

Media and murderers – a case of confusion? (guest blog)

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2014-10-28

*Generally, the British press takes a tough line on 'law and order' and sentencing. This is often criticised by liberals as prejudicial to fair legal process. But in this article, LSE student **Ross Longton** argues that the media has too much power overall in influencing public attitudes to criminals, a power that can even be to the detriment of those who seek tougher punishment.*

Just last year, Theresa May vowed that 'life would mean life' for anyone who murdered a police officer. Great. So why then are we about to let a triple murderer back on to the streets of London?

The name Harry Roberts is not a popular one amongst many families in London, or any police force across the United Kingdom. Now, 48 years after all three members of Police Unit Foxtrot One One were shot dead in a West London street, one of Britain's truly most deplorable is about to be given a second chance.

It was to be Sergeant Christopher Head, Detective Constable David Wombwell and Police Constable Geoffrey Fox's last day representing the thin blue line when they stopped Harry Roberts and his two accomplices on their way to a West London bank robbery. It was an act of iniquity that resonated through the public then, and now decades later, has once again surged to the forefront of contemporary media with his impending release.

Boris Johnson has condemned the decision as one that would 'sicken Londoners' and Steven White, Chairman of the Police Federation of England and Wales, has also explicitly stated his utter dismay at such a decision. I find it hard to disagree with such sentiments. Why is Roberts getting released? Surely he forfeited his right to a normal life the moment he ended those of three others.

Whilst we may have to accept Theresa May's idealistic pledge of 'life means life' will probably never be realised – contemporary politics is never so unambiguous – I am at least relieved to see the vast majority of newspapers openly and explicitly condemn Roberts' release.

At such times, however, I cannot help but consider the role the media now plays in formulating our convictions on such matters...

Whilst the various platforms of modern media have ushered in an era of co-operation between the policy makers of society and mass public consensus, it has also enabled us to act as the high arbiters of what is venial and what is inexcusable. That is, a power to condemn or exonerate our peers. A concept both exciting, yet terrifying.

To the sceptics of such a claim, I would refer you to the Great British train robbery of 1963. The media courted the ringleaders, 'Buster' Edwards and Ronnie Biggs, earning them notoriety as charismatic and daring names in a Hollywood-esque heist. The public in general find it much harder to remember the identity of the victim and train operator at the time, Jack Mills, who was so violently assaulted he never worked again.

The media has always had a role to play in shaping collective public opinion. However, at a time of increasing radicalism and violence throughout society, it has never been more important for it to retain its primary function as the impartial mouthpiece between all aspects of society. One where we can collectively and rationally debate the issues that are far bigger than ourselves.

Whether you view Roberts as a man that has served his time, or someone, out of principle, who should never be reintroduced into society again, it is important we remain vigilant against demonizing or romancing criminality, in any form.

I, for one, believe that whilst you can be truly repentant for previous wrongdoings, time served in prison does not

necessarily entitle automatic absolution, a sentiment I'm sure many of the families and members of society defaced by Roberts actions would also echo.

Such a decision to release Roberts devalues the incredible job and exceptional risks our police forces and emergency services have to endure every day, all in the name of keeping a blissfully unaware public safe. Some argue that Roberts has been rehabilitated after 48 years. Maybe so. But 48 years later the people of London are still missing three valued members of their society. To release Roberts invites domestic and international criticism at a time when morality in world media, politics and society is in danger of slipping into shades of grey...

This article by LSE student Ross Longton

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