Introduction

“Once We Became Aware”

Lillian O’Dare was 34 years old when she vanished from the streets of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Little is publicly known about her except for a few banal details. Newspaper reports tell us that she shared a birthday with Elvis Presley, had “carefully waved” blond hair and was raised in Williams Lake, but offer little information about who she was, the life she lived or the social and political circumstances that foreground her disappearance (Hawthorn 2007). In contrast to this biographical obscurity, however, her story is freighted with an ominous historical importance. It is marked by the dubious distinction of being the inaugural episode in a pattern of predatory violence that would claim a long list of victims in this district. It was here — in the city’s oldest and poorest neighbourhood — that more than sixty local women, many of them street-level sex workers, were murdered or went missing between 1978 and 2002.

In Canada, where rates of violent crime remain comparatively low, murders and abductions can generate significant media attention and mobilize impressive deployments of the resources of law enforcement agencies. The recent disappearance of a Toronto teenager who vanished on her morning commute to school, for example, captivated local and national media for weeks and was the source of a wide-ranging investigation by police (Teotonio 2009). Events like these disrupt widely shared perceptions about what is to be expected in this country. Polling data in recent decades demonstrates that Canadians have a high degree of faith in the capacity of authorities to ensure both their own personal safety and the safety of the population in general (Gannon 2005; Statistics Canada 2005). Violent incidents, in the minds of many, constitute aberrational episodes in a continuum of otherwise orderly co-existence; rare and provocative disruptions of a prevailing peace. When they do occur, it is widely expected that they will be met with a swift and severe response by accountable and professional institutions.

The grisly series of events that unfolded in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, however, can scarcely be considered aberrational. The disappearance of so many women — sustained over such a significant period — betrays a decidedly different reality; it demonstrates that brutality and predation had become a norm in the neighbourhood. Yet Vancouver’s crisis of missing and murdered women generated very little formal interest before 1998, and few outside of the neighbourhood took notice as the crisis was spiraling out of control. O’Dare’s disappearance in September of 1978 initiated a trend that would gain momentum rapidly in the
years that followed. By the end of the 1980s, for example, an additional ten women had vanished from the neighbourhood. This pace quickened in the early 1990s as roughly a dozen more went missing by 1994. It spiked dramatically again after 1995 and more than thirty new disappearances had occurred by the end of 2001 (Missing Women Task Force 2007). But as the bulk of these crimes had unfolded, local authorities and journalists were missing in action; they made little acknowledgement of the genuine crisis that was taking place. At best, they had failed to notice. At worst, they had failed to care.

So what, then, was different about what happened in Vancouver? Why did the disappearance of a single teenager in Toronto — a tragic but definitively isolated incident — marshal vigorous police and media campaigns while a far more expansive series of tragedies in Vancouver was for a long time met with state inaction and media silence? The answers to these questions are complex and can only begin to be elucidated when we consider how an intersecting series of social and political practices operate to valorize certain lives while simultaneously disregarding others. What’s clear is that the social and geographical location of the women that were taken from the Downtown Eastside operated to disqualify them from the protective assurance of authorities. As residents of a stigmatized inner city neighbourhood, sex workers in the bottoms rungs of Vancouver’s street-level sex trade, drug users or poverty-stricken members of an increasingly stratified society and as racialized women, they were part of a social segment that was either rendered invisible to, or cast aside from, the core constituencies that are served by our collective institutions. As one politician asked: “do you think if 65 women went missing from Kerrisdale [an affluent Vancouver neighbourhood], we’d have ignored it so long?” (Wood 2004)

