Article

'Nobody feels safe': Vulnerability, fear and the micro-politics of ordinary voice in crime news television

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Abstract
The new prominence of ordinary voice in crime journalism – claims to have seen things, experienced things, felt things 'first-hand' – has the potential to decenter elite perspectives and open up crime news narratives to the voices of systemically criminalized subjects. However, I argue in this paper that the political potential of ordinary voice can only be realized in and through concrete instances of its use, and so needs to be examined within news texts as sites of micro-political struggle over meaning. Looking at Australian current affairs television coverage of so-called 'African gang' crime in Melbourne, this paper approaches crime news texts as sites of vulnerability politics, where different and sometimes competing claims to vulnerability encounter one another and struggle for public recognition. A close multi-modal analysis of three episodes of current affairs television uncovers four specific strategies of textual composition and presentation by which the criminalization of Black African youth is able to persist despite the testimonial interventions of the criminalized: appropriation, marginalization, subjugation and calculation. The paper concludes by considering the implications of this analysis for future studies of ordinary voice and citizen testimony in news reporting.

Keywords
Australia, criminalization, current affairs, news discourse, ordinary voice, testimony

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Introduction

The cultural legitimacy of practices like policing and incarceration hinges on how crime is rendered, through storytelling, into a moral and political problematic worthy of (often-times violent) intervention. Historically, the mediation of crime has been dominated by the voices of political elites: politicians, police officials and journalists themselves, all of whom have derived authority from approaches to journalistic objectivity that largely elide the question of power, and particularly the question of race (Hall et al., 1978; Robinson and Culver, 2019; van Dijk, 1993). However, the virtual monopoly of elite voices in the mediated construction of crime through the news has been still-recently broken by the proliferation of technologies and practices of self-mediation (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013; Richardson, 2020), the rise of citizen journalism (Al-Ghazzi, 2014; Blaagaard, 2013) and the new prominence of 'ordinary voices' in news and current affairs reporting (Hopmann and Shehata, 2011; Peter and Zerback, 2020; Turner, 2009a).

   The political potential of 'ordinary voice' as a new regime of authenticity in the news (Chouliaraki, 2010) remains unsettled. Whether or not testimony-based newsmaking can meaningfully decenter the perspectives of political elites and 'open up' crime news narratives to the voices of criminalized subjects, and under what conditions, is unclear. And so, while most existing critiques of the 'demotic turn' (Turner, 2009a) have focussed on the consequences of the pivot towards testimony in newsmaking as they register in the macro-political terrain of institutions and structures (in particular, in the assemblage of institutions, practices and identities we call democracy), I tighten focus here to the micro-political terrain of crime news texts as sites where power is enacted through struggles over meaning. The literal audibility of non-elite voices in news stories about crime has the *potential* to deliver symbolic audibility to marginalized and criminalized subjects; my intention here is to demonstrate the contingency of that potential at the level of language.

   In this paper, I will consider these questions through a grounded examination of how Australian current affairs television programs have incorporated testimonial voices into coverage of so-called 'African gang crime' in Melbourne. The paper unfolds in four sections. First, I consider the state of the debate amongst scholars and practitioners of journalism about the new prominence of 'ordinary voice' in newsmaking, advancing the argument that the political potential of ordinary voice can only be realized through concrete instances of its use, and so must be analyzed at the micro-political level of news texts. Second, I consider how Black African youth have been criminalized in and through the Australian press to offer a conceptualization of crime news texts as sites of vulnerability politics. Third, I engage in a close, multi-modal discourse analysis of three examples of ordinary voice 'at work' in current affairs texts, to explicate four specific strategies of textual composition and presentation by which the testimonial interventions of criminalized subjects can be symbolically undermined. Finally, I conclude by considering the implications of this analysis for future research into the relationship between journalism, citizen testimony and cultural (de)criminalization.

Journalism and the (micro-)politics of ordinary voice

A rich body of empirical and theoretical work has emerged in the last decade around the new prominence of citizen voices in journalism and its political potential (see Allan,

2013; Blaagaard, 2013; Hopmann and Shehata, 2011; Kleemans et al., 2017; Peter and Zerback, 2020; Richardson, 2020; Turner, 2009a). Much of this research focusses on how technologies of digital witnessing, including smartphones and the internet, may empower ordinary people to more autonomously interject in and shape the mediated construction of major events such as political uprisings (Al-Ghazzi, 2014), natural disasters (Chouliaraki, 2010), terrorist attacks (Allan, 2014) and war (Chouliaraki, 2015). Within this growing field of scholarship exists a more specific body of work examining the political potential of mediated citizen testimony in contexts where Black people and communities have been systemically criminalized by State institutions and the mainstream media (for example, see Richardson, 2020).

