

PaCCS POLICY BRIEF:
The Representation of Transnational Human Trafficking
in present-day News, True Crime and Fiction

Foreword

In September 2017, we convened a group of academics, police officers, third sector, Home Office and media representatives, creative writers and filmmakers to discuss findings from our research into the **Representation of Human Trafficking (HT)**.

The symposium was informed by talks (and also one reading and film) by:

- Professor Kevin Bales - University of Nottingham
- Dr Charlotte Beyer - University of Gloucestershire
- Mark Burns-Williamson – South Yorks Police & Crime Commissioner and Chair of the National Anti-Trafficking & Modern Day Slavery Network
- Dr Melissa Dearey - University of Hull
- Bernie Gravett - Special Policing Consultant
- Dr Christiana Gregoriou - University of Leeds
- Matt Johnson – crime writer
- Paul Kenyon – journalist, writer and film-maker
- Professor Nicola Mai - Kingston University
- Dr Nina Muždeka - University of Novi Sad in Serbia
- Dr Ilse Ras – University of Leeds.

The speakers discussed the portrayal of trafficking, traffickers, and victims in: British and Serbian newspapers; British and Scandinavian crime fiction novels; and in documentaries. They analysed news media and supposedly factual/fictional discourses published in multiple languages and countries (both inside and outside the European Union). These include countries of origin for victims of HT, as well as transit and destination countries, providing an exploration of both dominant and marginalized points of view (as expressed by both organized groups and individuals). Attention was also given to comparing popular media portrayals with the realities of trafficking.

The input - and discussion that followed - highlighted the subject's complexity and brought to light several controversial issues including **media distortions** shaped by economic forces that compel creative producers to turn human trafficking accounts into 'newsworthy' stories, and **the challenge of communicating these stories in translation**. We also identified trends and practices that led to **the generation of stereotypes, clichés and reductively formulaic HT narratives**.

We set out, in the following pages, a set of findings and recommendations that will be of interest to a range of practitioners whose work involves them in presenting or articulating the realities of HT: creative writers and filmmakers; police officers and social workers; media agencies and NGOs; educationalists and government officials.

Given the pervasive nature of stereotypes being deployed to represent both the victims and perpetrators of HT (in the media and popular culture), we have concluded that there is a need to change perceptions and raise awareness of the complexity of HT. These crimes are local as well as global, and the relationships between victims and perpetrators are more complex and variable than those portrayed in the media. Addressing the issue is also about changing prevailing attitudes and practices in the social media and public sphere regarding complex stories of crime, victimisation and slavery, as well as the need for audiences to actively engage and re-think notions of culpability and responsibility in general as part of a civic duty shared by all.

Our Policy Brief's strength is derived from the ways in which our research insight has been debated by our symposium's varied participants who are field experts in terms of both research and practice, giving credibility and authority to our recommendations which hence deserve serious attention.

