



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Forgotten lives: the crisis of missing people in UK media

By **Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff**

July 2025

Trinity Term

Sponsor: Thomson Reuters Foundation

Contents

Foreword	3
Introduction	5
The crisis of missing people in the UK	8
How the media has covered the crisis	10
What the data says	11
Celebrified victims	12
Does coverage matter?	14
When does coverage harm?	15
How coverage helps	16
The perfect victim: what warrants coverage?	18
What makes a good story?	18
Photogenic victimhood	20
The usual as unusual	22
Public, media, police: a fundamentally broken relationship	25
Press as an accountability measure	25
How families and friends engage with the media matters	27
Conspiracy theories are running rampant	30
The missing beat: a specialist assignment	32
Missing White Woman Syndrome exists in UK newsrooms	34
Media guidelines and newsroom strategies for better coverage of missing people	37
Eight newsroom strategies to improve coverage of missing people	37
Conclusion	39
Acknowledgements	40

Foreword

This deep-dive into British coverage of missing people takes place in an era of unprecedented change within the journalism industry, as mainstream media faces an “[extinction-level event](#)” and social media continues to evolve how we engage with current affairs.¹

Our stories, especially when they relate to missing people, are at the mercy of the burgeoning interest of citizen journalists, internet sleuths and true crime fanatics. Some of those operating in the social media space are happy to peddle misinformation. With no oversight on what they produce, this can create pervasive, toxic narratives.

While much of the work around missing people is thoughtful and well-reported, there is no disputing that, as the artist [Christina Sharpe](#) put it, “spectacle is not repair”.² That is, we cannot simply write stories of pain and expect people to do anything but gawk and stare. Without a deeper praxis, and sometimes even with the best of intentions, our journalistic endeavours can still ultimately be harmful for the individuals involved because of how they end up being disseminated or due to other factors outside of our control.

With this in mind, I’d like to acknowledge the fact that I am still grappling with the ethics of reporting around missing people. Over the course of conducting this research I’ve asked myself many hard questions. These include: is the very nature of journalistic endeavour inherently exploitative of the missing? Is it ethical to write a story about the missing without their consent? How can we build public interest in these cases without sensationalising them? What are the effects of certain cases being extremely amplified? Do we need to prevent that from happening and balance our reporting? Will the public continue to presume certain disappearances are underreported unless they actually become 'overreported'?

¹ New Yorker. (2024). Is The Media Prepared for an Extinction-Level Event? Retrieved from [\[https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-weekend-essay/is-the-media-prepared-for-an-extinction-level-event\]](https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-weekend-essay/is-the-media-prepared-for-an-extinction-level-event)

² Lithub. (2023). A Kind of Mutuality: Christina Sharpe on the Importance of Regard. Retrieved from [\[https://lithub.com/a-kind-of-mutuality-christina-sharpe-on-the-importance-of-regard/\]](https://lithub.com/a-kind-of-mutuality-christina-sharpe-on-the-importance-of-regard/)

As you read on, I hope you will consider these questions too and take a moment to witness the humanity at the heart of every missing person story. I've tried to include snippets about each missing person's personality and life to make the reader more conscious of who they are as individuals, rather than a statistic or a news story.

Across the world, the term "missing" can speak to many different adversities. As I write, there are, for example, [at least 20,000 children missing in Gaza](#), many of whom are likely buried under the rubble of their homes and communities. I dedicate this project to them, and to all the lives harmed and cut short by tragedies outside of their control.

Introduction

In 2014, I was interning on the news desk of *The Times* newspaper in London when an editor bounced over with a story to assign to someone in the newsroom. “A girl has gone missing. She’s young, she’s pretty, she’s creative, she’s middle-class... our readers are going to love her,” he announced.

He was talking about [Alice Gross](#), a 14-year-old who had disappeared from West London. Alice was later found to have been murdered by a man named Arnis Zalkalns. Her sister, Nina Gross, later said, “I feel that it is sometimes forgotten that Alice was a real person; a kind and loving sister who deserved so much to live a full life. Life is broken and cold without her.” Her father described Alice as a “thoughtful, intelligent, caring and beautiful girl”.³

As a 20-year-old recent graduate striking out into the field of journalism, hearing an editor reduce the newsworthiness of Alice’s disappearance to such superficial traits was shocking. It suggested a deep-rooted problem in the media industry in terms of how journalists and editors decide on which missing person cases to dedicate coverage to. The implicit thing that hadn’t been said was the most obvious to me: that Alice was white.

In the UK, more than 170,000 people go missing each year. A missing person is defined as anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character, or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or risk. Their cases strike a chord with the public because it is easy to imagine the pain and suffering families and friends go through when separated from their loved ones.

Journalistic coverage is a crucial part of the ecosystem that provides comfort to the family and friends of the missing, holds power to account, and can potentially jolt the memories of those who have information about missing people’s whereabouts, leading to better outcomes.

³ Guardian. (2016). Alice Gross's mother blames government for failures over daughter's killer. Retrieved from [<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jul/04/alice-gross-inquest-finds-schoolgirl-was-unlawfully-killed>]

Since my internship at *The Times*, I've learnt that newsrooms have long been criticised for their coverage of missing people from non-white backgrounds, despite data to prove that some people of colour are more likely to go missing than white people. There's even a term for this coverage phenomenon: "Missing White Woman Syndrome" (MWWS), coined by the American journalist Gwen Ifill in 2004.

In 2018, I reported on the case of [Joy Morgan](#), a Black British midwifery student whose vibrant spirit was as bright as her name.⁴ Joy went missing and was later found dead, murdered by a member of her church congregation. In my coverage, I brought attention to the fact that – unlike two white students who went missing in the same period – Joy's case had barely been reported on by the British media.

There remains a significant lack of research into reporting bias in missing people cases in the British media, and more generally into best practices around missing people reportage. Misinformation around how and why people end up going missing abounds: perhaps the greatest being that most missing people cases are related to serious crime and abduction. In reality, the opposite is true.

With that in mind, this project aims to interrogate a key question: how should newsrooms be covering missing people?

To do so, I've looked at the realities of why people go missing, reviewed current research on missing people and the media, and conducted a series of interviews with academics, activists, law enforcement, and the friends and family of missing people. I've gathered insights through conversations with the charity [Missing People](#), which have helped me suggest strategies for how newsrooms can approach these incidents more equitably (see page 38).

I also spoke to top journalists from major national British media outlets about their experiences of reporting missing cases. I decided to focus on national outlets rather than local because their approaches can be dissimilar, and national outlets tend to have the reach and power to be able to boost certain missing cases into the stratosphere of public awareness.

⁴ gal-dem. (2019). Joy Morgan can be laid to rest, but more needs to be uncovered about her murder. Retrieved from [<https://gal-dem.com/joy-morgan-can-be-laid-to-rest-but-more-needs-to-be-uncovered-about-her-murder/>]

It's worth noting that many journalists, especially from the tabloids, ignored my outreach, dropped contact after I explained in more detail about the nature of my project or asked me to reach out via newsroom press officers. There is undoubtedly a reluctance to share details of the inner-workings of the newsroom from those who are most likely to be on the sharp end of criticism. Most of the journalists I spoke with did not wish to be named for fear of repercussions within the industry.

Despite this resistance, what I discovered was a functional yet archaic system which is still heavily reliant on journalists "selling" stories based on what editors believe the public wants rather than hard data. As noted by Professor Karen Shalev, leader of the Missing Persons Research Group at the University of Portsmouth, "Missing people become a product, rather than seeing the actual person and family and distress. They are something to take advantage of and exploit."

Many journalists are attempting to move with care and consideration around missing people but are bogged down by the hierarchy of their institutions, the fast-paced nature of digital news operations in the 2020s, or the fact they are operating as a lone voice. Still others are doing remarkable work which sets an aspirational standard, and are wholly supported by their newsrooms or the outlets they work for.

