024). This blurring of local and global online, with practices from each influencing the other, has been defined as “glocalisation” (Baines 2012; Rao 2010).

This process has continued as local print media companies have faced financial headwinds and editorial cutbacks, threatening to diminish their contribution to communities (Cawley 2017; Hill 2016). Yet scholars argue even struggling newspapers retain a “keystone” role in their local information ecologies (Nielsen 2015; Nygren 2019). These trends make it harder to analyse the “local” in local journalism (Hess and Waller 2014a; Napoli et al. 2017). Even discussing “newspapers” can be misleading, when this study considers websites produced by media companies under a brand associated with a legacy print product. But, for clarity, this article uses “local newspaper” to mean a publisher of print and online news content predominantly linked to a particular city.

Six newspapers covering major cities were selected, two each from the three biggest UK local press groups. The *Manchester Evening News* and *Liverpool Echo* from Reach, Newsquest titles the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* and *York Press* and the Leeds-based *Yorkshire Evening Post* and Sheffield’s *The Star* owned by National World. The latter purchased struggling rival JPI Media in 2021, ending the era of the “big four” in the UK’s local press (Sharman 2022). One goal was to include similar “sister” publications from each company. Each city retains a Crown court which its newspaper would traditionally cover, along with magistrates’ courts. However, although all are in the north of England, the metropolitan areas traditionally served by each title vary in size limiting broader conclusions.

All court stories published by the websites of the six titles over the seven days beginning Monday 7th November 2022 were analysed. An individual week was chosen in part

to help gain insights into how newspapers cover ongoing trials and the extent to which the publication of articles about the conclusion of a case are delayed until a future date. Searches were carried out within each website for the terms “Crown court” and “magistrates’ court” during the period. A total of 180 articles formed the corpus. While convenient, keywords can be frustrating, with online searches leading to discrepancies from one search to the next (Abel 2013; Upchurch 2012). Yet using websites allows titles from various locations to be readily consulted, strengthening the analysis. Civil and coroners’ courts were not specifically considered as they are not a daily part of the beat of most court reporters (Jones 2021). Indeed, a lack of coroner’s courts coverage in the local press has been noted (Binns and Arnold 2021). However, two inquest stories did feature where those hearings were held in magistrates’ courts buildings. Following Harcup and O’Neill (2017), I carried out a close reading of each text then considered and evaluated the content of each. Like them, and others (eg Brighton and Foy 2007; Parks 2019) who have come to the study of news values having worked in professional journalism, although in my case not for any of these newspapers. I relied partly on that familiarity with how journalism is produced to aid this process.

To answer RQ1, I conducted a quantitative content analysis to identify details which might help illuminate the selection and treatment of each story, through the following characteristics: whether the case was heard at Crown or magistrates’ court, the length of the story, whether it included visual material such as a photograph or video, if it relied on a press release and whether it featured a case from a location traditionally considered out of that newspaper’s main circulation area, known within journalism as a “patch”. To assess whether it had drawn on a press release, online searches were conducted on quotes included in articles to see if they matched items published previously on police, Crown Prosecution Service, council or other websites. The use of a press release as the main or only source for a story suggests no in person reporting of the case took place, obliging the journalist to rely on a potentially one-sided version of events. The “patch” was the general metropolitan area surrounding each city, such as Greater Manchester for the *MEN* and Merseyside for the *Echo*. Findings are displayed in Table 1. I also checked the byline and whether a reporter was listed as a specialist court journalist, or whether the story had been written by someone else.

Table 1. Analysis of court stories.

	<i>Manchester Evening News (MEN)</i>	<i>Liverpool Echo</i>	<i>Bradford Telegraph and Argus (T&A)</i>	<i>York Press</i>	<i>Yorkshire Evening Post (YEP) (Leeds)</i>	<i>The Star (Sheffield)</i>
Total number of stories	52 (43 Crown, 9 Magistrates')	47 (31C, 16M)	29 (14C, 15M)	13 (6C, 7M)	22 (20C, 2M)	17 (13C, 4M)
Average length of articles in words	695	652	320	386	401	625
Primary visual material	51 photo 1 video	50 photo 0 video	25 photo 4 video	12 photo 1 video	0 photo 22 video	2 photo 15 video
Based on the press release	10/52	13/50	19/29	4/13	2/22	5/17
Out of patch	18/52	6/50	4/29	0/13	0/22	0/17