Dr Christiana Gregoriou
University of Leeds

1. Findings

- There has been an increase of UK media coverage on HT from 2000 until 2016.
 - spikes in reporting appear to coincide with (international) events that raise the public's awareness of migration-related matters, and have been misused to stir up anti-migrant sentiments.
- The texts marginalise and stereotype victims, creating a hierarchy of deserving/undeserving victimhood.
 - a focus on the foreignness of victims and their traffickers suggests that this is an imported problem (rather than being linked to domestic pull factors and to push factors created at least in part by foreign policy);
 - context (such as the social, political and/or economic roots of the phenomenon) is rarely provided;
 - trafficking (a crime against the individual) is conflated with smuggling (a crime against the state), and (illegal) immigration and asylum seeking, failing to follow legal definitions of these terms; this creates the perception that all economic migration/movement into the UK is problematic and undesirable;
 - texts place more emphasis on 'official' points-of-view (Government Ministers, Law Courts, Police Forces); alternative views (eg those of academics or activists in the field) are excluded or side-lined.
- It appears difficult for 'true stories' to be told about the realities of HT, because this erodes the boundary between traffickers and those trafficked in a way that makes responsibility and victimisation difficult, if not impossible, to reliably determine.
- Crime Fiction (representing transnational child trafficking, for instance) varies in terms of detail, plausibility and victim engagement:
 - some works explicitly engage in public and private debates around human trafficking: through popular outreach, they have the potential to affect popular perceptions of human trafficking and to effect change;
 - others are hampered by narratives that are too 'busy', and try to do too much, or suffer from a confusion of focus[
 - some works confuse or perpetuate stereotypes, for example of Roma people.
- Crime Fiction novel analysis shows that there is still work to be done, in terms of telling the victim's story and rendering the complexity of the trafficking narrative; the genre carries limitations and possibilities with which to address exploitation, inequality, oppression and suffering;
 - narratives where differences between 'evil' and 'innocence' are accentuated, appeal to aesthetic pleasure or the spectacle of the story
- In documentaries, traffickers are shown to be hugely diverse in their identities, activities and degrees of involvement:
 - some are victims themselves;
 - some are part of the state and economic apparatus;
 - there are political and economic as well as social and cultural factors that shape (and to some extent determine) who traffickers are, and who becomes a trafficker
 - the old dichotomies of victim/perpetrator and transatlantic slavery still predominate (although there are some open-ended narratives);
 - heavy use of voiceover and advocacy workers/experts denies or discourages viewers from making up their own minds about traffickers and trafficking.
- There are dynamics at work among practitioners involved in countering HT, that promote the creation of simple, unambiguous, expedient if unrealistic messages; these interact with media accounts to distort realities:
 - practitioners involved in countering HT need to create posters/public service messages for staff who could encounter victims/perpetrators in airports;
 - clear and morally unambiguous narratives appear to help law-makers and enforcers to garner political support and funding.

2. Recommendations

- The research team to make this research **accessible** to non-academics (eg via Open Access platforms) in order to make these findings available to a wide range of media companies and others in the field, influencing better practice;
- Press regulators to be supported through guidance documents on the representation of Human-Trafficking and/or by creating a **code of practice** for those reporting on the issue:
 - raise awareness on legal terminology and the ideological implications of language;
 - avoid seeing stories as mere commodities/entertainment where truth can be manipulated;
 - the research team to seek the support of those who can influence the discussion on media accuracy and encourage responsible reporting.
- The research team to develop research-led material that can be used for online or in-person **training/workshops** for relevant practitioners in all fields (including police officers, media representatives, educationalists, and film/soap script writers), but also A-level and university students.
- The research team to generate research-led **media footage** or actively contribute to mainstream audience films (see, for instance, <http://unchosen.org.uk>, a film-based project that has been managed and passed to a wide range of NGOs) that more accurately and sensitively report on the issue.
- The research team to offer **briefings** for policy-makers and practitioners: eg the Brexit Committee, human trafficking foundations, and airport/airline staff, helping identify situations or individuals of concern, improving relevant information posters (say, at airports), and ultimately informing better policy development.
- Police officers and Third Sector representatives (including migrant rights and sex worker rights organisations) to encourage and **enable victims** to represent themselves, in their own words/forums, devolving power down from the conventional editor/journalist decision- and programme-makers.
 - police officers and third sector reps to develop the skills to gain the trust of such victims.

The Project

Human Trafficking Representation in Present-day News Media, True Crime and Fiction was led by Dr Christiana Gregoriou (University of Leeds). This cross-disciplinary project used analytical tools from the humanities and social sciences, including corpus-based and critical linguistics, literary and media studies and cultural criminology.

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The Partnership for Conflict, Crime & Security Research

This initiative of the Research Councils in the United Kingdom supports the delivery of high-quality research with impact, to improve our understanding of current and future global security challenges. The Partnership supports collaboration by bringing together researchers from across disciplines to work on innovative projects and creates opportunities for knowledge exchange between academia, government, industry and the not-for-profit sector.
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