Today a rich collection of accounts from friends and allies of the missing and murdered women demonstrate that a prevailing spirit of dismissal defined police approaches to the cases throughout the 1990s. Carrie Kerr, whose sister Helen Hallmark disappeared in this period, recalls that police refused to open a missing persons file. “They told me ‘No, go down to the needle exchange and leave her a message there,’” she recalls. Angela Jardine, who asked Vancouver police to follow up on her daughter’s disappearance in late 1998, was told not to worry and that her daughter would likely turn up. Police delayed producing a missing persons poster for two months, assuming her disappearance was innocuous (Levitz 2007). Sandra Gagnon, who reported her sister missing in 1997, concedes that she encountered genuinely concerned police officers that were willing to pursue an investigation but was frustrated by their inability to connect individual disappearances to a larger pattern. “They never took the threat seriously… I can guarantee you that if it wasn’t the Downtown Eastside, and they weren’t hookers, something would have been done in an instant,” she says (Amnesty International 2004). Police sustained the view that as “transient” sex workers and drug users, most of the missing had not actually disappeared; in most cases, they maintained that the women would soon show up again. They were, of course, devastatingly wrong.
The severity and scope of these events are now well known but their current prominence is deceptive. A recent deluge of bureaucratic, journalistic and political interest in the case contrasts sharply with the prevailing culture of disinterest that had permeated police departments, newsrooms and legislative chambers while women were disappearing with a marked frequency for two decades. In contrast to authorities, however, residents of the Downtown Eastside had long been aware that something horrific was unfolding in their midst. Since 1991 local activists have been organizing an annual Valentine's Day march as a public opportunity to honour the victims of violence and demand justice for the disappeared. But in spite of their efforts, few outside the neighbourhood's rugged twenty-one blocks — then as now Canada's “poorest postal code” — bothered to take much notice before a few local journalists began to do some probing.

The first media coverage of the crisis began to trickle out in the summer of 1998. Vancouver Sun reporter Lindsay Kines was the first mainstream journalist to catch wind of it. That July, he reported that police had begun to look for connections between ten disappearances of Downtown Eastside women that had been reported since 1996. Anne Drennan, a police liaison officer, assured readers that these files (and an additional six dating back to the late 1980s) were being given “the highest of priorities” (Kines 1998a). Kines' stories generated some initial public pressure. By September, he was reporting that the local force had moved to establish a “working group” to review cases dating back to 1971. As the public profile of the disappearances grew, speculation that they might be the work of a serial killer soon became widespread, but police were careful to play that down (Kines 1998b). By March of the next year, however, police had offered little indication that they were making any headway on the files and public concern had begun to morph into a growing “clamour” (Stall 1999b). Mounting public outrage crystallized in a series of well-attended demonstrations that spring, and local politicians were quickly losing the luxury of indifference. In an effort to demonstrate that they were taking the situation seriously, police officials soon assigned new officers to the investigation (Kines and Culbert 1999). But this alone was insufficient to appease the concerned. Frustrations were exacerbated after police issued two $100,000 rewards for information related to a series of home and garage invasions and allies of the missing women began to ask tough questions about official priorities. As the scale of the disappearances became more broadly known and anxieties about an un-apprehended serial killer built toward a crescendo, the case began to attract outside attention. In the wake of a visit from the television crime program America's Most Wanted — in town to do a segment on the disappearances — municipal officials finally acquiesced; in a last-minute effort to mitigate embarrassment, authorities announced that another $100,000 reward would be available to anyone who could provide information leading to an arrest related to the missing women. The initiative, funded and supported by municipal authorities, marked a stark reversal of Mayor Phillip Owen's initial position on the matter. Weeks earlier he had
argued that it would be “inappropriate” to use public funds to provide a “location service” for prostitutes (Phillips 1999). When the America’s Most Wanted segment aired, host John Walsh praised police efforts and spoke approvingly of the reward (Pitman 2002). For many of those who had demanded action, the reward marked an overdue acknowledgement that the crisis was real. The day it was announced, police confirmed the severity of the situation; Drennan told reporters: “Once we became aware ... that there was clearly something wrong here, something that we should be concerned about, we started to kick in additional resources” (Cameron 2007). But a well-documented record contradicts police claims. It is now clear that no such vigorous pursuit of answers had transpired as soon as police became aware that women were disappearing. In contrast, police and municipal authorities had displayed a chronic lack of interest as the case had spiraled catastrophically out of control.

Little hard evidence had been gathered by the fall of 2000 and the police department announced that they would scale back the review team that had been established. But even as police attention ebbed, the number of disappeared continued to mount: seventeen women went missing between 1999 and 2001. Concerned with the lack of progress, Kines and other Sun reporters launched a four-month investigation of the cases in 2001 and unveiled a damning series of revelations. They determined, among other things, that the official police figure of twenty-seven missing women was woefully inadequate and that at least forty-five cases should have been part of the investigation. They also concluded that while police had taken pains to maintain the appearance of an “aggressive, concerned investigation,” their work had been devastatingly tainted by petty in-fighting, the absence of coherent leadership and a distinct lack of resources (Vancouver Sun 2002). It was now clear that, in spite of their protestations to the contrary, police could hardly claim to have made the investigation a real priority. Once again confronted with a spiraling public relations disaster — and an ever-expanding roster of missing women — Vancouver police were forced to take new action. Weeks later, they joined forces with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to form the inter-jurisdictional Missing Women Joint Task Force.

