Mediatized public crisis and civil society renewal: The racist murder of Stephen Lawrence

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Abstract
There have been many racist murders in Britain both before and since the killing of Stephen Lawrence, an 18-year-old black student, in April 1993. This particular murder, exceptionally, prompted widespread re-examination of questions of (in)justice, cultural identity and continuing racism in British society and it eventually initiated processes of institutional reflexivity including government policies targeting institutionalized racism within Britain’s most powerful organizations of state and civil society. The Stephen Lawrence case unfolded within the arenas and processes of the criminal justice system, but the public story of ‘Stephen Lawrence’, the central concern of this article, was principally played out within the nation’s media (and some international media too). It was here that the symbolic and moral charge of the case became generalized outwards to different publics in society, galvanizing emotions and appealing to a sense of moral solidarity subjunctively oriented to how society should or could be. This article, based upon analysis of the extensive media reporting over the ten year period 1993–2003 and developing theoretical ideas of ‘mediatized public crisis’ as a form of ‘society in action’, explores how the mainstream British media ‘performed’ the Stephen Lawrence case and thereby transformed it into a ‘mediatized public crisis’ embroiling as it did so powerful institutions of state (police, judiciary, government) and unleashing institutional reflexivity, social reforms and cultural change.

Key words
media performance; mediatized public crisis; moral solidarity; publics; ritual; social drama; ‘society in action’
INTRODUCTION

Mediatized public crises . . . tend to increase the distance between the indicative and the subjunctive, thereby giving to civil society its greatest power for social change. In these situations, the media create public narratives that emphasize not only the tragic distance between is and ought but the possibility of historically overcoming it. Such narratives prescribe struggles to make ‘real’ institutional relationships more consistent with the normative standards of the utopian civil society discourse. (Alexander and Jacobs, 1998: 28)

There have been racist murders in Britain both before and since the killing of Stephen Lawrence, the 18-year-old school student stabbed to death in Southeast London in April 1993. The Institute of Race Relations documented 124 racially motivated killings in England and Wales in the period 1970–2003, 50 of which occurred between 1991 and 2002 (IRR, 2001; 2002a; 2003). Between 2000 and 2001 53,090 racist incidents alone were recorded by the police in England and Wales, including 7887 common assaults and aggravated woundings; a figure that we reliably know from the British Crime Survey will be an under-representation (CRE, 1999; IRR; 2002b). The collective stain of British racism and violence rarely finds, however, public exposure and concerted response. The case of Stephen Lawrence proved to be very different.

The parents of the murdered youth, Doreen and Neville Lawrence, and their supporters campaigned for justice for their murdered son, winning some media coverage especially in the early years when media interest was sparse (Cathcart, 2000), but this does not account for the massive media exposure and public crisis that eventually enveloped the case. Institutionally the case unfolded within the criminal justice system and involved two police inquiries, two police reviews, the Crown Prosecution Service, committal and trial proceedings, a private prosecution, a coroner’s public inquest and then a public inquiry authorized by the new Labour Home Secretary, four years after the murder. This, in turn, resulted in Sir William Macpherson’s report that found police incompetence and institutional racism to blame for the five prime suspects’ evasion from the law and the injustice experienced by the Lawrences (Macpherson, 1999). A raft of wide-ranging, and consequential, legislative reforms followed aimed at, inter alia, changing policing practices, increasing ethnic minority recruitment and instituting social reforms designed to tackle ‘institutional racism’ (publicly acknowledged and defined for the first time) within police services as well as other institutions throughout British society.

The Stephen Lawrence case, then, unfolded within the arenas and processes of the criminal justice system. But the public story of ‘Stephen Lawrence’, the central concern of this article, was principally played out within the nation’s media (and some international media too). To be publicly seen and, importantly, ‘felt’ as a mounting crisis releasing consequential effects, the Stephen Lawrence case had to be placed within a narrative framework that could establish its significance and meaning. This work of meaning construction – both cognitive and affective – was principally conducted by the media. It was here that the symbolic and moral charge of the case became generalized outwards to different publics in society, galvanizing emotions and appealing to a sense of moral solidarity subjunctively oriented to how society should be.
Through its mediatization, the Stephen Lawrence case became a potent symbol and catalyst for change; it became, in the terms of Jeffrey Alexander and Ronald Jacobs (1998), a ‘mediatized public crisis’ challenging the British system of (in)justice and proved to be a litmus test of the extent to which British society was prepared to move beyond the anachronistic practices of the past, acknowledge institutional racism, and embrace cultural diversity. Exceptionally, then, this case focused national attention on deep-seated issues of ‘race’, racism and British identity and embroiled as it did so powerful institutions of state (police, judiciary, government) and elite public figures. Given the extensive research findings documenting the cultural predilections and institutional and professional logics of the news media (Cottle, 2000; 2003), how are we to account for this apparent departure from the racializing practices and representational silences that routinely characterize the reporting of ‘race’ and racism? What can it tell us about how the media, exceptionally, intervene in processes of civil society and its renewal?

This article, based upon analyses of the extensive media reporting over the ten year period 1993–2003, explores how the mainstream British media ‘performed’ the Stephen Lawrence case and thereby transformed it into a mediatized public crisis that unleashed institutional reflexivity, social reforms and cultural change.1 This performative ‘doing’, it is argued, sustained and channeled growing public concern about the case as well as its evident affront to society’s ‘utopian civil society discourse’. In Britain, as in many other contemporary multi-ethnic liberal democracies, this discourse had come to comprise a normative (though clearly not universal) assent to the idea and ‘moral rightness’ of society premised on equality before the law, legal justice enforced by an impartial criminal justice system, abhorrence of racist violence and a growing tolerance towards cultural difference (Ignatieff, 1998; Phillips and Phillips, 1998). In its mediatization the Stephen Lawrence case threatened to expose these normative claims as a baseless myth or, worse, cynical sham. It was this which proved potentially so shaming and, in the context of Britain’s multi-ethnic society, so charged.

