

# Stigmatizing Handsworth: Notes on Reporting Spoiled Space

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□—Deploying Erving Goffman's seminal ideas on stigma, the author demonstrates how a particular inner city locality in Birmingham, UK, has been subject to repeated stigmatization in its news portrayal. A seven year sample of local TV news reports concerned with Handsworth is subjected to detailed interrogation. Unlike previous studies concerned with the role of the mass media in processes of deviance, however, this study demonstrates a more complex interplay between professional news producers, stigmatized social settings and the symbolic construction of deviance. With reference to the concepts of social setting, moral mis-aligners, and tension management, the role of the media in the symbolic construction of deviance is explored in new ways. Empirically the article demonstrates the relevance of these theoretical constructs and illustrates exactly how Handsworth in its repeated news rehearsal has become a potent and sticky symbol referencing far more than a strictly geographical space. It is this, it is argued, which principally accounts for its continuing and disproportionate news visibility.

While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind—in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous or weak. He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma.

—Erving Goffman (1990, p. 12)

**E**RVING Goffman (1990) in his path-breaking book on stigma develops an understanding of how individuals become disqualified from full social acceptance. Perceived attributes of difference, often felt to be

deeply discrediting, serve to demarcate stigmatized individuals and groups from "normals" who thus respond to each other with a deep sense of otherness. This sense of difference, while confirming normative expectations of what is normal, usual and acceptable for full social membership, also contributes to the dynamics of group formation and the possibility, on the part of the stigmatized individual, of internalized shame.

This article maintains that Goffman's ideas, first published in 1963, continue to offer insight into contemporary processes of stigmatization and social control. Specifically, it demonstrates that his ideas on stigma can be applied usefully to the media's symbolic representations of particular localities. These localities, re-

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peatedly symbolized through the news media in particular ways, can become publicly stigmatized social settings which, in turn, symbolize as deviant all those found living within their midsts. A detailed case-study of a regional TV news program over an extensive time period and its presentation of just such a locality—Handsworth, an inner city ward in Birmingham—demonstrates how attributes of stigma, symbolization and tension management inform news presentations.<sup>1</sup> These routine forms of local news reportage provide symbolic resources that are likely to inform wider public perceptions of certain localities, their inhabitants, and the causes and nature of associated social problems. Such symbolization may, in turn, inform face-to-face encounters, and even serve to legitimize policies and programs of social control.

### STIGMA, SOCIETY AND MEDIA

Goffman (1990, p. 24) was principally concerned to analyze the effects of stigma in face-to-face encounters. Indeed, he saw such encounters as "one of the primal scenes of sociology" because "these moments will be the ones when the causes and effects of stigma must be directly confronted by both sides." Consequently references to the wider society are infrequent and when made, tend to remain theoretically undeveloped. "Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories" (Goffman, 1990, p. 11).

How society constructs ideas of so-

cial difference, and how these are sustained and reproduced outside of the immediate milieux of particular social settings and personal encounters, tend to be lost from view. Merely to indicate that processes of stigmatization can serve wider system-maintaining needs, activate processes of social control and encourage deviant conformity, does not in itself relate these ideas to a theory of social structure nor processes of symbolic construction and mediation. Maintaining that "before a difference can matter much it must be conceptualized collectively by the society as a whole" (Goffman, 1990, p. 149), Goffman fails to pursue how such collective representations become publicly defined. Nor does the analysis identify their possible sources of social determination.

Institutionally, of course, the mass media are well placed to contribute to such social processes; they circulate symbols, meanings, and collective representations to various audiences and thereby help to constitute audiences as publics. Symbolically, whoever is positioned outside or inside the legitimate "public" is of far reaching consequence. This is a theme which has been pursued to some effect in the recent history of mass communications research. A number of now classic studies continue to throw light on the contemporary involvement of the mass media, and the news media particularly, in situations and processes of social dissent, conflict and control (Halloran et al., 1970; Cohen, 1973; Hall et al., 1978; Cohen and Young, 1981; Golding and Middleton, 1982). More recently, studies continue to demonstrate how the mass media can be

regarded as centrally relevant to the broad concerns of the sociology of deviance (Erickson et al., 1987; Gerbner, 1992; Waddington, 1992).

A number of key concepts deployed in earlier researchers, however—including labelling, moral panics, deviance amplification and primary definers—have begun to be subject to more searching criticism. The concept of media orchestrated “moral panics” for example, has proved vulnerable at a number of points. So-called “new realist” criminologists have questioned the symbolic only basis of public anxiety, arguing from realist premises that public fears and alarms may be more “real” than once supposed (Young, 1987). Media theorists have criticised the concept’s ahistoricism, its undeveloped view of the mass media and monolithic view of the state (Schlesinger, 1990). The alleged relationship and facilitating mechanisms between moral panics, authoritarian state power and processes of social control remain, empirically, largely unexplored. A further criticism can be made. Studies of moral panics have tended to pay insufficient attention to textual properties; as a consequence, they have tended to postulate a relatively straightforward involvement of the news media in processes of labelling and deviance amplification. Arguably, the theoretical thrust in earlier studies to move beyond interactionist sociology and relate publicly communicated definitions of deviance to wider structures and centers of power, led to a situation where the exact composition of those definitions and the part played by newswriters in their construc-

tion, received less than detailed attention.<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of a close analysis of a particular news medium, this study provides evidence for a more differentiated understanding of the news media as well as a more complex understanding of news media involvement in processes of stigmatization. This is not to suggest that stigmatization is exclusively a property of media attribution or that the media bear the sole responsibility for originating stigmatizing categories. It does suggest, however, that parts of the mass media—seemingly as a matter of routine and over a more extensive period of time than that usually associated with a moral panic—daily distribute symbols, categories and representations that are deeply implicated in wider processes of social differentiation. Taking some of Goffman’s observations on stigma as its starting point, this study pursues a particular news medium, that of regional TV news. It finds that some of Goffman’s ideas offer new insights into the way in which the news media may be involved in stigmatization.

Three features of Goffman’s discussion of stigma are particularly relevant: 1) the symbolic importance attached to social settings and the way in which these may support associated ideas of social deviance; 2) the role of so-called “moral mis-aligners” in symbolizing a superior morality to that of stigmatized individuals and groups; and 3) the sometimes ambivalent role played by news producers in the tension management of stigmatized localities and social groups. Each feature points to a more complex interplay than has typically

been assumed between news producers and the social representation of deviance.

## STIGMATIZING A SOCIAL SETTING

Social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there. The routines of social intercourse in established settings allow us to deal with anticipated others without special attention or thought—we lean on these anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands (Goffman, 1990, p. 11).

