Rethinking Power:

An Analysis of Media Coverage of Sexual Abuse in Ireland, the UK, and the USA

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Introduction

The phenomenon of sexual abuse in Ireland and elsewhere in the developed world, after decades of denial, represents a stark social reality, with which society is slowly coming to terms. Recent research has revealed the extent of sexual abuse in Ireland to be a significant, contemporary problem. The Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland report (SAVI), commissioned by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre and carried out by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) in 2002, has shown that more than 42 % of women and 28% of men reported some form of sexual abuse or assault in their lifetime (McGee et al., 2002). It is absolutely imperative that this phenomenon is analyzed from a sociological perspective, as well as dealing with criminal and therapeutic dimensions. This research focuses on the critical role of the mass media and the contribution of the media to shaping public opinion and serving as information providers on this core issue.

This research constitutes a year-long project which has been facilitated by the IRCHSS funding of a Government of Ireland Research Fellowship. The aim of the larger project is to document empirically the nature and extent of the coverage of sexual abuse of adults and children in the Irish Times, the Times (London) and the New York Times as newspapers of record, and to offer a comparison between the media constructions and representations of sexual abuse with the national prevalence statistics and national crime statistics for each nation.

The current paper deals with a development of the theoretical understanding of the issues involved in such media construction. It develops the theoretical underpinning of well established media theory while adding two further dimensions from the work of Jenny Kitzinger and others, and then applies these theories to the content under consideration. Finally the paper indicated some further research that is deemed necessary as a consequence of this theoretical approach.

Current media theory: Agenda setting, Priming & Framing

Mass media play a role in the formation of public opinion. They are selective in the messages transmitted, they are directive in trying to shape and mould opinion (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). While there are clearly external forces at work in terms of what enters the news, it is abundantly evident that there is much left to the choices of the individual editor or journalist, as well as many influences that act from within media organizations (White, 1950; Breed, 1960, Bass, 1969; Altheide, 1976; Weaver, 1979; Gross, 1981; Peterson, 1981; Dimmick & Coit, 1982; Todd, 1983; Luttberg, 1983; Stempel, 1985; Schudson, 1989; Salwen & Garrison, 1989; Schrott, 1990; Pan & McLeod, 1991;Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). 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.

Agenda setting theory states that those issues that receive prominent attention in the media become the problems the reading and listening publics regard as the nation's most important. Lippmann referred to the 'pictures inside the heads' of individuals which were altered by information; he used the analogy of people of different nationalities living in harmony who suddenly discover that their respective nations have been at war for some time, and whose view of one another is altered by learning of the war (1922, p. 5). He also developed the idea that the 'pictures' influenced by the media were not a matter of random chance, but arose directly from media choices (p. 12). Items only get placed in the news stream if they are a matter of media routines or if they are made into an issue in some fashion (p. 15). In this regard, he focused on 'press agents' as the central characters responsible for getting events turned into media issues:

> The enormous discretion as to what facts and what impressions shall be reported is steadily convincing every organized group of people that whether it wishes to secure publicity or to avoid it, the exercise of discretion cannot be left to the reporter. It is safer to hire a press agent who stands between the group and the newspapers. … But it follows that the picture which the publicity man makes for the reporter is the one he wishes the public to see. … Since in the daily routine reporters cannot give a shape to facts, and since there is little disinterested organization of intelligence, the need for some formulation is being met by the interested parties (p. 15).

Whatever about the manner of how items get into the news stream, it is those items that have influence, for clearly the public cannot be influenced by that of which it is does not have any knowledge. As Cohen puts it:

> That is to say, then, that the press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. And it follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read. … The editor may believe he is only printing the things people want to read , but he is thereby putting a claim on their attention, powerfully determining what they will be thinking about, and talking about, until the next wave laps on their shore (1963, p. 13).

