



LANGUAGE AS A MEANS OF VICTIMIZATION

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Abstract

Cursed to live in interesting times, we are contemporaries of many magnificent achievements in numerous fields, happy users of the latest technologies, globetrotters and even space travellers, but at the same time - almost daily - witnesses of unfortunate events, both at the local and at the broader, global level. Reports of accidents and crimes have gradually displaced more beautiful topics from the media, particularly due to a certain type of morbid competition among media outlets that are not particularly burdened by high ethical standards and are committed to sensationalism. Writing about accidents and crimes without respect for the victims, as well as without compassion for their loved ones, has become a widespread phenomenon. Statements and personal data of vulnerable population categories, even children, are frequently published. Details about criminal acts and ongoing investigations, as well as court proceedings, are disclosed, even when trials are closed to the public. Articles about suspects and accused individuals inevitably contain qualifications such as "monster," "butcher," "rapist," "villain," and the most drastic recent example of such treatment includes the articles about the boy who committed a mass shooting at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" elementary school. Even when and if the court unequivocally establishes his guilt, can we, as a society that highly values humanity and empathy or at least claims to do so, forget that the person in question is a child and label him in such a way?

Key words: *Victimization, media, sensationalism, empathy.*

Introduction

We live, as the apocryphal Chinese curse suggests, in "interesting times". Humanity today enjoys the benefits of unprecedented progress: advanced technologies, global connectivity, and achievements that span from life-saving medicine to commercial space travel. These developments have reshaped how people live, communicate, and perceive their place in the world. Yet this era of progress is shadowed by near-constant exposure to tragedy. News cycles are dominated by reports of accidents, crimes, wars,

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and disasters. The paradox of our moment is clear: we are both beneficiaries of extraordinary advancement and witnesses to extraordinary violence and loss.

The way in which these realities are presented to us is mediated primarily by the press. Journalism is not merely a conveyor of facts; it is the central lens through which societies come to understand themselves. In democratic theory, the press is entrusted with informing citizens, scrutinizing power, and contributing to the public good. However, in practice, much of contemporary journalism is shaped by the imperatives of profit, competition, and spectacle. Sensationalism—the emphasis on drama, graphic detail, and emotional intensity—often supersedes ethical principles of fairness, compassion, and accuracy.

This paper examines the ethical consequences of sensationalist reporting. It focuses on three interrelated dynamics: (1) the displacement of constructive topics by morbidly captivating stories of accidents and crimes; (2) the secondary victimization of victims and their families through intrusive or disrespectful coverage; and (3) the stigmatization of suspects and accused individuals through dehumanizing labels. The 2023 mass shooting at the *Vladislav Ribnikar* Elementary School in Belgrade, Serbia, serves as a case study that illustrates these dynamics with unusual clarity. The labelling of the boy shooter as a “monster” or “butcher” raises a profound ethical dilemma: can a society that claims to value humanity and empathy reconcile such language with its ideals, particularly when the subject is a child?

The argument developed here is that sensationalist journalism victimizes not only those directly affected by tragedy but also the broader public by undermining empathy, reinforcing stigma, and corroding the ethical fabric of media practice. To support this claim, the paper proceeds in five sections. First, it reviews relevant literature on media sensationalism, critical discourse analysis, and victimization. Second, it outlines general patterns of sensationalist coverage. Third, it examines the *Ribnikar* case and compares it to international precedents. Fourth, it discusses the ethical implications of these practices through theoretical frameworks. Finally, it concludes with recommendations for more responsible and humane journalism.

Literature review

Sensationalism and the political economy of media

The tendency of the press toward sensationalism is well documented. McQuail (2010) defines sensationalist journalism as the prioritization of “drama, spectacle, and emotional intensity” over accuracy or public service. Its growth has been tied to the commercialization of media. Bourdieu (1998) argued that news organizations are embedded in a “field of cultural production” dominated by economic competition. In this field, audience ratings and advertising revenue exert constant pressure, requiring journalists to produce stories that attract attention quickly. These pressures have significantly increased in the digital age, where the focus is on “clicks” and “shares” (Couldry, 2012).