The term 'ordinary voice' describes an emerging journalistic epistemology that foregrounds lifeworld testimony – claims to have seen things, experienced things, felt things 'first-hand' – in the mediated construction of social and political realities through the news (Chouliaraki, 2010). While political elites and institutional experts have been historically centered as 'primary definers' in the production of news narratives about crime and its management (Hall et al., 1978), ordinary voice reconfigures the concept of expertise so that first-hand experiences of practices of crime control – including the experiences of overpoliced communities in Australia and elsewhere – become recognizable as authoritative forms of knowledge on this subject. Thus conceived, ordinary voice has the potential to democratize the news as a 'mediated space of appearance' (Arendt, 1958; Silverstone, 2006) in which moral sensibilities are forged and political collectivities negotiated through contentious discursive encounters between competing accounts of social reality (Chouliaraki, 2006; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Moreover, the 'evocative force' of first-person testimony may revitalize the aesthetic dimension of journalism as a practice that asks audiences to *feel* and *experience* certain stories as morally important (Kunelius and Renvall, 2010).

However, this optimistic account of ordinary voice as a democratizing force in newsmaking is not universally shared amongst critical scholars of journalism. Turner (2001, 2009a, 2009b), for example, has pointed to commercial pressures, weakened regulatory infrastructure and the rise of 'infotainment' journalism as key drivers of the new prominence of ordinary voices in the news and on television. While his work on the Australian media context acknowledges how the 'demotic turn' in news storytelling may give voice to groups previously underrepresented in mainstream media discourse, he cautions that foregrounding emotional and experiential testimony can put pressure on 'the quality of [audience] access to the information a functioning democracy needs' (Turner, 2009b: 425). This line of critique draws on an informational (rather than representational) imagination of journalism and the political work it performs. In such an imagination, objectivity is considered paramount to the Fourth Estate function of the press, and so impartiality and emotional detachment the gold standards for authoritative testimony in news television and of journalistic practice more broadly (Boudana, 2011; Richards and Rees, 2011). Ordinary testimonies, which foreground the subjectivity and emotions of the speaker, sit in clear tension with this mandate.

I interpret this divergence of critical opinion as emerging from competing visions of journalism as a means for realizing democratic ideals. In framing ordinary voice as a threat to journalistic objectivity, the informational line of critique envisions that the historical role

of journalism has been to communicate the 'facts' of social life as they exist *prior to* the act of communication. By contrast, the representational line of critique understands social reality as being *contingent within* communication, and so conceptualises journalistic discourse as a field of political struggle in its own right, rather than merely a supplement to 'politics' as enacted by institutions of the State. This take eschews the possibility of 'objective' testimony altogether and instead recognises claims to objectivity as bids for power (Hackett and Zhao, 1998). Here, objectivity in journalism is a normative professional ideal with unavoidable political implications, not a hitherto defining characteristic of news discourse which becomes political only in its violation (Blaagaard, 2013; Hall et al., 1978; Tuchman, 1972). Moreover, it has worked historically to elevate and authorize the perspectives of the already-powerful in newsmaking, obscuring their subjective standpoints while relegating the voices of women, BIPOC, and other marginalized actors to the realm of the 'subjective' and the 'particular' (Durham, 1998).

This paper does not aim to adjudicate or resolve these competing accounts but rather to nuance this debate by drawing attention to one of its underlying assumptions. Namely, that ordinary voice should *necessarily* be a disruptive and/or transformative force in the meaning-making work of journalistic texts, for better or for worse. I argue that the political potential of ordinary voice is realizable only in concrete instances of its use, and so macro-political critiques of the demotic turn must consider the actual symbolic work of testimonies *within* news texts as sites of micro-political struggle. This paper contributes to that effort by looking at *how* testimonies are being integrated into and ordered within news texts, and with what effects for the negotiation of crime 'realities' through news discourse.

'African gang crime' and the politics of vulnerability

Since beginning to arrive in Australia in significant numbers in the late-1990s and early 2000s, people of Black African[1] ancestry, and the Sudanese community in particular, have been subject to persistent negative media attention (Budarick, 2018; Nolan et al., 2016; Wahlquist, 2018; Windle, 2008). The dominant frame in this coverage has associated Melbourne's Black African communities – and young Black African boys and men in particular – with increasing incidents of violent crime, public disorder and racialized social conflict in the city, often irrespective of whether they have been caught up in such incidents as perpetrators or victims (Windle, 2008). In the foreground of this mediated moral panic have been claims about an ever-present threat of *future* crime, with journalistic and political commentators alleging that Melbournians are 'living in fear' of future victimization by 'African gangs' (Majavu, 2020; Wahlquist, 2018; Windle, 2008). In this context, Sudanese-born boys and men have become 'disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system' in the state of Victoria, and significantly more likely to be arbitrarily stopped by police and/or to report negative or discriminatory treatment by police than Australian-born youth (Shepherd et al., 2018: 483).

