John Tulloch

Printing devils: Reflections on the British press, the problem of ‘evil’ and fables of social dis-ease

In an era of unparalleled secularism, half of the British national press routinely invokes ‘evil’ as an explanatory tool. John Tulloch explores the paradox – and examines in detail the coverage of the ‘Karen Matthews scandal’

‘evil’ as an explanatory tool, deploying an essentially Manichean view of the world in the shape of monsters and saints, angels and devils, heroes and villains. Moral fables are constructed, stalked by a cast which includes demon paedophiles, marauding gangs of feral teenagers, terrorist fanatics, slothful social workers, wicked stepfathers, mothers from hell.

The longstanding marriage between British popular media and moral fables of villainy can be understood as a means of defending certain social values and confirming existing social hierarchies, whilst profitably entertaining a mass audience with sensationalist narratives of social danger and dis-ease. No less a figure than Paul Dacre, editor of the Daily Mail, told the Society of Editors in November 2008: ‘Since time immemorial public shaming has been a vital element in defending what are considered acceptable standards of social behaviour...For hundreds of years, the press has played a vital role in that process’ (Dacre 2008).

Although monstering might be regarded as coded into the DNA of popular journalism, Dacre’s public analysis indicates that this process is not a mere populist reflex but a deliberate newspaper strategy. Moral fables involving monsters create the most powerful Northcliffean ‘talking points’ – the key element in the circulation strategies of popular newspapers (Tulloch 2000). This demonstrates one of the limitations of the popular sociological term ‘moral panic’, which connotes a wholly irrational process. But Dacre’s analysis stops short of serious reflection. For philosophically, ‘evil’ is one of the knottiest of problems. Socrates notoriously regarded ‘evil’ simply as error. Aristotle saw it as a failure of rationality, a consequence of poor education and social conditioning. ‘Evil’ conduct resulted when a person’s:

- desires for pleasure, power or some other external goal have become so strong that they make him care too little or not at all about acting ethically. To keep such destructive inner forces at bay, we need to develop the proper habits and emotional responses when we are children, and to reflect intelligently on our aims when we are adults (Kraut 2008).

British tabloid culture is, in part, defined by its tendency to demonise and systematically create human objects of hatred. In this process, it utilises the concept of ‘evil’. Paradoxically, in an era of unparalleled secularism (despite the growth in minority faith communities), half of the British national press1 routinely invokes

As with attitudes to sexuality, it was Christianity that can be plausibly seen as revolutionising Western approaches to ‘evil’, and some contemporary philosophers dismiss the concept as an aberration springing from religion. For example, approaching the issue from an atheist stance, Anthony Grayling asserts:
There is no greater social evil than religion. It is the cancer in the body of humanity. Human credulity and superstition, and the need for comforting fables, will never be extirpated, so religion will always exist, at least among the uneducated... ‘Evil’ is first and foremost a religious notion. It means whatever a religion dislikes... Satan...is, in short, the representative and personification of things the church wished people to stop liking and doing (Grayling 2001: 33-5).

In Grayling’s terms these are ‘monster stories for older children’ whose function is to construct allegories on subjects that are an inescapable part of a human condition that humans find hard to confront (ibid: 200).

More plausibly, human ‘evil’ can be defined as ‘the suffering which results from morally wrong human choices...a synonym for extreme forms of moral wrong’ (Downie 1995: 254). A shift from the human subject to human action is distinctly comforting, although a definition that is confined to ‘suffering’ lacks conviction in the light of the known practice of systematic and deliberate slaughter, orchestrated by the state, as in Nazi Germany or Rwanda (see for example Straus 2006). But what precisely is going on when the press invokes ‘evil’? Consider the recent case of Karen Matthews and Michael Donovan.

The case of Karen Matthews
A chronology

Feb 19 Shannon Matthews, 9, of Moorside Estate, Dewsbury, Yorkshire, disappears on her way back from school
Feb 20 Her mother Karen Matthews makes BBC TV News appeal
Feb 20 - Mar 12 Police hunt involving escalating number of officers - by March 4 one tenth of Yorkshire police deployed, biggest inquiry since Yorkshire Ripper
Feb 26 Family and neighbours stage a vigil and many residents of Moorside join in the hunt
Feb 27 Karen Matthews appears on GMTV wearing white T-shirt ‘Have you seen Shannon Matthews?’ – first of several appearances
Mar 1 Karen Matthews Mother’s Day message to Shannon. Sun offers £20,000 reward
Mar 12 Sun increases its reward to £50,000
Mar 14 Police recover Shannon in flat of Michael Donovan, the uncle of Matthews’s then boyfriend, Craig Meehan, a mile from family home
Mar 17 Donovan charged with kidnap and false imprisonment

April 2 Police find child pornography on computer of Karen Matthews’s partner Craig Meehan
April 8 Karen Matthews charged with perverting the course of justice and child neglect
Sep 16 Craig Meehan jailed for 20 weeks
Nov 11 Trial of Donovan and Matthews starts in Leeds
Nov 13 Donovan attacked in Armley prison, Leeds, after media reports of leash alleged to restrain Shannon
Dec 4 Donovan and Matthews found guilty of kidnap, false imprisonment, perverting course of justice.

