

Chapter 15 (5,928 without refs 7,744 with)

Media constructions of, and reactions to, paedophilia in society

Kieran McCartan

Introduction

This chapter will address media constructions and representations of paedophilia in modern society, based on the existing literature and current reporting. It will first examine what the media actually is which will allow for a discussion of the role and impact of the media on the public. In doing so the psychology of media influence will be addressed, therefore examining why the media has the impact it does on public opinion and how it can help shape individual attitudes. This will then tie into ideas around the social construction of reality, particularly with regard to social issues, examining paedophilia as a socially sensitive and traumatic topic. The chapter will then address how the media, especially the press, has reported and discussed paedophilia, looking at the language and ideas used with regard to paedophiles and dangerous child sexual offenders, asking how close to reality these practices are? This will finally lead into a discussion of the social responsibility, morality and ethics of the media, and whether they achieve this in their reporting and presentation of stories concerning paedophilia. In discussing the press' coverage of paedophilia the chapter will focus on the News of The Worlds Sarah Payne campaign, which will demonstrate not only how the press used this case to raise the profile of paedophilia, cementing it as a moral panic, but will also allow for a discussion concerning media sensitivity and ethics. In closing, the chapter will bring these various strands together to demonstrate the impact of the medias representation of paedophilia on the public and how by

changing their approach the media could help change the public perception and social construction of paedophilia towards a more realistic representation that could help in child protection.

What is the media?

Prior to discussing the role and function of the media in depth it is first important to understand what the media actually is. Although, the media is often discussed as a monolithic and homogenous term it is anything but. Rather it is a variety of different formats, with different purposes, focusing on different issues all with different agendas (McQuail 2007). As such the different aspects of the media can be, and often are, at odds with one another. This means that the media in contemporary society is a complex and multi-faceted industry, which is continually adapting in light of modernisation, technological developments, changing social norms and globalisation (McQuail 2007). Consequentially, the majority of people living in our global society, not just westernised countries, will come into contact with multiple media formats as well as various media perspectives and agendas every day. Understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of the modern media is important as it affects the stories being told, the way that they are told, who accesses them and the impact that these stories have. This is salient, as the media plays an increasingly important role in modern society (Giddens 1991), with regard to crime and criminal justice matters (Gray 2009; Howitt 1998; Brown 2003), particularly in the UK, which has become a media-centred society (Howitt 1998; Cohen 2002). As such it would be impossible and irresponsible to portray the media as one homogenous sector. With this in mind

this chapter will focus upon the news and current affairs sector of the media, particularly in the form of the press (i.e., the press and broadcast media).

There are many potential explanations, of what the role and the function of the media should be in society; these fluctuate both between and within the various types of media. However, in general, the media is seen as the main method for the dissemination of information, the shaping of public perception and the reinforcement of societal attitudes (Greer 2003). Potentially the media has a great deal of power and influence in society, in that it can shape and influence public opinion, while at the same time inform society in a quick in-depth fashion that legitimises the subject, thereby re-establishing the creditability of the story (Mc Quail 2000). Howitt (1998) argues that the media can affect public opinion by utilising one of three potential models, either the cause and effects model; uses and gratification model, and/or the cultural ratification model. As such the media helps shape individual attitudes through a series of psychological and sociological processes including, but not limited to, stereotyping, group processes and norm reinforcement. Research indicates that attitude formation and opinion making is based on many premises, including, active and inactive processing, the attitude of the processor, the story being told and the expertise/reliability of the person telling it (Bohner and Wanke 2009). All of these are relevant, with regard to the media, as we come into contact with it on a daily basis and we have very individualised attitudes to it; with research indicating that the general public are invested in and trust their preferred media sources (McCartan forthcoming). Consequentially, there seems to be a symbolic relationship between the media and the public, with the public selecting its media based upon its content and approach and the media producing stories and voicing opinions that the public, or certainly specific sections of the public, want to engage with (Cohen and Young 1981; Howitt 1998;

Greer 2003; Gamson *et al.* 1992). This leads to the suggestion that the media has a dual function of reporting and creating the news (Cohen and Young 1981), however the degree to which the media would agree with this is a hotly debated issue. Despite this, the media does play some role in the shaping of public opinion (Gray 2009; Bohner and Wanke 2009), societal attitudes (McQuail 2007) and current debates (Gray 2009; Silverman and Wilson 2002; Cross 2005; McCartan 2008a), thus it would be inappropriate to suggest that it has no impact, although the question has to be to what extent is this influence: is it just limited to individual receptors or can the media help form/change social attitudes wholesale?