To strengthen the methodology, 100 of the articles were coded by a second person as part of an Intercoder Reliability Test (ICR). This technique helps assess the rigour and transparency of manual coding and signal the reliability of the work (Besen-Cassino and Cassino 2023 O'Connor and Joffe 2020;). The ICR score was 91.4%. For RQ2 and RQ3, I carried out a qualitative thematic analysis of the sample using the typology set by Chibnall (1977) as a coding sheet. I identified where those “imperatives” could be found and assessed potential alternative news values. Towards the end of this article, I will propose a list of news values in court reporting. Further information about how these methods were operationalised, including the ICR test, are in Appendices 1 and 2.

Findings—Characteristics

Total Number of Stories

The two Reach titles published 99 court stories, more than half the sample. Reach has been criticised for compromising quality local reporting and cutting staff amid declining print revenue, stiff competition in the digital advertising market and the servicing of corporate pension liabilities (eg Cairncross 2019; House of Commons DCMS Committee 2023; Partridge 2023). Yet an average of seven court stories per day appeared on both the *MEN* and *Echo* websites, underlining a commitment to court coverage, at least in these major metropolitan areas. Four titles published more from Crown courts. Moran (2014) found magistrates’ hearings covered more widely than Crown in the local press. Yet a decline in magistrates’ coverage was later noted by Chamberlain et al. (2019), who found journalists in Bristol reporting on just one case in a week. This study finds more widespread published coverage of the lower courts but, as implied by that earlier study, much did not involve in-person reporting.

The two titles to cover more from magistrates’ courts were owned by Newsquest. The *Bradford T&A* often explicitly based stories on court documents, as well as police press releases. They were sometimes published several days after the hearings. The tally of 15 included six by reporters for previously distinct weekly titles in Skipton and Keighley, now absorbed into the main *T&A* online brand and considered as such here. These were not necessarily a result of reporters continuing to attend those local magistrates’ courts. Rather, the brief copy usually stated they were written up from court documents. They contained no colour such as quotes from solicitors, strongly suggesting reporters did not attend. The two National World titles also did not report directly from a magistrates’ court, with both *YEP* magistrates’ stories and all four from the *Star* based on police press releases.

In-person reporting from the magistrates’ court was a feature elsewhere. The *Press* journalist combined Crown court duties with four magistrates’ cases. On each occasion the defendant pleaded guilty, a factor which allows a journalist to cover all elements of the case heard in open court in a time-efficient fashion (Jones 2021). Topics included an ex-prisoner selling stolen bikes on eBay and a hit-and-run driver sentenced for leaving the scene of an accident where a child was injured. Without the journalist’s presence at court, these stories would not have come more widely into the public domain.

The Reach papers did more, with seven of the nine magistrates’ stories in the *MEN* and nine of 16 in the *Echo*, apparently based on in-person reporting. This was partly explained

by two cases heard in Liverpool. One was an initial court appearance of a man charged with murder, important enough to be liveblogged. The other related to a woman filmed performing a sex act on a man in public in a video clip extensively shared on social media. This got two articles each in both the *Echo* and *MEN* with content shared between the titles. The interplay of an embarrassing crime caught on video leading to outsized media coverage of a formal court appearance echoes the critique of Hess and Waller (2014b) that social platforms can be a form of “digital pillory” in which individuals can be publicly shamed for relatively minor misdemeanours. The story was even covered by the *T&A*, as the defendant was originally from Bradford. But without a sister paper in Liverpool, its copy relied on a Crown Prosecution Service press release.

Five of the six newspapers continued to employ at least one dedicated court reporter. The *MEN* had two, one for the city’s main Crown court and a second with a remit extending across the second Crown court and magistrates. The title also often used courts copy produced by other Reach titles, usually partly rewritten to provide or emphasise a Greater Manchester angle. The *Echo*, *YEP*, *Star* and *Press* had one specialist each, who published the bulk of court stories for each title. The exception was the *T&A*, which did not have a named court reporter on staff at the time of the sample. Nine *T&A* journalists had court bylines during the week, although most stories were brief with just two producing articles with extensive details such as quotes from solicitors, suggesting they were the only ones who attended in person.