The new unit raided a farm in suburban Port Coquitlam one year later. It soon became clear that the search was related to the missing women and the investigation quickly took on a robust media profile. Local and national media were captivated by speculation that Robert Pickton — one of the farm’s owners who had been detained on a series of weapons charges — was being considered as a person of interest in the case. Pickton was well known in the area; he and his brother David operated a registered charity organization called Piggy Palace Good Times Society that was known for the large-scale parties and events it held on the farm. In the weeks that followed, journalistic digging and information that trickled out from investigators suggested that these events were often boisterous affairs that frequently included sex workers from the Downtown Eastside, often lured to the
property with the promise of money and drugs. As early details became available, journalists anticipated that the dramatic prosecution of a serial killer would soon unfold and the story quickly soared to the top of news agendas.

Two weeks later, police confirmed media speculation and Pickton was charged with murdering two of the missing women. Within a year, ten additional murder charges were added to the indictment against him. By 2005, that number would climb to twenty-seven. If convicted, Pickton would become Canada’s most prolific serial killer. Not surprisingly, media interest matched the magnitude of the accusations and the story generated prominent coverage for months.

That same interest would return again with a pronounced vigour in January 2007 when the trial phase of the proceedings against Pickton opened in New Westminster, British Columbia. The original indictment had been split in two during the voir-dire hearings and the Crown was instructed to proceed initially with six charges of first-degree murder. The lessened ambitions of the court did not dissuade the media, however, and a swarm of nearly four hundred media workers descended on the suburban courtroom to cover the story (Cameron 2007). It was a short-lived assignment for most; they were there to provide an initial context and then move on, not to return again until a verdict had been reached. For the Canadian print media, however, the trial seemed to merit a more thorough examination. Correspondents were enlisted to follow the minutia of trial developments but also to put the story in a larger socio-political context. In fact, this work had already begun for many newspapers. Since the initial raid of the Pickton farm nearly five years earlier, they had run stories that attempted to look beyond the particular modus operandi of the accused and examine what else could help to explain how dozens of women could be made to disappear from a densely populated urban neighbourhood. Many reporters looked to the Downtown Eastside for answers. Lurid portrayals suggested that the neighbourhood’s “mean streets” and the social status of people on society’s “fringes” offered part of the answer. Police negligence and bureaucratic inefficiency seemed to offer another. These early reports demonstrated that the case was bigger than being about a deranged killer; it was also about a criminal underworld, a dangerous part of town, rapacious addictions, damaged and vulnerable individuals and indifferent or incompetent authorities. Local and national audiences would be exposed to an expansive consideration of these dimensions by the time the case had concluded.

This book considers how the national print media told the story of Vancouver’s missing and murdered women through their coverage of the proceedings against Robert Pickton. I want to stress, at the outset, that this coverage was neither monolithic nor uncomplicated. It is important to acknowledge that it was laudably expansive in a number of ways. Members of the press were instrumental, for example, in demonstrating that a simple consideration of the serial killer himself was entirely inadequate to explain what had happened in the Downtown Eastside. In sum, they provided a coherent framework for understanding the tragedy, a
compelling series of dominant narratives through which audiences might make sense of what happened in Vancouver. But these prevailing explanations, thorough as they may be, provoke a number of questions. Is a consideration of irresponsible policing, for example, sufficient to explain the state’s complicity in the crisis? Do sympathetic portrayals of the victims disrupt the relentless stigmatization and demonization of street-involved women? Are audiences given enough information about the Downtown Eastside to adequately assess why social suffering and violence seem to have become so concentrated in this district?