This discussion details how the inner city ward of Handsworth in Birmingham appears to have become symbolically established as a stigmatized social setting in its TV news portrayal. The analysis takes Goffman's claims seriously—that "social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there." It demonstrates how—over a considerable period of time and involving processes of news repetition and story treatment—Handsworth has become a potent sign conveying more than a strictly geographical reference. Attending to the symbolic representation of Handsworth as a social setting suggests that the processes of stigmatization are not confined to the attributes held by or imputed to deviant individuals and groups. In fact, they may be mobilised in association with certain social places or spaces. Indeed, to the extent that such signs can become charged with meaning over time, journalists do not have to elaborate their story treatments repetitively. They can signal heightened news interest and even judgmental commitments without explicitly proclaiming

them. In a profession which makes much of its commitment to impartiality and objectivity (Tuchman, 1972; Elliott, 1978; Hackett, 1985), this proves professionally pragmatic in warding off possible criticism, while nonetheless maximizing a story's possible news value.

Therefore, the question pursued here is this: If Handsworth in its news mediation is capable of functioning as a sign, sustaining particular meanings and associations, what exactly are the latter?

### Handsworth Profile

Before answering the question directly, it is helpful to review some basic characteristics of the Handsworth area, as compiled by local and central governments. This official view is not necessarily the real Handsworth, with the media portrayal merely a representation; both, of course, are representations. Official data point to a set of concerns, however, which may also be considered worthy of media interest and public scrutiny. According to official sources, then, during the period under review Handsworth was defined as extremely deprived. Over 70 percent of its enumeration districts fell within the most deprived 2½ percent of enumeration districts in England and Wales.<sup>3</sup> Census indicators used to calculate such deprivation include rates of unemployment, over-crowded households, households lacking basic amenities, single parent households, pensioners living alone and ethnic origin (Department of Environment 1981).

By the early 1980s, like many other British inner city areas, Handsworth had experienced a net population emigration of minus 13.4 percent in-

cluding a high percentage of skilled and economically active residents. At the time of the major disorders in 1985, nearly 8 percent of all households lacked exclusive use of a bath and inside toilet, while 30 percent lived in overcrowded conditions and over 65 percent of all households had no access to a car. According to the housing department, prospects were bleak for large families on the housing waiting lists. At the 1985 letting rate, for example, it was estimated that it would take 42 years to house all cases in a four bed queue. One bedroom units were also in short supply, with only 60 lettings made to single people and childless couples from a waiting list of 1159 cases. If official unemployment rates are considered, in October, 1986, 36.6 percent of the Handsworth population were seeking employment, with male unemployment running at 43.0 percent. In a population including 60 percent from minority ethnic backgrounds, the City Council note, given the lack of available general data, the City Council recognized that unemployment rates among black people were likely much higher than the quoted figures. On leaving school in 1985, for example, only 2.4 percent of Afro-Caribbean, 5.5 percent of Asian and 9.4 percent of white youths found employment.

Interestingly, within the period both prior to and immediately following the major disturbances of September, 1985, the West Midlands Police reported that recorded crimes in the Handsworth area fell by 7 percent in 1985 compared to the previous year. This was more than three times the drop for the city as a whole. At 131 crimes per 1000 of the population, the local crime rate was still

above the city average of 107 crimes per 1000 of population; but it was nonetheless below the average of other inner city areas such as Aston/Witton.

These official statistics show a typical scene of concentrated inner city deprivation and distress. These and other factors are highlighted in the three inquiries commissioned in the wake of the so-called Handsworth riots of September, 1985 (Dear, 1985; Silverman, 1986; Ousley et al., 1986) subjected to review elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> While the Report of the Chief Constable referred to the general conditions of inner city malaise, it stressed the conspiratorial and criminal intent of "drug dealers who had become fearful for the demise of their livelihoods" (Dear, 1985, p. 53). In contrast, the City of Birmingham Inquiry painted a similar picture to that above, but stressed above all the corrosive effects of concentrated unemployment on individuals, families and communities (Silverman, 1985). The alternative report, "A Different Reality" commissioned by the West Midlands County Council, made an impassioned case against British racism. It decried "institutionalised discrimination, denied opportunity, denigrated pride, devalued culture and state harassment." It pointed to the ways "the police are viewed by a substantial proportion of Handsworth residents as an an ill-disciplined and brutal force which has manipulated and abused its powers in dealing with the black community over a long period of time" (Ousley et al., 1986, pp. 9, 89).

While there is much that is contested among these three different "realities" together they point to a number of factors and issues vari-

ously thought to be at the heart of Handsworth and its inner city conditions. They also serve to draw attention to the issues and concerns often identified with inner cities more generally. Other core inner city localities in Birmingham could also be described in similar ways, as could countless localities throughout the United Kingdom (Rex and Moore, 1967; Pryce, 1979; Harrison, 1985; Hausner and Robson, 1985; Scarman, 1986; Benyon and Solomos, 1987, 1991; MacGregor and Pimlott, 1991).

### **TV News and Handsworth**

If the profile above has helped raise a number of issues and concerns variously thought to characterise Handsworth and its problems, how have these been featured in its news mediation across an extensive period? A systematic review of a seven year sample of regional TV news programmes, comprising a sample of 288 separate news programmes begins to provide some answers. Handsworth, as noted already, is but one inner city ward in Birmingham that contains 15 other designated core deprived inner city wards, while the TV news broadcast region contains, in total, at least 128 inner city wards in major cities and conurbations.<sup>5</sup>

It is astonishing to find, then, that from the sample of 288 news programmes and a resulting sample of 246 news items all in some way referencing inner city localities and problems, 52 (or 21.1 percent) of these are found to be Handsworth related. Only 1.9 percent of news reports could have been anticipated to deal with Handsworth, however, if all inner city areas had equal news coverage. Handsworth, in other words,

had over 10 times the coverage that might have been expected given the other 128 inner city localities also found in the news region.

An immediate explanation for this remarkable news visibility may be thought to be due to the "Handsworth riots" and their known news value for journalists. Two points minimize the usefulness of this explanation, however. First, Handsworth is by no means the only inner city ward within the broadcast region to have erupted into urban unrest across the sample period; and second, even when accounting for riot related news reports, the sample remains (at 12.2 percent) over six times the anticipated figure. A second line of explanation may thought to be the unusually high crime rate found in the area, generating a plentiful source of Handsworth stories rich in news values. While crime news, as detailed below, does indeed figure prominently in this portrayal, the fact remains that the official crime figures for the area, as indicated, are not dissimilar to those of many other inner city localities in Birmingham and the region as a whole; in fact, in comparison, they often fare better. On these grounds it can be stated that Handsworth, for reasons explored further below, has been subject to massive and disproportionate news visibility.

How, then, has Handsworth been represented within this remarkable news outpouring? Working with some fairly blunt categories it became clear that Handsworth was the subject of news interest on issues of crime and law and order in most cases (67.3 percent), with issues of "race" and racism, and the multiple concerns of urban deprivation each

only portrayed marginally (9.6 percent). Other news reports also made reference to Handsworth but only in incidental ways (13.5 percent). Clearly, Handsworth has had repeated news visibility across the period and that visibility has been mainly focused on crime, criminality, law and order.