My hope is that this paper will help the media play an authoritative role in all missing people cases. While I am focusing on the British media industry, there are learnings here for practising journalists worldwide.

The crisis of missing people in the UK

A person is reported missing in the UK every 90 seconds, but the vast majority return home within 48 hours. Less than 3% of adults and 2% of children remain missing for more than a week, and roughly 97% of missing people return home or are found dead within a week.⁵ After a year has passed, that number [lifts to 99%](#).⁶

There is a misconception that the majority of missing persons cases relate to serious crimes like abduction and murder. In reality, this only accounts for a tiny number of cases.

“Most adults will know of someone who has gone missing, whether they realise it or not, whether they even define it that way or not,” said Professor Karen Shalev, leader of the Missing Persons Research Group at the University of Portsmouth. [Less than 1%](#) of missing cases have a fatal outcome and those that do are usually due to confirmed or suspected suicide, with a small number due to murder, accident, and natural causes.⁷

That does not mean that the current number of missing people is unproblematic. There are currently over 12,000 “long-term” missing people in the UK, with a strong likelihood that the police and local authority data we have access to is an underestimate.⁸ The longer someone is missing, the more likely they are to have come to harm.

Although police data suggests that 15% of missing adults and 8% of children come to harm while missing, it is widely acknowledged that the stats are – in the words of Jane Hunter, Head of Research and Impact at [Missing People](#) – an “under-representation for various reasons (people not disclosing, harm not being identified,

⁵ National Crime Agency. (2021). Missing Persons Data Report 2020-21.

⁶ The Conversation. (2017). We do nothing for missing people who come home – here’s what should change. Retrieved from [<https://theconversation.com/we-do-nothing-for-missing-people-who-come-home-heres-what-should-change-79594>]

⁷ Missing People. (2022). The nature and scale of harm experienced by missing adults in the UK <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/3.-Fatal-outcome-cases-info-sheet.pdf>

⁸ National Crime Agency. (2022). Missing Persons Data Report 2021-22.

issues with recording)”.⁹ And, although there was a drop in missing reports during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Crime Agency report for 2021/22 suggested reports of missing people had returned to pre-pandemic levels. This has been termed a “crisis” and a “[silent epidemic](#)”.¹⁰

There are vulnerabilities at play in most disappearances and all of them should be taken seriously, regardless of the reasons behind them.¹¹

“In a few cases, the person will have been the victim of a serious crime, murder, kidnap, or abduction. Others will be victims of criminal exploitation, county lines, child sexual exploitation, modern day slavery or human trafficking. Some will have mental health challenges, depression, or be feeling suicidal. Others will be escaping family conflict, a broken relationship, financial worries, or an abusive relationship. Some will have become lost or have suffered injury in a remote location. While others will have made a conscious decision to go missing.” – UK Missing Persons Unit, Missing Persons Data Report 2018/19

Hunter said she and her colleagues refer to missing people as the “Clapham Junction” of social issues. (Clapham Junction being a station in London where many different train lines connect.) “Almost any sort of social issue that you think of there will be in some way a link to missing,” she explained. This means that when we talk about the missing, we’re also talking about mental health, homelessness, the refugee crisis and much more.

⁹ National Crime Agency. (2022). Missing Persons Data Report 2021-22.

¹⁰ Guardian. (2023). ‘Going missing wasn’t a conscious choice’ – why do some people just walk away from their lives? Retrieved from [<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/mar/20/going-missing-why-do-some-people-just-walk-away-from-their-lives>]

¹¹ National Crime Agency. (2020). Missing Persons Data Report 2018/19.

How the media has covered the crisis

In 2005, a young girl named Jessica Lunsford was abducted. According to contemporary reporting, Jessica “loved her father, grandparents, and friends. She liked Bratz dolls, and especially liked practising sign language”.¹² Sadly, she was found to have been murdered. Two years later, the American professor and journalist Sarah Stillman wrote about noticing the disparities in media coverage of missing people for the first time while following Jessica’s case.

While Stillman couldn’t ignore the huge amount of coverage around Jessica’s disappearance, it was something else that captivated her. “A corpse mentioned only for a brief instant in a ticker-tape scroll that crawled along the bottom of the screen: ‘*Body found in lake was not Jessica’s*’. The headline grabbed me not for the tragic loss that it intended to document, but rather for the loss that it blatantly erased,” [she wrote](#).¹³ Stillman ended up tracking down the family of the woman who had been found in the lake, Donna Julane Cooke, and reporting her story.

Although she was also a white woman, unlike Jessica, Donna could not be regarded as an archetypal “victim”. She was disabled and had been arrested for sex work in the past. According to Sarah’s reporting, she was also deeply loved by her family. Donna had worked as an informant for the police, and in investigating her story, Stillman was able to [break news](#) about the horrors of young offenders who had been killed while or after working in similar roles for the police.

Donna’s erasure illustrates the importance of an intersectional understanding of MWWS. “It’s true that when a woman is poor, or when she’s a sex worker, just because she’s white doesn’t necessarily mean that she’ll get positive attention,” said Dr Danielle Slakoff, assistant professor of criminal justice at California State University, Sacramento.

¹² Fox News. (2007) Jessica’s Lunsford Family Finds Some Satisfaction in Couey Verdict. Retrieved from [<https://www.foxnews.com/story/reporters-notebook-jessicas-lunsford-family-finds-some-satisfaction-in-couey-verdict>]

¹³ Stillman, S. (2007). ‘The Missing White Girl Syndrome’: Disappeared Women and Media Activism, *Gender and Development*, Vol. 15, No. 3, Media, 491-502. Retrieved from [<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20461232>]

Within the media system, race isn't the only factor at play in determining victimhood. Class, gender, sexuality, job choices, familial ties and many other factors help to dictate coverage decisions.

There are some middle-class white girls and women who don't get as much press as others when they go missing. Or, as in the extreme example of Denise Huskin, explored in the Netflix documentary *American Nightmare*, where they receive extremely negative press. Denise was accused of faking her own abduction alongside her boyfriend. One of the key journalists who covered the case, Henry Lee, admitted that the media "branded [them] as liars". Rather than being victims, women like Denise become villains.

There are also rare examples of non-white women and girls who capture public and press attention, and examples of men and boys receiving attention too. On either side of the Atlantic, some of the best-known missing cases are those of young (white) boys, such as Etan Patz and Ben Needham. Other more familiar names of missing Black people might include Asha Degree and Owami Davies.

All of this to say, the phenomenon of MWWS does not suggest that all media coverage ends up developing in the same way; it is a vehicle for exploring a worrying trend that needs ongoing examination. It encourages us to scrutinise which cases capture attention, the cases that don't and, extremely importantly, the *type* of coverage that these cases get, too.

What the data says

Much has been written about MWWS from a U.S. perspective, and the vast majority of empirical data we have on disparities in coverage comes from there. Dr Slakoff believes there are enough similarities between the media structures in our countries to make direct comparisons. "Obviously, there are some differences, especially tabloid entertainment. But [...] who is running the media companies looks very similar across the two countries," she said: older white men.

One study in the U.S. found that cases of missing Black girls and women could be roughly 25% less likely to receive coverage than white girls and women.¹⁴ Other

¹⁴ Sommers, Z. (2016). Missing White Woman Syndrome: An Empirical Analysis of Race and Gender Disparities in Online News Coverage of Missing Persons

research has suggested, for example, that a white woman from Nevada might be more than [10 times more likely](#) to receive significant press coverage than a Black woman from New York.¹⁵ In the U.S. nearly 40% of the nation's missing are Black, even though they make up 13% of the population.