The Reach stories were longer. The *MEN* averaged 695 words. The *Echo* figure was 652 reflecting more shorter items from the magistrates’ courts. The *Echo* also published three long-form articles following the conclusion of a murder case. The longest was 2226 words and was an extensive “backgrounder” recapping key details of the trial. Two of those were republished by the *MEN*, as the crime took place in Haydock, between Liverpool and Manchester. The greater availability of space online may have encouraged longer stories in recent years, as Moran (2014) found no court articles above 500 words in his single-day snapshot study.

Having visual material alongside written court stories is essential to aid the visibility and shareability of articles on social platforms (Greer 2010; Harcup and O’Neill 2017; Simons and Bosland 2020). This is a contrast to traditional print journalism. Coleman et al’s study of the news ecology in Leeds found most stories in the *YEP* to be descriptive and lacking in accompanying photos, leaving the news “in black and white tones, both literally and figuratively” (2016, 59). Much has changed even since then in the modern online-first publishing landscape. In this study, every single article had either photos and/or a video at the top. In all but the shortest articles, multiple photos were published.

Considering only the main image or video, differences in approach can be seen. The Reach titles used a still picture on all but one occasion. In 16 of the 99 *MEN* or *Echo* articles, the main image was a “snatch photograph” of the defendant outside court. Cuts have affected the use of staff photographers, and this study finds only the Crown Courts at Manchester now regularly have a photographer taking snatch images. Those published by the *Echo* were either from Manchester or related to the Liverpool public sex acts story. That was the only occasion a professional photographer appeared to attend court in any of the other five cities. Yet, despite previous research indicating a growth in court reporters themselves coming under pressure to take snatch photos on their phones (Jones 2021) there were no examples of this. The other images were either

mugshots of defendants and other images supplied by the police, generic images of crime scenes sourced from Google Street View, or stock images including of court buildings and police stations.

National World put videos ahead of still images on all but two occasions. These included the only attempt at TV-style reporting, with 12 articles in *The Star* including a piece-to-camera delivered by the title's court journalist. Another innovation was the sole use of a paywall. A single article and accompanying reporter video on a stabbing trial were available only to subscribers. Many of the other National World videos, especially in the *YEP*, had no connection to the story in question and were instead generic round-ups of other stories appearing on the papers' websites that day, but still embedded at the top of the court articles.

Press releases are one of the key resources relied on for information by local reporters (O'Neill and O'Connor 2008; Williams, Harte, and Turner 2015). Journalists can also sometimes use basic information released by courts to compile lists of defendants and their punishments. Yet covering the courts in person allows those reporters not only a chance to reflect a case in more detail, but also provides a steady stream of exclusive stories not covered by rivals and never circulated in press release or listings form. In this sample, relatively little use was made of press releases, and this was often limited to updates from the police about when someone had been charged and would soon be appearing at court.

The *YEP* used no press releases for Crown Court stories, with 18 of its 20 articles written by the same reporter and full of detail that could only have come from watching proceedings. As already noted, the general exception was the *Bradford T&A*, which relied on press releases and especially court documents. All 15 of its magistrates' courts stories used these sources. This allowed the title to give a flavour of goings-on before local magistrates. But these pieces usually only ran to a few lines with basic details.

Traditional definitions of local news tied newsworthy items to a newspaper's geographical circulation area or "patch" (Franklin and Murphy 1991). Despite having websites which can be read around the world, most papers in the sample retain a focus on only court stories from their areas. Indeed, the *YEP*, *Star* and *Press* did not cover a court case from anywhere else. The Reach titles were more comfortable in looking further afield. The *Echo* ran six from either Manchester, Lancashire, North Wales or Shropshire, although each was on the fringes of the *Echo's* traditional circulation area or had a thin Liverpool connection. The *MEN* covered 18 court stories from outside Greater Manchester. These were mainly drawn from sister titles including the *Echo* and rewritten, usually with bylines for both an *MEN* editor and the original reporter. Some related to places close to Greater Manchester, but the *MEN* was the only title which republished stories from elsewhere in the UK with no local connection at all.

Chibnall's "Professional Imperatives"

Before moving on to the findings in response to RQ2 and RQ3, I will briefly discuss Chibnall's work further. *Law-and-Order News* was one of several noted studies of crime and the media in the 1970s. Tunstall (1971) argued stories about crime and the courts held little interest for advertisers making their publication largely about attracting audiences. Cohen (1972) highlighted how the media can be central in the creation of "moral panics" about potential or imagined threats to society from a particular group. Many of Chibnall's

insights were echoed by Hall et al. (1978), who considered newspapers tend to reproduce consensus because much of their work depends on relationships with those in policy elites who set the initial terms of how a new issue is interpreted. Hall et al noted newspapers will transpose statements made by those “primary definers” into a more everyday form of language suitable for their publication’s style, described as the paper’s “mode of address”, the journalists on titles having gradually learned how to write and construct articles for their outlets (see also Cotter 2010).