Portrayed in such terms over such an extended period of time Handsworth is unlikely to remain a simple geographical referent, but in Goffman's terms is likely to take on characteristics that the media use relentlessly in their news presentation. Insofar as Handsworth continues to reference a place, this is now likely to be a symbolic location filled with news-derived associations and meanings. The media have repeatedly implicated Handsworth in news reports of crime, criminality, violence and deviance. These could be documented at length, but only a few representative news stories from the seemingly limitless parade need to be provided. With crime, often involving serious violence—violent attack, gang war, rape, riot—routinely featured in the Handsworth news reports, the police assume a regular presence, symbolically confronting the rising tide of lawlessness. Handsworth's ethnic minorities are often verbally referenced as the perpetrators of crime (28.8 percent), often involving drugs, rioting and extreme acts of violence and, less frequently, as crime victims (7.7 percent). Consider the following news reports, transcribed as broadcast.

1. An 18 year old girl was raped by two men in Birmingham. She was pulled into a car after refusing a lift in Handsworth and driven to

a wood and raped. She was then dumped back in Birmingham.

2. A girl is seriously ill in hospital after being attacked by four men with a meat cleaver. Karen Delaney who is twenty was taken to hospital from her home in Handsworth after the attack. She has serious back injuries and was having an operation this afternoon.
3. Police in the Handsworth district of Birmingham say they have a gang war on their hands. This afternoon a man was stabbed and shot bringing to four the number of similar attacks since Sunday. Doug Carnaghey reports. Police have set up an incident room here at Nechells Green Police station after linking four violent attacks in Handsworth since the weekend. Shotguns have been used in these attacks, knives and in one even a sword. Police believe two feuding gangs are involved and that their quarrel may be about drug dealing. Assistant Chief Constable Tom Methon told a hastily assembled press conference that in three of the incidents the targets were brothers from one well known West Indian Handsworth family, the Lindo brothers.
4. In Handsworth twelve people have been arrested and large quantities of cannabis and other drugs seized in a police raid today on a Birmingham cafe where a similar operation last year sparked off the initial Handsworth riots. This afternoon drugs squad officers swooped on the Acapulco Cafe and other premises at Villa Road in Lozells and charges are expected later tonight.

5. A Handsworth rioter who admitted he went wild during two days of disturbances last September has been given three years youth custody. Losen Thompson from Northfield in Birmingham was warned several times by the judge after speaking in the West Indian dialect patois during the trial. He was convicted of rioting, burglary and arson.
6. A man who made a false claim for damages after the Handsworth riots has been given a suspended prison sentence and fined £400.00. Mustapha Ahmed who runs a clothing business claimed he lost £53,000 when his shop was looted. In fact his losses were only a thousand pounds. The judge said he was a foolish and greedy man.

These examples from the steady stream of Handsworth news reports (on average almost one a week) suggest that the resources are at hand for Handsworth to function as a fully-fledged symbol, condensing, combining and signifying a number of resonant themes increasingly associated via their news mediation with a particular urban locality. Crime, criminality, violence, deviance and minority ethnicity all become entangled within the signifying capacity of Handsworth. In its news symbolisation Handsworth appears then to conform to Goffman's idea of a social setting which helps "establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there," sustaining normative expectations.

Of course it can be countered, as Goffman (1990, p. 62) himself was aware, that "it is possible for signs which mean one thing to one group to mean something else to another

group." It is certainly the case that signs potentially can exhibit multi-acculturality—or the capacity to sustain different meanings for different interpretative communities (Voloshinov, 1973). However, it is also the case that these are dependent on the availability of different or alternative interpretative frameworks which in turn are socially and culturally informed. As Stuart Hall has remarked, polysemy must not be confused with pluralism. "Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a dominant cultural order, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested" (Hall, 1986, p. 134). Confronted as a matter of routine, year in and year out, with news treatments which seem to accord with dominant cultural motifs it can be anticipated that acts of negotiated or oppositional reading will be confined to those with alternative cultural resources, commitments and mental stamina (cf. Philo, 1990).

Insofar as such recurring media significations of Handsworth appear consonant with prevailing ideas about the inner city, defined as one essentially of crime and criminality, so the possibility for misreadings of this news construction of Handsworth are small. When combined with the repeated references to racial minorities and their involvement in acts of deviance, this is likely to feed those deep cultural roots of British racism documented across numerous studies (CCCS, 1982; IRR, 1987; Fryer, 1989; Braham et al., 1992; Solomos, 1993). In other words, Handsworth as both sign and symbol, is unlikely to have escaped its repeated media signification, implicating it within a

particular discourse on inner city problems and issues. Goffman's commentary on signs and symbols is appropos.

Some signs that convey social information may be frequently and steadily available, and routinely sought and received; these signs may be called "symbols." The social information conveyed by any particular symbol may merely confirm what other signs tell us about the individual, filling out an image of him (sic) in a redundant and unproblematic way (Goffman, 1990, p. 59).

Handsworth has become a potent symbol condensing a variety of stigmatizing associations. In a climate of multi-cultural awareness public opprobrium is likely to attend explicit racist statements directed at minority ethnic groups, especially if advanced by respectable TV news organisations. When these same groups are referenced indirectly through the racialized sign of Handsworth, however, discourses of race secure public representation without incurring public disquiet.<sup>6</sup> Handsworth proclaims itself simply to be a place, when in fact for many it has become a highly racialized social setting. If "race" is best understood as a social construct, typically sustained in contexts of inequality (Miles, 1989, pp. 41-98), processes of stigmatization and racialization exhibit a deep affinity. It would be difficult to overstate the potency of Handsworth in this respect.

Even without pursuing the tortuous path of comparison between official crime figures for the area and news reports of crime (both, of course, are subject to complex and multi-layered processes of social construction, Lea and Young, 1984; Reiner, 1989; Chibnall, 1977; Erick-

son et al., 1991) the general observation stands. Though Handsworth is only one inner city ward among many others in the region—and notwithstanding the fact that police statistics have confirmed that its recorded crimes cannot be taken to be exceptional—it has been subject to routine and disproportionate news interest. In this respect also, Goffman's observations on the public image of an individual could be related equally to the public image of place.

Where an individual has a public image, it seems to be constituted from a small selection of facts which may be true of him, which facts are inflated into a dramatic and newsworthy appearance, and then used as a full picture of him (Goffman, 1990, pp. 90-91).

Through its repeated news portrayal in terms of crime, criminality and deviance, Handsworth and its associated communities have become charged with meaning and stigmatized as deviant, other, and outside normal boundaries of behaviour and morality. Other features of this Handsworth portrayal confirm this basic stigmatization while also pointing to more complex, and hitherto unexplored, forms of media involvement in stigmatizing processes.