Race and ethnicity data and research around missing people in the UK is sparse and imprecise, but there has been similar disproportionality recorded for years. Despite making up just 4% of the population, around [14% of people reported](#) to the police as missing are Black, and discrepancies have been found in both publicity appeals and engagement with those appeals on social media based on race in the UK.¹⁶

Data analysis from Missing People and policy and research organisation [Listen Up](#) found in 2023 that Black adults and children are also the most likely to remain missing for over 48 hours and, separately, for over seven days. Black and Asian people who go missing, including children, are less likely to be identified or flagged for risks including mental health and sexual exploitation, suggesting that their experiences of harm may be being overlooked.

Celebrified victims

This data makes the media's focus on missing white, middle-class women and girls even more stark. On both sides of the Atlantic, examples of coverage are easy to recall. Where in the U.S. they had [Kristin Smart](#), a 19-year-old college student nicknamed Roxy who loved bear hugs, who disappeared in 1996; in the UK we had [Suzy Lamplugh](#), a 25-year-old estate agent who lived life to the full and whose disappearance launched Britain's biggest-ever missing person's inquiry.¹⁷

Where in the U.S. they had [Cherrie Ann Mahan](#), the bright and happy 8-year-old who went missing in 1985; in the UK we had [Madeleine McCann](#), the omnipresent blonde 3-year-old who loved pink and sparkles, who went missing in 2007.

¹⁵ Columbia Journalism Review. (2023). Are You Press Worthy? Retrieved from [\[https://areyoupressworthy.com/\]](https://areyoupressworthy.com/)

¹⁶ Missing People. (2024). Missing People: Data Report 2021/22. Retrieved from: https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Missing_Ethnicity-report.pdf

¹⁷ Guardian. (2009). Suzy Lamplugh's father: my advice for the family of missing chef Claudia Lawrence. Retrieved from [\[https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/aug/30/claudia-lawrence-suzy-lamplugh-missing\]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/aug/30/claudia-lawrence-suzy-lamplugh-missing)

Where in the U.S. they had [Gabrielle Petito](#), the 22-year-old who went missing after a road trip with her boyfriend in 2021, in the UK we had [Nicola Bulley](#), the 45-year-old who went missing in 2023; both of whose cases ignited a massive online frenzy. Gabrielle’s case was termed by Dr Slakoff as “the first social media MWS”.

For many, these women are household names, something that I term “celebrified victims”; inescapably famous for having something terrible happen to them. One of my American friends, who grew up in Florida, recounts having grown up knowing exactly who [Jaycee Dugard](#) was – an 11-year-old girl who was kidnapped in 1991 (and remarkably was later found alive in 2009). “She went missing the same year I was born so I grew up with her as the main cautionary tale for not talking to strangers,” she explained.

The point is not that we need any *more* celebrated victims. It would be egregious to simply replace these women and girl’s stories with those of men and boys, people of colour or those from working class backgrounds. It is that we should not care more about one group than another. Equitable coverage will be good for society at large because, as Stillman put, it will help us to deconstruct “long-standing hierarchies of human worth”.¹⁸

“[We need to] help audiences imagine each human life as equally worthy of narration and protection. This goal is intertwined with broader political struggles against the intersections of race, class, and gender oppression, since attempts to reclaim the full worth of marginalised female victims cannot ‘stick’ until long-standing hierarchies of human worth are deconstructed.” – Sarah Stillman

Under-reported cases in the UK include that of the rugby player and *The X Factor: Celebrity* star [Levi Davis](#) (described by a friend as “a ray of light”), who went missing in Barcelona in 2022, [Georgina Gharsallah](#), an “active, friendly, fun, personable” mother who disappeared in 2018, and baby [Ames Glover](#), who disappeared in 1990 at age 5 months.

¹⁸ Stillman, S. (2007). ‘The Missing White Girl Syndrome’: Disappeared Women and Media Activism, *Gender and Development*, Vol. 15, No. 3, Media, 491-502

As the journalist Philip Hensher wrote back in 2012:

“It seems to be harder to make a good story out of a missing Black child than out of one with blond hair and blue eyes... Twenty years after Ames Glover’s disappearance, his mother Shanika Ondaatje said, heartbreakingly: ‘I have lived in the hope that one day I will find out where he is or what became of him.’ She said it to the Hounslow Chronicle. No one else was interested.”

Does coverage matter?

Early in his career, Jim Glasshouse (pseudonym), a senior journalist, worked on a story about the kidnapping of two 10-year-old girls. [Charlene Lunn and Lisa Hoodlass](#) went missing from their hometown of St Leonards, a seaside resort in Hastings, East Sussex. After three days, it was presumed they had come to harm. Glasshouse remembers covering the story for around a week, travelling into the area from London. Thankfully, the girls were eventually found: they had been kidnapped.

“It was important that it was a story,” said Glasshouse. “And I think I seem to remember that [...] publicity may have helped.” Contemporary reporting mentions that the girls knew that their families were searching for them because of appeals on the TV. Many years later, in 2007, [Lisa spoke](#) about feeling “a burst of excitement” while in captivity when she found out people were looking for her.¹⁹

Media coverage is not statistically proven to help improve outcomes in missing cases, though this may be because the data would be difficult to measure. There is slightly more [research available](#) for the more generalised idea of “publicity”, which media falls under, but even this reveals “disappointing results” which suggest that “publicity appeals don’t necessarily positively impact the investigation or search”,

¹⁹ The Argus. (2007). Teenagers who were kidnapped break silence to call for Sarah’s Law. Retrieved from [<https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/1429279.teenagers-who-were-kidnapped-break-silence-to-call-for-sarahs-law/>]

according to Mette Drivsholm, et al in a paper looking into the effectiveness of missing campaigns.²⁰

There are many variables and individual factors impacting the outcome of missing person cases. While media coverage might play a small role or an outsize role in helping to bring a missing person home safely, “ample coverage” is subjective and slippery as a data point.

“The computer system will show us: ‘Found by police’. It won’t say: ‘Found as a result of publicity’. And yet, indirectly, we may not have found them had it not been for that bit of information,” explained Alan Rhees-Cooper, a former inspector at West Yorkshire Police who works with the National Police Chiefs Council around missing people. “It’s just a massive piece of research that nobody’s really attempted. It would be difficult to do, and you might not even get meaningful results.”

It’s also worth noting that most people, as Professor Shalev explained, are not good at recognising a face they’ve seen in a publicity campaign. Media appeals alone are therefore not the only tool that law enforcement, family and friends should rely on when trying to investigate or support a case.

When does coverage harm?

According to the police and Missing People, there are certain instances where media coverage could be more damaging than useful. “It can impede the investigation and make it more difficult,” said Rhees-Cooper. “There is little evidence showing the positive effects of the media. There’s far more evidence of the negative effects of media coverage.”

Rhees-Cooper added that media coverage can sometimes drive missing people underground, and points toward research that confirms the damaging effect that publicity can have on missing people. Missing People the charity confirmed similar findings.

²⁰ Drivsholm, M, Moralis, D, Shalev-Greene, K. (2017). Once missing, never forgotten? Missing Children Europe. Retrieved from [<https://rke.abertay.ac.uk/en/publications/once-missing-never-forgotten>]

“For some people we have heard positive things about publicity being used, with returned missing people saying it did or would make them feel pleased that someone was looking for them. However, more often we do hear about some of the more damaging impacts of things like media coverage and public facing publicity appeals. People have spoken of feeling embarrassed, and feeling really unhappy that people in their community and strangers knew information about them, including sometimes sensitive information about challenges that they may have been facing. We also hear that for some people it can make it more difficult for them to return, and that media coverage can feel really overwhelming and stressful.” – Jane Hunter, Missing People

Journalists should be aware of this, and not proselytise the family and friends of the missing about the benefits of media coverage, when the truth is far more complex in terms of its usefulness.