This book is primarily an attempt to answer these questions. In what follows, I demonstrate that the dominant themes that emerge from the coverage provide a series of explanations that insufficiently examine the range of instruments and assumptions that operated to imperil the women that disappeared from the Downtown Eastside. I argue that the coverage effectively reduces the case to a series of contingencies — albeit an expansive list of them — that camouflage the functioning of structural and cultural systems of domination. That is, they offer a series of coherent explanations that hold particular individuals and practices accountable but largely omit, conceal or erase altogether the broader socio-political context that rendered those practices possible.

The Canadian Mediascape

My observations are based on case-related materials extracted from the Ontario editions of three of Canada’s principal English-language daily newspapers, the *Toronto Star*, the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*. They are drawn from three periods of heightened interest in the case: the first begins with the raid on the Pickton farm and ends shortly after he was charged with the initial counts of first-degree murder (February 8–27, 2002); the second encompasses the opening week of the trial and the days that immediately preceded it (January 20–27, 2007); and the third encompasses the conclusion of the trial and the sentencing of the convicted (December 1–12, 2007). A group of 157 articles and a large number of corresponding images and photographs constitute these case-related materials. I treat these articles as an aggregate product in an effort to give a broad impression of how the story was told by the national print media. But I do this cautiously and with full knowledge that the messages they contain are interpreted by audiences in a wide variety of ways. News discourses are instruments of knowledge production, to be sure, but that knowledge is processed and reconstituted in ways at least as diverse as the audiences that absorb it.

I examine these particular newspapers for a number of reasons. First, all three are non-Vancouver based and their correspondents could not assume that audiences would be acquainted with the case. The crisis had been extensively considered for years in local newspapers but these outside sources were all relative newcomers when the story acquired a national profile in 2002. Each needed to establish the
broader context of the case for its audience. This necessity determined a certain consistency between the news rhythms of each source that allowed me to compare them coherently. I also focus on these newspapers because each reaches (and presumably influences) a broad readership. They are the three most circulated English-language dailies in the country, as table 0.1 demonstrates. The National Post and the Globe and Mail are the country’s only national dailies while the Toronto Star is produced and distributed in the country’s most densely populated region. Finally, other dailies tend to rely on wire services and press agencies for much of what they publish while these papers produce the majority of their content internally; they serve a generative rather than reproductive function within their parent corporations and news narratives produced by these papers often re-circulate through other outlets. This is particularly notable given the sprawling range of media outlets held by each source’s ownership group. Bell Globemedia (owner of the Globe and Mail), CanWest Global (owner of the National Post) and the Torstar Corporation (owner of the Toronto Star), collectively produce nearly half of the newspapers circulated each day in this country, as table 0.2 demonstrates.

Recent research demonstrates that Canadians now rely on a broad diversity of sources for information about current affairs so it is necessary to explain why this study focuses exclusively on newspaper narratives (Hermida 2008). This is particularly important since the former leaders of news dissemination, the nightly network television news and the daily newspaper, have seen their influence wane in recent years as a wide proliferation of web-based and specialty channel sources have eroded their dominance. Despite these trends, however, both have retained a significant stake in mass media markets. Television remains by far the most relied upon source with more than 65 percent of poll respondents reporting that they consult it regularly (Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications [hereafter ssctc] 2006). Daily newspapers continue to lag significantly behind their televisual counterparts but they do remain the second most consumed medium with slightly less than 20 percent of respondents reporting regular consultation.

Table 0.1 English-Language Canadian Newspapers, by Circulation (2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Average Daily Circulation</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Daily Newspaper Circulation (Canada)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toronto Star</td>
<td>465,803</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Globe and Mail</td>
<td>337,387</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Post</td>
<td>206,003</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto Sun</td>
<td>194,042</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver Sun</td>
<td>171,782</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,009,193 (top three)</td>
<td>21.58 (top three)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Canadian Newspaper Association 2008.
They are most often read by Canadians aged 45–64, a powerful and influential demographic. Moreover, newspapers in general, and these three in particular, remain key sources of information for both business and political elites. There is also significant evidence that newspapers continue to propel the agendas of other media, particularly television news (Soderlund and Hildebrandt 2005). This is of particular note in a case like this one, where particular political practices are held up to scrutiny. Further, newspapers have retained a significant edge on radio and magazine sources in all demographics and an edge on Internet sources in most (ssctc 2006). Yet in spite of these successes, newspapers no longer enjoy the consumer loyalty that once seemed inevitable. Research that considers the political importance of newspaper messages must account for this decline. It cannot simply be assumed that print narratives are representative of media opinion generally; they must be understood as one group of articulations in an ever-expanding field.