McCombs and Shaw (1972) examined the connections between media content and issue salience, building on Lippmann's assertion that it is the 'pictures in our heads' that drive our behaviours. In their original research on the agenda-setting function of the mass media, McCombs and Shaw reached the conclusion that 'voters tend to share the media's composite definition of what is important' (1972, p. 184). In reviewing the research that followed from that original work, McCombs and Shaw pointed out that agenda-setting theory had gone through a four-phase development: the basis hypothesis, discovery of contingent conditions, extension into new

domains, and an analysis of the media agenda (1993, p.59). Expanding on Cohen they wrote:

> Agenda setting is considerably more than the classical assertion that the news tells us what to think about. The news also tells us how to think about it. Both the selection of objects for attention and the selection of frames for thinking about these objects are powerful agenda-setting roles. Central to the news agenda and its daily set of objects — issues, personalities, events, etc. — are the perspectives that journalists and, subsequently, members of the public employ to think about each object (1993, p.62).

Shaw and Martin (1992) followed up on McCombs and Shaw's (1972) original study and concluded that there are:

> residues of press influence on key demographic groups, but there are many other directions to agenda-setting, both "down" to the individual level and "up" to the social system level. … Whether from our personal life or our mediated one, issues line up in our heads. The media spotlight public events and issues long enough for collective identification and social discourse. That is one major function of mass media agenda setting — presenting and reflecting a slowly evolving array of public issues, so that societies, like glaciers, can inch along (Shaw & Martin, 1992, p. 920).

Iyengar and Kinder's (1987) work on agenda setting in television news indicates that news coverage affects the public's approach to major issues. Their studies show that the people most prone to agenda setting effects are those who are neither politically active nor strongly affiliated with a political party. Significant non-political news items, then, are relatively easily placed in the public consciousness. The clear consequence of agenda setting theory is that it is the framers of the news who wield a vast amount of control over how the public views various events and personalities.

Agenda setting is not simply a function of journalistic choice. Becker (1980) points out that agenda setting is driven in part by a number of elements including individual desire to be informed, the needs that are met by the mass media, and the ability of the individual consumer to respond to media cues (p. 530). The role played by the consumer is critical in this process and it is important to remember that the audience is in fact composed of discrete individuals. What then are the dynamics of agenda setting for individuals — clearly not each person is affected in the same manner or to the same degree as we do not observe any homogeneity of outcome.

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) investigated the priming hypothesis — that by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, national news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged. People, like journalists, cannot pay attention to everything and are equally selective, taking similar shortcuts by relying on the most accessible information sources. Frequent priming of a given story in the national news means people's choice will tend to be focused more on that issue.

The framing of stories is of key relevance in the issue of priming. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) suggest that the more television coverage interprets events as though they were the result of the president's actions, the more influential such coverage will be in priming the public's assessment of the president's performance. Experimental results showed that in contrast to agenda setting, priming occurs amongst politically astute and ignorant alike. The greatest priming occurs when people have a theory in which they connect presidential performance and specific problems.

Priming effects can be exerted by positive or negative stories. The priorities that are uppermost in a voter's mind as he/she goes to the polls is a significant determinator. For true effectiveness priming requires a close fit between the intended target of the priming and the priming event — there must be a link between the priming event and the choices that the voters are being called on to make.

According to Iyengar and Kinder, people hold 'tacit theories' regarding national problems. Included in these tacit theories are what they perceive as causes and moral accountability. The notion of tacit theories is interesting. Such opinions are apparently formed primarily by the media; in making this assertion, Iyengar and Kinder assign rather greater power to the media than can fairly be ascribed on the basis of experimental research. They completely ignore the whole notion of sharing and debating opinion wherein people engage in social intercourse on the issues of the day, and do so in a critical frame of mind, with individual reactions and opinions. The potential for media effects may be quite high but the actual effect is somewhat ameliorated by the pragmatic approach of the public.

The public can only make decisions on the information that it has at its disposal. Iyengar (1991) refers to the 'accessibility of information' which is highly dependent on the pattern of news coverage (p. 132). While it is clear that other elements enter into the accessibility equation, such as party affiliation, socioeconomic status, personal values, religious orientation, and cultural perceptions, Iyengar argues that accessibility of information on public affairs in primarily dependent on media content.