How coverage helps

Despite all this, Professor Shalev and other researchers argue media coverage is an essential tool in a large toolbox. It can, according to crime researcher Zach Sommers, “leverage awareness of cases”.

In more recent years, podcasts such as [Your Own Backyard](#), which covered the “cold case” disappearance of a college student named [Kristin Smart](#), and eventually led to a first-degree murder conviction, have been effective in getting justice for families left with questions about their missing loved ones.

Journalists I interviewed talked of being thanked by the police for their coverage, while almost all of my interviewees agreed that good coverage was integral and in the public interest. “Equitable coverage matters, even if it has unproven investigative value, because media attention shapes how and to whom people extend their sympathies,” wrote [Gene Demby](#) for NPR.²¹

²¹ NPR. (2017). What We Know (And Don't Know) About 'Missing White Women Syndrome'. Retrieved from [<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/04/13/523769303/what-we-know-and-dont-know-about-missing-white-women-syndrome>]

Media coverage can provide comfort to the family and friends of the missing, hold power to account, and, on the odd occasion, can potentially jolt the memories of those who have information about missing people's whereabouts.

“From the criminology side, we know that more eyes on these stories is helpful. But then from just the human beings' side, we know that there are so many families that are missing a loved one. And it can be part of the solution of potentially bringing closure and/or that person back to their families. It's a really important role that the media have in trying to get the public to help with this search,” said Dr Slakoff.

The perfect victim: what warrants coverage?

There are three main players involved in the search for the missing: law enforcement, NGOs and journalists. While police and charities seek primarily to serve the needs of the missing individual and their families and friends, journalists must meet the needs of a wider group.

As journalist Francisco Garcia wrote in his book *If You Were There: Missing People and the Marks They Leave Behind*, police and NGOs are united by their public service mission. “The duty was to the missing, to make sure they were found safely – if they wanted to be found at all. There was a moral sense underpinning their work, a carefully set contract of rules and ethics to follow.”²²

Many journalists believe deeply in the public service element of their role. But we are also storytellers and truth-seekers, and our primary duty is to the public at large rather than just to those who are caught up in the tragedy of a missing incident.

There is sometimes a conflict between these realities. As Sallyanne Duncan wrote in *Ethics for Journalists*, “Minimising harm also has to be balanced with the need for the journalist to seek the truth and report it. And even this action can appear intrusive, with personal matters necessary to the story becoming public knowledge. These two ethical issues can sometimes be in conflict with the result that one has to take precedence over the other.”²³

What makes a good story?

News journalism is more art than science, and we can’t always predict which stories will end up developing in a way that is interesting and important to the public. Newsrooms are cautious about over-resourcing stories that might end up resolving in ways that aren’t particularly meaningful.

This means news editors are often looking for a particular type of story when they decide to cover a missing person in a national newsroom. Without unlimited resources, they can’t cover every missing case. Therefore, they prioritise stories where the disappearance is “unusual” and where there is suspected foul play: stories

²² Garcia, F. (2021). *If You Were There: Missing People and the Marks They Leave Behind*. Mudlark.

²³ Duncan, S. (2023). *Ethics for Journalists*. Routledge.

they think will have “legs”. These are the ones, they believe, that tend to capture the public’s interest.

“It’s hard to turn a story around when that element of mystery – ‘this is highly unusual; what’s going on?’ – isn’t there. Does that make sense? It sounds really awful to say it. And I’m not saying that I agree with any of that. But I’m just being realistic,” said Sarah James (pseudonym), a former tabloid journalist, currently working at a national broadsheet newspaper. “They’re trying to establish: is it one of those rare cases where someone may have been hurt or abducted or something like that, as opposed to someone who simply doesn’t want to be found?”

Glasshouse explained that his newsroom usually starts to pay attention to a story when appeals from the police or family members start to get “panicky”, or when a bit more time has passed. “Unless,” he said, “there’s some other indication that there’s been some serious harm: CCTV of somebody being abducted, or something like that. So a missing person, very often, from a national perspective, is actually a person missing and believed to be in deep trouble, either kidnapped or dead.”

This lens on particular types of missing stories becomes even more narrow because some editors are wary of “complex” stories: where there’s a history of substance abuse or where the person has gone missing more than once. There is naturally a correlation between these types of disappearances and more vulnerable and marginalised people; they are not considered as “normal” and “stable” as others.

“There is something called the news hierarchy. So they look for the idea of the victim through the vector of somebody who’s innocent, somebody is really good, and something bad has happened... because that immediately gets attention. We don’t like that. It’s good versus evil. It’s really simple. It’s easy to sell. Right? So when you have a 3-year-old going missing, everybody understands that. That’s a little kid. Everybody’s jumping. But when you have somebody with a complicated existence...? And most adults – possibly all the teenagers that go missing – it’s probably because they have a complicated existence. Unless they’ve been abducted, unless they’ve been murdered. [But] the media normally try to come with an angle to pitch any person as innocent.” – Professor Karen Shalev, leader of the Missing Persons Research Group at the University of Portsmouth

Case study: Fiona Holm

Fiona Holm went missing on the 20th of June 2023. A 48-year-old mixed-race Black woman who lived in south-east London, she was a mother of four, including a young daughter. In June of 2024, a man named Carl Cooper was tried for her murder, as well as the murder of another Black woman, Naomi Hunte. He was found guilty and sentenced to 35 years in prison.

At the trial, Fiona was described as “one of the kindest people you’ll ever meet”, “bubbly and funny” and “trusting”. “She wasn’t an angel but she wasn’t a bad person,” said her sister Helena Holm. She was autistic,

struggled with an addiction to alcohol, and had gone missing at least once before, for 48 hours. All of these details were relevant to how her disappearance was handled.

In one anecdote, it was described how Fiona was incredibly generous — she took in a homeless man from the street, cooked for him, let him use her shower. The man described her to the jury as an angel.

Over the first few days of the trial, there were a handful of journalists in attendance from national and local news, and from press agencies. While some major outlets covered the trial, there was very little public attention drawn to Fiona’s disappearance. One journalist told me that, after they filed their copy, their editors were not interested in publishing the story.

On Facebook, Savannah Holm, Fiona’s eldest daughter, shared a post that read: “If only Fiona Holms [sic] case got as much media attention as the teenager missing in Spain or the lady found in a river.”

Her family is acutely aware that the media didn’t care about her disappearance, and there appears to be a clear case of racism and classism at play in the lack of coverage. Her story certainly meets the news editor threshold of being “unusual”: a mystery, a crime element, and a photogenic woman.

There is public interest in covering Fiona’s disappearance in more detail. Cooper was walking free when she disappeared, despite being a suspect in Naomi’s murder over a year before.

At the time of writing, Fiona’s body has still not been recovered.



Fiona Holm (Image: Met Police)

Photogenic victimhood

Some journalists told me editors still want a good picture of a missing person and often prioritise stories of pretty women. “A good-looking woman always, they say,

does better,” said James, while Glasshouse added: “A story without a picture seems impossible, really.”

This insistence takes on a sinister hue when recollecting the story of 9-year-old [Shannon Matthews](#), who was kidnapped by her own mother, Karen Matthews, and kept drugged and tied up in a flat for 24 days, sparking a search. Her mother had hoped to claim a £50,000 reward and chose Shannon out of her children because she was a girl and “more photogenic”, according to [contemporary reporting](#).²⁴

(Before it was revealed that Shannon’s mother had orchestrated her disappearance, *Guardian* media columnist Roy Greenslade and others highlighted the fact that she picked up less coverage than Madeleine McCann because, “Shannon comes from a council house in a deprived working-class area.”)