Media, social constructionism and moral panics

The media helps shape societal attitudes through a series of sociological processes including, but not limited to, reflexivity modernisation and social constructionism, which can have a lasting and significant impact (i.e., social attitudes and government legislation). Social constructionism is the idea that society is a socially constructed reality that adapts and changes depending on the cognition of the individuals involved (..REF..); which is why society adapts over time and space (Giddens 1991). Social constructionism is shaped by the twin concepts of meaning (the act of defining) and power (the motives for the definition); and is rooted in ideas around language and communication. Social constructionism places an emphasis on contextualisation and social interaction (Burr 1995), arguing that all concepts are transitory and specific, meaning that society is constructed through the individuals and culture that shape it and as such can change over time, with regard to the meaning and power attributed to it by its member's attitudes, beliefs and opinions. This suggests that social

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constructionism is closely related to modernisation, because in both process, society and the individual constantly re-evaluate life in relation to new information being produced. This is particularly important with regard to media influence because the media argue that they produce relevant news that is in the public interest (McQuail 2007), meaning that new information is continually being produced and social attitudes are always changing. This can be seen very clearly in certain social issues, especially socially sensitive topics like paedophilia (McCartan 2009) and child protection (Scott *et al.* 1998).

Paedophilia is in part a social construction, specifically the labelling and definition of it (McCartan 2009) (For more information on this see Chapter Two of this volume). This has partly occurred through the media coverage and representation of paedophilia, with it a vast amount of media coverage in recent years, it in many different formats, however the print media, especially particular sections of it, have focused completely on this story contributing it status as a massive public interest story. Hence, paedophilia has become a prominent social issue, a popular social risk and modern moral panic (Kitzinger 1999; Cohen 2002; McAlinden 2006). Moral panics, the media and social constructionism are a series of notions that tie together quite well, with the media being one of the main mechanisms in the development and maintenance of moral panics (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Thompson 1998; Cohen 2002) which can lead either directly or indirectly to the changing of social attitudes and social norms; clearly seen in the example of paedophilia. Hence, the moral panic is one of the clearest examples of the influence of the media on society.

The moral panic was first developed by Young (1971) and then expanded in more detail by Cohen (1972, 2002), who argued that a moral panic is an overblown social concern relating to the negative or anti-societal actions and/or ideologies of a

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certain event, group or sub-culture by society, which sees the actions as being destructive to modern life (Cohen 2002). Moral panics tend to focus around specific groups of 'folk devils', for example, paedophiles, young males and drug users (Cohen 2002), who are vilified and branded as deviant by society and suffer from a form of offender apartheid (whereby society excludes and morally rejects them) (Kleinhaus 2002). This is then reinforced through deviancy amplification (that the issue is so salient in society that anything that is related to it is seen as it) (Cohen 2002), leading to an extreme social response that often overshadows the threat of the actual problem (Silverman and Wilson 2002). This in turn creates a need for a solution, generally an emotional response that is not always well conceived and usually with severe repercussions for the current 'folk devils' (Klienhaus 2002; Silverman *et al.* 2002; Soothill *et al.* 2002).

However, this is not the only interpretation of the construction of moral panics. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) indicate three different theoretical perspectives of which Cohen's thesis is only one. Cohen's theory is closely linked to Goode and Ben-Yehuda's concept of the interest group model of moral panics, which perceives moral panics as unintended and unplanned outcomes of crusades perused by moral groups. The second theoretical perspective is the elite-engineered model where the moral panic is a conscious/deliberate outcome of manufactured campaigns designed to divert attention away from the actual crises. This is closely linked to the work of Hall *et al.* (1978) who argued that moral panics are mechanisms employed by the ruling classes to mystify the existing crisis in society and as such the media disseminates these panics, but does not create them. The third definition of moral panic that Goode and Ben-Yehuda discuss is the grass-roots model, which is where the moral panic is created through the anxieties of the normal public, and that they are

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reinforced and/or perpetuated by the media or government. According to the grass-roots model the media and government can not create moral panics; these panics have to be based on public anxieties that already exist. Although, all the models suggested by Goode and Ben-Yehuda as well as Cohen, have validity; moral panics are complex and it is difficult to pin down why one social concern becomes a moral panic and another does not. Therefore it seems likely that a more integrated theory would be better, especially with regard to paedophilia which has arisen out of the fears of the general public (Grass roots model), in conjunction with a series of media and government campaigns (interest group model). Moral panics therefore seem to be created from and perpetuated through the interactions between the media, the government and the public.