The criminalization of Black African youth through the Australian press draws on a historical metanarrative of 'white vulnerability' to 'Black violence' (King, 2015). This narrative is a racializing trope that relies, amongst other things, on the misrecognition of the vulnerability of Black subjects, and on obfuscating the overlapping forms of vulnerability *inflicted* on Black subjects through criminalization (Davis, 1998; Smiley and Fakunle, 2016). Through this lens, the strategies deployed to manage the 'threat' of

Black African youth crime – which have included policing and incarceration, but also reductions in Australia's humanitarian intake from African countries (Haggis and Schech, 2010) – reveal themselves as a 'moral calculus' that has actively created vulnerability for one group of people in Australian society so that another might ostensibly be shielded from it (Burke, 2008). This analogy, however, fails to compare like with like; vulnerability exists in multiple registers, and not all registers of vulnerability have the same relationship to justice (Cole, 2016). While the vulnerability inflicted on Black African subjects in Melbourne through this criminalizing narrative is material and systemic, the vulnerability it purports to address – namely, the fear of Black African crime – emerges directly from the history of anti-Black racism in Australian culture (Majavu, 2020) and has no demonstrable basis in material reality.[2]

In her reflection on vulnerability's unsettled normative status in feminist scholarship, Cole (2016) calls for a 'politics of vulnerability' to help distinguish, in and through public discourse, those forms of openness to potential harm or injury that are most antithetical to social justice and most in need of remedy. News stories about crime, I propose, perform just that kind of political work, as different and sometimes competing claims to vulnerability encounter one another in discourse and struggle for public recognition. Along these lines, my approach conceptualizes journalism as a practice and genre of storytelling that lays explicit claim to the objective representation of social 'reality', with news 'narratives' defined as the versions of reality that journalistic storytelling constructs and advances (Bell, 1991; Tuchman, 1980). At stake in the constructed reality of vulnerability is both its ontological character – that is, *who* is really vulnerable in society, *to whom* and *under what conditions* – and its moral status – that is, which experiences of vulnerability constitute injustice, which are 'mere misfortune', and on what basis.

Analytical approach

The empirical context for this research is one in which the Australian press has consistently constructed the Black African diaspora in Melbourne as a 'problem group' associated with issues of crime and juvenile delinquency (Budarick, 2018; Windle, 2008). The theoretical context, emerging from my review of the extant critical literature on ordinary voice in journalism, is one that presumes that the testimonies of Black African subjects in such coverage should, at least in theory, help disrupt the reproduction of this dominant, criminalizing narrative. My intention in this paper is to look closely at how these opportunities for disruption actually play out in specific instances of media representation, and to track how, at the micro-political level of the text, the disruptive potential of Black African testimony can be symbolically undermined. My aim is not to describe a pattern of symbolic exclusion occurring across texts, but to explicate the precise discursive mechanisms by which exclusion is made possible even under the conditions of formal *inclusion* that ordinary voice helps cultivate. As such, the texts chosen for analysis here should not be conceived of as a 'sample' which speaks to some larger population of texts, but rather as case studies – purposefully chosen sites for investigating, through close textual analysis, *how* criminalizing narratives are able to endure despite the discursive interventions of the criminalized.

Current affairs television offers an ideal research site for this study due to its particularly demotic character in the Australian context (Turner, 2001). As a sub-genre of

journalistic storytelling, Australian current affairs programming is typically invested in communicating larger phenomena as they register in the everyday lives of ordinary people. Bonner and McKay (2007) call these 'personalization' narratives – stories of family dispossession, community resilience and personal overcoming which explicate 'politics' in the abstract through an examination of the personal. As a result, lifeworld testimonies form the backbone of current affairs storytelling, and experiential and emotional forms of evidence the basis upon which current affairs accounts stake their claims to realism. Such reports also constitute important sites at which competing testimonial accounts from different subjects encounter one another, especially when covering subjects, like the (un)reality of an 'African gang crime' problem, which are contentious in public discourse (Nolan et al., 2016).

To be appropriate research sites for this study, texts needed to meet three criteria: (1) to cover the issue of Black African youth crime in Melbourne; (2) to give significant airtime to testimonies from Black African subjects and (3) to be drawn from the genre of current affairs television. I also narrowed my search to programs which aired in 2018, as recent studies find that media coverage and debate about Black African youth crime intensified during that year (see Majavu, 2020). Using the above criteria, three texts were selected for close analysis: two from Australia's public broadcaster the ABC (Four Corners episode 'Crime and Panic', 5th November 2018; and Q&A episode 'Polling, Policing and Reporting', 9th April 2018) and one from commercial network Channel 7 (Sunday Night episode 'African Gangs', 8th July 2018).

