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## **How media content assists and neglects child safety**

*By Michael J. Breen*

Child sexual abuse is a significant worldwide problem. Although there is relatively little data about such abuse from the developing world, the developed world has been somewhat exposed to the nature and extent of the problem thanks largely to the reporting of child sexual abuse cases in the mainstream media. Such abuse has always existed, but it is only in the last 20 years that it has been identified and reported as such.

In the Irish context, a national prevalence study of sexual abuse of both adults and children was undertaken recently. Commissioned by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre and carried out by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, the research report, entitled "Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland" (SAVI) contained startling results.

The researchers interviewed more than 3,000 men and women by telephone in an effort to establish lifetime experience of sexual abuse. The findings were stark. Forty-two percent of women and twenty-eight percent of men report sexual abuse as having occurred at some stage in their lives. Twenty percent of women report contact sexual abuse in childhood with almost six percent of all women interviewed reporting rape in childhood. Sixteen percent of men report contact sexual abuse in childhood with almost three percent of all men interviewed reporting rape in childhood.

One recommendation that followed from the report was that the media should be utilized to educate the public about the nature and extent of the problem.

The media carry out a surveillance function for the public. The central task confronting the media is to engage the attention of the public and then to activate that public without overwhelming it with information by distinguishing effectively between that which is important and that which is not.

Writing in *Media Culture & Society* in 2000, J. Kitzinger pointed out that the press use "media templates" routinely in reporting to emphasize only one clear perspective. These serve as rhetorical shorthand/shortcuts and help audiences and producers to contextualize stories. There are three effects of such template usage: they shape narratives around specific issues, guide public opinion and discussion, and set the frame of reference for the future.

The analysis of such templates allows researchers to develop an understanding of how reality is framed, as well as pointing up the disparity between media representation and social reality. Some templates are readily recognizable: the "Wall Street crash" for stock-market issues, "Vietnam" as a synonym for military failure, and "Watergate" for political

scandal. Such templates also occur in media reports of child sexual abuse and abusers. "Templatic" reporting, however, rarely offers insight or analysis into the original event.

### **What and how the media report**

The aim of this study is to examine the nature of media reporting on the issue of child sexual abuse, and to engage in a critical evaluation of that reportage from the perspective of child safety in society. To do this, the Lexis-Nexis libraries of the Irish Times, the New York Times, the Times of London and the Mirror, a U.K tabloid, were used.

Five weeks were randomly sampled from each of 10 years, yielding 50 weeks of stories in total. A complex search term (all variants of sexual abuse/ assault, molestation, gross indecency, incest, rape, pedophilia/ pedophilia and buggery) yielded the initial number of stories. All stories not related to sexual abuse in the country of origin were removed from the sample. This resulted in the final number of 1,789 stories for analysis, 571 in the Irish Times, 512 in the Mirror, 317 in the Times of London and 389 in the New York Times.

The comparison of the media coverage with prevalence statistics and national crime statistics indicate that certain types of crime are over-reported. This is especially true of rape which is reported as one of the most common types of sexual crime perpetrated on children, but which is not supported either by national crime figures or prevalence studies. By way of example, in the Irish Times reports, 17.1 percent of reports about child sexual abuse refer to child rape but, in a study of national crime statistics between 1993 and 2002, the average is 2.6 percent of all sexual crime against children is rape. In the SAVI report the figures are 5.6 percent for females and 2.7 percent of males.

Feminist literature suggests that rape reporting often represents social control of women, often appearing to dictate how women should dress, and where they can go, at what time, and with whom. In the case of children, the over-reporting of rape contributes to a climate of fear about children and distracts from the real nature of child sexual abuse.

This study shows how certain categories of perpetrators are highlighted. In the Irish data, clergy and religious teachers are the perpetrators of abuse in 68.1 percent of stories, and teachers/coaches in 13.1 percent of stories. In the Times of London these figures are 17.0 percent, and 17.0 percent for both, and 34.7 percent and 29.2 percent in the New York Times. While national prevalence data are not available in the same format for the U.K. or the U.S., the SAVI report indicates that clergy or religious teachers were responsible for 3.2 percent of child sexual abuse in Ireland, and teachers at 1.2 percent.

Coverage of familial abuse, on the other hand, varies dramatically in the media. In the Irish Times data, parents or relatives are the perpetrators in 17.4 percent of stories, compared to 3.1 percent in the New York Times and 19.1 percent in the Times of London. The Irish figure is substantiated by the SAVI data which indicates that parents or other relatives are responsible for about 16.8 percent of child sexual abuse. In this context it is interesting to note that SAVI shows that the perpetrators of sexual abuse against

children were other children in 25 percent of cases, something not generally reported in the media.

Stranger danger receives differing emphases. In the Irish Times, only 2.9 percent of stories identify a stranger as the perpetrator of sexual abuse against children, compared to 23.5 percent in the New York Times and 30.9 percent in the Times of London. The corresponding figure from the SAVI report is 20 percent of all child sexual abuse being perpetrated by strangers.