Mediatized public crises, it will be argued, can be regarded as a contemporary form of ‘society in action’, and that their disruptive and transformative possibilities often inhere as much within their emotional and moral appeals, narrative dynamics and ritual forms as their centering of discursive contention, strategic claims-making and deliberative forums of engagement. These theoretical claims are grounded in the analysis that follows. But first a few words that help to theoretically situate the study and its approach to mediatized public crises.

MEDIA, MORAL SOLIDARITY, MOMENTUM

Jürgen Habermas (1996: 319) has observed how the moral regulation of conflicts inevitably call for a normative orientation to legitimate orders of the social world, and how problems of expressive identity formation call for an orientation to shared conceptions of the good life. Moral relations and moral solidarities are thereby immanent to all societies and can become available for collective mobilization and periodic revitalization within the media. Moral panic theory (Cohen, 1972), clearly, identifies the mobilization of moral solidarity at
the heart of its model of media amplified fears and societal reaction, as does the theory of
‘media events’ (Dayan and Katz, 1994) with its account of how ceremonial and celebratory
occasions of state build hegemony through ritualized affirmation and integrative appeals to
collectivity. Some ‘media events’, however, are clearly more conflicted than consensual and
more politically disruptive than integrative. Spectacular ‘media events’, according to John
Fiske (1994), for example, are ‘sites of maximum visibility and maximum turbulence’ (p. 7)
and threaten, as in the O.J. Simpson case, the televised beating of Rodney King and the Los
Angeles ‘riots’, to bring to the surface normally subterranean conflicts within wider society
(see also Hunt, 1999). It is this which grants them their electrifying charge. Whether
approached as essentially consensual or contested, however, these approaches to ‘media
events’, as the name suggests, fail to address the longer-term dynamics that propel some
events into becoming exceptional media phenomena – criticisms that can often also be
levelled at recent approaches to ‘media spectacles’ (Kellner, 2003).

Recent work on media scandals, however, helps to overcome the loss of analytical pre-
cision now associated with the term ‘media events’ (and ‘media spectacles’) and usefully
emphasizes the narrative and sequential dynamics propelling some media phenomena
forward through time (Lull and Hinerman, 1997; Thompson, 2000). James Lull and
Stephen Hinerman (1997), for example, argue that media scandals ‘serve to delineate a
breach in moral conduct and authority’ which ‘disgrace or offend the idealized, dominant
morality of a social community’ and when narrativized by the media these can produce
‘a range of effects from ideological and cultural retrenchment to disruption and change’
(p. 3). These studies, like those attending to ‘mediatized public crises’ more generally, pay
careful attention to the dynamic and narrative progression of exceptional media phenom-
ena and how these invariably summon moral solidarities and release social charge (Elliott,
1980; Wagner-Pacifici, 1986; Alexander, 1988; Ettema, 1990; Alexander and Jacobs,
1998; Jacobs 2000). Such studies have often had recourse to Victor Turner’s (1974)
anthropological framework of ‘social dramas’:

In previous studies I have used the notion of a social drama as a device for describing
and analysing episodes that manifest social conflict. At its simplest, the drama consists
of a four-stage model, proceeding from breach of some social relationship regarded as
crucial in the relevant social group, which provides not only its setting but many of its
goals, through a phase of rapidly mounting crisis in the direction of the group’s major
dichotomous cleavage, to the application of legal or ritual means of redress or recon-
ciliation between the conflicting parties... The final stage is either the public and
symbolic expression of reconciliation or else of irremediable schism. (pp. 78–9)

Turner’s schema of ‘social dramas’ proves useful to this day, and serves to highlight the
dynamics propelling public crises forward as well as their contingencies and potentially
transformative impacts. It also encourages a more nuanced understanding of the mediations
of power and how these are often couched in symbolism and ritual public perform-
ances that appear to be both demanded by, as well as steering, the ‘social drama’. Im-
portantly, his discussion of ritual as ‘performance’ and ‘enactment’, and not simply as
ceremony and formality (Turner, 1981: 155–6), breaks with earlier Durkheimian views, and
challenges the idea of public rituals as necessarily integrative or supportive of the
dominant social order (see also Chaney, 1986; 1993; Kertzer, 1988; Emirbayer, 2003). Related concepts of ‘communitas’ and ‘liminality’ further help to illuminate how social dramas can generate emotional intensity, mobilize moral solidarity and encourage social reflexivity in precipitous moments that reside, on occasion, outside of ‘normal’ space and time.

Today, if we are to better understand how or to what extent society’s ‘expressive cultural genres’ can ‘flood their subjects with affect’, contribute to processes of ‘institutional and cultural reflexivity’ and ‘subjunctively’ orient readers/audiences towards ‘redressive actions’ aimed at overcoming major cleavages and divisions within society (Turner, 1982), we have to carefully attend to the performative enactment of mediatized public crises.