On the surface, the diversification of media sources would seem to signal a correlative diversification of media opinion. But while technological advance has afforded alternative news sources an unprecedented capacity to reach audiences, recent trends in media ownership suggest that the diversity of news narratives is contracting. The vast majority of widely consulted media outlets are now owned by a small number of corporate conglomerates. This trend has been particularly pronounced in the Canadian newspaper industry and in some urban centres it has resulted in a near or total monopoly of newspaper ownership (ssctc 2006). CanWest, for example, has achieved total saturation in Regina, Saskatoon and Vancouver, where the corporation controls all of the city’s dailies and total linguistic saturation in Montreal where they control all of the English-language dailies (Soderlund and Hildebrandt 2005).

Yet concentrated media ownership is not exclusively a print phenomenon and most of the major newspaper-holding conglomerates own other media outlets too.

**Table 0.2 Average Daily Circulation, by Ownership Group (2007)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Average Daily Circulation</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Daily Newspaper Circulation (Canada)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CanWest (National Post)</td>
<td>1,163,886</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torstar Corporation (Toronto Star)</td>
<td>654,164</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bell GlobeMedia (Globe and Mail)</td>
<td>337,387</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,155,437</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Canadian Newspaper Association 2008.
Table 0.3 Urban Market Share, by Ownership Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Market</th>
<th>Ownership Group</th>
<th>Market Share of Television Newscasts (%)</th>
<th>Market Share of Daily Newspapers (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver</td>
<td>CanWest</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmonton</td>
<td>CanWest</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebec City</td>
<td>Quebecor</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>56.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>Bell GlobeMedia</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CanWest</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina</td>
<td>CanWest</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montreal (English)</td>
<td>CanWest</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montreal (French)</td>
<td>Quebecor</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>60.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Soderlund and Hildebrandt 2005.

CanWest’s sprawling corporate empire marks an extreme but not unique example of this trend. In addition to a wide diversity of local and national newspapers, the corporation now controls a major national television broadcaster with dozens of local broadcast affiliates, a host of specialty cable channels, a series of high profile, web-based news sources, radio stations, magazines and other key communications assets. Though less pronounced, this trend is repeated with other media conglomerates, including Bell GlobeMedia and Torstar. These few conglomerates wield a decisive influence in local and national mediascapes and have an unrivalled capacity to define both how the news is presented and what counts as news at all.

There are few considerations of these questions of ownership, consolidation and convergence in what follows. My analysis is focused on the content of media messages and pays scarce attention to the corporate environment in which they are incubated and shaped. In spite of this absence, I remain convinced that the corporate structure of media production is central to a full consideration of the content of media messages.

Ideology as the Reproduction of Commonsense

The assertion that the coverage privileges a series of dominant narratives that mislead or deceive, as I suggest above, must be considered in some detail. It is not sufficient to suggest — without qualification — that these mystifications simply appear in news narratives. In fact, the contention that deception occurs at all begs a number of important questions. Are the press implicated in a grand conspiracy to conceal the true nature of this crisis? Are individual journalists beholden to a certain constellation of power and therefore compelled to distort? Do structural limits or editorial expectations somehow restrict a full telling of the story of the
missing and murdered women? My own view is that a strictly conspiratorial analysis of the mass media — one that suggests individual journalists knowingly and actively deceive — is simply untenable. Nevertheless, as the analysis that follows will demonstrate, there are jarring disconnections between the explanations of the crisis that are privileged by the coverage and a well-established historical record which seems to contradict them. But if journalists are not in the business of deliberate manipulation, how can we account for these disparities?

In what follows, I adopt a particular conception of ideology as a way to approach this question. But this approach is not without its dangers: the terrain of ideology is fraught with contestation. The term has not only been frequently rejected by its opponents as an overly-reductionist way to understand complex social relations, but there is also no coherent agreement amongst its adherents about what constitutes an ideology. Ideology has also been employed divergently by a wide range of intellectual traditions; as Terry Eagleton (1991: 1) points out, the term itself is “woven of a whole tissue of different conceptual strands.” Thus at the outset — and in the interest of theoretical precision — it is important to outline precisely what is meant when I invoke the term ideology in this volume.