Media coverage, Moral Panics & Paedophilia

Paedophilia has become one of, if not the, most prevalent moral panics of recent years (Silverman and Wilson 2002; Cohen 2002; Kitzinger 1999; Cross 2005); with the UK media, especially the press, discussing paedophilia almost on a daily basis (Greer 2003; Critcher 2001; Davidson 2008). The UK press tends to discuss paedophilia in an inappropriate, generalised, fearful and negative light; this is especially the case with the language and sentiment used to discuss paedophilia, especially by the tabloids (Thomas 2005). UK tabloid headlines have included: 'Vile sickos sulking in high places' (Parsons 2003), 'Paedo caught by perv site' (Flynn 2006), 'Lonely heart sicko was a paedo' (Patrick 2009), 'My brave girl caged a monster' (Coles 2007), 'Paedos have dodgy wiring' (The Sun 2007a), and 'Pervs on the loose' (The Daily Star 2007). However, this emotive and reactionary language is not just limited to the

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tabloid press; with the broadsheets often following suit, all be it in a toned down fashion: ‘Don’t betray Sarah now’ (The Guardian 2000), ‘Mobs and monsters’ (Younge 2000), and ‘Child-killers on the loose’ (McKie 2000). In conjunction with headlines this language continues in the articles, with paedophiles being described as perverts, monsters and beasts (Thomas 2005; Greer 2003). The media further complicates the reporting of paedophilia by not differentiating between the different types of sex offenders (i.e., paedophile, hebophile, child sexual abuser), with all being labelled as paedophiles (Thomas 2005), which has contributed to a further escalation of the moral panic. This slanted media reporting contributes to the social construction of paedophiles and child sexual offenders as threatening and inhuman, therefore reinforcing the myth of stranger danger (Silverman and Wilson 2002), and promoting the negative social reactions in modern society (Cricher 2002; Silverman and Wilson 2002; Cross 2005). The clearest example of the media significantly contributing to the moral panic of paedophilia can be seen in the News of the World campaigns surrounding Sarah Payne.

The News of the World ran a series of anti-paedophile campaigns, arguing for stricter government procedures, including the introduction of the public disclosure of sex offender information, in the wake of the abduction, sexual abuse and murder of Sarah Payne in 2000. During the police investigation the Payne’s were approached by then News of The World, and current The Sun, editor Rebekah Wade (Wade 2009), who befriended the family and helped to spearhead an anti-paedophile campaign. The News of the World wanted to see the introduction of Sarah’s Charter, which contained thirteen policy changes in relation to sex offenders, the last of which was Sarah’s Law (Cricher 2002). Sarah’s Law is based on America’s Megan’s Law (Silverman and Wilson 2002), and calls for the full public disclosure of all registered sex offender

information in the UK (Critcher 2002). The News of the World ran its Name and Shame campaign to convince the government to implement Sarah's Law. The main argument behind Sarah's law, which is also its Achilles heel, is the premise that public disclosure would have saved Sarah Payne, but this is unfortunately untrue. The murder of Sarah Payne happened at the Payne's grandparents where the family were on holiday; Roy Whiting was not actually from Kingston Gorse, where the grandparents lived, and would not have been registered there; thus the abduction of Sarah Payne was a crime of opportunity. Public disclosure of Roy Whiting's information would therefore not have alerted the Payne's to his whereabouts and enabled them to prevent the unfortunate events that unfolded.

The News of the World's Name and Shame campaign ran for two consecutive Sundays, the 23rd and 30th of July 2000, and published the details, including photographs, of some of the UK's most prolific paedophiles and child sexual abusers, with the paper arguing that public disclosure was the most effective mechanism to allow parents to appropriately, and successfully, protect their children from child sexual abuse. Whether the campaign led to parents feeling safer and better able to protect their children is debateable, but it did seem to be a causal factor in the Paulsgrove riots of the same year (Critcher 2002). During the campaign the newspaper received mixed reactions, with condemnation by policy makers and the government (Morris 2000; Dodd 2000) and mixed reactions from the media, who whilst they supported Sarah's Charter condemned public disclosure (Critcher 2002; Hodgson 2001). The Payne family, however, were positive about the campaigns (Day 2001) and seemingly wide spread public support (Critcher 2002), allowed the newspaper to justify its actions (Hodgson 2001). The campaign was successful in the

implementation of twelve of its thirteen conditions in Sarah's Charter, excluding a full Sarah's Law (Critcher 2002).

The British government's reaction to Sarah's Law was interesting as it fluctuated quite significantly. The government initially rejected Sarah's Law claiming it would drive paedophiles underground, off the register and make them a greater potential threat to children (Plotnikoff and Woolfson 2000). These concerns were reinforced as Sarah's Law is in direct opposition to the Human Rights Act 1998, which guarantees people, among other things, a right to privacy (more on this can be seen in Chapters 5 and 16 of this volume). However, the government's opinion on the viability of this controversial law has changed in recent years, becoming complex, confusing and worryingly inconsistent. Although, the government initially rejected Sarah's Law (Dodd 2000; Morris 2000), it then reconsidered its position (BBC 2006; Assinder 2006), agreed to implement it (The Sun 2007b) and then quickly backtracked, rejecting the entire premise (Travis 2007). The government then agreed to pilot partial public disclosure, whereby parents, carers and guardians are allowed to ask whether anyone with access to their children has a history of sexual offending and single mothers are allowed to check on the past histories of new partners. The police provide relevant information using due care and attention and all material revealed is done so with the greatest of confidentiality in mind (BBC 2009; Home Office, 2007). It has recently been decided that following this successful pilot, which saw no public disorder or vigilantism, but also did not seem to evidence a high inquiry rate, that it will be extended within the police forces involved. Full evaluation will take place at the end of 2009 at which point a decision will be made as to whether to roll the scheme out nationally (Home Office 2009).