MEDIA PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY

Ideas of performance and performativity, whether those developed in fields of linguistics and language studies (Austin, 1956/1975), symbolic interactionist sociology (Goffman, 1959), anthropology and ethnography (Turner, 1969; 1974; 1982; Geertz, 1992; Hughes-Freeland, 1998; Schieffelin, 1998), or gender and identity studies (Butler, 1990), invite us to move beyond the referential or ‘constantive’ (Austin, 1975) level of communication and consider how, respectively, words, social encounters, culture and identity are performed and are thereby ‘doing’ something, and invariably doing so with an awareness of an audience (Bakhtin, 1986; Carlson, 1996). Studies of media ritual and performativity give rise to issues of agency and intentionality, creativity and constraint and the participatory nature of spectatorship (Hughes-Freeland, 1998), as well as the relationship between media and other centers of social and cultural power (Elliott, 1980). There are many possible roles performed by the news media within mediatized public crises including: ‘conduit’, ‘instigator’, ‘conductor’, ‘narrator’, ‘mediator’, ‘advocate’, ‘campaigner’, or ‘champion’, just as there are diverse roles performed by the news media in situations of conflict more generally (Wolfsfeld, 2003). We also know that these can change through time (Hallin, 1986; Bennett, 1990; Butler, 1995), be enacted differently within different media and media forms (Elliott, Murdock and Schlesinger 1986; Cottle, 2002), and that the media increasingly engages reflexively with its own performance.

In the context of this study, then, ideas of performance and performativity invite analysis of the ways in which media deploy symbolization and sentiments, discourses and form to simultaneously embody and appeal to moral solidarities oriented to how society should be. While these performative deployments often exhibit considerable rhetorical and emotional force, such ‘invitations’ can only come alive – experientially, emotionally, subjunctively – when actively read by audiences/readerships who are prepared to commit to them as symbolically meaningful and who can accept the ‘solidarity’ offered (Ryfe, 2001). Such is the implicit social relational contract of meaningful communicative encounters embedded within mediatized public crises. Given the sociological reality of complexly structured societies characterized by conflicting interests and identities, we can expect that media performance and performativity will be differently enacted across different media and will variously address and invoke different ‘publics’. But we may also anticipate that
when a mediatized public crisis exposes deep-seated fault lines within society, so is it likely to produce attempted closure around a political or moral invocation of society’s unspoken ‘utopian civil society discourse’, a discourse that can then be enacted to narrow the distance between ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be’.

**MEDIATIZED PUBLIC CRISIS: THE STEPHEN LAWRENCE STORY**

In the analysis that follows, a number of media features evidently helped to propel the Stephen Lawrence story forward and, over time, pushed it deeper into the surrounding and conflicted terrain of ‘race’, racism and British identity. These included: routine news narrativization that reported the latest developments of the case as it moved through the criminal justice system, rehearsing the ‘known’ facts and positioning it as an ongoing narrative; the media’s transmutation of ‘Stephen Lawrence’ from ‘sign’ to ‘symbol’ as questions of racism migrated from the particularities of the case to collective grievances and the injustices of racism in British society; the media’s increasing preparedness to act as advocates of change in respect of specific institutional reforms (and as a way of cauterizing the social wound that threatened to open up around the Stephen Lawrence case); and the deep-seated emotions that the case gave rise to, and which the media powerfully expressed and publicly sustained – emotions that served to resonate with notions of ‘moral universalism’ (Malik, 1996; Ignatieff, 1998) and society’s declared ‘utopian civil society discourse’ (Alexander and Jacobs, 1998). Together, these helped to produce a new ‘public mood’ and it was on this basis that the media felt able to publicly enact, often in concert, a form of ‘moral solidarity’ which gave them license to direct flows of moral opprobrium and moral approbation whilst sustaining the impetus for change. These various media features were essential in precipitating a sense of public crisis and unleashing social pressures for change. The following now examines these dynamics and their performative enactment by the British mainstream media.

**BREACH**

The public story of the Stephen Lawrence case developed unevenly and over a considerable period of time before it enveloped the nation as a moment of social reflexivity and civil society renewal (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Initially the murder was ignored by large sections of the British news media and those that reported it did so on inside pages and informed by their respective editorial views and lexicons of ‘race’. The *Daily Mail’s* main headline, for example, read: ‘Fear of Reprisals After White Gang Knife Teenage Student’, the *Sun’s*, ‘Race Murder Stabbing of Perfect Pupil’, and the *Independent’s* ‘Police Appeal for Calm After Racist Murder’ (all on 24 April 1993). Even at this early juncture sections of the press had seemingly recognized the ‘purity’ of Stephen Lawrence, the 18-year-old, hard-working school student, and this ‘moral’ evaluation would later lend considerable...
support to media enactment of the Stephen Lawrence story – despite its immoral implication that some racist murders can be taken as more newsworthy than others. Nelson Mandela’s visit two weeks after the murder and his words of support for the Lawrences, attracted further media interest, and Doreen Lawrence used the opportunity to publicly criticize the police and its handling of the investigation. At this point, the Stephen Lawrence case also attracted some news interest through community marches and demonstrations protesting against the rising tide of racist violence in areas of south-east London (where at least three other racist murders had recently been committed) and the presence of the British National Party that was fomenting racist hatred in the area. The Daily Mail, however, chose to devote considerable time and resources to investigating the presumed ‘hi-jacking’ of these demonstrations by political extremists and sought to rubbish anti-racist organizations responding to the rising numbers of racist assaults and murders.

It was not until the ‘bombshell’ decision announced by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) not to prosecute the prime suspects that a ‘breach’, in Turner’s sense, opened up that paved the way for a period of mounting crisis that would progressively position the Stephen Lawrence case as a major public concern within mainstream media discourse and wider society.