Mark Townsend, a senior reporter at the *Guardian* and former crime and defence correspondent at *The Observer*, believes there is some change happening in non-tabloid newsrooms; an understanding of different vulnerabilities that cause people to go missing and how to sensitively report on it. “I was very interested in looking at the opposite of the blue-eyed, blonde girl, middle class family... I think we’ve grown awareness of [why all sorts of] missing people are worthy of looking into,” he said, explaining that his mantra for coverage was more often than not based upon “the ratio between the vulnerability of the human versus the responsibility of the state”.

He argued with his editors about covering the story of Nicola Bulley, a 45-year-old who went missing in 2023 and who was later found dead in a river as he didn’t feel like the story would develop in a way that would be meaningful for the public. “I was saying ... ‘I don’t want to do it’... Some of my bosses were very sympathetic. Others were more like, ‘If others are doing it, we can’t afford not to do it – it would be pointed to ignore it,’” he said. “The problem with news agendas is, by not doing something everyone else is doing, it raises more questions about your decision making.” This unimaginative culture in newsrooms bleeds into the problem of some disappearances being overreported while others remain untouched.

²⁴ Telegraph. (2017). Shannon Matthews abduction trial: The dysfunctional family where children equalled benefits. Retrieved from [<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/shannon-matthews-trial-dysfunctional-family-children-equalled/>]

Townsend added that he believes that many missing cases that are covered by the tabloids are “very superficial”. In comparison, though he would likely be too humble to make this connection himself, in 2023 Townsend broke the story that more than [400 unaccompanied children](#) had gone missing from hotels they were housed in by the Home Office.²⁵

“The Home Office were basically their parents and because of their race and where they’re from and how they’re perceived by the state, they were allowed to go missing and their fate was of no consequence,” he said. [Legal action](#) was subsequently launched against the Home Office and the use of hotels to accommodate unaccompanied children was found to be unlawful.²⁶

The usual as unusual

An expansion of reporting around missing people is urgently needed: there are more stories out there like this that need journalistic attention. As the author and journalist [Gary Younge](#) once said, “Sometimes ‘dog bites man’ really is the story. The trouble is journalists keep missing it.” Meaning, that sometimes the regularity of an occurrence *does* make it newsworthy and, arguably, suggests we need to look at the root causes of harm as well as the individuals involved.

When it comes to the missing, it is highly likely there will be a story hidden even in the *least* “unusual” disappearances. If older people with dementia [regularly wander out of care homes](#), or [children in care keep disappearing](#) (both of which are real-world occurrences), journalists need to be aware that there is a tear in the fabric of the social contract that is meant to keep us safe in British society.^{27, 28} Journalists should ask what has gone wrong and why people aren’t being looked after.

²⁵ Guardian. (2023). Child migrants to be sent back to hotel where 136 vanished. Retrieved from [<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jun/25/child-migrants-to-be-sent-back-to-hotel-where-136-vanished>]

²⁶ ECPAT UK. (2024). Final judgment issued in ECPAT UK case against Kent County Council and the Home Office. Retrieved from [<https://www.ecpat.org.uk/News/final-judgment-issued-in-ecpat-uk-case-against-kent-county-council-and-the-home-office>]

²⁷ A.W. Griffiths et al. (2024). Exploring the impact of care home environments and culture on supporting residents to ‘wander’ safely. Retrieved from [<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13607863.2024.2338204>]

²⁸ Missing People. (2022). “People are paid to care for you” Why missing from care rates are so high. Retrieved from [<https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/missing-from-care>]

This is not to say that every single disappearance needs coverage, because they don't. But thematic and long-term investigative pieces about the missing should be prioritised alongside “newsworthy” cases, and we should never ignore a story based on the stereotypes associated with a person's lifestyle.

It's also worth noting that when it comes to securing a green light from editors for coverage, an angle might be police failures. “That's one factor that might push it up in terms of possibly getting coverage,” said Dodd. (See next chapter for more.)

Holes in coverage start to appear because of assumptions made about individuals from marginalised backgrounds. We can acknowledge that the media cannot play by the same rulebook as charities and the police, that sometimes our reporting might be harmful on an individual level to the families and friends of the missing, while also successfully building interest and attention around the case which might, in some small way, benefit them.

We should also be more transparent about the fact that not every case can be picked up by the media and actively communicate to charities like Missing People and the police the types of stories we want to be kept abreast of. But first, that will require the mending of a very damaged relationship.

Case study: Nicola Bulley

Nicola Bulley was a 45-year-old mortgage broker who disappeared while walking her dog in January 2023. It was later found she had accidentally drowned in a river. Her partner, Paul Ansell, described her as “an incredible mother” who was dedicated to her children. Her beloved dog, a springer spaniel named Willow, was like a third child.

Nicola is undoubtedly a “celebrified victim” and almost every journalist I spoke to for this project mentioned her disappearance and the subsequent furore around it. There was a “carnival of hysteria” around Nicola, one *Guardian* headline argued.²⁹ This stretched from the amount of media coverage to the



Publicity still of Nicola Bulley

²⁹ Guardian. (2023). The carnival of hysteria over Nicola Bulley shows us the very worst of modern human nature. Retrieved from [<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/20/nicola-bulley-family-social-media-public-police>]

number of online sleuths who went as far as to journey to the village where she went missing to hunt for clues. Bulley's family described the press intrusion as "shameful", adding that "Do the press and other media channels and so-called professionals not know when to stop? These are our lives and our children's lives."³⁰

Journalists I spoke to felt the furore could have been avoided if the police had been more open with the media about what they thought had happened to Nicola from the start. "If you trust proper journalists, keep them informed, brief them off the record as needed. That's the best way to manage coverage and ensure that it's responsible, and correct, and not veering off in these wild conspiracy theory directions. To just block everyone out... That's when things just spiral out of control," said James.

The police were also heavily criticised for releasing information about Nicola's struggles with alcoholism and the menopause, which were then circulated by the media. And while we can apportion some of the blame to social media, the tabloids didn't hold back from positing outrageous theories and overreporting on details of Nicola's life.

"Newspaper columnists such as the *Daily Mail*'s Amanda Platell and Petronella Wyatt took the opportunity to critique Smith's outfit, physique and whatever could thence be inferred about her character on social media," wrote Zoe Williams.³¹

"We can't control what the press picks up. If we do a media release, we will do it on the risks that are presented to us. And some of those just get ignored," said Rhees-Cooper. "They could have handled the media better. But the Bulley case has really made forces very nervous about involving in the media and trusting the media."

³⁰ BBC News. (2023). Nicola Bulley: Ofcom 'extremely concerned' by family media complaints. Retrieved from [<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-lancashire-64713045>]

³¹ Guardian. (2023). The carnival of hysteria over Nicola Bulley shows us the very worst of modern human nature. Retrieved from [<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/20/nicola-bulley-family-social-media-public-police>]

Public, media, police: a fundamentally broken relationship

The journalists I spoke to said they find many of their stories around missing people via police appeals – whether directly in their inboxes via press releases or on social media. Slightly less frequently, they will notice family and friends’ appeals, and every now and then, family and friends will reach out to them directly.

“You often see ‘so-and-so has gone missing; it’s out of character’. And you start bookmarking it in your head: that’s one to watch, or check in with the cops and see if a missing person’s report has been lodged. And then you get in touch with the person who’s posted it. And that’s how you can get into it, so to speak,” said Rafe Nelson (pseudonym), a news reporter for a major newspaper.

But Nelson said two roadblocks pop up continuously: the police often tell families not to speak to the press, and they are not transparent with the media about the status of different cases. “You’ve got to trust your instincts. Don’t wait for the police force to tell you, ‘this case is coming up’. Because chances are you may have missed your ‘in’ with those who are running the campaign, or family, or they may have been told not to talk to the press – ‘Come through us’. That type of thing happens all the time,” he said.