On 5 December all national newspapers carried extensive reports of the trial, lengthy back-ground stories, and interviews with a variety of participants, including family members and former partners. Headlines in the mainly compact ‘quality’ press2 focused on the extraordinar-ine twist in the tale – a mother kidnapping her own child to claim a reward - and the role of the state, including social services and benefit provision, with some reflection on what the case suggested about life in the poorest communities.

Headlines in the ‘quality’ newspapers on the Shannon Matthews case, 5 December 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Headline</th>
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| Independent         | S12.08
| The Guardian        | S12.08
| The Daily Telegraph  | S12.08
| The Times           | S12.08
| Daily Star          | S12.08

In contrast, headlines in the tabloid newspapers prioritised ‘evil’ – a description that derived from a statement after the verdict by Detective Superintendent Andy Brennan, who was reported as saying: ‘Karen Matthews is pure evil.’ Pure evil is an interesting formation – cod vernacular in one sense, meaning unmitigated, absolute, through and through etc. But a paradoxical dissonance is inherent in the formation – how can evil be ‘pure’? Shorn for the most part of its inverted commas, and sometimes of its doxical dissonance is inherent in the formation – how can evil be ‘pure’? Shorn for the most part of its inverted commas, and sometimes of its puzzling qualifier, Brennan’s ‘evil’ was seamlessly transposed into many of the tabloid headlines.

Table headlines, S.12.08

<table>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maddie’s Fund</td>
<td>GAVE EVIL MUM IDEA TO KIDNAP HER SHANNON pp 4-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>SHANNON PAIR GUILTY PURE EVIL. ‘Worst mum ever’ says Karen’s mother</td>
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Tabloid headlines, S.12.08

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Children were just a way of getting money from state p. 3
In contrast, headlines in the 'middlebrow' lower middle class tabloids, the Daily Mail and Daily Express, utilised ‘evil’ to a lesser extent and raised the role of social workers – always a live issue for these papers (as a metaphor for the ‘swollen’ welfare state, bureaucratic incompetence, the arrogance of theory and ‘ology’) but red-hot in the aftermath of the ‘Baby P’ case. The Daily Express also utilised a link to the most high profile case of child kidnapping of recent years – Madeleine McCann – which it had run continuously on its front page for most of 2008. The Daily Mail utilised the case to provide an example for the thesis that British society is ‘broken’ advanced by Conservative leader David Cameron consistently during 2008.

A comparison between the Sun’s terms for the attributes of Karen Matthews and the Mirror’s reveals an overlapping framework, inspired by the police sources and courtroom events. The Sun’s lexicon of abusive terms is wider, and plays to an imagined proletarian discourse, embracing words such as ‘slob’, ‘scrounger’, ‘guzzled’ and ‘scoffed’. The Mirror’s lexicon is marginally more restrained and somewhat more forensic: e.g. ‘twisted’, ‘bizarre’, ‘uncaring’ and displays an ‘inability to put her children’s needs above her own’. Both stress the deception involved – in the Sun she ‘brazenly play[s] a role’ while in the Mirror she ‘bask[es]’ in the media spotlight. The downmarket Daily Star foregrounds alleged sexual attributes, referring to ‘kinky orgies’ and goes into some detail about the sexual implications of the cucumbers allegedly kept in her refrigerator, with the mini-fable ‘Man-mad Karen Matthews loaded her fridge with cucumbers to use as sex toys, while letting her kids starve’ (Daily Star p. 6).