MOUNTING CRISIS

The CPS decision not to prosecute on grounds of ‘insufficient evidence’ on 30 July 1993, crystallized the family’s growing lack of confidence in the criminal justice system and, in the context of growing community calls for action against the rising tide of racist violence, signalled a public ‘breach’ of trust in the authorities charged with the responsibility of investigating and prosecuting racist murder. The Stephen Lawrence case now moved into a protracted phase of ‘mounting crisis’ that ran until 15 March 1998, the day before the opening of the Public Inquiry (see Figure 1 and Table 1). Across this period the Stephen Lawrence story was kept in the public eye on a mundane basis through a succession of news updates and brief reports. It is in the nature of discontinuous news reporting that basic information has to be rehearsed time and again and it was by this narrative means that the known facts of the Stephen Lawrence story became told and retold time and again as the case made its way through the criminal justice system. Though often containing little new information these basic reports nonetheless served to publicly signal the Stephen Lawrence case as a ‘story’ moving through time and one, moreover, which promised future developments and possible conflicts. This provided grounds on which further media generalization could be built later.

The events leading up to and including the earlier CPS ‘breach’ had also placed the name of Stephen Lawrence in the public eye and, as such, it was now available for further public circulation. News reports of other incidents of racial violence and murder, as well as institutional moves to bolster public confidence in the authorities’ handling of these, increasingly made reference to Stephen Lawrence. The name ‘Stephen Lawrence’, at first ‘sign’ of the murder of a particular black teenager in south-east London, thereby began
### TABLE 1 The mediatized Stephen Lawrence story: press output

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*In this table and all subsequent data, figures for 2003 refer only to the period from January to April.*
COTTLE THE MURDER OF STEPHEN LAWRENCE 57

176
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24 14 9 4 26 39 31 44
11 5

CPS drops
charges
Committal
hearings
Private
Prosecution
Inquest,
Daily Mail action
Inquiry
begins
Inquiry
ends
Report
released
Suspects
interviewed
Nail bomb
attacks

More arrests,
Brooks’s case

FIGURE 1 The mediatized Stephen Lawrence story: mapping

1539

Redress
Reintegration/
Schism
Crisis
Breach
Ebbing/
Revivification

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to transform into a symbol that could act as a common focal point holding together
diverse events and issues within the troubled field of ‘race’ and racism. None but the most
rabidly racist could deny the inhumanity and injustice of his murder given its violation of
the utopian discourse of contemporary civil society. But there were other features that also
made ‘Stephen Lawrence’ such a universalizing symbol of racial injustice within white
British society.

Young, gifted and black, Stephen Lawrence did not conform to the usual media stereo-
types of black youths as criminal, disaffected or otherwise troublesome, and his parents
seemingly matched the middle-England ideal profile of hard-working, God-fearing and
self-improving first-generation immigrants, content to make their own way in British
society. The sign of ‘Stephen Lawrence’, then, spoke to different discourses within the
field of British ‘race’ relations and registered with emotive force and political urgency the
essential inhumanity of his murder. Additional symbolic charge was also generated in this
period by two key moments of failed institutional redress: the private prosecution
mounted by the Lawrences and their legal team, and the later coroner’s public inquest
into Stephen Lawrence’s death. Each was characterized by moments of high tension and
ritual drama and each, through its performative mediatization, flooded the Stephen
Lawrence story with emotional affect and moral charge.

Stephen Lawrence’s murder had at first received limited press reporting, as we have
heard. Now, three years later with the opening of the private prosecution on 19 April 1996,
it was prominently replayed in terms that emphasized its racist brutality: ‘Hacked to Death
Just for Being Black’ (Sun), ‘Race-hate Led to Boy’s Knife Killing’ (Daily Mirror), ‘Black
Student Killed “Out of Racist Hatred”’ (Independent). Under the headline ‘Black Teenager
“Murdered” by Race-hate Gang’, The Times (1996) described Stephen’s last hours and
included eye-witness statements and graphic accounts of both the attack and the knife
that caused his fatal injuries. Press reporting, then, was giving full vent to the racist nature
of the attack and its appalling violence. Through this relived violence, readerships were
being invited to bear witness and see and feel the hurt that this had caused.

When the case collapsed on 25 April 1996, after the judge ruled that both Duwayne
Brooks’s testimony (who had been with Stephen Lawrence when he was attacked) and
the video evidence of the prime suspects acting out racist attacks were inadmissible, the
media reported the anger that attended this latest ‘breach’ of justice: ‘It’s Just Not Fair’
(Sun), ‘So Who Did Kill Stephen? Father of Race Murder Victim Demands Justice’ (Daily
Mirror). The mainstream press also followed up on the collapse of the prosecution and
many provided lengthy transcripts of the covert police video that, again, underlined the
extreme racism of the prime suspects. Given the extremism of the language and senti-
ments that these revealed, this could only serve to summon feelings of common revulsion
across the liberal-democratic spectrum.

Depth of Hatred Revealed in Covert Video

Neil Acourt brandished a knife, waved it around and thrust it into the wall or furniture
uttering vile racist abuse.

‘I reckon that every nigger should be chopped up mate and they should be left with
nothing but fucking stumps’. (Independent, 26 April 1996)
Touched by the understandable grief and sentiments of the Lawrences and repulsed by the grotesque display of verbal racism and acting out of racist violence, the British press now collectively became emboldened in its support for the Lawrences. The coroner's public inquest was reported in detail. Police blunders were publicly revealed for the first time and various police claims were challenged by the Lawrences' legal team. The refusal by the five accused to answer questions in the witness box produced universal press condemnation. In its mediatization, the ritual drama and affect of the inquest was publicly elaborated and commented on by both the press and broadcasting institutions and by the time the inquest reached its final, unprecedented, verdict the story was guaranteed to receive extensive coverage. The Guardian (14 February 1997) led with the story on its front page: 'Unlawfully Kill in an Unprovoked Racist Attack by Five White Youths'. The mainstream British press followed up on the verdict with detailed commentaries and analysis reflecting on the failure of the criminal justice system to deliver justice to the Lawrence family.