To analyze these episodes, I have drawn on Chouliaraki's (2006) proposed analytics of mediation, which integrates multi-modal textual analysis with the critical analysis of discourse. This method investigates how verbal and visual semiotic resources come together on television to enact different kinds of news realism – in this study, around testimonial accounts of vulnerability: perceptual realism (claims to the 'factual' reality of vulnerability), categorical realism (claims to the emotional character of vulnerability) and ideological realism (claims about the relationship between vulnerability and justice) (Chouliaraki, 2006: 163). This approach was operationalized using a two-stage analysis method. First, a written transcript of each episode was prepared[3] and analyzed, initially to identify instances when speakers used lifeworld testimony to articulate claims about the (un)reality of vulnerability, and then to analyze the symbolic relationships between these testimonies in the overall metanarrative construction of each text. Each episode was then analyzed as audio-visual text, to investigate the different relationships of visual-verbal correspondence (Chouliaraki, 2006) established in the multi-modal presentation of the testimonies identified in the first round of analysis. My aim in this second round was to uncover the mechanisms by which different testimonies were being authenticated as evidence of 'real' vulnerability, with particular comparative attentiveness to the authentication of Black African claims to and about vulnerability compared with claims articulated by other subjects.

Analysis

The testimonial interventions of Black African subjects were by no means *universally* undermined in the analyzed texts, and in several instances did meaningfully disrupt the

criminalizing 'African gangs' narrative. The analyzed episode of *Q&A*, for example, features an extensive discussion about racial profiling, press vilification and racist vigilante violence. The analyzed episode of *Four Corners* dedicates considerable time to exploring the impacts of racism on the lives of Black African refugees, primarily through the presentation of first-person testimonies. However, close analysis additionally identified four specific strategies of presentation through which the disruptive symbolic potential of Black African testimonies of vulnerability was being subverted, undermined or otherwise blunted in these texts: appropriation, marginalization, subjugation and calculation.

Appropriation

I use the term 'appropriation' to describe a strategy by which the authenticating force of ordinary voice can be co-opted by elite speakers and then articulated with and internalized by other sources of discursive authority, such as professional status. In the texts analyzed for this study, appropriation was found to be operating through two key mechanisms: first, through *testimonial saturation*, and second, through *narrator adoption*. I will discuss each of these in turn, using an illustrative example from one of the analyzed texts for each.

First, *testimonial saturation* describes a strategy by which the testimonial interventions of criminalized subjects are drowned out or dulled by the testimonial interventions of institutional elites, such as politicians or senior police officials. The analyzed episode of *Q&A* provides an illustrative example. As a panel discussion program, *Q&A* brings together public figures from a range of professions to discuss and debate current issues in Australian politics. This episode features an extended debate about the (un)reality of the 'African gangs' narrative circulating in the Australian press. The panel features two politicians (Labor shadow minister Clare O'Neil and Liberal minister Alan Tudge), one prominent crime journalist (Herald Sun reporter Andrew Rule), one senior police official (Victorian Police Commander Stuart Bateson) and one lawyer and community advocate (Nyadol Nyuon). As the only Black African person on the panel, Nyuon draws on experiential and emotional forms of evidence to articulate claims about the vulnerability of her own community to overpolicing and racist vigilante violence:

> **Nyadol Nyuon:** . . .we've questioned whether we can be safe going to shopping centers. We've been made to feel like criminals, honestly. I give advice to my young brothers, who are very tall six-foot boys, because I'm afraid that the three of them walking together constitute a gang. I tell them to behave nicely. I tell them to dress nicely. I tell them to minimize their presence in public, because I'm afraid that, unfortunately, things can get really bad. . .

The perceptual and categorical realism of Nyuon's testimony (that is, its embedded claim to facticity and appeal to human feeling) are grounded in the authenticity of lived experience and the 'empiricism of emotion' (Chouliaraki, 2010). This is emphasized by the repetitive, sequential use of first-person pronouns and present-tense verbs ('I give', 'We question', 'I tell them') as well as testimonial expositions of internal emotional experiences ('I'm afraid'). However, the disruptive symbolic potential of this intervention by Nyuon is blunted as her fellow panelists – institutional elites without her lived

experience of criminalization – also draw on these same forms of realism to articulate their own competing claims to and about vulnerability:

> **Andrew Rule:** . . .there were car-jackings, there were home invasions, there were serious things that did, for a while, 18 months ago, a year ago, become the subject of conversation everywhere I went. And everybody knew somebody who had had a brush with it, including me.

> **Stuart Bateson:** I mean, when I started, 30 years ago, I think it was a little bit easier for front-line police and I look at our people today [. . .] they're starting every working day by putting on a bulletproof vest. And it might be the day that they need it.

> **Clare O'Neil:** I mean, the idea that people are afraid to go out to dinner. I actually drove down Thomas Street, Dandenong, before I arrived here [. . .] You will see hundreds of people on the street out there, they're having a wonderful time and they're not too afraid to go out.

Much as in the discourses of populist politicians (Wodak, 2015), institutional elites here employ lifeworld testimony in order to position the claims they articulate about crime as being 'of' the ordinary experiences of everyday life. As a result, the program is saturated with the evocative force of first-person testimony, stripping criminalized subjects (in this case, Nyuon) of that which should make their discursive interventions epistemologically distinct (Kunelius and Renvall, 2010). Testimonial saturation can thus obscure disparities of power and experience between speakers by creating, through a shared style of claim-making, an illusion of equality and pluralism, whilst actually fortifying the authority of elite voices by articulating them with the authenticity of lived experience.