Attributes of Karen Matthews in working-class tabloids

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sun</th>
<th>Daily Mirror</th>
<th>Daily Star</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lying mum</td>
<td>showed no emotion, evil mother, twisted, bizarre, insatiable ‘baby machine’, sick games, neighbour from hell, inability to put her children’s needs above her own [quote], vulgar, selfish, uncaring, boasted, howled at dirty jokes, flirted, basked in her celebrity attention, devious, synthetic tears, fake concern.</td>
<td>monster mum, kinky orgies, scum mum, callous, evil, sick, shed crocodile tears, man-mad, lust-crazed scrounger, wicked money-grabbing, heartless mother, kinky secret, real-life Waynetta Slob, beast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>showed no emotion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>monster[es], monstrous [pair], sponging mum-of-seven, brazenly played the role [of frantic mum], led away in shame, warped immoral scrounger, vile, foul-mouthed drunken slob, dreadful mother, squalid existence, guzzled lager, scoffed pizza, chain-smoked, milked the system, raking in, no love, no compassion, sex-mad, uncaring, grasping, vile mum, twisted, slob, lounging.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
It is notable that the most downmarket of the tabloids, the Daily Star, also includes in its coverage heavily loaded mention of the dangers of physical retribution from an enraged populace. ‘Taxpayers’, we are reminded, ‘will have to foot the £1 million a year bill to protect her from revenge attacks behind bars.’ And, in a reference to the female partner of one of the most-vilified murderers of recent times, Ian Huntley, ‘when she eventually comes out she is likely to apply for an expensive Maxine Carr-style change of identity.’ (Star p. 6) Maxine Carr’s identity and whereabouts are, to the fury of British tabloids, the subject of permanent legal injunction.

In contrast, the attributes assigned to Karen Matthews in the ‘quality’ newspapers avoid direct abuse, and focus on her poverty, limited intelligence and cunning. This results in some surprisingly Victorian resonances. The language of class and social condescension here is implicit, but powerfully present.

Both qualities and tabloids, however, report with some astonishment the sheer size (reportedly 300 people) and complexity of Karen Matthews’s extended family, which, like a metaphor for an underclass jungle, police present as an impenetrable hindrance to their investigation.

Attributes of Karen Matthews in middlebrow tabloids

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Daily Mail</th>
<th>Daily Express</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lazy, sex-mad, living on benefits, pathetic symbol, greedy mother-of-seven, not a flicker of emotion, sickening behaviour, crocodile tears, casual sexual relationships, shocking maternal neglect, laziness, idle, selfish, use appalling language, never cooked her children a meal.</td>
<td>scheming, workshy scrounger, ‘real-life Waynetta slob’, guzzled takeaway food, had sex with a string of boyfriends, chain-smoking, ruled her children with an iron fist, posed as struggling single mum, fed [children] drugs to keep them quiet, calculating, consummate actor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The attributes of Karen Matthews in ‘quality’ newspapers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Guardian</th>
<th>The Independent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domestic drifter</td>
<td>apparent sleeplessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“inability to successfully place the children’s needs above her own”</td>
<td>feigned anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>left school at 16</td>
<td>sobbed pretend tears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>series of dead-end jobs</td>
<td>cry for the camera</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>brazen charade</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>forever dressed in cheap, ill-fitting clothing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>antithesis of glamorous female TV reporters</td>
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</table>

The Times

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<tr>
<th>The Daily Telegraph</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crying for the TV cameras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleading for the safe return of ‘her little angel’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mad, bad or irredeemably stupid?</td>
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<td>Deeply in debt to doorstep loan sharks</td>
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Her partner in crime: The attributes of Michael Donovan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Sun</th>
<th>Daily Mirror</th>
<th>Daily Star</th>
<th>Daily Mail</th>
<th>Daily Express</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unstable weirdo, odd-ball lone, bug-eyed weirdo,</td>
<td>“oddball”, misfit, frail,</td>
<td>desperate, evil, sick,</td>
<td>desperate, evil, sick,</td>
<td>Uncle weirdo, sordid behaviour, violent,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A striking feature of the comparison between tabloid and quality newspapers is the sheer quantity of invective in the descriptions of Karen Matthews in the tabloids, compared to the more limited and restrained register of the qualities, and the desire to push it to grotesque extremes – for example, the Sun claimed that Matthews ‘cared so little about [her children] she even FORGOT how many she had’. Also, the alacrity with which elaborations of the fable which foreground celebrity interest are grasped. For example, the Sun claimed: ‘[Karen Matthews] is thought to have been spurred on by watching Channel 4’s Shameless – about a family on a sink estate. An episode screened a month before Shannon’s abduction showed the character Debbie fake the kidnap of her younger brother to demand a £500,000 ransom.’ This claim was explicitly denied by Detective Supt Brennan in the Guardian of the same day (see p. 2).

A second is the imbalance between the attention given to Karen Matthews and Michael Donovan. Although portrayed as accomplices, Matthews is consistently presented as the dominant partner – Donovan as an ‘inadequate’ and ‘weirdo’. Many words are lavished on Matthews’s lack of ‘motherly’ qualities. Much less attention is given to Donovan. This is analogous to the balance of the coverage in the McCann case – in the fable of monster parents, the unnatural mother appears to bulk much larger than the male. Donovan, however, was the first victim of the media coverage: media reports of the leash used to restrain Shannon were alleged in some newspapers to have led to attacks on him in Armley prison in which his jaw was twice damaged.