Press as an accountability measure

[Gaia’s Guide](#) is a community organising resource created by the family of [Gaia Pope-Sutherland](#), a 19-year-old woman who went missing 2017 and was found dead 11 days later.^{32, 33} An [Independent Office for Police Conduct report](#) criticised the police response to her missing case and found that the police search should have been better organised, and that Gaia’s disappearance may have benefited from higher initial risk assessment.³⁴

³² Justice for Gaia. (2020). Gaia’s Guide. Retrieved from [<https://justiceforgaia.com/gaias-guide/>]

³³ Sky News. (2022). Gaia Pope-Sutherland: Teenager found dead after hearing man she accused of rape was being released from prison, inquest hears. Retrieved from [<https://news.sky.com/story/gaia-pope-sutherland-teenager-found-dead-after-hearing-man-she-accused-of-rape-was-being-released-from-prison-inquest-hears-12600091>]

³⁴ Gaia Pope-Sutherland investigation final report. (2023). IOPC. Retrieved from [<https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/publications/gaia-pope-sutherland-investigation-final-report>]

The guide is what her family – who described Gaia as “a force of nature and fiercely loyal to those she loved” – wish they’d had when Gaia went missing. In it, it is explained that speaking to the press can “make sure loved ones’ voices are heard and that agencies like the police are held accountable and doing everything in their power to help”. It goes on: “If issues arise with the police, having an independent relationship with the media will enable you to have your say, apply public pressure and make sure those in charge are held accountable.”

Despite police reticence to trust the media, Rhees-Cooper, a police officer who works with the National Police Chiefs Council around missing people, acknowledged more resources are sometimes put into missing cases that the media (and the public) focus on. “They’re in the public eye, so the senior bosses are thinking, ‘We’ve got to get this right’,” he said. “When you think of the harm done to other missing person cases... We had cases where we were looking for dead bodies in rivers running alongside Nicola Bulley that nobody was interested in. They just didn’t make the headlines.” While the media holds a lot of power, the cases we neglect to cover may be negatively impacted.

It’s a fractured system: the police may blame the media, but the media could just as well blame the police and hold them accountable for disproportionate resource decisions on coverage.

The relationship between the police and the media is symbiotic yet dysfunctional. The media is reliant on the police to help identify high risk cases, but the police have been found to have racist biases in which cases they prioritise. Research has highlighted that Black people are more likely to go missing but less likely to have risk flags attached to their cases.³⁵ There are many cases in which Black families have criticised police response, the most high profile being that of [Richard Okorogheye](#), a 19-year-old described by his mother as the “perfect child”, who went missing in 2021 and was later found dead.³⁶ “I am disappointed with the initial

³⁵ J. Hunter, J. Allan, R. Rickford. (2023). The Ethnicity of Missing People. Missing People, Listen Up. Retrieved from [<https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/new-research-ethnicity-report>]

³⁶ Guardian. (2021). My heart’s been ripped apart, says mother of Richard Okorogheye. Retrieved from [<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/apr/08/my-heart-ripped-apart-mother-richard-okorogheye-student-body>]

response by police when I reported Richard missing,” she said.³⁷ She later added: “If Richard was that colour – blue eyes – maybe the reaction would have been different immediately.”

To correctly cover stories like these will require taking a more expansive look at the cases we’re willing to seek out, probing the police for more details than they immediately offer, and, in some cases, looking beyond the police altogether to communities.

How families and friends engage with the media matters

It can be hard for journalists to get stories over the line without buy-in from family and friends willing to give interviews about their missing loved ones. But it can also be hard for those families and friends to trust the media with their stories.

There is a certain brutality that still pervades crime journalism, that sometimes prioritises story-gathering over basic human decency. The public are all too aware of this. It’s one of the reasons why public trust in journalism is at an all-time low.³⁸ Emily Bell, Director of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, recently described British journalism quite accurately, as “venal, competitive, direct and blunt.”³⁹

When [Anthony Stammers](#) went missing in Colchester, Essex, in 2012, his family were approached by a journalist from a local paper. “She just came to the doorstep the very morning after Anthony was reported missing. So we were in the throes of the police calling and, well, you know, terrified – didn’t know what was happening. We’d never been through anything like this before,” said Julie Stammers, Anthony’s mother. “I was distraught – totally, and utterly distraught – and I kind of opened the door, gave her a mouthful, and told her to get off the doorstep. A really terrible thing to do, just cold call like that straight away.”

³⁷ The Independent. (2021). Richard Okorogheye: Mother ‘disappointed’ by police when reporting son missing. Retrieved from [<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/richard-okorogheye-death-mum-police-b1829502.html>]

³⁸ Reuters Institute. (2024). Race and leadership in the news media 2024. Retrieved from [<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/race-and-leadership-news-media-2024-evidence-five-markets>]

³⁹ Guardian (2024). US and UK journalism are different. But they’re going to get a lot more similar. Retrieved from [<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jun/21/us-uk-journalism-differences>]

Anthony still hasn't been found but, over the years, the family's relationship with the press has improved. "On the whole, most of the press have been very polite when they've come round, to be honest. They've filmed us, and they've been affected when you start telling your story," said Robert Stammers, Anthony's father. "A couple of them have been quite emotional when they've left, because they're human beings, and they think, well, that [could be] my family."

There is no doubt that it can be difficult to get stories over the line or develop them without access to strong interviewees who can paint a picture of the missing person, and that the needs of the family, and the things that they view to be irrelevant to coverage, might be entirely different to what the newsroom regards as important for getting the public's buy-in to a story.

"One of the things that's quite difficult is if the family doesn't want to talk. If you don't talk to us, my news desk is going to be, like, 'What's the line?' I can't say, 'They won't talk to me', because then they're just not going to run it," said Nelson. James said families' expectations need to be moderated at times. "It's difficult [when] people want coverage, but want to control the coverage. And unfortunately, once your name [and] your story is out there, your right to privacy going forward is somewhat different," she said.

Melissa Sigodo, a community reporter at the *Daily Mirror*, agreed that access to family and friends can impact engagement in coverage. "It's going to reach more people, because now more people are paying attention to seeing a fuller picture of this individual: they have family who care about them, they're a human being – that can actually help the investigation and help this person be found."

She added that it's important for journalists to figure out a way to cover stories where they can't get the interviews they want. This is especially true in the cases of marginalised people, who might not have friends and families looking for them in the same way, or, for personal reasons, may not want or be able to engage with the media. Journalists need to work harder to cover these stories.

Police often offer a liaison to act between the media and the family, but, in my own experience and that of my peers, liaisons can also behave as a barrier between families and the media – especially if they feel that reporting might highlight flaws in their conduct. "There have been times where I've asked them, please, to put me

in touch with the family. Because when the family speaks, that can really be a game changer in finding the person,” said Sigodo.

Encouraging families and friends of missing people to engage with the media needs to be balanced against the practical needs of law enforcement and the truth that media coverage, especially at an excessive degree, can be damaging to people close to the missing depending on what the press chooses to report.

“I think families need to be fully informed of what that relationship is, how it works, and that the media is not going to stop just because you had enough of it. Or just because that person was found. Or because you give them some information, or they don’t get the information they want, they’re going to start looking through your bins. Literally,” said Professor Shalev.

There is no doubt that without interviews from friends and family, the journalism we can produce will be weaker. We must take great care with how we use that privileged access.