While it can be demonstrated that there is an agenda held in common by a mass public, there is no guarantee that television news is the primary source of that agenda. One problem is the key assumption that, if the content of the mass media corresponds with the individual's reported list of important problems facing the country, the causal process must take the form of the media influencing the individual. As Iyengar and Kinder state:

Observing that television news coverage and viewers' beliefs correspond is not the same as establishing that television coverage influences viewers' beliefs. No doubt the television reliant group differs in many ways from those who obtain their information elsewhere and it may be these differences that are responsible for generating different outlooks on national problems. (1987, p. 7)

New dimensions: Media templates and media power

According to Kitzinger (2002) media templates are routinely used to emphasize only one clear perspective, to serve as rhetorical shorthand/shortcuts, and to help audiences & producers contextualize stories. These templates have a threefold effect: they shape narratives around specific issues, they guide public opinion & discussion, and they set the frame of reference for the future. Research analysis of media templates allows researchers to develop understandings of how reality is framed, how various elements of social life are constructed and how media power is operationalized in society.

Some examples will suffice. The 'Wall Street crash' of 1929 is a media template for the reporting of financial issues and problems; 'Vietnam' is a template for a failed or mired war, and is routinely used in relation to the US invasion of Iraq. 'Watergate' refers to political scandals, and is such a strong template the suffix –gate carries its own derived meaning. 'Jamie Bulger' is shorthand for a host of events related to child abuse, child abduction and child murder. 'The Taliban' refers to any kind of extremist, conservative, fundamentalist (often religious) leadership. And most recently, 9/11 has become a multifaceted template that references a gamut of issues from terrorism to public panic to security to xenophobia.

All of these, according to Kitzinger, are major social issues that attracted intense media interest at the time. Even thought they are long past, certainly in terms of news immediacy, they all continue to carry powerful associations and have long outlived the conclusion of their actual events they originally referenced. But they have critically become part of a litany of key moments inseparably associated with particular issues in public debate. These are 'media templates'. Their power lies in their association. 'Vietnam' references political failure, political cover-up, public protest, military failure, the draft, body bags, tenacious enemies, My Lai, the Tet offensive, war veterans, and, above all, military failure.

Media templates are key events with an ongoing shelf life beyond the conclusion of news happenings. They are defined by their retrospective use in secondary reporting rather than contemporaneous coverage and therein lies their power. Because they are used to explain current events, they emerge of themselves as a point of comparison and as proof of an ongoing problem. Templates are used to highlight patterns in particular issues or social problems. Media templates have a single primary meaning or sense rather than being the focus for debate, and they are rarely questioned.

Thus, says Kitzinger, there are operating implications that follow from the use of templates: simplification/distortion, minimization of alternate textual readings, and osmosis. Simplification and distortion indicate that details may be blurred, dissenting accounts forgotten and various pertinent facts (from past or present) may be misrepresented or disregarded. Minimal opportunity for alternative readings implies that the various events are pared back, often simplistically, to their essence, without nuance, that alternative interpretations from audiences are neither facilitated nor accommodated because the audience is only exposed to secondary accounts

of events, and the very events themselves are recalled differently by those who were aware of the contemporary reporting, such is the power of the template. By osmosis Kitzinger means that the meanings attached to template events are, in part, created by the interaction between such episodes and subsequent linked cases. The meaning of media templates may be both reinforced and altered as they are applied to events as they unfold.

In terms of this current work, Kitzinger's approach suggests four critical questions:

- Is there any evidence of media templates in current child abuse coverage?

- Are these connected to power in any way?

- What are the implications for child protection?

- What are the implications for media professionals?

Previous research indicates that, as the source through which most people survey their world, the media serve to color the lenses through which the world is perceived. Those "lenses" are often based on previous trigger events (templates) and applied, willy-nilly, to associated groups. Child sexual abuse is one such event which provides a specific lens through which clergy and churches are viewed. The reporting of the trial of James Porter, a very high profile clergy sex abuse case in the US, was the triggering event that served as a media template for how an accusation against Cardinal Bernardin was reported. Although Bernardin was innocent of the accusations made against him, the reporting of his case was repeated referenced by the Porter case (Breen, 1997). Today, churches and clergy are now themselves the lenses through which child sexual abuse is often reported.