### **REPORTING HANDSWORTH: THE ROLE OF MORAL MIS-ALIGNERS**

Indeed, if one did want to consider other social roles along with the in-group deviant it might be useful to turn to those roles whose performers are out of step with ordinary morality, although not known as deviators. . . One of these morally mis-aligning roles is that of minister or priest, the performer being obliged to symbolize the righteous life and live it

more than normal; the other is that of law officer, the performer having to make a daily routine out of other people's appreciable infractions (Goffman, 1990, p. 169).

This statement is suggestive in the context of media representations of stigmatized places and people. It points to the role that may inform the presentation of those with a statutory or other responsibility to those stigmatized. According to Goffman such individuals can perform a special role, simultaneously drawing attention to the deviance of the social group in question, while also providing—perhaps in exaggerated ways—a contrasting and morally superior way of life. In the context of news reports, this is a double-edged sword. Journalists may actively seek out notable personalities who appear to contradict the prevailing view of the stigmatized social group, while simultaneously confirming the latter because of their imputed exceptional status. Goffman's ideas direct us to conceptualize the role of news participants differently when compared to the prevailing orthodoxy of media theory.

For some time, it has been a central claim of media theory that news operates a "structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions" who are thereby able to advance "definitions of social reality" in accordance with dominant social interests (Hall et al., 1978, p. 58). That is, accessed voices are taken to be "the primary definers" of events and their media signification. This position draws attention to a possible role of accessed voices, but it tends, among other things, to privilege the level of the cognitive over the symbolic. Goff-

man's categories, in contrast, point to the possible symbolic implications of the news involvement of others, and this issue is pursued here. In overview terms, it is apparent that across the news sample certain voices have undoubtedly secured increased access when compared to others (Table 1).

Clearly, the police have secured the lion's share of news access. That is not surprising given the predominance of Handsworth news concerned with crime and law and order. It is also noticeable, however, that other voices—and the individual voices of the organisationally non-aligned in particular—have found some news involvement. These will be returned to below. While the police have secured prominent access, the significance of their presence may best be seen at a symbolic level. Consider the following typical news report (see also news reports 3 and 4 above).

7. News presenter: West Midlands police launched a massive man hunt tonight after three armed men brutally attacked a policeman and hijacked his car. 34 year old PC Davis was threat-

TABLE 1  
HANDSWORTH AND NEWS ACCESS

	N	Percent
Police	28	33.7
Individual voice	13	15.7
Government	11	13.3
Community voice	10	12.0
Education	7	8.4
Court	4	4.8
Media	4	4.8
Business	3	3.6
Royal	2	2.4
Expert	1	1.2
Total	83	100.0

ened with a shotgun and beaten over the head. The attack's been linked with an armed robbery earlier today in West Bromwich and police say the robbers are extremely dangerous. The men were spotted in Regent Road Smethwick driving a stolen van. PC Davis was attacked after chasing them to Upper Grovenor Road in Handsworth. They stole his car and later dumped it a mile away in Crock Lane.

**Reporter:** This white transit van was stolen late this morning in Dudley. An hour later in Smethwick it aroused the suspicion of PC Adrian Davis and he gave chase through Smethwick in Handsworth. Suddenly in Grovenor Road Handsworth it stopped and three men got out and smashed the police car windows with a butt of a shotgun and forced the officer out of his vehicle at gun point, and then they beat him over the head with a cricket bat and stole the police car, abandoning it a mile away in Crick Lane Handsworth.

**Police Supt:** I think they're extremely dangerous. Men who walk around or run around with guns in Handsworth, or any part of the city, must be considered to be very dangerous men.

**Reporter:** Is this incident linked to any previous incident in the West Midlands?

**Police Supt:** At this moment in time we're looking into an incident that occurred in West Bromwich where an armed robbery took place this morning at about 11.20. At this moment I can't

really connect them, but it's one possibility we're looking into.

**Reporter:** What kind of condition is the officer in now?

**Police Supt:** Thankfully he's okay; he's shaken, bruised and cut and he's got a bit of an injury to his neck after being dragged out of the vehicle. The officer's now at the local police station helping us to compile a picture of exactly what went on. So the inquiry's very much in its infancy at the moment.

**PC Davis:** Yes, the side window was smashed by a wooden implement. My window was smashed by another wooden implement and when I looked up there was a shotgun in my face.

**Reporter:** Then what happened?

**PC Davis:** They dragged me out of the car; I radioed through to say that a shotgun was involved and when I was out of the car I threw my radio underneath the car so they couldn't grab that, then they drove off in my police car.

**Reporter:** What did they hit you with?

**PC David:** I don't know.

**Reporter:** Why did you throw your radio under the car?

**PC Davis:** I had the impression they were trying to take the radio as well.

**Reporter:** Was this the first time that you have ever been the subject of violence as a policeman?

**PC Davis:** In four years as a policeman this is the first time I've ever been assaulted.

**Reporter:** What's your feelings on that?

**PC Davis:** I'm relieved it's all over.

**News presenter:** Police have issued descriptions of the men they're searching for following the attack on PC Davis. All three are Asians. The first is aged 20–25, about 5' 9" and stocky, he has long scruffy looking hair. The second man is about 23, about 5'8" tall, he was wearing a black bomber jacket. The third is about 22 years old, about 5'7" with short dark hair; he walked with a limp and was also wearing a black bomber jacket.

In the news story above, Handsworth finds explicit reference no less than five times, as the news frames the story in terms of the personal heroism and elicited feelings of the individual police officer involved. He has undoubtedly behaved in a brave and selfless fashion, exhibiting courage over and above the call of duty. He has, in short, symbolized a superior morality, not only to the deviant group confronting him, but also perhaps to that of "normal" society. This story moves beyond the role of Goffman's law enforcer who makes a "daily routine of other people's appreciable infractions," and begins to symbolize an extra-normal morality nearer perhaps the province of the priest.

Once again, Handsworth has become associated with crime, violence and minority ethnicity. The news presence of the police serves at a symbolic level to highlight the daily confrontation with those forces of lawlessness and violence that appear to threaten the norms and codes of conduct of civilized society. It is less a question of what the police say in terms of the conveyance of indispensable information and opinion, and more a question of their continuing

presence, symbolically positioned as the thin blue line against a seeming rising tide of spatially referenced immorality, lawlessness and violence. As James Carey has recently pointed out: "A ritual view of communication is directed not towards the extension of messages in space, but the maintenance of society in time (even if some find this maintenance characterized by domination, and therefore illegitimate); not the act of imparting information or influence but the creation, representation, and celebration of shared even if illusory beliefs" (Carey, 1989, p. 43).