The Daily Mail, however, went much further in a stunning performative intervention. On 14 February, under the headline 'Murderers' blazoned across its front page, it reproduced pictures of the five prime suspects and sub-titled 'The Mail Accuses These Men of Killing. If We Are Wrong, Let Them Sue Us', and did so in the knowledge that none of the suspects would want to risk self-incrimination in a libel case. The paper's action, praised in many quarters, was not motivated by a coincidence of views with those of the Lawrences, but indignation at the way in which the process of criminal justice had seemingly been thwarted by, to use their terms, five 'moronic thugs' and how this threatened to 'damage race relations and the reputation of British justice' (Daily Mail, 14 February 1997).

Through the public mediatization of the coroner's inquest, and the earlier private prosecution, then, the Lawrence story signalled issues of 'race' and racism as well as injustice at the heart of its public telling. Press advocacy and the media's elaboration of emotions and feelings generated by the case powerfully moved the story into a subjunctive register. This had been enacted by 'quality' broadsheets and 'popular' tabloids and opened up opportunities for increased cultural reflexivity around issues of 'race', racism and British identity. The Daily Mirror (17 February 1997), for example followed the debate up with an editorial addressing Britain's race relations:

The Monday Debate: Will We Ever Be Able to Live in Racial Harmony?

. . . No one has been convicted of the killing, but last week a newspaper took the unprecedented step of naming five men as the murderers. The case has reopened the whole issue of racism in Britain. Here we examine whether it will ever be possible to live in racial harmony.

Yes, says Herman Ouseley Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality . . . No, Says Doreen Lawrence Mother of Stephen Lawrence, stabbed to death three years ago . . .

While right-wing newspapers and commentators sought to contain the political challenges supported by the new 'emotional mood' unleashed by the 'Stephen Lawrence' crisis, the sense of crisis now deepened with every new report of a racist attack and police incompetence – and there were many.
Police Failed to Act as Race Hate Victim Died in Hospital

For six days the family of a black musician who was set on fire in a street attack begged detectives to take a statement from him in hospital, but he fell into a coma and died before being interviewed.

The death of Michael Menson, 29, is now the subject of a murder inquiry. But, in an echo of the notorious Stephen Lawrence case, police sources admit that the prospects of bringing his attackers to justice may have been seriously weakened by their colleagues’ slowness to act. (Observer, 30 March 1997)

By this point, the symbolic status and signifying capacity of ‘Stephen Lawrence’ was firmly established and a sense of moral solidarity was informing the media’s enactment of the case, even if the press then sought to canalize the groundswell of emotion and sentiments along preferred political and editorial tracks. The Stephen Lawrence story had thereby entered into a moral realm in which symbolism and ritual would play an increasingly important part in determining how it discharged its political effects.

What the private prosecution and public coroner’s inquest had not managed to do, notwithstanding their ritual potential to do so, was head off the mounting public criticism now being directed at the criminal justice system and some of its key institutions. The various institutional responses had so far only served to exacerbate the sense of deepening crisis; they had opened the wound symbolized by Stephen Lawrence but had not cauterized it. Closure demanded moral and institutional redress if community anger and public opprobrium was not to overspill and pollute core institutions of state and society, ruin public reputations or threaten serious civil unrest. At this juncture, clearly, the Stephen Lawrence story had entered into public life and was being performed on the media stage. Hopes for, and tensions surrounding, the public inquiry were high.

REDRESS

According to Turner (1974) it is in the redressive phase ‘that both pragmatic techniques and symbolic action reach their fullest expression’, for it is here that society is ‘at its most “self-conscious”’. Redress often exhibits ‘liminal features, its being “betwixt and between” and may be conducted through the “idiom of judicial process, or in the metaphorical and symbolic idiom of a ritual process” (p. 41). With each successive failure of the criminal justice system and with each new report of continuing racist attacks and murders in London and elsewhere in Britain, the sign of Stephen Lawrence accumulated further symbolic power. The media breathed life into this symbol as it took up position centre stage in a narrative that had yet to run its course.

The media also elaborated the emotional resonance of the case throughout society and, in so doing, contributed to a sense of moral solidarity. A short digression is useful at this point. Randal Collins (2003: 129–33), in his sociological theory of transient emotions, emphasizes how rituals make use of emotional ingredients and produce feelings of moral solidarity. Rituals, he suggests, shape cognitions and leave a longer-term emotional energy: ‘we feel the emotions of social solidarity in the various ideas with which we think’
and ‘thinking those ideas allows those individuals to feel a renewed surge of socially-based enthusiasm’ (pp.132–3). Raymond Williams (1985), when struggling to find a language that captures the always formative, always ‘experienced’ processes of social being coined the concept of ‘structures of feeling’ (pp. 128–35). These historically emergent ‘structures of feeling’, according to Williams, are ‘affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity’ (p. 132). Together, these ideas help to underline the possible role of emotions and ritual in the Stephen Lawrence case at this time and how these became powerfully expressed and elaborated in its mediatization and contributed to the production of a sense of moral solidarity.