Revisiting Chibnall, Mawby (2010) highlighted the growth of police communications departments and the decline of resources within print journalism as factors behind the increasing dominance of the police in that relationship. Yet Greer and McLaughlin (2010) argued the press can become antagonistic when commentary about crime matters extends to columnists and editorial writers. Within court reporting, Donoghue (2007) suggested judges can assume the status of “primary definers” when interpreting laws which may have been framed vaguely, giving them greater flexibility to influence their application, potentially aided by media coverage.

Chibnall’s list of eight values can be summarised as follows.

1. Immediacy. Events or developments which have just happened. Chibnall argued a relative lack of context means events are shorn of alternative interpretations, so are fitted into existing broad narratives.
2. Dramatisation. Making an impact to grab the attention of potential audiences for commercial reasons. So, for example, it is easier to report on the disruptive actions of a group of protesters, rather than their arguments.
3. Personalisation. The cult of the star or celebrity. This carries over into serious news items, with an increased focus on individuals such as, perhaps, union leaders, with those figures achieving a notoriety beyond their actual influence. Chibnall argued this personality focus obscures discussion of structural causes.
4. Simplification. Chibnall described this as an oversimplification and the glossing over of subtle complexities, which he considered leaves the actions described by news stories understandable only at a mundane level.
5. Titillation. Scandalous news, often blended with a self-righteous tone.
6. Conventionalism. The situation of emerging phenomena within existing structures of meaning. The journalist as interpreter, translating the specialised language of government, finance and so on, into a digestible format.
7. Structured access. News stories grounded within the views of experts. Only those regarded as legitimate can comment, closing off other perspectives.
8. Novelty. An element of randomness. This includes the desire to keep stories alive by finding fresh angles.

News Values

Considering immediacy first, most stories in the sample were published on the day of a case or the following day. A small number of “Friday” stories were held for Sunday, presumably to help spread content to a quiet time of the week. The *MEN* ran five non-immediate court articles, timeless stories pre-prepared for the weekend about historic

cases. The *Bradford T&A* published six stories that were not immediate, each about magistrates' cases based on court documents.

Chibnall considered the fast turnaround nature of court reporting forced stories into general, pre-established narratives. Yet the contemporaneous nature of reporting the courts is unavoidable. Section 4(1) of the Contempt of Court Act 1981 provides journalists with a defence against contempt so long as their coverage consists of "a fair and accurate report of legal proceedings, held in public, published contemporaneously and in good faith". By publishing with immediacy, journalists are given some protection in law against inadvertently prejudicing a case (Jones 2023).

A further four of Chibnall's news values were almost ever-present: dramatisation, personalisation, simplification and conventionalism. Only 10 stories were coded as lacking dramatisation while none missed personalisation, simplification nor conventionalism. The only ones absent any sense of the dramatic were all short magistrates' court reports published by either the *T&A* or *Press*, based on court documents or press releases.

Personalisation was a theme Chibnall related specifically to the media's focus on celebrity matters. Indeed, a small number of stories in the sample did feature celebrities, most notably the ongoing rape trial of Manchester City footballer Benjamin Mendy, covered by the *MEN*. The general run of court reporting does not feature celebrities, but it does—and in this sample, without exception—include some kind of focus on, and personal details about, individual criminals. There were no articles about the justice system more generally, or where defendants were organisations.

Chibnall critiqued the simplification used by journalists to make stories more readable to a general audience, as "oversimplification". Yet although conventional reporting and writing techniques were a feature of all stories, one challenge came in the length and depth of stories, especially from the *Reach* titles. This follows Moran (2014) who argued the local press produced stories far closer to the reality of events than the national media. A further counter is evident in the extent to which mitigation given by defence lawyers is quoted, routinely outlining contextual factors such as drink and drug addiction or mental health problems which contributed to offending. These quotes are usually absent from stories based on police press releases. This further underlines the importance of in-person reporting in providing more subtleties of a case and in turn allaying Chibnall's concerns such complexities are lost when authority voices are dominant in narratives around crime.