I theorize ideology not as a static or abstract set of propositions but as a series of representational and discursive practices that are embedded in commonsense or taken-for-granted assumptions about what our society is and how it works (Hall 1981). This book considers how press reports operate to reproduce such assumptions by establishing particular “frameworks” through which audiences are given the opportunity to make sense of the crisis of missing and murdered women. Ideology, in this sense, is not simply an aggregation of the political preferences or beliefs of individuals but a broad analytical space — a “field of power,” to borrow a phrase from Pierre Bourdieu — in which members of a society tend to formulate understandings of the world that they inhabit (Hackett and Carroll 2006). I share the view that our individual positions of identification are frequently constructed within the boundaries of such fields. Put differently, my inquiry begins from the premise that “ideologies are not really produced by individual consciousness but rather individuals formulate their beliefs… within positions already fixed by ideology” (Larrain 1996: 49). I am, of course, cognizant of Michel Foucault’s (1980) warning about the inadequacy of theoretical work that seeks to explain domination through an all-determining “infrastructure,” a gesture which risks collapsing the wide proliferation of power relations into a single set of discrete knowable forms. Connectedly, I share Jean-Francois Lyotard’s (1984) suspicions about the danger of relying on a single coherent narrative to explain the diversity of social phenomena that are at play in a given milieu. Nevertheless, I remain committed to the view that a theory of ideology offers an effective way to confront the pronounced contradictions inherent in press representations of the crisis. I accept the contention that, in some sense, all discourses are ideological in that all discourses are both partial and subjective. Nevertheless, my concern here is with those discourses that — by
virtue of this partiality — provide definitions that support and sustain an established constellation of power or particular modes of domination. I insist on the term ideology because it is precisely this relationship that I want to elucidate in this book.

In the analysis that follows, I will argue that a prevailing ideological logic was not only central to the production of the very possibility of the crisis but also at the core of the dominant news discourse mobilized to explain it. I agree with Jennifer England (2004: 296), who argues that “although the boundary between discourse and everyday life is fluid, complex, and often disrupted, it is important to trace these connections, particularly when discrimination and oppression are at work.” Thus at the core of my analysis is a prevailing interest in unmasking the material dispossession that particular discursive constructions conceal. I pursue these erasures and obfuscations “without guarantees” and make no claim to scientific certainty (Hall 1996).

Ideology and News Discourses

Mass media institutions have access to striking concentrations of symbolic power. As such, they exist in a decisively ideological sphere; they are key sites where social meanings are produced and distributed (Hall 1981). Thus not surprisingly, communication researchers have long been interested in the relationship between mass media messages and social and political power. Stuart Hall et al. (1978: 65), in their seminal consideration of a perceived mugging outbreak in the United Kingdom, consider why news narratives have tended to “reproduce and sustain… definitions of… situation[s] which favour the powerful.” Thirty years later, the premise of their inquiry is hardly controversial; a wide diversity of scholarship has been dedicated to answering precisely this question and a number of compelling schools of thought have been mobilized and developed to do so.

In light of now well-established suspicions about the effects of media practices, it is easy to forget that some media scholars once considered (and, in some cases, continue to consider) mass media institutions as the exemplars of an engaged democratic citizenship. Mass media scholarship was once dominated by a series of liberal-pluralist assumptions that presented the institution of journalism as a “watchdog against the abuse of power, a righter of wrongs, a humbler of hubris and arrogance, a promoter of positive social change, [and] an agent to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable” (Hackett and Carroll 2006: 21). In the first half of the twentieth century, celebrated research saw the potential of mass media communication as inherently democratic. Social behaviorists like George Mead (1948: 326) argued that the proliferation of instruments of mass communication would provide a basis for social unity by providing individuals with the means to “identify themselves with each other.” These approving assessments of the press were often sustained and reproduced by what media institutions said (and continue
to say) about themselves. David Taras (1990), for example, suggests that the “mirror model” — which holds that mass media news discourses mirror reality and reflect issues and events as they truly are — is “widely accepted” among individuals working within news-generating organizations. Geneva Overholser and Kathleen Jamieson (2005) suggest that notions of media “mirroring” are still common among news institutions and animate professional pretensions of objectivity. Yet others have challenged this paradigm, suggesting that news discourses do not simply reflect reality but act as active agents of representation that hold up a “distorted mirror” which alters fundamentally the content it reflects (Taras 1990).