Conspiracy theories are running rampant

In the summer of 2024, a 19-year-old British man named [Jay Slater](#) – described by his mum as “bubbly and fun” – was missing in Tenerife.⁴⁰

Mark Williams-Thomas, a private investigator working on behalf of Jay’s family, hit out against the many conspiracy theories that circulated online about his disappearance. “There are some really vile people who have done that; they’ve tried to hack some of the social media sites, they’ve attacked some of the family,” he told [The Independent](#).⁴¹ [The Times](#) reported that “online sleuths” on “Jeep safari tours” had been visiting the Tenerife villa where Jay was last seen.⁴²

Because of the explosion in popularity of true crime content and social media sleuthing, the media must be even more careful about how they report around missing people. “Online outlets in particular are amplifying conspiracy theories by repeating them,” said James. “You know, someone posts a theory on social media, and then it gets written up. All this kind of circular stuff.”

Glasshouse added: “We may not be able to control what people make of our reporting nor everything that is posted on social media in response to it, but we can do our level best not to feed into the corrupting ecosystem of true crime.”

Conspiracy theories tend to abound when there is a vacuum in mainstream reporting. This can be seen in the social media activity surrounding missing Black people who don’t receive the same levels of mainstream coverage. When 19-year-old student [Samaria Ayanle](#) went missing in March 2024, conspiracy theories reached a fever pitch. Among other speculations, Black British social media was buzzing with questions about a possible serial killer murdering Black people. This is

⁴⁰ Daily Mail. (2024). Jay Slater's mother breaks down in tears as she pleads for her 'little baby' to come home after going missing in Tenerife four days ago. Retrieved from [\[https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13550683/jay-slater-mother-tears-home-tenerife-missing-plead.html\]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13550683/jay-slater-mother-tears-home-tenerife-missing-plead.html)

⁴¹ The Independent. (2024). Are TikTokers and Facebook sleuths drowning out actual leads in the hunt for Jay Slater? <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/jay-slater-missing-tenerife-facebook-tiktok-news-b2569684.html>

⁴² The Times. (2024). Jay Slater: amateur sleuths take ‘safari tours’ to Tenerife villa. Retrieved from [\[https://www.thetimes.com/uk/crime/article/jay-slater-tenerife-villa-search-96zn57v76\]](https://www.thetimes.com/uk/crime/article/jay-slater-tenerife-villa-search-96zn57v76)

problematic because, as Helen Alves from Missing People said, it can be “hugely traumatic” for the friends and family of missing people “in a period of uncertainty for themselves when they are psychologically speculating themselves”.

It is understandable that some Black people are using social media to amplify the stories of missing Black people. Jahnine Davis is the director of Listen Up and co-author of [a report](#) highlighting the disproportionate number of missing people from Black communities. She said there had been a “responsibilisation” placed on Black and other racialised communities to take on a safeguarding role, “because of the real fear or disbelief that the police or wider statutory agencies or non-statutory agencies are able to discharge their safeguarding duties in the ways they need to”.

In other words, because the Black community cannot always trust the media and the police, they feel a greater responsibility in terms of publicising the cases of missing Black people – we are trying to fill the gap in both police response and media coverage.

Sigodo agreed, “A lack of good reporting on missing Black people has led to the current situation. Another part of it is that I think there’s a lack of transparency from the police. It takes a village to find a missing person. If we are more aligned on what’s actually going on, and what information we have out there, I think that you might start to see people becoming less sceptical.”

Conspiracy theories are not only damaging to the family and friends of victims; they can also cause excellent reporting to be overlooked. As we push for better and more responsible reporting, we will also need to continue to do outreach to communities who have historically been underserved by the media. Without it, we will be fighting a losing battle.

The missing beat: a specialist assignment

Stories about missing people are often assigned to journalists on general reporter beats, or under the diverse spectrum of stories covered by crime correspondents. This means there are very few journalists who specialise in writing about missing people, despite the regularity of these cases occurring.

Francisco Garcia, a journalist who authored a book about missing people, is a rare exception. While he knew that in some ways missing people was an “enormously well-covered” subject, Garcia felt there was a gap in coverage. “You’ve got so much popular culture devoted to it – a lot of column inches. But, of course, there’s a glaring disparity within that world of who’s been covered and what’s being covered and in what way.” Garcia wanted to do things “properly” and fairly, and set out to explore the missing persons crisis with a critical mindset.

Some of his biggest learnings, he said, were to “shed assumptions” about how comfortable people would be in terms of speaking about their missing loved ones, and to strive to recognise just how devastating ambiguous loss can be. “There isn’t an effective language, always, to talk about that kind of bereavement,” he said. “It’s painful beyond what words can express.”

Other journalists spoke to me about the steep learning curve covering missing cases. “There are so many things that you learn about how to approach families who are in panic, in distress, and what information you should be being put out there,” said Nelson.

The combination of an ongoing crisis, and the steep learning curve in reporting that crisis, point to the benefit of creating a role for specialist coverage. Not only would reportage benefit from deep experience, but specialist reporters would be in a better position to forge better relationships between key stakeholders, like the police, charities, and underrepresented communities.

Specialist reporters could also invest time in monitoring social media for under-covered stories requiring more thorough reporting, and in tracking victim demographics. They would be better positioned to identify trends and patterns in missing people cases, such as an excess of elderly people who go missing from care homes, or missing migrant children.

The ability of journalists like Garcia to handle stories with grace and care should be applauded, as should the resilience of all who dedicate their lives to writing about the worst of humanity.

Mr Stammers, reflecting on his experience dealing with journalists after his son, Anthony, went missing said, “They have to cover all sorts of nasty stories, let’s be honest. It’s not just the local fête winning the biggest cucumber or something. They have to deal with horrible things and interview people at a time when they’re stressed. So it’s very important that they handle it correctly.”

Missing White Woman Syndrome exists in UK newsrooms

While the term may have U.S. origins, Missing White Woman Syndrome is undoubtedly present in the UK media landscape. It presents in a similar way, if on a smaller scale, against a backdrop of a country where, proportionally speaking, more Black people go missing than any other race. “Of course, we see that in the UK, because the history is very similar,” said Davis. “So I understand the term. I don't particularly care what term is used. We need to do better around acknowledging that we have an image of deserving and undeserving.”

We know that news editors are looking for unusual stories, that they prioritise, rightly or wrongly, stories that have a sense of mystery to them, and where it is likely that the person has come to harm. But, as most of the journalists I spoke to agreed, it is widely acknowledged that even within this tight framework, there are stories that don't make the cut based on basic factors like age, gender, race, class, and perceived beauty.

“There are so many good stories from the Black community, from the Asian community, but they're just not being told,” said Sigodo. “Overall, I think they are just being overlooked. Because the colour doesn't fit into the narrative that they might have in their head of a person going missing.”

James said that while she had never heard anyone vocalise anything overt like, “We're not going to cover this case, because of the ethnicity of the missing person”, it is true that there is a “bias towards good-looking middle-class people” in her newsroom. Glasshouse, on the other hand, said he hadn't experienced MWWS in his career, but that there could be a “feedback loop between the newspapers and the broadcasters” in terms of which stories are covered – an “unwitting bias”, he said.

Professor Shalev argued that the “bottom line” is financial interest. “If you're targeting the [highest possible] readership, viewership, and listenership, you're

going to aim for stories that [the majority] feel they can relate to the most. You see that play out again, and again, and again,” she said. As Greenslade wrote:⁴³

“Who decides the scale of coverage? Editors, of course, drawing on news values that they find it acutely difficult to discuss openly because they are laced with prejudice, sometimes unconscious and, more often than not, overt. It is not quite as crude as deciding what sells, but there is little doubt that they interpret what their audience wants. In terms of crime, as countless examples have shown previously, they divine whether the majority of their readers and viewers will be sympathetic to the victim.”
— Roy Greenslade

Nelson said that while he thinks things are improving because of more diverse reporters coming through the ranks with “different life experiences, and different cultural backgrounds”, there is room for further growth. “All the top editors are older, and white, and some of them have children,” he said. When a child goes missing who resembles their own offspring, he said, they are more likely to care.