The phase of judicial and symbolic redress begun on 17 March 1998, the opening day of the Government instigated public inquiry, included the release of the Macpherson report on 24 February 1999, and continued across the first wave of political responses and public discussion in March of that year. It mirrors Turner’s (1974) discussion remarkably. The inquiry opened with a minute’s silence in memory of Stephen Lawrence, before rehearsing, to use Turner’s terms, ‘a distanced replication and critique of the events leading up to and composing the “crisis”’ (p. 41). This began with detailed scrutiny and criticism of the botched police investigations: ‘Inquiry Told of Lawrence Case Blunders’ (Independent, 25 March 1998), ‘Cops Waited Two Weeks to Quiz Murder Suspects’ (Sun, 25 March 1998), ‘Amazing Trail of Blunders by Police: Inquiry Opens with Catalogue of Errors’ (Daily Mail, 25 March 1998). But it was the highly charged testimonies and emotional scenes of the inquiry itself as much as the disclosure of previously hidden details which sustained the ‘collective effervescence’ now infused in its public mediatization.

On the second day of the inquiry Doreen Lawrence testified: ‘Mum’s Hell at Murder of Stephen’ (Sun, 26 March 1998), ‘The Anger and Anguish of Mrs Lawrence’ (Guardian, 26 March 1998), ‘A Mother’s Torment: “I Gave a Police Officer the Five Suspects’ Names. He Folded the Paper into a Small Ball. I Was So Angry.”’ (Daily Mail, 26 March 1998). The following day this emotional intensity was deepened even further with the heartrending testimony, publicly aired for the first time, of a couple who had cared for Stephen Lawrence as he lay dying: ‘You Are Loved, Woman Passer-By Whispered As Stephen Slipped Away’ (Daily Mail, 27 March 1998). The intensity of this emotional discharge was not dependent only on spoken testimonies at the inquiry however, but inhered in the media’s performative enactment of them. Consider, for example, the following extract from the front page of the Independent (30 June 1998):

**Passing Before Their Eyes, One By One, Were the Racist Thugs They Believed Killed Their Son**

*If he felt the slightest twinge of self-consciousness, he did not show it. Jamie Acourt swaggered into the room, glanced at the massed ranks of hostile faces and settled down in the witness box, adjusting the lapels of his freshly pressed suite.*

Twenty feet away, Neville and Doreen Lawrence gazed steadily at this young man, with his slicked back dark hair and insolent demeanour. Acourt slouched back in his chair, unfazed by the attention . . .

Expectation of public drama also informed the participation of the Metropolitan Police
at the inquiry, building to a climax as public apologies were belatedly offered by senior representatives of the Met, declined by the Lawrences, and as calls for Sir Paul Condon’s resignation began to be heard. This was now essentially a moral drama being played out on the media stage and in which public accountability, humility, and shame were seemingly demanded and, periodically, offered up as a means of demonstrating public contrition – and slowing the flow of public opprobrium being directed at the institution of the police. By the time Sir Paul Condon was required to take the stand, public expectancy was palpable. The Guardian performatively displayed this dramatic event on its front page: ‘Lawrence Family Spurns Met Chief’s Personal Apology over Racist Murder: When Sorry is Not Enough’ (Guardian, 2 October 1998).

Alongside and contributing to the daily mediatized enactment of the public inquiry, the press produced an upsurge in background stories, features, opinion pieces and editorials both contributing to and expressing wider processes of cultural reflection (see Table 2). Ten percent of all Stephen Lawrence press items in 1999, for example, focused on discrimination and ethnic minority representation in different sectors of society, including the probation service, social services, housing and education, and a further ten percent of all items focused specifically on police racism and minority ethnic recruitment in both 1998 and 1999 (see Table 3). This produced such headlines as ‘Shame on the Racists in Our Police Ranks’ (The Times, 9 August 1998), ‘Forgotten Victims of Race Hate: the Murder of Stephen Lawrence Was Not an Isolated Incident. Nor Was the Bungled Police Response to His Death’ (Observer, 7 February 1999), ‘Straw Demands More Black Cops’ (Sun, 10 February 1999) and ‘Why Racists Flourish in an Anti-racist Force’ (Independent, 24 February 1999).

The press also reflexively focused on itself and other media in an upsurge of 292 such media reflexive pieces, or nearly ten percent of all press output in 1999 (see Table 2). Liberal broadsheets, for example, reflected on the symbolic status acquired by Stephen Lawrence in the media and compared this historically to other ‘watershed’ cases, thereby extending and deepening both its historical and political reach: ‘Lawrence Becomes Black Icon’ (Independent, 20 December 1998), ‘Icon for a Sceptical Age’ (Observer, 10 January 1999), ‘Tragedies that Shaped Perceptions’ (Guardian, 26 February 1999). Such media reflexivity grew across the mounting crisis and redress phases, but assumed its most prominent aspect following the release of the Macpherson inquiry report on 24 February 1999.

The release of the Macpherson report, six years after the murder, represented the pinnacle moment of symbolic redress. Here the political centre of society came together to publicly demonstrate its support for the Lawrences, acknowledge a collective sense of shame and lend support to symbolic processes of redress. This all-party support was embodied in the statements by leading politicians in the House of Commons on 24 February 1999, statements that were broadcast live and in full by television as well as in abridged form later that same day, and then reported by the press the following day.