**Whom do we blame?**

For the right-wing tabloids the easiest available target was the ‘underclass’. This was not a phrase that made it into the headlines but, in columns, opinion pieces and leaders, it made an appearance. According to Jon Gaunt, in his column in the Sun, ‘The tragedy is that – just as there will be another Baby P case – there are plenty more Shannons being dragged up in a life of grime that leads to a life of crime. To blame are the feral parents who couldn’t spell the word parenthood, let alone know the meaning of it. Whole estates are infested by this underclass. They are not working class – the clue is in the title – they don’t and won’t work (Sun, 5.12.08). For the Daily Express, it was framed as a problem of benefit culture. ‘Handouts do not help…Depravity exists in parts of modern Britain…Our bloated welfare state has produced pockets of dependency where almost every family is fractured and criminality is endemic’ (Daily Express 5.12.08 p 10).

But for the Daily Mail there was the glimmer of a lost working-class community before society was ‘broken’: ‘the moral code that once bound the nation together is now widely ignored. Until Shannon was abducted, Matthews had much in common with many other women on Dewsbury’s deprived Moorside estate and others like it in Britain. Neighbours thought of her as “one of us”’ (Daily Mail 5.12.08 p. 10).

Out of the tabloids, it is only the Daily Mirror that attempted to penetrate the troubled...
childhood of the chief protagonist: ‘Karen Matthews’ problems stemmed from her unsettled childhood and she claimed her life started to collapse when her relationship with her mother broke down when she was 14’ (Daily Mirror 5.12.08 p. 6).

The Times proposes and abandons three explanations:
1. stupidity;
2. urban deprivation and the dreadful living conditions of the estate;
3. The corrupting effect of a benefit culture that allowed Karen Matthews to assume, as she received £400-plus child benefit a week without working, that ‘money could be gained without doing anything in return’. The paper discards each explanation as inadequate: ‘Seeking for an explanation to inexplicable acts of evil is understandable. Trying to understand poverty in modern Britain is laudable. But the crimes of Shannon Matthews and Michael Donovan are ultimately theirs, and theirs alone’ (The Times 2008 p. 2).

However, The Times speculates elsewhere that ‘it may have been a reward plot from the outset but it also seems possible that she initially arranged for Donovan to take Shannon for a few days because she intended to leave Meehan...That scenario sees her losing her nerve at the last moment, being too scared to tell Meehan then sitting back and letting events take their course, realising at an early stage that a newspaper’s £50,000 reward for Shannon’s safe return would solve a lot of financial problems’ (The Times, 5.12.08 p. 4).

Conclusions

As grief stricken parents they had been a letdown. Recast as monstrous villains they fitted the bill perfectly.’ (Andrew Norfolk, The Times 5.12.08)

Apart from the socially and morally debilitating effects of creating hatred, there are three problems connected with the promiscuous use of ‘evil’ in media accounts that purport to make sense of the world. First – on a continent that invented Auschwitz it behoves us to be careful and discriminating in what we label ‘evil’…Like other human qualities we can be engaged by the latest monster fable which provides marionettes on the scaffold that we can stone to death, whilst comforting ourselves that we are decent parents, model citizens. As middle class readers we can derive the same sensationalist pleasures from the complex antics of the poor, relieved that we are not on a ‘sink’ estate next door to the ‘neighbours from hell’, confirmed in our good fortune in the lottery of capitalist life.

Third, it precludes the possibility of mercy. ‘Another woman’s life has been mercilessly exposed to public vilification,’ observed Madeleine Bunting, after the tabloid fury had abated. ‘She was “pure evil”, a slob who had never done a day’s work in her life. Matthews behaved appallingly to her daughter and she will rightly go to prison for it, but her life story was one of such desperate inadequacy that it demanded pity alongside our judgement, not demented mob hysteria’ (Bunting 2008).

With ‘evil’ there can be no forgiveness, no change, no reconciliation – young Shannon will be, in the ‘evil’ scenario, forever sundered from her mother. Just as well, many may conclude. But modern British society, secular as never before and without a death penalty, has contrived to create a form of living damnation. The first requirement for mercy is to be able to identify some human quality in the offender. Yet mercy, as André Comte-Sponville observes, that depends on identification, is quickly exhausted: ‘I can forgive the thief because I myself have on occasion stolen (books, during my youth). I can forgive the liar because I sometimes lie, the egoist because I am one, the coward because I could be one. But what about the rapist or the torturer? As soon as the offence exceeds a common limit, we stop identifying; indeed the very idea of identification becomes implausible. Yet these crimes, and especially the most horrible among them, are the very ones that call for our mercy....Like prudence, mercy is an intellectual virtue...Mercy requires that we understand something’ (Comte-Sponville 2002: 120-121).