While there are specific vulnerabilities that might be associated with children and women which go some way in justifying the degree of coverage, there are other specific vulnerabilities associated with demographics that get less coverage: men, elderly people, people of colour, refugees and so on. As put by Dominic Norton, who runs [Missing Black People](#), an information and resource centre for the friends and families of missing Black people, “When we’re saying Black Lives Matter, or Palestinian Lives Matter, I don’t think there is a level of comprehension that all human life is sacred. When there’s not that comprehension – whether we talk about kids missing from social care; whether they’re Black and immigrants and get lost in the system; whether it’s a young girl and she went missing on a night out – when you don’t value human life, it’s going to negatively impact all of those different situations that happen when it comes to missing Black people.” This is why the news media must look at their coverage through an intersectional lens.

⁴³ Guardian. (2008). Why is missing Shannon not getting the same coverage as Madeleine? Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2008/mar/05/whyismissingshannonnotget>

While it's brilliant that there's been a growing awareness of MWWS in the UK – entering so far into popular culture that it was recently mentioned by a character in the hit British Netflix series *Supacell* – we also cannot just keep writing about MWWS itself and expect that to make up for a lack of adequate news and feature reporting. Moving forward our coverage needs to be proactive rather than reactive.

As I wrote in a piece for gal-dem back in 2019: “We must stop making missing people a comparative sport... fundamentally, we shouldn't need to use the cases of missing white women and girls to generate interest in the cases of missing Black people. In the long-term, these reductive equivalences might do more harm than good in raising awareness of black missing people.”⁴⁴

In the aftermath of Samaria Ayanle's disappearance earlier this year I counted three similarly written opinion-lite pieces from *Grazia*, *Glamour* and *The Evening Standard*, titled respectively, ‘I'm A Black Woman From London, Would Anyone Care If I Went Missing?’, ‘When will missing Black women be prioritised?’, and ‘Where is all the mass feminist rage when Black women go missing?’

We will know we have succeeded in tackling MWWS when stories about missing people of colour are reported separately from the noise of the phenomenon itself. Ultimately, MWWS in the UK means that key stories continue to be overlooked. Further proof that we need to entirely expand our understanding of victimhood.

⁴⁴ gal-dem. (2021). After Richard Okorogheye's death, we must stop making missing people a comparative sport <https://gal-dem.com/richard-okorogheye-death-sarah-everard-missing-people-sport-of-comparison/>

Media guidelines and newsroom strategies for better coverage of missing people

When I began this project, there were no media guidelines in place to support journalists reporting on missing people. “It’s like garlic to a vampire, isn’t it?” joked Garcia about how journalists might respond to them. “They’re pretty ideologically dead-set against guidelines. But I think it’s a good idea.”

A decade ago, the Samaritans rolled out [guidelines on reporting suicide](#) that have been widely adopted across UK newsrooms. Now, with the Samaritans support, Missing People has published [their own guidelines](#).

Garcia is right, in that many of the journalists I spoke to were wary of receiving guidelines, but they all agreed they would like to read them if they were to come into existence.

“In an online world, the pace is so relentless. It’s hard for any online outlet to have any kind of consistency, or even editorial judgement,” said James. “It can never hurt to have some more guidance and best practice out there. As long as they’re prepared from a realistic journalistic perspective.”

Here are eight additional ways newsrooms can begin to rethink their coverage.

Eight newsroom strategies to improve coverage of missing people

1. **Respect privacy and sensitivity** Everyone has “the right to be forgotten”. It can be hard for journalists to get stories over the line without families and friends willing to give interviews but approaches during times of crisis should be considerate. Those reporting around missing people should understand ambiguous loss, and how painful it can be.
2. **Be judicious with coverage** Is this story in service of the public and the missing, or is it sensationalised? Not all elements of a missing case can, or should, make the news. Be intentional. Keep in mind that more police resources may be given to investigating crimes when you cover them.

3. **Engage with complex stories** Many editors are wary of stories where there's a history of substance abuse, or where the person has gone missing before. They might prefer stories where the disappearance is 'unusual' and where there is suspected foul play. But 'simple' stories aren't always what the public want or need.
4. **Expand our understanding of victimhood** There remains a refusal to plainly acknowledge racism across British newsrooms, but Missing White Woman Syndrome – the disproportionate coverage of young, white, middle class, often good-looking women, and girls – undeniably exists in the UK. This is why key stories continue to be overlooked.
5. **Collect data** Actively striving towards equitable coverage involves taking stock of the types of stories and individuals we are prone to cover excessively. There has never been any type of data collection that attempts to quantify how the British news media tackles missing person cases.
6. **Highlight support available to missing people and their loved ones** The charity Missing People is a great resource and should be used similarly to the way Samaritans is for suicide reporting. The Missing People media guidelines will likely be available by the end of 2024.
7. **Diversify our newsrooms** Many of the journalists working hard to tell missing Black people's stories are Black themselves. Initiatives to improve race and ethnicity representation have been losing steam since 2023, and are lagging behind efforts to reduce gender disparities within the media. This should serve as a warning about the stories that will be missed. .
8. **Make space for specialist roles.** The relationship between the public, the media and the police is fundamentally broken. Engaging with families in a respectful, responsible, and effective way is a steep learning curve. Both issues can be countered when general reporters are able to focus on the missing and can forge better relationships between stakeholders while championing impartiality.

Conclusion

The strategies and advice pulled together in this report are only a cog in a machine that desperately needs to whirr into action in response to the UK's missing people crisis. More needs to be written and uncovered about how the media reports on missing people, and how we can start to challenge the status quo.

In future, I would love to speak to more reporters and news editors about their experiences, and support or develop data analysis that paints a clear picture of publication trends around missing people: for example, by scraping the websites of the top British news outlets over a set time period. I also want to spend more time speaking with people who have gone missing and their friends and family about their experiences with media representation. As Davis puts it: "It's really important that that's also included, that their voice is somehow locked into this."

There are things I have touched on that journalists can be mindful of moving forward: look for stories outside of the norm, pay close attention to social media use around missing people, beware of fuelling conspiracy theories, and so much more.

There's also plenty to be hopeful about: there has been some brilliant, impactful and responsible journalism over the years, especially out of the U.S. – from the [She Has a Name](#) podcast, hosted by Tonya Mosley, [Your Own Backyard](#) podcast, hosted by Chris Lambert, Columbia Journalism's [Are You Pressworthy](#) feature, and [Sarah Stillman](#)'s reclamation of Donna Julane Cooke's story. And, while I have spent a lot of time focusing on journalism's flaws, I want to acknowledge that good journalists and radically-minded outlets have always existed. There has long been a tradition, particularly among Black journalists in the UK, of going the extra mile to ensure their community's stories are told responsibly.

My final message is this: we can all be part of the change to push for responsible coverage, regardless of whether or not we are journalists. By engaging with quality media, you could play a small role in helping to bring missing people home, or getting them the justice they deserve. Get in touch [here](#) if you want to collaborate, or if you have a missing person's story that you feel has been underreported.

Acknowledgements

Reuters Institute:

Caithlin Mercer

Mitali Mukherjee

Juan Morante

Lauren Brown

Rasmus Neilsen

and all other staff members

Interviewees and Supporters:

Jane Hunter

Helen Alves

Chantal Korcz

Kate Graham

Jahnine Davis

Professor Karen Shalev

Dominic Norton

Dr Danielle Slakoff

Vikram Dodd

Melissa Sigodo

Mark Townsend

Stammers Family

Francisco Garcia

Zach Sommers

Alan Rhees-Cooper

Roland Hughes

Andrea Gharsallah

Charlie Hedges

Julie and Robert Stammers

Joshua Osman

Kimi Chaddah

and others

Organisations:

Missing People

Listen Up

Missing Black People
National Police Chiefs' Council
Justice for Gaia
and others