Conventionalism, Chibnall's account of the way in which journalists relate stories to existing phenomena to allow their readers to make sense of them, was again ever present. Almost all stories involved reporting on proceedings at court following the established rhythms of justice. This often leads to a routine article format, with a defendant pleading or found guilty, details of their offence and punishment, then quotes from lawyers and the judge. At times colourful quotes can upset the order in which the article is written, but there were none in the sample which Chibnall might have considered "unconventional".

Chibnall used "titillation" as a way of describing a thirst for gossip about the lives of others. Only 15 stories did not feature evidence of it by this broad definition. But one theme was the prevalence of items about cases with a sexual element, including sexual abuse. Both the *MEN* and *Echo* published two stories each about the gruesome case of a sex offender found dead in an industrial estate in North Wales, having

apparently taken his own life by cutting off his own genitals. The man died in Bangor, 75 miles by road from Liverpool and 96 from Manchester. The coroner's inquest, featured in two of the stories, opened in Caernarfon, even further away. This is in the circulation area for one of the *Echo's* sister weekly titles the North Wales *Daily Post* (itself an offshoot of the former *Liverpool Daily Post*, a morning sister to the *Echo* which closed in 2013) and its associated website *North Wales Live*, which produced the original copy rewritten for publication in the *Echo* and *MEN*. Yet neither paper covered any other North Wales court stories, suggesting it was the lurid nature of this one that made it of interest, not any residual interest in ensuring audiences were kept up to date with that region.

Chibnall's notion of structured access concerns expert quotes in news stories. Hall et al. (1978) argued the speedy way in which journalistic content is created means dominant ideologies tend to be reproduced in media coverage. Similarly, Fishman (1980) considered journalists were more likely to treat as factual versions of events outlined by police and other authority spokespeople, because they are involved in upholding a normative order of "authorised knowers". Yet while this may have been a clear critique to make of crime reporting, where MPs, police chiefs and others might seek to make political headway from a crime issue, the picture is more complex within court reporting.

Only 25 stories were coded as featuring structured access in the form of quotes gleaned in reaction to a court case. Usually, these were taken from press releases available online, but on other occasions were not published elsewhere suggesting they were gathered through interviews or press conferences at court. Typically, those quoted were police or prosecutors. The voices of victims were heard relatively rarely. Exceptions included two murder cases relating to domestic violence, where victim impact statements read in court featured prominently in reporting. There were no clear examples of victims or their families being directly interviewed following a case, underlining the extent to which such material is now typically controlled by a police press office (Mawby 2010).

Most court reports do feature quotes from those with expertise. Munnik (2018) considered lawyers could become authorised knowers by developing journalist-source relationships and familiarity with media production processes. Yet that is not what lawyers, judges and magistrates quoted in most court stories are doing. They are putting the case or offering mitigation as part of their function in the criminal justice system and would be doing so whether a reporter was present or not. The only exception was an *MEN* story which extensively quoted a judge who used his sentencing remarks to call for football fans convicted of violence to be banned from attending future matches. But even then, the journalist was not relying on special access to gain such quotes, so there was little "structured" about it. This suggests the concept needs refining.

Novelty is the last of Chibnall's typology. The inclusion of a category for the sometimes-random quality of news is common in lists of news values. Any court case considered newsworthy by a reporter is likely to feature something out of the ordinary, especially when compared to predictable diary events such as political meetings or sporting fixtures. The two titles which published fewer "novelty" stories were the *MEN* and *T&A*. The *MEN's* lower tally was down to the volume of daily coverage it provided of ongoing trials. These included both Mendy's and that of Lucy Letby, a nurse later convicted of murdering seven babies in a hospital in Chester, although the week's proceedings in both trials were relatively routine with stories providing incremental updates on

evidence. The *T&A*'s less novel articles again concerned the humdrum magistrates' court stories curried from court documents.

The New News Values of Court Reporting

This brings us to the news values in court reporting, in response to RQ2. Any list of this nature cannot be exhaustive. The latter attempt by Harcup and O'Neill (2017) to codify news values ran to 15 categories, and even then they noted there would be exceptions. The same is surely true for the list that follows. But the sample analysed in this study suggests published court stories in UK newspapers tend to satisfy at least one, and usually most, of the following.