Prime Minister, Tony Blair: Madam Speaker, I think it right today to praise Doreen and Neville Lawrence for their courage and dignity. We should confront honestly as a nation the racism that still exists within our society. We should find within ourselves as a nation the will to overcome it. The publication of today’s report on the killing of Stephen
Lawrence is a very important moment in the life of our country; it is a moment to reflect, learn and to change. It will certainly lead to new laws, but more than that it will lead to new attitudes, a new era in race relations and a new more tolerant and inclusive Britain. (BBC2 Westminster, 24 February 1999)

Following the official release of the Macpherson report on 24 February 1999, the media collectively performed a spectacular outpouring that dominated the media sphere on this day, and for many days and weeks thereafter. This was performed on front pages, in double-page spreads, supplementary pages and special reports, and all making full use of page layout, visual impact and championing headlines including ‘Stephen Lawrence’s...
### TABLE 3 The mediatized Stephen Lawrence story: press themes

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Britain's mainstream media, then, collectively reported the response from the political centre of society as a moment of historical import. This 'cultural flooding' also signalled a liminal moment outside of routine time and party politics and thereby helped to promote a sense of national renewal and moral solidarity. While different newspapers, as we have seen, had sought to emphasize certain aspects of the case and not others, for a while at least they evidently felt obligated by a shared recognition of 'national shame' and the need for a moral commitment to change. This new public mood continued to be expressed by, and also conditioned, press performativity for some time thereafter.

REINTEGRATION/SCHISM

The release of the Macpherson report, then, was accompanied by an outpouring of mediatized cultural effervescence. This remained palpable for some time and helped to sustain the momentum for redressive action. Following the announcement by the Prime Minister and Home Secretary in the House of Commons on 24 February 1999, the Labour government embarked on turning Macpherson's 70 recommendations, and some of its own, into legislation and policy. This did not, however, preclude some sections of the media challenging the pace of reforms or the validity of the concept of 'institutional racism', or even refuting claims of widespread police racism. But the mainstream media nevertheless evidently felt obligated to a deeper collective sense of 'society' and as one now in need of repair after its bruising from the Stephen Lawrence case. This was a necessary collective project if the social imaginary of British civil society was once again to reestablish itself as a taken-for-granted, if mythical, place of even-handed justice and social inclusion protected by, rather than undermined by, the forces of law and order.

The collective sentiments publicly stirred by the spectacular mediatization of the Macpherson inquiry had also produced a powerful cultural ambience that could envelop new developments. This cultural energy was principally sustained by widespread anticipation of thorough-going reforms and/or disbelief that the political centre could in fact deliver on its pledges. But the Stephen Lawrence story also found an additional infusion of moral energy from an unexpected source. This manifested itself when sinister forces of violent racism appeared to attack the sacred idea of society in a backlash deliberately targeting the new subjunctive mood. Up until this point the locus of public odium against violent racism had been focused for the most part through the 'profane' media images of the five prime suspects, recycled time and again. It was these images which had helped to personify and literally 'embody' racism within the media's collective representations. The more diffuse processes, practices and outcomes of 'institutional racism' had, needless to say, proved more difficult for the media to visualize. The desecration of Stephen Lawrence's memorial stone, filmed at the height of the cultural flooding of the nation's
media, had seemed at the time a deeply sacrilegious act. But even this didn’t compare with the dramatic shock that befell the new subjunctive mood when a nail bomb exploded in a bustling Brixton market, a centre of black culture in London, injuring 39 people, on 18 April 1999.

The media immediately suspected a racist backlash: ‘The Brixton Bomb Was Probably the Work of Racist Thugs’ (Sun, 19 April 1999). When further bomb explosions followed in the East End of London nine days later, the perception and fear of a racist backlash was now firmly embedded: ‘Race Terrorism Fear as Bomb Blasts East End’ (Independent, 25 April 1999), ‘Bomber Picks Targets to Spread Race Terror’ (The Times, 25 April 1999).

Confronted by such assaults on ‘society’ and its sacred revitalization, the press united in moral condemnation and closed ranks once again against the racists. ‘Communitas’, according to Turner (1982), ‘tends to be inclusive’ and ‘this drive to inclusivity makes for proselytization’ (p. 51) – and so it did in the British media.

**What the Bombers Want**

*Two bomb explosions in London’s multi-ethnic communities in consecutive weekends are clearly calculated to spread fear, arouse suspicion and incite racial tension. The injuries of passers-by are a means to that end. If we are to defeat the bombers, it follows that we must do all we can to deny them their real ambition, which is to destabilize good race relations. Their aim is to turn Londoners against themselves and replace neighbourliness by neighbourhood wars. However long it takes to catch them, they must not succeed.* (Sunday Times, 25 April 1999)

When a third bomb went off in the Admiral Duncan pub in Soho killing three people, a place frequented by the gay community, the presumption that a racist conspiracy was responsible, or that this was a backlash aimed specifically at the new Macpherson public mood, was weakened. Over a year later, in July 2000, David Copeland who declared that he was a ‘righteous messenger from God’, was sentenced to six life sentences for the bombings. While he stated that he had aimed to ‘start a race and homophobic war’, he had in fact acted alone and did not claim to have been responding to the Stephen Lawrence case at all.

The moral force of the Stephen Lawrence case, then, had become infused in the contests and conflicts played out in his name, and some that weren’t. And this extended to the political party arena. When William Hague, leader of the Conservative opposition, argued later that year that the Macpherson inquiry had in fact damaged police morale and led to less vigorous policing in black areas with a consequent rise in black crime, he badly underestimated both the longevity and potency of the public sentiments surrounding the Stephen Lawrence case. His intervention immediately brought forth widespread media condemnation, and eddies of moral pollution once again began to swirl: ‘Mr Hague has Shredded his Credibility with this Cynical and Disgraceful Speech’ (Independent, 15 December 2000), ‘Voice of The Mirror: Shame of a Tory Leader at New Low’ (Mirror, 15 December 2000), ‘How Hague Mugged Macpherson’ (Guardian, 15 December 2000). Even the right-wing Sunday tabloid *News of the World* (17 December 2000) now felt compelled to come out against Hague’s transgression of the public mood:
Have You No Shame, Hague?

