
The disappearance and murder of dozens of women in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside is undoubtedly one of Canada’s largest news stories from the first decade of the 21st century. The horror and scope of the murders incited a media storm, brought hundreds of reporters to the small New Westminster courtroom where Robert Pickton was tried and finally convicted in 2007. Yet the media frenzy surrounding the trial stands in stark contrast to several decades of media and state silence as an estimated 60 women steadily disappeared from Vancouver’s densely populated Downtown Eastside neighbourhood. Even a 1999 episode of the true-crime reality TV show America’s Most Wanted focusing on Vancouver’s missing women had little effect as police and media continued to treat the disappearances as inevitable outcomes of high-risk lifestyles. In 2001, reporters from the Vancouver Sun, Kines, Bolan, and Culbert, published an 11-part series investigating the missing women and highlighting the police mishandling of the disappearances. A year later when Pickton was arrested, the story finally caught the interest of the national and international press. Through this crisis the media had a golden opportunity and, some would argue, a responsibility to investigate the social ills behind the events: crime, poverty, prostitution, drug addiction, and other forms of social deviance. Sadly, this opportunity appears to have been completely missed.

Redressing this failure is one of David Hugill’s goals in his new book Missing Women, Missing News: Covering Crisis in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Hugill argues throughout the book that national print media coverage of the Pickton trial did little to investigate these larger problems and overwhelmingly fell back on stereotypical narratives based on dominant and hegemonic ideologies. These narratives had the effect of obscuring the range of complex social and political contexts and allowed the press to entirely ignore state responsibility in creating the conditions that made these events possible in the first place. The basis for his argument is an aggregate sample of 157 articles published in the Ontario editions of Canada’s principal daily newspapers—Toronto Star, Globe and Mail, and National Post. The articles all originate from three short periods of heightened coverage of key events in the trial occurring in 2002 and 2007. It is not clear whether Hugill considers the exclusion of the interim five year period of coverage in any way, leaving the reader to wonder whether important articles were published outside of the height of media frenzy. The resulting analysis will feel familiar to those with some exposure to critiques of this kind, particularly of other studies looking at the media coverage of the Pickton murders (by Jiwani & Young, 2006, for example). In this instance, Hugill grounds his discussion in ideology as a foundation from which he attempts to confront the contradictions he finds in press coverage. He makes his argument over four concise, well-written chapters, each covering a particular core narrative ‘erasure,’ which include: 1) “Defining the Boundaries of the Crisis,” 2) “Absolving the State;” 3) “Producing the Prostitute;” and 4) “Producing Skid Row.”
Chapter one questions the explanation of police negligence as the reason why nearly 60 women could disappear from a downtown neighbourhood with barely anyone seeming to notice. While police negligence certainly played a role, for Hugill, the issue here is one of over-emphasis. He argues that by reducing police negligence to a series of individual and bureaucratic failures, and over-emphasizing police culpability, an operational limit was set on the tragedy's discourse, which minimized other potential state factors. Where the explanation of police negligence operates to limit the ways in which the state might be considered as a participant in the tragedy, Hugill tries to rectify this media oversight in his second chapter. Here he investigates three core elements of state complicity: retrenchments of the Canadian welfare state and the rise of neoliberal values; the lingering effects of colonialism; and the criminalization of prostitution, which combine to increase the burden on the poor and put street-level sex workers and Aboriginal women at greater risk. The third chapter focuses even more on the narratives of street-level sex workers and how they were positioned as self-selected victims—and importantly, as different from other women socially and morally. While the victims were often identified as mothers, sisters, and daughters as a way to transcend social stigmas, this paradigm conforms to the dominant hegemonic value system that valorizes some women and disregards others. The stereotype of the sex-worker as portrayed in the media paints a picture of a victim of abuse and private tragedy. His final argument addresses how the geographical history and narratives of the Downtown Eastside meticulously create the zone as a space reserved for deviance, violence, and criminality. Such coverage separates the neighbourhood from the rest of Vancouver while ignoring the complex factors that marginalize many of its residents.

Examinations of media ownership, praxis, distribution platforms, and the demographic reach of print media are fertile ground for media and communications scholars, yet regretfully these considerations have little place in Hugill's analysis, as he chooses to focus primarily on assessing the content of the articles through an ideological lens. The closest he gets to a consideration of the factors at play in producing this failure of coverage is a tantalizing nod in chapter two toward the reporting of the Aboriginal race of the victims and how political pressure may result in journalists feeling that they cannot report on a racial element for fear of appearing racist. Hugill is not altogether blind to the limitations of his analysis, nor is he apologetic. Yet it must be said that without them we are left with a rather narrow picture of the Canadian media coverage of these events. In particular, Hugill offers no analysis of how these dominant ideologies were produced in the coverage. Without this there can be no examination of areas from which change might take root. This omission is perhaps not surprising as Hugill is openly cynical in his conclusion about the potential for media to affect change, asking his readers to search elsewhere for solutions, and pointing to forms of citizen grassroots advocacy as having any hope for change in the neighbourhood.

Despite the potential limitations in his method and approach, Hugill's analysis is solid and written with depth and compassion. He borrows liberally from previous studies of the crisis, but his ideological critique adds an interesting dimension that complements rather than repeats previous scholarship in this area. While his analysis does not incorporate an overtly feminist perspective, it may appeal to feminist scholars, as
well as those in the fields of media, communications, and journalism. *Missing Women, Missing News* is a welcome addition to the repertoire of research that takes aim at the absent media coverage of the disappeared and murdered women.

**Reference:**

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