In the context of regional TV news at least, a strong case can be made that many news stories are indeed constructed in ritual and symbolically resonant terms. Examples abound, but two further instances help make the point (see 3, 4 and 7 above). In the first, a reporter and film crew—in fly-on-the-wall documentary fashion—accompany an inner city drugs squad operation carried out by the West Midlands Police. Focusing on the preplanning and eventual execution of the raid conveys little information of immediate or wider relevance to most audience members. What it does do, however, is capitalize on the drama of a drugs bust. Most importantly, the news treatment once again symbolically positions the police as a morally superior, if hard pressed, body of officers, professionally confronting an ever rising tide of anti-social and morally reprehensible behaviour.

Second, a different type of regional news story nonetheless makes the same point. Here the predisposition to recognize various annual, seasonal or calendar landmarks creates further opportunities to reaffirm con-

trasting behaviours and moralities. A year after the Handsworth riots, for example, news programs reported on the award ceremony of the West Midlands Police in which a number of officers—named as heroes by the news media—receive bravery awards. Again, though such items convey little by way of information, they nonetheless provide yet another vehicle carrying symbolic resonance. This instance, as in so many others, provides an opportunity to indulge past scenes of inner city conflagration, violence and destruction with the police symbolically positioned as the restoring force of reason and law and order. Such imagery demonstrates its symbolic potency when contrasted with the findings of numerous riot reports. These analyses—far from regarding the police as simply a reactive force to inner city disorder—maintain that they have been a central protagonist in antagonistic inner city relations for some time. Consequently, they are likely to have played a more active (as opposed to reactive) part in causing serious disorders (Ousely et al., 1986; Benyon, 1986; Benyon and Solomos, 1987; Cashmore and McLaughlin, 1991).

The continual stream of Handsworth news reports, therefore, in which the police play such an important symbolic role, serves to invoke a series of deep cultural oppositions: legality and illegality, order and disorder, morality and immorality, normalcy and deviance. All played out in relation to a named social setting and its associated population.

If the police can function symbolically, as well as professionally, to demarcate and police the boundaries of deviance and normality, what then

of the role of Goffman's priests? Returning to table 1 above, it is clear that a sizable proportion of accessed voices comprise individual voices, those of the organisationally or formally non-aligned. Here, too, Goffman's suggestive comments on the role that priests perform in a stigmatized social setting find empirical support. Consider the following news feature, for example.

8. News presenter: Ever since the riots, the world's spotlight has been on Handsworth. Politicians, police and social experts have all been asked what they think can be done about inner city problems of poverty, poor housing and unemployment. But in the middle of it all, there's a man whose trying to do his bit to help. He's Eric, a little man, with a very big heart. Tony Maycock has been along to see him.

Reporter: They make an odd pair at best, he's twenty one years old, six feet tall and has the mental age of a five year old; Eric Faux is sixty five years old and not much over five foot tall, but they're both enjoying their holiday. The mentally handicapped young man is just one of forty youngsters which Eric has brought out from Handsworth in Birmingham on a three week holiday in Llandudnow in North Wales. Forty youngsters who wouldn't get a holiday and it's all due to Eric. They're getting hungry now, so with his five helpers he packs them up and shepherds them back to the house he has rented. He could of course be spending a month abroad celebrating his retirement from his job as a

NALGO organiser. Instead the plump little man they call Dad is passing the summer the way he has passed it for the past twenty five years looking after the mentally and physically handicapped children of Handsworth. Katie tell me about Eric, he's quite a bloke isn't he?

Katie: He's been doing this holiday now for 25 years and I've only known him for five, but I think the world of him and everyone else does whose involved with him. It's very difficult, you ask why he's special. I don't think anybody could explain why, he's just got something which nobody else has got.

Helper: He's a father figure to all of us really. He's a very special man, and the children love him.

Reporter: He's persuaded you to turn up for the last twelve years hasn't he Ian? He's obviously a very persuasive man.

Ian: He's a very special man

Reporter: It all started for Eric back in 1961 when his eleven year old son received a head injury in a sporting accident. It left the boy mentally handicapped and Eric became involved, starting the holiday because no one else was doing anything. This holiday is costing you £2000 a week, that's £6000 you spend here. Some of it you're getting from charity, but most of it you're finding. How do you get it?

Eric: I hope more than anything else and I try and convince people that, they say, people say from time to time 'well I'll send you some money' and they do probably, and you get the

odd sponsored walk or Bingo session coffee evening and it build ups.

Reporter: Let's be honest. Quite a bit of it comes out of your pocket hasn't it?

Eric: Yes well, I suppose it is. That's nothing. Money is to be spent. It's no good to me, I'd rather give it to other people.

Reporter: Not that he sees his holiday with the handicapped as a race relations exercise. From his terraced house in Handsworth his other children have done well: one's a doctor, one's a nurse and one's a teacher. What Eric believes in is self-help for Handsworth.

Eric: It's no use saying we'll leave it to the Council or the Government or to the social workers or whatever. It's YOU, you're the person, you can be a contributor. Something can be done, something positive and it's up to each of us, I think, to get moving on that. I play my part I hope, and I'm standing there trying to do that.

Reporter: The politicians turn up in Handsworth and do their little bit, what do you really think is going to happen to Handsworth?

Eric: I don't know. I can see what might happen to Handsworth. That's the thing that worries me. I think really, that if people take the same attitude of seeing how it goes, it will all go away, it will become a no-go area. That really worries me. You might as well put the barriers up. I don't know, I don't know what's going to happen but what we have to try and do is try.

**Reporter:** There's some people who will regard you as, it's not too strong a word as a saint.

**Eric:** Ah rubbish, I'm not, I'm not. All I'm, I'm just an ordinary person trying to do the best for the people I like. That's all it is, that isn't sainthood. I'm not prepared to accept that at all. I've got my faults just like everybody else.

**Reporter:** Are you going to stay in Handsworth?

**Eric:** Yep, they'll carry me out.

**Reporter:** They'll carry you out?

**Eric:** Yep, that's the way they'll get me out of Handsworth. I like it. It's the people, the people need care and understanding and there's something good in every area. And it's up to me to play my part. I shall stay there, yes.

**News presenter:** Eric Faux, one of the unsung heroes of the inner cities.

Eric may not strictly speaking be a priest, but he has certainly been positioned in this news treatment as a saint, notwithstanding his embarrassed comments to the contrary. This unwitting performer has most definitely been invited "to symbolize the righteous life and live it more than normal." Once again it is discerned how the exceptional qualities and actions of a particular Handsworth resident, deliberately sought out for news treatment, simultaneously invokes both the normal and the deviant quality of Handsworth life and its peoples.<sup>8</sup> For Eric to be sung as one of the heroes of the inner cities can only prove to be sustainable and newsworthy against a common assumption that the inner city, Handsworth included, is gener-

ally populated by anything but heroic figures. Saints need their deviants perhaps more than deviants have need of saints. This news feature—typical of the regional news disposition for individually focused and human interest stories—is also principally found to work at a symbolic and affective level.