Second, *narrator adoption* describes a strategy whereby journalists construct hierarchies of authenticity between citizen testimonies by imbuing some, but not others, with the authoritative voice of the journalist-narrator. In *Sunday Night*, the episode narrative is built around the testimony of a woman named Elaine. A white woman in her 60s, Elaine worked as a receptionist at a jewellery store in the upmarket Melbourne suburb of Toorak before an attempted robbery at the store left her traumatized and unable to work. The *Sunday Night* investigation into Black African youth crime centers on Elaine's experience of this robbery and its aftereffects:

> **Reporter:** . . . she just loved working here. . .

> **Reporter:** . . . in just seconds, the job that had brought Elaine so much satisfaction became a place of fear and dread. . .

Here, the journalist reporting the story actually *takes on* Elaine's voice as his own. This format of appropriation forges an alliance between the two speakers. By speaking *as* Elaine, from her perspective, the reporter on *Sunday Night* blurs the intersubjective boundary between them: his own voice becomes infused with the authenticity of the ordinary, while Elaine's testimony of her own vulnerability takes on the authority of the journalistic voice and its implicit claim to perceptual objectivity. In the analyzed texts, narrator adoption worked almost exclusively to authorize and elevate the testimonies of white crime victims rather than the testimonies of criminalized

Black African subjects, creating a clear hierarchy of authenticity in these subjects' respective attempts to establish the reality of their vulnerability through testimony.

Marginalization

Marginalization is a strategy by which the voices of criminalized subjects can be officially 'called into' the mediation of criminal events and yet still 'locked out' from meaningful symbolic participation in the negotiation of their meaning. As has been discussed, the claim to authenticity that ordinary voice advances is grounded in the experiential and emotional proximity of speakers to news issues and events (Chouliaraki, 2010). 'Proximity', however, can be interpreted in a variety of ways by news editors. Commonly, it can mean spatial proximity as an eyewitness to events covered in the news (Zelizer, 2007). However, it can also be proximity that is intersubjectively rendered: proximity through identity, through historical experience, through emotional investment, or, as the analysis here finds, through racialization. Some ordinary voices are thus discursively authorized as 'flesh witnesses' (Harari, 2009) to newsworthy events, while others can speak only as 'symbol people' (Tuchman, 1980) who represent a category of person deemed relevant, by editors, to the story being told. Such speakers are 'heard' in the official sense, but struggle to access the authenticating force of ordinary voice through lifeworld testimony because they have no lived connection to the specific events being narrated and discussed.

Sunday Night provides and illustrative example of marginalization at work. In addition to crime victim Elaine, the analyzed episode incorporates the voice of a Sudanese music producer named Torit. Torit is a young Black man with no lifeworld relationship with Elaine nor connection to the attempted robbery at her workplace. The underlying logic of Torit's inclusion in the episode is directly indexed to Elaine's testimony: specifically, her racialization of the men who tried to rob her store and her subsequent identification of anti-Black prejudice as a 'wound' inflicted on her through the robbery:

> **Elaine:** Well I'm too nervy. . . too nervy. I mean, you know, I can't go to a shopping center because if I ran into a. . . a colored person I'd be having a panic attack or ten [. . .] It's just. . . it's not easy, even going for a walk.

Throughout the episode, Torit uses first-person testimony to advance his own claims to vulnerability, including testifying to his experiences of war and of the criminal justice system. However, Torit's claims are articulated under intense symbolic pressure, as his primary role in the overall narrative structure of the text (which focusses on Elaine's experience of the robbery and its subsequent effects on her quality of life) is that of a prop: a conjured embodiment of a fear that synonymizes criminal threat with the physicality of the Black male body (Smiley and Fakunle, 2016). Torit here is less a symbol person than he is a proxy, called into the narrative not to represent a particular community or point-of-view (less still to represent himself) but rather a *specific person* – Elaine's attacker – to whom he is linked editorially only by race.

This point is most clearly illustrated in the visual composition of the episode's final scene, when Elaine and Torit are brought together in a staged 'reconciliatory'

encounter. Though Torit and Elaine both offer testimonies of vulnerability throughout the episode, in this final scene they are cast in opposing roles – Elaine, the threatened, and Torit, the threatening. Tight shots of Elaine's face emphasise her emotional distress upon meeting Torit, eliciting sympathy and imbuing her vulnerability and fearfulness with a sense of categorical realism. Meanwhile, low-angle and wide shots emphasise Torit's height and physicality, as well as the visual contrast between his body and Elaine's. This preoccupation with visual difference, and the symbolic synonimization of height with physical invulnerability, are common racializing tropes in Australian media representations of Black African men (Windle, 2008). Despite Torit's discursive interventions earlier in the episode, the sense of ideological realism resulting from this final scene is one that reinforces, rather than complicates or subverts, the dominant metanarrative of white vulnerability to Black violence. This is somewhat a *fait accompli*, given that the logic informing Torit's presence in the narrative at all is Elaine's synonimization of 'fear of crime' and 'fear of Blackness' in her own testimony.