The major study of which this paper is a part draws on the Irish Times/New York Times/ UK Times/The Mirror databases on Nexis-Lexis. Five weeks were randomly sampled from each of ten years, yielding 50 weeks of stories in total. Complex search term (all variants of sexual abuse/ assault, molestation, gross indecency, incest, rape and buggery) yielded the following:

- 1127 stories from Irish Times

- 868 stories from The Mirror

- 975 stories from The New York Times

- 961 stories from The Times (UK)

The Irish Times data is complete, others are work in progress. Each story coded for 35 variables. Within The Irish Times, in those stories where the profession of the perpetrator is identified, the stories about child sexual abuse indicate that of 127 cases, clergy or religious are connected with 90, about 71% of all stories. Fathers constituted 35 cases of 135, or 26% of all child sexual abuse cases where the relationship was identified. On the other hand, we also know from the Sexual Abuse & Violence in Ireland Report, a national prevalence study by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland that a relatively small percentage of perpetrators fitted the current stereotype of

abusers of children: strangers were in the minority - over 80% of children were abused by those known to them. We also know that fathers constituted 2.5% of all abusers with clerical/religious ministers or clerical/religious teachers constituting 3.2% of abusers. Contrast with 26% and 71% of all newspaper reports.

There is very strong evidence to suggest an over-emphasis on fathers and clergy/religious as perpetrators of child sexual abuse, in stark contrast to the reality of SAVI. Two cases, that of Fr. Brendan Smyth, a notorious paedophile and Joseph McColgan, an abusive father, may well be responsible for much of the reference frame. They meet the requirements of media templates and we see much of the associated factors. Both cases are iconic, standing for something much larger and more pervasive than themselves.

The particular emphasis on abuse by clergy is worth examining closely. The power and influence of the Church pre-1970 was enormous. In particular the control of the Church over issues of sexual morality such as contraception was deeply resented and, more lately, widely ignored. The Church today is a conservative bulwark on sexual matters, including abortion and still controls the majority of schools in Ireland. The level of emphasis on the failure of some Church personnel is an indicator of institutional media attitudes to the Church as it loses power in society. The mass media now control the lenses through which the Church is perceived and can direct that perception by the use of media templates.

More importantly, however, and much more immediately, there are important implications for child protection. The current emphasis on fathers and clergy as abusers hides the reality of abuse from social scrutiny. In four-fifths of cases of child sexual abuse, the perpetrator was known to the abused person. The perpetrator was another child or adolescent (17 years old or younger) in one out of every four cases. The most common other relative or authority figure categories were uncles (6.2%), cousins (4.4%), babysitters (4.4%), brothers (3.7%) and non-religious/clerical teachers (1.2%). Given these statistics, there is clear need for a large scale ongoing media campaign against child abuse which alerts parents to realities rather than stereotypes.

There are also implications for media professionals. Editors in particular and journalists in general, need to attend to their use of media templates as such shorthand can readily be misinterpreted. The broad sweep of coverage should be examined such that a fact based analysis of current research is used in news reporting rather than reliance on the cuttings morgue or online databases. It is vital that ideological influences on content, such as they are, be at least acknowledged and identified. Further research on issues such as refugees/asylum seekers, social exclusion, prisons, mental illness, and sexual orientation could be examined in the light of media template theory.

There is little doubt about the power of the press in contemporary society. That power is often wielded unthinkingly, especially through the use of journalistic mechanisms such as templates. While templates are invariably

useful, they can also serve to distort public perception. The function of the news media in informing the public is clearly critical, all the more so in our information rich age. It is imperative, therefore, that news is delivered in a considered, reflective fashion, which is true to the events being reported, open to contextual reading, and situated in the full understanding of the historical events referenced. The public deserves no less.

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