1. **Immediacy.** Court cases which happened earlier in the day, or on the previous day. This includes coverage of ongoing trials and liveblogs.
2. **Dramatisation.** Stories which allow a reporter to emphasise the dramatic nature of an incident.
3. **Personalisation.** Stories about the personal, often deviant, behaviour of individual criminals, particularly relating to violence and/or sexual crimes.
4. **Simplification.** Stories which can be quickly and easily summarised in the length of a typical news article.
5. **Visibility.** Where photos or videos are available to aid online visibility and shareability. If no bespoke content has been created and none supplied by the police or others, this also covers the use of generic or library material.
6. **Exclusivity.** In-person reporting at court from a journalist about cases not otherwise widely known. This differs from traditional notions of exclusivity in that criminal courts are generally open to the press and public, so court coverage is not exclusive to one journalist. But in practice only one reporter is often present giving their newspaper access to a story not covered elsewhere.
7. **Quotability.** A development of Chibnall's notion of "structured access", this relates to the use of quotes delivered in open court, either during witness evidence or in remarks by lawyers, judges, victims or others, which can provide a sensational or novel angle. Again, these quotes are effectively exclusive where only one journalist is present.
8. **Content sharing.** Stories recently published by a sister title, typically slightly rewritten to emphasise a local angle.
9. **Publicly accessible.** Stories based on press releases or court documents, published online and/or sent to media companies through email lists or other means. This includes items about forthcoming court appearances.

Conclusion

The continuing financial crisis in local journalism has led to concerns court reporting has declined in the UK's local press. The conclusions that can be drawn from this study about the validity of those concerns, and the extent to which they might apply elsewhere, are limited. It is focused on only six titles, albeit notable ones, from the north of England. Separate legal jurisdictions exist in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Trying to read insights

across to other parts of the UK is therefore potentially difficult, even before considering the rest of the world. The UK's unusually restrictive contempt regime constrains what can be published about a case once proceedings are active (Jones 2023). This again makes it tricky to compare with countries which have more open approaches. The sample considers criminal matters, not civil, so broader conclusions about other forms of legal coverage cannot readily be made either. Further research might consider in more detail the extent to which the voices of victims are represented, through trial coverage, impact statements and post-case interviews.

Yet this study has found court stories continue to be published daily by the UK's major newspaper companies. Mostly, they are based on in-person reporting by a specialist court journalist. Not every case of potential note will be covered. But residents of the six cities considered here can still gain an insight into activities in their local courts through the work of these newspapers. Of the three major UK local press publishers, Reach perhaps most often attracts criticism for how it operates. But its two titles here did the most court journalism. Both the *Manchester Evening News* and *Liverpool Echo* retain a strong commitment to making sure justice is seen to be done. This is perhaps less surprising when considering the large metropolitan areas served by these titles and the fact Manchester has two Crown Court complexes. Nevertheless, this output often represents the best traditions of local journalism, scrutinising the work of the criminal justice system in a style accessible to a broad readership.

This study might therefore offer reassurance to those fearful of a collapse in standards at major local press titles. But there is no room for complacency. The *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* struggled most to thoroughly keep across the courts in the chosen week. It was also the one without a specialist court reporter at the time of the sample, although it has since filled this role. This study underlines the value in retaining a court specialist to help maintain the quality and quantity of coverage.

Several of Chibnall's imperatives remain visible. Indeed, qualities such as simplification and conventionalism are omnipresent. Even everyday hearings feature processes and terminology unfamiliar to most readers and court reporters must use their skills to translate events into an easily understandable package. Chibnall would not have regarded simplification as a "quality" and I use the word advisedly. For him, the media is often guilty of oversimplifying events and not providing suitable context, hindering public understanding of why a crime has taken place. But the stories considered in this research offer a counterpoint.

Chibnall critiqued how coverage of criminal justice lacked context and nuance, prioritised authority narratives and reproduced dominant ideologies. Reporting of any notable crime and the police investigation does this because the media's main and often only sources of information are the police themselves and victims or witnesses, usually speaking via the police. But in court reporting, other voices do give context and alternative viewpoints through witness testimony and in mitigation. We hear them because journalists present in court write those words down and publish them in newspapers and on websites. We still hear them despite the financial challenges facing the local press. Without dedicated court reporters, open justice would become virtually closed, and we would be left with one-sided accounts provided by occasional police press releases. Industry leaders, policymakers and figures from the criminal justice system must all help make sure the press seats in the UK's courts do not empty any further.

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