More prominently, a wide diversity of scholars have argued that the relationship between media outputs and political power hinges crucially on questions of ownership. Researchers have argued that the status of news-generating organizations as privately-owned corporations has engendered a near-seamless relationship between media messages and the interests of capital. Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1988) famously proposed that a “propaganda model” could be used to evaluate the extent of this relationship. They claimed that media messages must be evaluated according to the five “filters” through which they must pass before being deemed fit for publication or broadcast. In this schema, the outputs of corporate media institutions will tend to reflect the interests of its owners, advertisers and those who fund its activities, as well as the opinions of those who are deemed appropriate sources and able to provide information quickly (well-financed and organized government and private institutions, including the military, for example). Media messages, they contend, are also tempered by the need to avoid flak from centres of power and by the prevailing ideologies of a society’s most powerful interests (for Chomsky and Herman this included the “national religion of anti-communism”). Consistently, Michael Parenti (1993: 51) maintains that corporate ownership has had a decisive impact on media outputs. He argues that because corporate power permeates the “entire social fabric” of our societies, “opinions that support existing arrangements of economic and political power are more easily treated as facts.” Prevailing notions of objectivity, therefore, necessarily reflect these particular biases and much of “what is reported as ‘news’ is little more than the uncritical transmission of official opinions.”

Yet others have argued that while questions of ownership are instructive, a thorough analysis of the relationship between media messages and established power must consider the relative autonomy of individual journalists. Hall et al. (1978) stress that news messages are themselves a social product and insist that understanding their relationship to power requires understanding the “professional ideology” in which they are incubated and deployed. To this end, they examine the professional practices that shape news discourses, pointing to a series of structural necessities that influence news production to explain why media institutions tend to provide an “over-accessing” to people and institutions in positions of power. But perhaps more centrally for our present purposes, they also argue that media
messages are articulated within “distinct ideological limits” and thus necessarily provide “frameworks” for evaluating issues that tend to tip in favour of established authority. Similarly, Ericson et al.’s (1991: 3–4) sprawling survey of media practices found that news discourses serve an inherently conservative function in that they perpetually “represent order” by installing particular views of “morality, procedural form, and social hierarchy” that promote particular “versions and visions” of social control. Nevertheless, they argue that the contention that news reproduces ideologies that are in “favour of the powerful” is too simplistic. They suggest that because the effects of media messages “vary substantially,” conclusions about their particular impacts are often too presumptive (Ericson et al. 1991: 19). Todd Gitlin (2001: 141) echoes this sentiment. He warns against the view that “media imprints are uniformly potent,” a dangerous assumption, in his estimation, which can quickly lead the critic to “collapse the whole of life into a shadow projected by the garish light of the media, a dumb show played out on the wall’s of Plato’s cave.” Yet others still, especially Bourdieu (1993), stress the importance of recognizing that power is dispersed in particular and often autonomous “fields” that are situated in a broader constellation of political possibility. Hackett and Carroll (2006: 48) summarize this approach’s applicability to the mass media, suggesting that it “invites us to consider journalism and mass media as relatively autonomous fields within a broader field of power, which is itself structured in dominance.”

My own theoretical approach is informed by a number of these positions. First, while I want to distance myself from a conspiratorial view of the media, I also want to stress that the newspapers I examine are owned by corporate conglomerates with an undeniable set of interests. Nevertheless, I hold that many of the problematic messages that the coverage reproduces have more to do with the “professional ideology” of news production than with the structure of their ownership (Hall et al. 1978). Ultimately, though, I agree with Hackett and Carroll (2006: 33) that “the media are powerful in so far as they comprise a concentration of society’s symbolic power.” Following Bourdieu, I think it is useful to consider particular media institutions as somewhat autonomous but stress that the opinions they produce are primarily shaped by the prevailing frameworks which are themselves the products of a broader “field” of dominant power.