As the underlying epistemology of this text, ordinary voice opens space for Torit to make testimonial claims to vulnerability, but limits the realism of those claims precisely because the testimony he offers *does not and cannot pertain to the event being discussed*. He has no lifeworld connection to Elaine nor to the robbery, and so cannot discursively participate in the construction of meaning around this event through first-person testimony. As a consequence, Torit speaks about his experiences from a position of profound narrative marginality, neutralizing the possibility of his testimony disrupting or complicating the ideological realism of Elaine's self-perceived vulnerability to Black African violence, which is positioned in the narrative as a direct consequence of the robbery. Through such marginalizion, criminalized subjects can thus be locked out of negotiating the political and moral significance of crime events, even as they are called into their reconstruction on television.

Subjugation

Testimonies can be incriminating as well as authenticating. Close textual analysis of ordinary voice at work reveals how the testimonial interventions of criminalized subjects can be forced down into the service of substantiating the testimonies of others, rather than authenticating the vulnerability of the speaker. This strategy, which I call subjugation, operates primarily through uneven forms of visual-verbal correspondence in the presentation of testimonies on screen. As regards the political potential of ordinary voice, subjugation reveals how the authenticating force of testimony is contingent in its multimodal presentation: that is, on how first-person accounts of vulnerability, articulated verbally, are then authenticated visually to imbue them with perceptual, categorical and ideological forms of realism.

The simplest way to demonstrate this point is to analyze testimonies in pairs, contrasting their visual authentication. In *Sunday Night*, we can look at paired excerpts from Elaine and Torit:

Elaine: And he's pushed the gun here into my throat, and he's said if you don't move I'll kill you dead, so I thought oh I gotta act calm, and I stood up, walked towards the safe, and he had the gun then in my back. . .

Elaine: It's ruined my life. I don't have a life anymore. From being a very active woman, going to work, playing golf, going out and enjoying myself. . . I don't do any of that anymore.

Torit: It's seeing bodies everywhere, you know, when you're young? Blood soaked, drenched clay, on the ground. . . people, animals too, you know, everything dying.

Torit: When I came here, I thought I could just fight at school like back then. . . but nah, it was different. It was very new for us, there was like, culture shock, you know?

A suite of visual resources are deployed to authenticate Elaine's account of her own vulnerability. First, the perceptual realism of her account of the robbery is reinforced by the use of CCTV footage of the event, spliced together with footage of a dramatic reenactment. The actors in the reenactment are styled to resemble the real people captured by CCTV, while the sequence of action in the reenactment follows Elaine's testimonial narration. These indexical relationships of visual-verbal correspondence reconstruct the 'facts' of the robbery through the prism of Elaine's perception, relying on her lived experience of the event to define its meaning. In terms of categorical realism, the fear and trauma Elaine experiences in the aftermath of the robbery are authenticated visually through repeated close-up shots of her face that emphasise her emotional distress as she talks about the impact of the robbery on her life, as well as the strategic use of composition to authenticate Elaine's perception of the outside world as a place of danger and threat – for example, through a shot of Elaine peering nervously out the front door of her house while the camera hovers predatorially behind a nearby rosebush, watching her.

Torit's claims to vulnerability are rarely authenticated in this manner. Instead, two key sets of footage are used to elaborate his testimony in the visual modality of the text. The first is (positioned as being) taken from the war in Sudan. Rather than indexically elaborating Torit's testimony through images of death or suffering, however, this footage foregrounds violence by focussing on images of child soldiers – young Black African boys and men with rifles slung across their backs. The second set of footage is a music video which shows Torit rapping from inside a prison cell. The visual-verbal relationship between these images and Torit's testimony is not indexical, but iconic: the images serve as evidence not of Torit's specific experiences of vulnerability, but as icons of 'violence' and 'disorder' that symbolically associate Torit with war and with crime (Chouliaraki, 2006: 163). The result of these iconic elaborations is that Torit's testimony, rather than authenticating his own vulnerability, instead authenticates *Elaine's* testimonial association of Black Africans with the threat of violent crime.

Four Corners offers another illustrative example:

Leah: I just remember. . . just yelling at us. . . just screaming to give us money and. . . and Gavin got out of the bed and, um, physically pushed. . . we had two of them in the room, and he got up and physically pushed them out [. . .] I don't know how they can say that the crime rate is falling, because everyone I know doesn't – nobody feels safe.

Martha: They killed Liep because he was Black. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, he was the first Black person they found. I arrived and saw him getting lifted into the back of the ambulance. And we all rushed to hold him. His brother was trying to hold his legs and I was trying to hold him, but the paramedics pushed us back.