Eric symbolizes all that is hopeful and promising in an otherwise desolate and crisis-torn locality. Fearing a "no-go" area Eric himself suggests that "there's something good in every area"—even Handsworth! With the prompting of the reporter, Eric maintains that the only way he will leave Handsworth is when "they'll carry me out." This only sounds remarkable when premised on a common assumption that most people would leave, not live out their life there. Eric's "saintly" disposition implicitly calls attention to, and reinforces popular conceptions of Handsworth as a deviant place. Unlike religious saints, however, news saints are more populous. In the human interest context of regional TV news, Eric does not stand alone.

Reference can be made, for example, to other occasional features included in the sample. These celebrate the achievements of a Handsworth photographer, artist, a West Indian cook, and youthful author; the rehabilitative work of a community based youth program; and the humane actions of a woman who found and saved the life of an abandoned baby. In addition, a number of police-based stories are detailed below, in which the police feature carrying out good works in the area. Such items, though a minority of all Handsworth stories (20 percent), nonetheless represent a substantial

stream of qualitatively different news features each symbolizing contrasting behaviours and moralities. Though each proclaims itself to champion exceptional individuals and talents, each simultaneously supports popular, news reinforced, preconceptions about the area and its communities. Without this informing contrast, it is doubtful whether such stories would be seen by journalists or their audience to be newsworthy at all. It is the stigmatized quality of Handsworth that enables such individuals to be imputed with exceptional status.

Whether Handsworth is portrayed, as in the vast majority of all news accounts, as a site of spatially located crime, violence, deviance and minority ethnicity, or as the location of the exceptional, both work to an understanding of Handsworth as separate from "normal" society. The problem here is that while Handsworth may well, in certain respects, be separate from the wider society how this is understood is critical for the formulation of political responses. If Handsworth is portrayed as outside of white middle class society, threatening its culture, customs and behaviour, such a view is predisposing to a law and order response. If, on the other hand, Handsworth is understood to be subject to complex forces of racism and social polarisation this prompts a more wide-ranging set of political prescriptions.

A succession of items celebrating personal achievement displaces from public view wider issues of structural disadvantage and discrimination and may even contribute to public complacency: "If so many individuals from these localities can make it, what's there to be concerned about?"

To return to the news story about Eric above, it is clear that Eric's individualized news treatment and politics displaces from wider view the contested nature of the inner city, while symbolising the "little man" as the solution to unfathomable social problems. The symbolic potency of Eric is not without ideological import.

A predominance of crime reports focused on individual offences also fits comfortably with the basic conservative view which sees criminality as rooted in and explained by individual behaviour. In this respect, such findings appear to confirm the inherent conservatism of news identified by others (Halloran et al., 1970; Golding and Middleton, 1982; Schlesinger 1987). These studies have drawn attention to how the conservatism of news is explained mainly in relation to its event orientation, and consequent tendency to displace considerations of social context and social process. The discussion above, however, also points to the operation of differentiated news values. In the context of regional news, for example, this event orientation has occasionally been supplemented by more 'positive' oriented features, not confined to the reporting of immediate events. These have nonetheless proved to be implicated in stigmatizing processes.

The two case studies discussed above (7, 8)—one concerned with a vicious attack on a police constable, the other focused upon the generosity of a Handsworth resident—suggest that news may well be populated by a range of "performers" who, to use Goffman's phrase, act as "moral misaligners" symbolizing the boundary between morality and immoral-

ity. Unwittingly perhaps, certain social groups and individuals become invested with symbolism and are capable of marking out, and in consequence policing, the boundaries of the acceptable and the unacceptable often in relation to identified social settings and their inhabitants. The categories of "law enforcer" and "priest" have proved suggestive, though these roles need not be seen as confined to particular occupations. The "priest" can function as a "law enforcer," and the "law enforcer" can aspire publicly to the role of the "priest."

The police, for example, have frequently sought to colonize the role of the priest, or perhaps missionary would be a more apt term. In a number of sample news items (9.6 per cent) the police are found entering Handsworth to perform "good works" and "civilize" the inhabitants. Running youth clubs and soccer leagues, sponsoring a Handsworth cricket team, conducting tours for school children around a police station and initiating a recruitment drive for increased ethnic minorities into the force (positioned significantly at the site of the Handsworth riots), all symbolically cast the police—courtesy of the news media—as a morally beneficent force. As the police superintendent stated in just such a news feature:

Well it's a long term investment and the idea is that the police like to get to the kids certainly before they get to the third year form, and let them see that the police aren't the bogey men that they are so often made out to be by other people, for whatever reason that they want to (sic). Because there are an awful lot of people around who do try to instil preconceived notions into the minds of these youngsters. And all that we endeavour

to do is to get our sixth penneth in, and let the kids make their own minds up and conduct themselves accordingly and hopefully make themselves into better citizens.

The police in news items such as these wittingly perform roles known to have symbolic importance in the battle for hearts and minds, both within the stigmatized setting of Handsworth and further afield. In terms of the roles performed by moral mis-aligners, then, it is clear that accessed participants can simultaneously draw attention to the moral deficit of those they confront within stigmatized social settings, while also signalling their own moral superiority. This is best accomplished in symbolic terms. As such, these public performances have pointed to a level of complexity of function and form that is not readily captured in the terms of "primary definition."

### **REPORTING HANDSWORTH: STIGMA AND TENSION MANAGEMENT**

In addition to prestige symbols and stigma symbols, one further possibility is to be found, namely, a sign that tends—in fact or hope—to break up an otherwise coherent picture but in this case in a positive direction desired by the actor, not so much establishing a new claim as throwing severe doubts on the validity of the virtual one. I shall refer here to disidentifiers (Goffman, 1990, p. 60).

It has been noted already how the role of moral mis-aligners—especially those who inhabit the social setting of the stigmatized—fractures the attributed stigma while simultaneously confirming its validity. A ray of light is cast only to confirm the

prevailing darkness. This last section pursues further the way in which news presentations manage the information and hence the stigma associated with Handsworth. This is the same stigma which has been relentlessly built in the past and continues to be attributed in the present. Goffman (1990, p. 57) draws a distinction between the socially discreditable and the socially discredited, encouraging in the former a strategy of information management (to reveal or not) and, in the later, a strategy of tension management (to respond to known differentness). News journalists, especially those based within or near the locality on which they report, occupy a privileged position in this regard and are likely to find themselves within a situation of tension management. The tension here emanates from past stigmatization that they must now manage. Handsworth, on past news accounts is no longer a discreditable locality, but an already discredited one. As such journalists must decide on a number of grounds whether or not to confirm or to challenge this prior news symbolisation.