### **Tabloid reporting**

Tabloid newspapers are noted for their banner headlines and lurid language. Child abuse reports contain references to 'monsters', 'fiends', 'pervs', 'sex-beasts' and 'evil menaces'. In the summer of 2001, the News of the World, a widely read U.K. tabloid, launched a "name and shame" campaign targeted against British pedophiles, with the stated aim of publishing details of all 100,000 of them. It retreated from the campaign in December 2001, having been roundly condemned by the mainstream media, child welfare professionals and policy makers.

The Independent, a mainstream broadsheet, had referred to the campaign as the more extreme folly that continued "to engage in scare mongering, sensationalism and incitement to vigilante action". This vigilante action resulted in the abuse of many innocent people who shared a name with those on the newspaper list. It also resulted in the deaths of innocent people: two vigilantes murdered a man they wrongly suspected of being a pedophile by firebombing his flat; a suspected pedophile was battered to death by vigilantes. Elsewhere in the U.K., illiterate protestors hounded a respected pediatrician from her home, assuming she was a pedophile. Reports of similar incidents, often targeted against innocent people by mistake, can be found in the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France, Ireland, and elsewhere.

The questions that these episodes raise are critical ones for society. Beyond holding perpetrators responsible, how should society react to the problem of child sexual abuse? What is the role of the press, vis-à-vis the public, in this regard?

### **What the media ignore**

It is evident that high profile cases are over-reported with a disproportionate level of coverage. This is typified by the Jon Binet Ramsey case in the U.S., Jamie Bulger in the U.K. and Sophie McColgan in Ireland. All of these cases are heinous examples of child abuse and were deeply shocking to the public in each country. While clearly newsworthy and important they are also singular events. To a large extent, the ongoing substrate of abuse is ignored. While it is not possible to give equal coverage to every episode of child sexual abuse, it is important to ensure that the topic itself is reported in a balanced way that will help educate and advise the public beyond a simple fear response.

Just as with adult sexual abuse, child sexual abuse reporting can retraumatize victims. A typical example of this in a different medium was seen in Ireland on a popular daytime radio program. The host asked a man, who had been molested as a child, about the precise nature of the abuse he had experience. When his guest declined to provide details, the host answered for him, telling the nation in detail what had happened. The risk of behaviour such as this, as well as lengthy detail in media reports of abuse, is that it can readily be abusive of the victims and their families, and sometimes as traumatic as the original abuse. This requires redirection by media professionals.

The extent of child sexual abuse in particular and child neglect in general is mostly ignored. While there is a focus on child abuse by specific groups of people (teachers/clergy/strangers), there is an overall lack of coverage as to the extent of abuse in society. Prevalence studies are rarely reported, and, even where reported, rarely references in subsequent reports. The lack of emphasis on child neglect, as opposed to child sexual abuse is particularly troublesome. Prevalence studies indicate that many more children are neglected than are sexually abused, but their plight rarely receives prime time coverage except when a particularly heinous case comes to light as a result of social system failure, as in the case of Victoria Climbié in then U.K.

The inadequacy of coverage has significant outcomes It prevents the development of appropriately directed public outrage and it allows abuse, especially family-based abuse, to continue. It also works against the production of effective public policies. A solution requires courage from policy makers, victims, support groups, child welfare professionals, media professionals and others. Problematizing the few, and driving the problem underground, does not solve the problem, ease the pain, protect children or advance social development and justice. There must be a better way.

### **Changes are needed**

The data suggest a need for significant changes in media coverage of child sexual abuse. Firstly, a focus on all cases of child sexual abuse would help direct public attention toward the extent of the problem. This requires coverage beyond those cases that are prosecuted in court, currently the source of most media reports. It requires attention to the knowledge base of child welfare professionals as well as a reporting of ongoing research on the topic, including the availability of national prevalence studies. Secondly, it would help if media reports were aimed at assisting the public in understanding and preventing child sexual abuse.

The role of the media in education and mobilization cannot be understated in this regard. Society owes a huge debt to the press for its uncovering of the problem and its unflinching resolve to bring perpetrators to justice. But, while much has been accomplished, more needs to be done. Primary among these outstanding items is a reorientation from blame to understanding. This is not in any sense to let perpetrators off the hook. It is, rather, a call for a critical debate, mediated and facilitated by the media, on the issue of child sexual abuse in society. Why, for example, is something so abhorrent to most people, so prevalent?

Finally, there needs to be a focus on education and prevention. Given the extent of the involvement of children in the sexual abuse of other children, a program of education is clearly imperative. On the simple premise that prevention is better than cure, the expenditure of public monies on early campaigns is a vastly better use of the public purse than later incarceration. This requires cooperation between media professionals, academics, child welfare professionals, and policy makers.

The welfare of children, and the subsequent betterment of society, requires that the public agenda take note of child sexual abuse as a pervasive issue that transcends class, race and creed. We owe it to future generations of children to ensure that our response is not simply one of temporary outrage but rather one of commitment to ensuring child welfare as a permanent feature of society. Our children deserve no less.

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