Both Leah (a young white woman whose home was broken into in an attempted robbery) and Martha (a Sudanese woman whose son, Liep, was murdered in an unprovoked racist attack) both offer first-hand accounts of events that testify to their own vulnerability. As with Elaine in *Sunday Night*, CCTV footage is used to authenticate the perceptual realism of Leah's account. However, Martha's testimony is elaborated iconically with footage of a community memorial and protest for Liep. This footage is emotionally charged and imbues Martha's testimony with a sense of categorical realism. However, her testimony ultimately authenticates Leah's claim that the threat of interracial criminal violence in Melbourne's suburbs is so severe that 'nobody feels safe'. In this way, the mediated realism of Martha's vulnerability is forced into the service of a criminalizing narrative that constructs Black Africans as a 'problem group' inherently and disproportionately bound up in the problem of criminal disorder, regardless of whether as perpetrators or victims (Windle, 2008).

Calculation

Calculation is a strategy of ideological realism which places testimonies of vulnerability in differential relationships with the question of justice. Through calculation, intolerable forms of vulnerability are distinguished from the merely regrettable, and injustice is distinguished from mere misfortune. In this way, calculation is a means by which the testimonies of criminalized subjects can be heard and authenticated as evidence of 'real' vulnerability in demotic news texts, yet simultaneously deprioritized in the overall *politics* of vulnerability that the text enacts (Cole, 2016).

    In the texts analyzed here, calculation operates primarily through the deployment of metaphor. Two strategies of metaphorization stand out: the presentation of fear as *existentially harmful*, and thus akin to grievous injury, and the presentation of fear as *incarcerating*, which invokes an intersubjective politics of space. Both of these techniques of metaphorization draw testimonies of vulnerability as articulated by (predominantly white) crime victims into competitive tension with the claims to vulnerability articulated by Black African subjects, ultimately prioritising the former over the latter.

    First, metaphors of death, destruction, breakage and discontinuity are deployed in the presentation of white testimony in order to position fear of crime as an existential problematic – that is, as a disruptive, even violent, challenge to the very continuation of human life, or at least life worth living. The following excerpts of testimony from *Sunday Night* (Elaine) and *Four Corners* (Leah) provide illustrative examples:

Elaine: I don't have a life anymore. From being a very active woman, going to work, playing golf, going out and enjoying myself. . . I don't do any of that anymore.

Elaine: Well I feel as though I am dead. . . just a shell of a person.

> **Leah:** Every time I see a Black person down the street or just anywhere, it's like a trigger. Before all of this happened, I wasn't scared of Black people or people of color or whatever [. . .] but I can't help but associate that night with them, and that's what's really unfair.

In these testimonies, the fear of encountering Black bodies in public space is framed as an injury, sustained through lifeworld experiences of crime victimization. For Elaine, this fear is an injury akin to death. For Leah, it sits at the core of what constitutes her as a wronged subject (*that's what's really unfair*). Again, the categorical reality of this fear is authenticated in the visual modality of the text, with tight shots of Elaine and Leah's faces that emphasize their emotional distress.

Crucially, the metaphorization of fear as existential harm – that is, as a threat to life itself – operates through an assertion of *newness* which positions racism as an injury for which Black criminal actors are directly responsible. We can see this in Elaine's repeated use of the qualifier *anymore*, as well as in Leah's assertion that *Before all this happened, I wasn't scared*. The metaphorization of fear as (fatal) injury operates as a strategy of calculation in that it closes down possibilities for restoration and renewal for fearful subjects, thus attaching a sense of moral intolerability to white subjects' *feelings of* vulnerability to future Black African crime.

Meanwhile, carceral metaphors work to calculate the balance of security between white crime victims and criminalized and racialized Others in zero-sum terms – in other words, leveraging the moral status of the former (security *for*) to justify police intervention against the latter (security *against*). The following examples from *Four Corners* (Unidentified Caller) and *Sunday Night* (Elaine) are illustrative:

> **Unidentified Caller:** As a victim, what happens to us? They get rehabilitated, they get sent back out into the community. I'm living with a life sentence every day.

> **Elaine:** I don't have any life. These four walls is where I live.

The first of these testimonies is played on *Four Corners* as accompanying audio for a visual frame of a Melbourne public park, juxtaposing the caller's metaphor of imprisonment with the openness of the park to invoke a politics of space and movement. The unidentified caller employs a carceral metaphor (*I'm serving a life sentence*) to relativize the normative value of restorative, less punitive justice practices (*they get rehabilitated, they get sent back out into the community*) against the demand for justice for victims, with the former positioned as coming at the expense of the latter. Similarly, Elaine's assertion of her own 'imprisonment' within her home (*These four walls is where I live*) draws on carceral symbolism to communicate the sense that Elaine has lost her security unjustly. More specifically, this metaphor evokes a zero-sum politics of space that calculates the injustice of Elaine's 'imprisonment' directly *against* the freedom of Black African subjects to move through public space in Melbourne undisturbed by the coercive institutions of the State.