It may be supposed that journalists would seek out and frame their stories in ways which capitalize upon deeply ingrained news values and therefore pursue stories involving conflict, negativity, violence and deviance. But this is less than the full story. Consider, for example, this TV journalist's comments about reporting Handsworth, made in interview with the author:

It's nice to get to the stage where you are not just on the hunt for the problems. The obvious thing here is to go down to Handsworth and see if there's any more trouble brewing. Which isn't really a very rewarding brief to be given, it's just a

sort of trouble shoot. It's much more interesting to take the thing over a longer period of time and say we'll meet people in a calmer mood and talk to them about what they are doing, see perhaps what the city council is doing to try and help the young Afro-Caribbean kids. They've got a scheme which I'm interested in, which is where they are taking some of them back; they are being taken to their parents' or grandparents' roots and learning certain skills in the West Indies. It might be carpentry or whatever and that's a lovely project to get involved in and have a look at. So those stories would be nice to do, and they've got a nice vehicle on Central News to put them out on.

The reporter claims that he is fully aware of the news profession's preoccupation with Handsworth framed in terms of trouble. He recognizes how this has dominated past news portrayal and, if a journalistic predisposition is not resisted, will continue to frame Handsworth reports. While sample findings qualify the reporter's remarks (67.3 percent of all news stories alone concern crime and law and order), it has nonetheless been seen how a sizable minority of news features have provided a succession of more positive news treatments. However, for the reasons noted, these may be less disruptive of the predominating symbolization of Handsworth than first assumed.

The statement does begin to provide an answer, however, to the earlier finding that Handsworth has found disproportionate news visibility when compared to any other inner city area in the broadcast region. Even when subject to the supposedly more positive news treatment detailed above, the informing premise of such features remains that Hands-

worth is newsworthy because of its prior association as a place of trouble.

It can now be maintained that Handsworth, because of its past repetitive news presentation has indeed been established as a potent symbol, condensing a number of recurrent themes each of which resonates with deep seated news values—conflict, negativity, violence, drama, deviance. As such, it has become newsworthy in its own right. Everything associated with Handsworth is now likely to be deemed by journalists to be of enhanced news interest simply because it references Handsworth. Handsworth, in other words, has figuratively and symbolically broken through normal news thresholds and therefore gained increased news visibility (Galtung and Ruge, 1981). When combined with the more populist orientation of regional TV news and its pursuit of human interest (Cottle, 1993), this has undoubtedly led to an increased number of incidental news stories about Handsworth, including that of Eric and other individualized news features. Aligned to the potent symbol of Handsworth such stories bathe in the news aura that has become attached to it. Once again Goffman's (1990, pp. 74–75) observations on individuals seems perfectly applicable: "Around this means of differentiation a single continuous record of social facts can be attached, entangled, like candy floss, becoming then the sticky substance to which still other biographical facts can be attached."

From present findings—and also intimated in the journalist's own account above—two different categories of news story can become attached to the sticky symbol of

Handsworth. Each represents a different response to the tension surrounding this stigmatized locality. The first concerns the reporter's admission of enhanced news interest in spatially located trouble, which has already been found to comprise the majority of all Handsworth news stories. The second concerns a minority of stories which seek to present a more positive view and serve, to use Goffman's phrase, as disidentifiers. Between these two orientations a tension remains. How should journalists approach a story about Handsworth? Should they capitalize on the existing stigma with its enhanced news value, or should a story focus on a disidentifier, challenging the prevailing stigmatized view? Invariably, the tension is resolved in favour of the journalistic "trouble frame," even when no actual trouble has occurred.

9. News presenter: Good evening. In Central News tonight a Chief Constable's warning. Geoffrey Dear says the riots could break out again.

Reporter: There's a warning tonight that serious rioting could break out in the West Midlands following what police see as a significant increase in tension between the police and groups of youths. The fears emerged this evening in a private meeting between West Midland's Chief Constable, Geoffrey Dear and local authorities. The meeting was called to find out what measures had been taken since last September's riot in Handsworth.

Interestingly, the non-event "trouble frame" can then be used to

frame yet a further event, itself involving no actual incident of trouble, only its possibility.

10. News presenter: Good evening. Tonight on Central News, Handsworth gets ready for the arrival of Prince Charles. Hundreds of extra police move in, but the locals promise a warm welcome. A big security operation is underway for Prince Charles's visit to Handsworth tomorrow. The prince is to tour the area at a time when the police are warning of increased tension. It's nine months since the Birmingham suburb was devastated by riots and Prince Charles will see for himself how the area has changed in that time. But the friction still remains. And for the past four weeks police have been preparing for possible trouble. Keith Wilkinson reports.

Reporter: Hundreds of policemen are on standby. Police vans, that can be quickly adapted for riot control, stand in readiness. But the police are hopeful that the protective grills and the riot gear won't be needed.

When Prince Charles visited, no trouble took place, but this did not stop journalists from reporting this non-event.

If the "trouble frame" continues to inform a number of news stories on the basis of possibility only, how have journalists treated stories that are not based on such expectations? Even here the "trouble frame" can be mobilized. Consider the following.

11. News presenter: And ten months

after the riots it's harmony in Handsworth. More than 50,000 people poured into Handsworth Park in Birmingham over the weekend for what's become one of the city's brightest events. Tony Maycock joined the crowds.

Reporter: The typically English past-time of watching cricket in the park, but this is Handsworth park in Birmingham over the weekend. It was the Handsworth festival and multiracial England now has another typical pastime, that of watching reggae in the Park. Just a year on from the Handsworth riots it was a pleasant mixture of races and cultures enjoying the weekend. There wasn't a single policeman in sight and no arrests. Incidentally the Handsworth team won their match by an innings. Visitors seemed to find the reggae irresistible.

Here we have a news story that stigmatizes as it patronizes. It is simultaneously informed by an excluding racialized understanding of Englishness while also keen to promote a multiracial ethic based on a pleasant mixture of races and cultures. When informed by an essentialist understanding of race and racial difference the two are not, of course, in contradiction. The main point, however, is that images of harmony only secure their resonance and enhanced news value when framed in relation to preceding riots. Following the Handsworth riots of September, 1985, the sticky quality of Handsworth has, if anything, become even stickier.

An analysis of news stills—the visual image electronically placed be-

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hind the news presenter's head when introducing news items—has shown how a limited range of riot images has accompanied diverse news stories about Handsworth in the aftermath of September, 1985 (Cottle, 1993, pp. 196–198). These potent images, presented in Caravaggio hues and reminiscent of scenes of the blitz in World War II, depict scenes of flames and destruction. They have accompanied news stories which are not strictly about these events. While stories not ordinarily deemed worthy of news interest may now find inclusion, they pay the price of being reframed in line with the symbolic claims of Handsworth.

Interestingly, much of the disorder that took place in September 1985—and which became popularly known, via their news mediation, as the Handsworth riots—in fact occurred in the adjacent inner city locality of Lozells (Dear, 1985). This once again points to the potent stickiness of Handsworth as symbol. When hearing of an outbreak of disorder in inner city Birmingham, how else could journalists have responded apart from concluding that such must be Handsworth riots? Thereafter, and not surprisingly, the name has become the common referent for these events.

Though some journalists as acknowledged above are aware of the limited nature of the "trouble frame," their occasional efforts to move beyond it have proved unsuccessful. Consider one last example.