Ideology and the Case of the Missing and Murdered Women

My analysis is primarily concerned with a consideration of the newspaper coverage’s concealment of certain dimensions of the case of the missing and murdered women, as I note above. Slavoj Zizek (1994: 4) argues that the task of the “critique of ideology is to discern the hidden necessity in what appears to be mere contingency.” In many ways, the present project is engaged in such a critique. In the chapters that follow I demonstrate how particular explanations of the crisis have operated to conceal, minimize or deny the “hidden necessity” inherent in the functioning
of particular systems of domination, even if such explanations do not reduce the crisis to mere contingency.

My observations are indebted to a number of other studies that have considered media representation of the missing and murdered women and have attempted to reveal a certain “hidden logic” of domination. Yasmin Jiwani and Mary-Lynn Young’s (2006: 902) survey of case-related articles that appeared in the *Vancouver Sun* between 2001 and 2006, for example, argues that a reproduction of historically entrenched (and contemporarily prevailing) stereotypes about street-involved women, Aboriginality and more generally the sex trade has had the effect of “demarcat[ing] the boundaries of respectability and degeneracy” and reproducing particular kinds of marginality. Their analysis observes that journalists employed a “moral and racialized economy of representations” to describe the disappeared women. They observe that

within this economy, racialized status, such as Aboriginality, interlocks with prostitution to position these women in the lower echelon of a moral order… [and] the stereotypical attributes ascribed to both of these positions feed into and reproduce common-sense notions of itinerant and irresponsible behavior, which is then seen as naturally inviting victimization. (Jiwani and Young2006: 902)

Dara Culhane’s (2003: 595) considerations of the crisis suggest that a similar journalistic logic has operated to conceal particular women (primarily Aboriginal women) behind a “regime of disappearance” — a pattern of knowledge production that “selectively marginalizes and/or erases categories of people through strategies of representation that include silences, blind spots, and displacements that have both material and symbolic effects.” England (2004: 300) echoes these sentiments and suggests that representations of the missing women have rendered them simultaneously invisible (in Culhane’s sense) and hyper-visible; she suggests that they are at once “inside and outside the gaze of the state.” My own project has much in common with these other studies and I draw on them repeatedly in the analysis that follows. Perhaps the central theoretical departure of my own study, however, is an insistence on the use of the term *ideology* to describe the ways in which these *logics* of domination function.

Reconsidering Dominant Explanations

This book attempts to supplement and counter the partial explanations that emerge from the coverage in four core arguments. Each one highlights a particular erasure or mystification.

The first demonstrates that the coverage’s focus on police negligence provides a compelling way to understand how more than sixty women could disappear. I argue that considerations of incompetent or unconcerned policing offer a compel-
ling way to understand the lack of an official response as the list of missing women continued to swell. But by overemphasizing this explanation, I contend, the state’s role in the tragedy is limited to a series of personal or bureaucratic failures and broader considerations of state culpability are effectively minimized.

The second argument demonstrates how the state itself was directly complicit in the tragedy in at least three ways. I argue that the retrenchment of state systems of social solidarity, the ongoing effects of colonialism, and the criminal regulation of prostitution, were (and continue to be) central to the marginalization and endangerment of certain women. While these particular modes of subordination are considered in the press coverage, they are done so in ways that minimize their foundational complicity in the crisis.

The third argument demonstrates how this minimization is accomplished through narratives that purport to explain the lives and motivations of street-involved women. I consider how certain portrayals establish street-level sex workers as morally and socially distinct from other women. I contend that descriptions that establish women as damaged and deranged operate to make their presence in the dangerous world of the inner city understandable, an important discursive move that helps to explain and rationalize their victimization.

The final argument demonstrates how the Downtown Eastside itself is produced as a space of chaos and criminality. I show how such portrayals present the area as a dangerous and detestable zone, a marginal space where violence and criminality are to be expected. Here, I challenge the suggestion that the neighbourhood’s problems can be explained by the presence of a criminal element. I counter such contentions by demonstrating how particular economic and political patterns have operated to isolate the Downtown Eastside from other city spaces and to concentrate particular kinds of social phenomena there.

The common thread that courses through each of these arguments is an attempt to reveal that the explanations provided by the coverage are inadequate, misguided or incomplete. This book attempts to supplement these definitions by expanding the field of who and what might be considered complicit in the production of the intersectional forms of marginalization and dispossession that give this tragedy its particular form.