Calculation, realized through metaphor, is a strategy through which demotic news texts can present different and sometimes competing accounts of vulnerability, yet nonetheless integrate them into an ideologically coherent account of social reality that morally

prioritizes the vulnerability of some over others. It is, therefore, through calculation that the justificatory work of crime news discourse vis-à-vis specific practices of crime management is most explicitly enacted (Boltanski, 2011; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Harvey, 1996). While ordinary voice can open space in crime news texts for the testimonial interventions of criminalized subjects, calculation limits the ideological disruption of these interventions – allowing specific means for achieving 'justice' (including policing and incarceration) to remain ideologically self-apparent despite competing visions of what justice means and wants put forward by different actors.

Conclusion

As an epistemology of journalistic storytelling, ordinary voice has the potential to grant new audibility and symbolic force to the voices of criminalized subjects in the mediated construction of crime and criminal justice through the news. However, scholars and practitioners of journalism remain divided as to whether ordinary voice helps or hinders the realization of democratic ideals through journalism. My intention in this paper has not been to adjudicate this debate – that is, to confirm whether ordinary voice is 'good' or 'bad' for democracy. Instead, my aim has been to nuance this debate by examining concrete examples of ordinary voice at work, highlighting the ways in which the political potential of testimony in newsmaking is a matter of discursive struggle, and so contingent within news texts themselves.

My analytical approach has been to start with an optimistic hypothesis – that current affairs programs, as demotic news texts *par excellence*, should open opportunities for Black African subjects to disrupt criminalizing narratives by asserting their own vulnerability through testimony – and then examine how, where and by what means this disruptive potential can be symbolically undermined. This analysis uncovered four specific strategies: appropriation, marginalization, subjugation and calculation. Cutting through the analysis of these four strategies, however, are some clear underlying directives for future research into whether and how the testimonies of criminalized subjects can be a transformative force in crime news television.

First, the *context* in which such testimonies appear clearly matters, as all four strategies emphasize how the meaning-making work of testimonies in such texts is relationally derived, rather than self-actualizing. An intuitive assumption underlying optimistic accounts of ordinary voice is that voice and subjectivity are intrinsically linked: that by making space for ordinary testimony in newsmaking, we necessarily make space for ordinary *people* to be heard. However, close analysis of demotic news texts disrupts this assumption. When analysing testimonies in crime news television, we need to ask questions like: Whose testimony is this? Whose testimony does it appear alongside? How are different testimonies being placed within the overall narrative composition of the text? How are they interacting symbolically?

Second, the *multi-modal presentation* of testimonies is of clear critical importance, as all four strategies – but especially subjugation and calculation – reveal how the meaning of verbal first-person testimonies can be reconfigured in the visual modality. To investigate how testimonies are presented and with what consequences for their micro-political potential, we need to ask questions like: How is this testimony being authenticated visually?

Which visual resources are being used? What kinds of relationships of visual-verbal correspondence are being established? Are there differences between the multi-modal presentation of some testimonies and others? If so, what governs these differences (e.g. race, gender, class)?

The collection of strategies explored in this paper is by no means exhaustive – there are certainly others to be found. Nor is it within the scope of my methodological approach to report on the breadth of their use in reporting on crime in Australia or elsewhere. These would both be empirically useful and theoretically productive areas for future research. In developing this short catalogue and unpacking how each strategy operates, my hope is that this paper provides a starting analytical vocabulary for future studies of the micro-political work of testimony in crime news – particularly, for analyses of how the testimonial interventions of criminalized subjects can be blunted through specific strategies of textual composition and presentation. Such research is vitally important as historical patterns of cultural, institutional and legal criminalization in Australia and elsewhere are being radically destabilised by the work of BIPOC organisers and their allies. At a moment when vulnerability is being reactively weaponized by powerful elites more than ever before (Chouliaraki and Banet-Weiser, 2020), the voices of systemically criminalized subjects need maximum audibility in our public conversations about crime and justice.

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Notes

1. The Australian press frequently lexicalises members of the African diaspora in Melbourne as simply 'African', 'Sudanese' or 'African refugees' (Majavu, 2020; Windle, 2008). These 'catch-all' terms obscure the diversity of communities, identities and migration experiences within the diaspora while disguising that racialization (rather than country or continent of origin) is what has informed their grouping together in media coverage. Following Majavu (2020), I use 'Black African' to describe a broad community of people marked as Other in Australian public culture through both racializing discourses that construct them as 'Black' and xenophobic discourses which position them as being 'of Africa'. As the terms 'Black' and 'Blak' are also used by First Nations people in Australia, I employ the term 'Black African' to also distinguish the forms of criminalization discussed in this paper from those experienced by First Nations communities, which have overlapping yet distinct conditions of possibility in the Australian settler colony.
2. Sudanese-born people account for only 1% of all crimes committed in the state of Victoria (Grivas, 2018)
3. Both *Q&A* and *Four Corners* had written transcripts available through the ABC website, which were downloaded and then checked for accuracy and consistency. A transcript of *Sunday Night* was prepared by the researcher.

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