12. News presenter: While David Gower's England struggles, another England cricket team assembled in the troubled Birmingham suburb of Handsworth have been finding life

all together more tolerable in Trinidad. Here's Tony Francis.

Reporter: There's a lot about Handsworth which frustrates West Indians. It boiled over in last year's riots, of course, for which the Birmingham suburb alas will always be remembered. Four and a half thousand miles away from Soho road, the scenery and the climate couldn't be more contrasting. But the problems of urban deprivation, of unemployment and of racial tensions still apply. Trite as it sounds, there's one thing that's guaranteed to restore sanity, no matter how fleetingly on both sides of the Atlantic. Cricket in Trinidad is played by ragged trousered kids on every vacant patch of shrub every day of the year. Some of the Handsworth team were only that age when their folks abandoned the sunshine for a better life in England.

This news presentation once again finds its resonance in the backdrop of the preceding Handsworth riots, notwithstanding the journalists' efforts to pursue a more positive Handsworth feature. This is not simply because such remain within a minority of all news presentations but because of the news treatment or frame which informs it. While the journalist may publicly decry the fact that Handsworth has become identified with the riots, this and the steady stream of Handsworth news portrayals already discussed is unlikely to do anything other than reinforce such associations.

If such features allow at least a

wider range of viewpoints on the nature and causes of the Handsworth riots outside of the restricted repertoire of criminality, conspiracy and mindless violence sustained in the relentless drip of Handsworth crime reports, these remain, for the most part, undeveloped. The fleeting reference to issues of deprivation, unemployment and racial tension in feature 12 above in any case, is contradicted by the reporter's trivializing statement concerning a presumed loss of sanity—all to be restored by the magic of cricket. As a disidentifier this news feature and the minority of all "positive" Handsworth stories like it, are unlikely to dislodge or break-up the prevailing news symbolization and stigmatization of Handsworth. Such is the potency of the journalists' creation.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article has drawn upon some of Goffman's insights into the nature of stigma and applied these to the news presentation of a particular inner city locality. His observations have been found to be relevant for an improved understanding of the symbolic nature of news reports and the way in which they stigmatize certain social settings and, by association, their resident populations. Actual audience decoding, the wider consequences of this news stigmatization, and the complexities of news production and their contribution to this stigmatizing output have not been examined. All could usefully be pursued. What has been demonstrated, however, is the way in which Handsworth, through its news construction, has become a potent and sticky symbol. This should alert us to

the way in which certain localities in their news presentation can serve as social settings and, as such, become charged with meaning through the repetition of certain types of stories. In the case of Handsworth the meanings attached stigmatize both the locality and its associated population in ways that are likely to feed popular racist sentiments.

Certainly these news presentations do have a referential basis. Clearly, Handsworth and its population are afflicted by many problems and difficulties often found concentrated within Britain's industrially decaying and socially marginalized inner cities (and outer estates). While this is not disputed, the ways in which the narrow and decontextualized symbolisation of such localities are played out in the media and granted wider public exposure are surely important. It is here that the resources for public understanding and mis-understanding are daily disseminated to those who may, or may not, have first-hand knowledge of such localities. Taken together, the symbolic presentations of the mass media are likely to inform social understanding and forms of social response to the problems of Handsworth and similar localities. Potentially at least they are implicated in those very social processes of inner city conflict and change that they report on with varying degrees of partiality.

If social spaces can be stigmatized publicly, how this influences the consciousness, feelings and forms of individual and group behaviour of those who live within such stigmatized settings has yet to be pursued. Continuing outbreaks of urban disorder in disadvantaged and marginalized lo-

calities suggests that at least some are not prepared to remain the object of public discussion and disquiet and, with all the attendant risks, take to the streets in a more strident subject position. Implicit to such actions, themselves highly symbolic events, may well be a sense of otherness, separateness and exclusion fuelled in part by wider public perceptions and media symbolization. This points to a much more complicated nexus between media and disorder than the common idea of copy-cat rioting suggests.

Stigma, observed Goffman (1990, pp. 12, 9), reduces "a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one" and thus contributes to a situation where he or she is "disqualified from full social acceptance." When applied to entire mi-

nority ethnic communities, in a context of racial inequality and deeply sedimented racism, the results can be catastrophic. In America in the early 1960s Goffman (1990, p. 36) discerned, in passing, how "within the city, there are fully-fledged residential communities, ethnic, racial, or religious, with a high concentration of tribally stigmatized persons." He (1990, p. 170) also made reference to the "urban unrepentant poor" stigmatized as "the folk who are considered to be engaged in some kind of collective denial of the social order." Though not pursued by Goffman, such observations have a decidedly contemporary ring. This case study of one social setting and its news symbolization suggests, unfortunately, that Goffman's insights are all too relevant for our own times.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The data used in this study were collected while undertaking a PhD study, and included a review of 288 news programmes across the period 1982–1988 (Cottle 1993). That study also includes a detailed analysis of the reporting of the 1985 Handsworth riots (Chp 6. "Mediating the Handsworth riots: Riotous Others, Silent Voices, Criminal Deeds"). Needless to say, the present study makes an original argument not presented elsewhere. I would like to thank all personnel at Central Television studios, Birmingham, UK.

<sup>2</sup>The classic example here could be considered to be Hall et al. (1978) with its analysis of the mugging moral panic, also centered in relation to Handsworth in the 1970s.

<sup>3</sup>These data rely on the sample areas selected by the City of Birmingham in compiling its Inner Area Studies in 1987. For the most part these relate to Handsworth, but on occasion also refer to the adjacent localities of Soho and Lozells. They provide the most detailed information available. They also point to the way in which many of these indicators are not strictly confined to the Handsworth locality, notwithstanding its news treatment which tends to imply a strict geographical/spatial boundary.

<sup>4</sup>These reports have been reviewed elsewhere (Cottle, 1993, pp. 24–31; Gaffney, 1987).

<sup>5</sup>The figure of 128 core inner city wards is derived from all local authorities in the region and a review of their designated most deprived inner city areas for the purposes of Central government assistance and local planning. As such, they represent an approximate only count of inner city localities, with even more localities designated as inner city, but not deemed to be "extremely deprived." On this basis the news overrepresentation of Handsworth could be said to be even more striking than its remarkable news visibility already suggests.

<sup>6</sup>A wider discussion of this implicit aspect of racist discourse and its role within the press is

found in Van Dijk (1991). For a study approaching newspaper constructions of the inner city as "myth" in relation to riots, often arriving at similar conclusions, see Burgess (1985). The substantial research into media and issues of "race" is reviewed in the following (Cottle, 1992), and media presentations of riots generally (Cottle, 1993, pp. 12-34).

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of how populist TV news ambitions impact on the reporting of "race," see Cottle (1993a).

<sup>8</sup>Handsworth finds explicit reference no less than ten times across the news item.

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