Sensationalism is not merely a stylistic choice; it is a structural outcome of the media’s economic model. Stories about crime and tragedy outperform stories about science,



culture, or diplomacy because they evoke strong emotions – fear, anger, shock – that keep audiences engaged (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001). This leads to the systematic displacement of constructive or “positive” stories from news agendas.

Victimization and media

The concept of victimization in criminology traditionally refers to the harm experienced by those directly affected by crime or violence. However, media practices contribute to what is called **secondary victimization** – the additional suffering inflicted through insensitive treatment, whether by institutions, authorities, or the press (Orth, 2002). When media outlets publicize victims’ personal details, broadcast their grief, or distort their stories for narrative effect, they extend harm beyond the original act of violence.

Scholars emphasize that secondary victimization undermines dignity and privacy. Greer (2007) highlights the “spectacularization of suffering” in news coverage, where victims’ pain is turned into a consumable product. This not only retraumatizes survivors but also creates what Silverstone (2007) calls a “compassion fatigue” in audiences, desensitizing them to suffering over time.

Language, labeling, and power

Critical discourse analysts such as van Dijk (1993, 2001) have shown how language is central to the reproduction of social power and inequality. Media labels do not simply describe; they frame reality in ways that influence perception and response. When suspects are called “monsters” or “butchers,” the language functions to dehumanize, stripping away complexity and reducing individuals to symbols of evil. Butler (1997) argues that language has performative force – it does not merely reflect reality but constitutes it, shaping identities and social possibilities.

Labeling theory in criminology (Becker, 1963) similarly suggests that once individuals are defined by stigmatizing terms, they may internalize or be permanently marked by them, regardless of legal outcomes. This is particularly troubling in cases involving minors, who are not yet fully accountable under legal or moral standards but are nonetheless branded in ways that foreclose the possibility of rehabilitation.

Ethical journalism

Professional codes of ethics emphasize the journalist’s responsibility to balance truth-telling with compassion. The Society of Professional Journalists (2014) urges practitioners to “minimize harm,” avoid pandering to lurid curiosity, and show special sensitivity when dealing with children or vulnerable groups. Similarly, the International Federation of Journalists (2019) highlights respect for human dignity as a cornerstone of ethical practice. Yet these principles often collapse under the weight of commercial imperatives.

Ward (2011) argues for a model of “global journalism ethics” that extends responsibility beyond the immediate audience to humanity at large. This broader



ethical orientation is particularly relevant in the digital era, where stories cross national boundaries instantly.

Patterns of sensationalist coverage

Displacement of constructive narratives

A defining characteristic of sensationalist journalism is the dominance of tragedy over progress. Reports of crimes and accidents displace stories of scientific achievement or cultural innovation, which are deemed less engaging. As a result, public discourse is skewed toward a vision of society defined by violence and danger. This contributes to what Gerbner (1998) described as the “mean world syndrome,” where audiences come to perceive the world as more dangerous than it actually is, with corresponding effects on trust, policy preferences, and social cohesion.

Intrusion into privacy

Another common pattern is the disclosure of victims’ private information without consent. Names, photographs, and intimate details are often published, even when legal protections for privacy exist. Vulnerable populations—such as children, survivors of sexual assault, or grieving families—are particularly exposed. Coverage that dwells on the tears of a parent or the anguish of survivors crosses the line from reporting to exploitation.

Stigmatization of suspects

Equally troubling is the stigmatization of suspects before trials conclude. Terms like “rapist,” “killer,” or “butcher” are often applied prematurely, creating trial-by-media scenarios that undermine due process. Even when guilt is established, the use of dehumanizing labels raises ethical concerns. As Butler (1997) notes, such terms not only injure the subject but also erode societal norms of empathy and humanity. It should be borne in mind that the purpose of sanctioning is not retribution but resocialization of the perpetrator.