Later, more reflective journalistic forays into Dewsbury’s Moorside estate began to construct a different picture than the wasteland embraced by the tabloids. The Independent observed that the case ‘cast into the light a segment of society that seemed to take the metropolitan commentary by surprise’ (Independent 5.12.08 p. 4). On the estate, talking to the Guardian’s Martin Wainwright, one of Matthews’s neighbours declared ‘“I’m proud to live on a council estate, except I call it a
village. Everyone knows who everyone else is and by and large we look out for one another...Other neighbours condemn Matthews for “behaving despicably” but argue that she needs help, not pillorying. Ian Saunders, who worked for 20 years at a timber yard before deciding to look after his children says: “I don’t think she was evil; more very, very misguided.” Vicky Saunders adds: “She was no monster and I believe she did love her kids” (Wainwright 2008).

“We wanted a Miss Marple mystery. We got Shameless without the humour,” commented The Times’s Andrew Norfolk (Times 5.12.08 p. 5). As middle class readers we can watch the antics of the ‘underclass’ with patronising contempt and/or social concern, just as surely as readers of the Victorian press (see Tulloch 2006) but safe in the knowledge that we have a more complicated view of the urban charivari than the strident publications of the less privileged, with their need for a daily quota of monsters for burning. We may feel we have a more stable grasp of the complexities of social structure and the mysteries of human motivation. But, as we dutifully fill our recycling bin, we might contemplate this valedictory from Slavoj Zizek:

What if the true evil of our societies is not their capitalist dynamics as such, but our attempts to extricate ourselves from them – all the while profiting – by carving out self-enclosed communal spaces from ‘gated communities’ to exclusive racial or religious groups?...The exemplary figures of evil today are not ordinary consumers who pollute the environment and live in a violent world of disintegrating social links, but those who, while fully engaged in creating conditions for such universal devastation and pollution, buy their way out of their own activity, living in gated communities, eating organic food, taking holidays in wildlife preserves, and so on (Zizek 2008: 23). It is difficult to understand what type of mother would subject her own daughter to such a wicked and evil crime. She is a manipulative individual who has demonstrated a remarkable ability to lie. Michael Donovan is an accomplished liar. Following his arrest and during this trial, he has attempted to portray himself as a weak-willed individual who only acted under duress. We have never accepted this as an accurate reflection of his involvement in Shannon’s kidnapping” Guardian 5.12.08 p. 2. He added: “It is really sad, the one person Shannon should have been able to trust over any other was her mother. If it was between the money or Shannon – the money would always have won!’ Daily Express 5.12.08 p. 6.

4 Donovan changed his name [from Paul Drake] to Michael Donovan, after hero of 1980s TV science fiction mini-series (Guardian p. 3).

5 ‘a condition that made his legs tremble and caused him to fall over’ Independent 5.12.08 p. 4.

6 ‘A few years ago, when Michael Donovan...was employed as a delivery driver, his boss sent him to put £20 of diesel in the van. Later, when Donovan had returned, his colleagues were bemused to see him driving back and forth in front of the company’s premises. He explained to them that he had been able to fit only £18.48 of fuel into the tank, so he was driving around until he could squeeze in the other £1.52 of diesel. So here is one explanation of the dreadful crime...the perpetrators were simply stupid’ (The Times p. 2).

7 ‘As the police built a picture of the extended Matthews and Meehan families, plus those of Matthews’s former boyfriends and the various fathers of her children, they found themselves with a logistical nightmare. There were soon several hundred names, including one murderer; many with criminal convictions and a number of convicted sex offenders’ Times 5.12.08 p. 4.

References
Bunting, Madeleine (2005) The anger is justified as bad times bite. But the targets are all wrong. Guardian, 15 December 2008 p. 31


Wainwright, Martin (2008) I’d give her a slapping – after that I’d give her a cuddle, Guardian, 6 December 2008 p. 12


Note on Contributor
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Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Westminster. Recent work includes jointly editing, with Colin Sparks, Tabloid Tales (Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield 2000). He has written on press regulation, official news management, popular television and the press’s coverage of the ‘war on terror’. He has also had a chapter on the journalism of Charles Dickens in The Journalistic Imagination: Literary Journalists from Defoe to Capote and Carter (edited by Richard Keeble and Sharon Wheeler; Routledge 2007).