Hague’s initial reaction to the inquiry into police mishandling of Stephen Lawrence’s murder was that all decent people would feel ‘shame and disgust’ . . . and that we must ‘build a nation in which every citizen, regardless of colour and creed, is treated with justice and respect’ . . . By last week all he cared about was getting maximum numbers of the death-or-glory Tory blue-rinse brigade to pull on their surgical stockings and do it for him one more time.

In its post-redress phase, therefore, the media performed the Stephen Lawrence story in ways that continued to publicly summon a sense of communitas. At the heart of these collective representations were symbolic appeals to moral solidarities and the dramatization of sacred and profane forces in society. It was by these representational means that the sacred idea of society once again became enacted by the press. Sections of the press also performatively enacted their own calendrical ritual under the legitimizing mantle of the Macpherson anniversary one year on, and then did so in following years. This too sustained further reflexivity on issues of identity in multicultural Britain as well as critical commentary and analysis about the progress of the Macpherson and Labour Government reforms.

As time moved on, however, the press began to reassert their editorial independence from the moral mood that they had helped to produce. Some newspapers now sought to slow if not derail the momentum of reform being directed at the forces of law and order, while others performatively stoked the engine of change and encouraged the New Labour Government to take their hands off the brakes. For a time, though, the moral momentum of the Stephen Lawrence story had powerfully intervened in the life of society, polity and culture and it had contributed a powerful impetus to how civil society could and should be.

CONCLUSION

The Stephen Lawrence story powerfully entered into the life of society and it did so, as we have seen, through its public enactment as a mediatized public crisis. It was here that the story was publicly performed, vitalized and delivered with such cultural force. The struggles conducted in the name of ‘Stephen Lawrence’ served to unleash processes of much needed social reform and cultural reflexivity. It is doubtful whether the government authorized public inquiry would have been authorized at all if the media had not earlier animated wider public sentiments about the Stephen Lawrence case in its reporting of ‘breach’ and ‘mounting crisis’ phases. The Stephen Lawrence story was progressively publicized and visualized in the media spotlight, and its emotional charge was thereby extended across society. But the media did more than this. They enacted the drama, discharged the intense emotions, steered the flows of moral pollution, displayed the symbols and deliberated the difficult issues raised by the inquiry. And, importantly, they also summoned and directed the emotional and moral force of the case outwards, and downwards, into society. They served, in other words, to energize and give shape to the sense of moral communitas that was publicly summoned in the moment of ritualized redress.
new ‘emotional mood’, a new ‘structure of feeling’ had been brought into public being and for a time this had structured the form, and possibilities, of enacted politics.

Status elevation and status reversal, to use Turner’s terms, were also clearly evident in the public performances and symbolism that helped constitute this liminal moment ‘outside’ of the normal structures of institutional, hierarchical power. High-energy symbols took up position on ‘sacred’ moral high-ground and signs of moral depravity possessed the ‘profane’ moral low-ground, but all entered with affective force and cultural resonance into the public drama that threatened, symbolically at least, the moral centre of society and which thereby challenged the strategic deployments of communicative power by institutional interests. Through this mediatized public crisis, social solidarity became rearticulated and reworked in respect of (white) society’s shameful secrets concerning racist murders and violent assaults in British society, as well as the racism embedded in some of its core institutions. Mediatized, the Macpherson inquiry had unleashed an avalanche of cultural reflection and reflexivity that began to uncover the stain of British racism and prompted, experientially as well as deliberatively, a moral solidarity based on declared commitments to change.

Following the high-watermark of the Macpherson report, the Stephen Lawrence story has inevitably ebbed through time but such was its earlier impact and so deeply was it etched into the historical memory of society, that it remains to this day available for periodic revitalization. It continues to hold charge partly because the issues and identities that surfaced through its cognitive and affective mapping of society remain contested terrains, but also because it accrued to itself symbolic power that burnt accusingly in the glare of the media. This continues to exert a moral force within society when mobilized in projects for change. Let there be no mistake however, this is contested terrain; and how could it not be given the material inequalities and identity politics at stake within the contested field of ‘race’, racism and British identity?

‘Ebbing/revivification’ constitutes a fifth phase that can be added to Turner’s schema. Here the media periodically enacts and revivifies the symbolic charge of ‘Stephen Lawrence’, whether as historical reference, political benchmark or cultural residue. For the reasons already stated, the name of ‘Stephen Lawrence’ is likely to remain part of media discourse and wider public sensibility for the foreseeable future. Over ten years after the murder, Britain’s liberal broadsheets have continued to performatively invoke the subjunctive mood galvanized by the case, and periodically sought to revitalize and extend its catalytic force to continuing concerns of ‘race’, racism and identity in British society. The sign, symbol, and historical referent of ‘Stephen Lawrence’ refuses to die and continues to exert agency to this day. Perhaps it never will, so long as a collective sensibility, and potential moral solidarity, exists that is shamed by racist murder and the continuing social injustices of racism within British society.

Notes

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1 This study is based on a comprehensive sample of 6989 newspaper items referencing Stephen Lawrence across the period April 1993 to May 2003 inclusive and produced by the following
representative weekday and Sunday UK newspapers: the Guardian, the Observer, the Independent, Financial Times, The Times, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, the Sun, News of the World, the Voice, the Scotsman, the Herald, Daily Record, and Belfast Telegraph. The analysis in this article concentrates on mainstream British newspapers only and their collective enactment of the Stephen Lawrence case as a shared moral concern. For a more detailed study of how the press (both mainstream and minority) and television performed this story differentially see Cottle (2004).

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