Case study: The *Vladislav Ribnikar* elementary school shooting

On May 3, 2023, a 13-year-old student carried out a mass shooting at the *Vladislav Ribnikar* Elementary School in Belgrade, Serbia, killing nine classmates and a security guard. The event shocked Serbia and drew international attention, not only because of its rarity in the region but because the perpetrator was a child.



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Media coverage

Within hours, Serbian and international media outlets saturated coverage with graphic detail. Photographs of grieving parents, footage of crying classmates, and personal information about victims circulated widely. More troubling was the language used to describe the perpetrator. Headlines labeled him a “monster,” a “butcher,” and a “cold-blooded killer.” Such language framed the boy not as a troubled child within a complex social context but as a figure of inhuman evil.

Ethical dilemma

Even if a court were to establish his guilt unequivocally, the ethical dilemma remains: is it acceptable for a society that claims to value empathy and humanity to label a child in this way? Unlike adult perpetrators, children are legally considered incapable of full responsibility. Moreover, the language used in media coverage risks shaping not only public opinion but the boy’s identity and the broader social response to youth violence.

Comparative perspective

International comparisons highlight similar issues. After the Columbine shooting in the United States (1999), media coverage emphasized the perpetrators as “psychopaths” and “outcasts,” while sensationalizing their personal lives. Following the Sandy Hook massacre (2012), debates emerged about the ethics of naming or showing images of the shooter, given the risk of copycat violence. In the Dunblane tragedy in Scotland (1996), British media were criticized for intrusive reporting into victims’ families. These cases suggest that the tension between sensationalism and ethics is not confined to Serbia but is a global problem.

Ethical discussion

Utilitarianism

From a utilitarian perspective, sensationalist reporting might be justified if it produces greater overall good—for instance, raising awareness of social issues or prompting reforms. However, the harms of secondary victimization, stigmatization, and public desensitization outweigh such benefits. The retraumatization of victims and erosion of empathy are significant social costs.

Deontological ethics

From a deontological perspective, journalists have a duty to respect human dignity, regardless of outcomes. Publishing private details or using dehumanizing labels violates this duty. Even when the subject is a perpetrator, respect for humanity should not be abandoned.



Virtue and care ethics

Virtue ethics emphasizes the moral character of the journalist. Compassion, empathy, and prudence should guide reporting. Care ethics further underscores the responsibility to protect vulnerable individuals—children, victims, and grieving families. By these standards, sensationalist practices are ethically indefensible.

Toward responsible media practices

The persistence of sensationalism does not mean reform is impossible. Several measures could mitigate the harms identified:

1. **Stricter enforcement of ethical codes.** Media councils and professional bodies should hold outlets accountable for violations, particularly regarding vulnerable populations.
2. **Legal protection of privacy.** Stronger laws should restrict the disclosure of personal data without consent, with special provisions for minors.
3. **Media literacy education.** Audiences must be equipped to critically assess media content, reducing demand for sensationalism.
4. **Restorative journalism.** Practices such as solutions journalism or peace journalism emphasize context, causes, and remedies rather than spectacle.
5. **International collaboration.** Given the global circulation of news, ethical standards must be promoted across borders to prevent the lowest-common-denominator effect of global competition.

Conclusion

The contradictions of contemporary life—technological brilliance alongside daily tragedy—are mediated through journalism. Yet sensationalist practices distort this mediation, turning the media from a watchdog of democracy into an agent of harm. Victims are retraumatized, suspects are prematurely condemned, and audiences are desensitized.

The case of the *Vladislav Ribnikar* Elementary School shooting epitomizes the dangers of sensationalist coverage. The labeling of a child as a “monster” is not simply descriptive; it erodes society’s claim to empathy and humanity. Similar dilemmas have appeared in international cases, suggesting that this is a global challenge.

To preserve journalism’s democratic and humane role, society must insist on ethical reporting. Responsible journalism should not only tell the truth but do so with respect, compassion, and sensitivity to human dignity. Only then can language fulfill its higher function—not as a means of victimization, but as a tool of justice, understanding, and healing.



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