

THE NEED TO CHECK FACTS : the coverage of the Hillsborough disaster

The Hillsborough Papers: The Sun, “The Truth” And Other Newspaper Coverage

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The Sun, 19 April 1989 (image via Hillsborough Independent Panel archive)

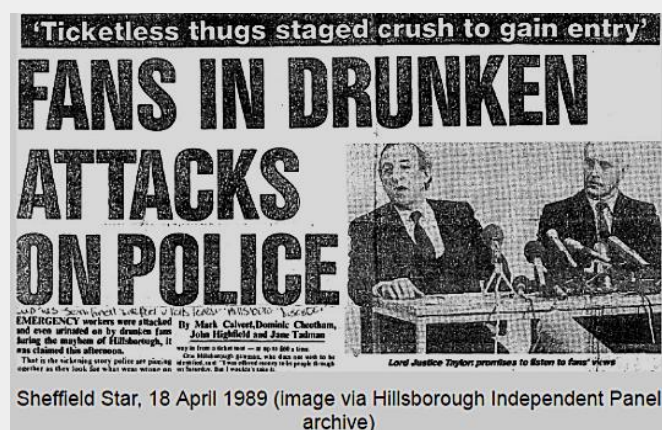
The Sun, 19 April 1989 (image via Hillsborough Independent Panel archive)

The Sun's reporting on Hillsborough, and its infamous headline of “The Truth” published four days after the tragedy, is well-known. Its long-standing refusal to apologise for the false claims about the actions of some Liverpool fans during the disaster has led to a 23-year boycott of the paper in most of Merseyside.

But Kelvin MacKenzie's Sun wasn't the only newspaper to print the allegations. And this week's release of documents by the Hillsborough Independent Panel gives us an opportunity to easily scrutinise how others reported them, and how those claims came to be in the public domain in the first place.

The allegations about drunken supporters attacking the police first surfaced in copy filed by Whites, a Sheffield news agency, on Tuesday 18 April. Among a series of un-named police officers, the copy quotes Paul Middup of the South Yorkshire Police Federation and, in a later version, local Conservative MP Irvine Patnick.

A version of the story was the front page lead of that evening's *Sheffield Star*:



Sheffield Star, 18 April 1989 (image via Hillsborough Independent Panel archive)

It read: “It is becoming dear that as some fans turned lifesavers, a group of yobs in the crowd ignored fellow supporters and turned on emergency workers,” then went on to include many of the same quotes from the Whites story, including those from Paul Middup. Patnick's intervention came too late for that day's evening paper, but his name was everywhere the following day.

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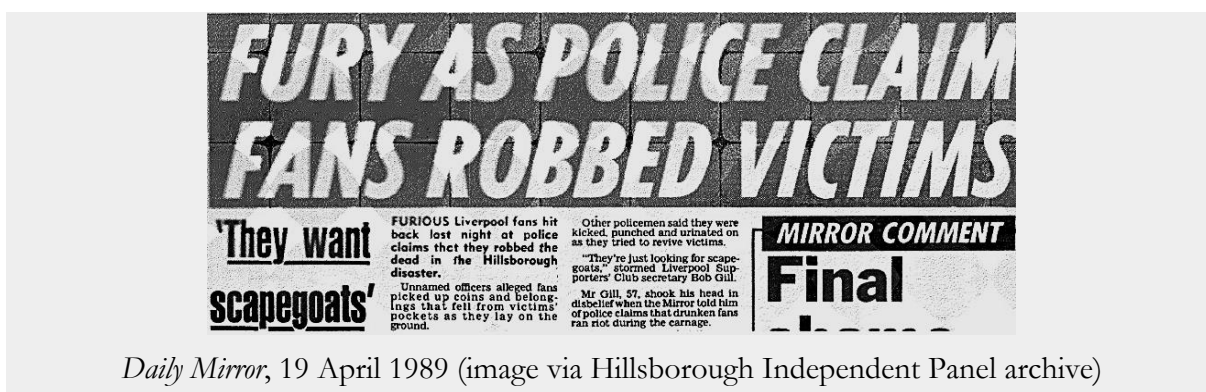
It was on the Wednesday that the story ‘went national’. But it wasn’t just *The Sun* that put the claims on its front page. Under the headline “Police Accuse Drunken Fans”, the *Daily Express* made Patnick’s comments from the later version of the Whites story the main focus of its lead article. Those comments also appeared at the end of *The Sun*’s “The Truth” piece. But it was another lurid claim being put about by Patnick that featured most prominently in *The Sun*, and caused most outrage.

The Sun claimed that Liverpool fans had “jeered” and made sexual taunts as police attended to the body of a woman killed in the crush. Another document released by the panel reveals that the source of this was almost certainly Patnick.

In a letter he sent on the Thursday to the Chief Constable of West Midlands Police, who would be gathering evidence for the later inquests, Patnick included his “rough notes” of his recollections of the day of the disaster which he had written on the Wednesday. He recounted meeting several police officers on the night of the tragedy, and how he was told the story of the dead woman, as well as claims about attacks on the police. It was these claims which he repeated extensively, despite them being little more than second-hand hearsay.

The same allegations regarding the dead woman, with Patnick’s name attached more prominently, appeared in the same day’s *Sheffield Star*. It was under the headline “Fans ‘made sex jibes at body’”. The *Sheffield Star*’s article wasn’t quite as unequivocal and graphic as *The Sun*’s, and indeed it included a brief quote at the end from Liverpool City Council leader Keva Coombes which looks remarkably apt in hindsight: “It is a horrible and evil story. It is a half-baked attempt to form the basis of a future cover-up.” Well, indeed.

Other newspapers, while mentioning the claims, significantly played them down. *The Daily Mail* gave them a few paragraphs at the bottom of an article about another aspect of the disaster. *The Daily Mirror* took a different angle, stating that there was a “furious” reaction in Liverpool to the claims, and quoting the Secretary of the Supporters’ Club. If Kelvin MacKenzie’s eventual apology this week is anything to go by, perhaps he finally wishes he’d done the same.



Daily Mirror, 19 April 1989 (image via Hillsborough Independent Panel archive)

Looking back on the whole sorry saga, I’d argue the hatred aimed at *The Sun* has as much to do with its presentation of the false allegations and its general attitude in the years afterwards, rather than its publication of the stories as such. Other papers printed the same or similar articles, even on the front page, but only *The Sun* insisted that it was “The Truth”.

Even the *Sheffield Star*, which carried the claims on two separate days, did so amid a huge amount of Hillsborough coverage which was largely very sympathetic to the victims. But despite the generally strong sources of the Police Federation and a local MP, it and other papers should have done far more to, in particular, challenge Patnick’s account of something he had only heard about second hand, before reprinting it.