The News of the World campaign was, therefore, partly responsible for the moral panic surrounding paedophilia that swept Britain at the start of the twenty-first century, and which is still in existence today. At the time few could have known that the death of one little girl (Sarah Payne) and the actions of one newspaper editor (Rebekah Wade) would have had such an inflammatory effect on the public (Cricher 2002; Silverman and Wilson 2002). The development of the name and shame campaign shows how the News of the World seized on public concern and reinforced social boundaries, while at the same time promoting a level of unrealistic fear and paranoia over an already sensitive issue (Silverman and Wilson 2002). The newspaper played on the irrational fear of parents, warning of stranger danger, and the corruption of the nation's children as a result of the sexual practices of a number of harmful deviants. However, the question must be asked whether the paper manipulated and exploited the Payne's tragedy for its own commercial gain. Both the Paynes (Day 2001) and Rebekah Wade (Wade 2009) have said no. This has not, however, been the true in all high profile cases of media influence, for example, the Madeline McCann case, where the parents here felt betrayed and used by sections of the press (Leicester Mercury 2009) with whom they had initially had a good relationship and whom had initially helped to publicise their case.

Despite this, moral panics are important, as they are thought to reinforce popular ideas and stabilise social order (Hier 2003), by emphasising the core social beliefs (Thompson 1998) and reinforcing dominant social norms. This means that the moral panic of paedophilia works to reinforce current social and cultural attitudes with regard to childhood, public protection and social order.

Media coverage of paedophilia versus the realities of paedophilia

Despite the high profile nature of paedophilia in the UK media, especially the press, the realities and complexities of paedophilia are not fully discussed. This is especially true of the tabloid press, for instance the News of the World and the Sun, do not discuss the reality of threats of abuse to children from within the home (incest, domestic violence, and neglect), which are far more prevalent in society than the threats from solitary, sexual predators (Howitt 1995; Briere and Elliott 2003). Consequentially it is important to highlight the realities of paedophilia, especially as research indicates that despite the current high-profile nature of paedophilia there is no easily accessible or widely accepted definition or explanation of the causes, the behaviour or the most effective treatments available (McCartan 2008a). This complexity and ambiguity is exacerbated when paedophilia is considered in tangent with other forms of childhood sexual abuse, especially child sexual abuse; which is often used as a blanket term to cover all childhood abuse and all child sexual offenders (Rind *et al.* 1998).

Research indicates that paedophiles are a very heterogenous and individualistic population, with them likely to be both male (Dobash *et al.* 1996), and/or female (Howitt 1995); however, typical paedophilic offenders are more likely to be male. Although research suggests that paedophiles tend to come from a working-class background (La Fontaine 1990), with a disorganised family system in childhood (Howitt 1995) and that they tend to be middle-aged (Blanchard *et al.* 1999), this is by no means rigid. Paedophiles tend to be employed in a diverse variety of careers (Wilson and Cox 1983) with there being no concrete or consistent evidence with regard to the level of their IQ (Cantor *et al.* 2005). Also, paedophiles tend to suffer from higher levels of social introversion, sensitivity, loneliness and depression

(Wilson and Cox 1983), with poorer interrelationship as well as social skills (Blanchette and Coleman 2002) leading them to feel that they are socially isolated (Taylor 1981).

Different paedophiles have different attitudes to the children that they engage with, with some arguing that they are involved in a normal relationship and that paedophilia is merely a sexuality (O'Carroll 1980; Howitt 1995). These cognitive distortions tie into how the offender views his offending behaviour and the ways in which he will offend against children. In line with the heterogeneous nature of paedophiles, not all paedophiles sexually and/or physically abuse children (Howitt 1995; Taylor and Quayle 2003; Silverman and Wilson 2002), having no typical offending behaviour, frequency or level of intensity (Howitt 1995; La Fontaine 1990); with some paedophiles reacting negatively or in disgust to the behaviours of others (O'Carroll 1980; Taylor and Quayle 2003).

The individualistic nature of paedophilia is when the potential causes/aetiology of paedophilia are examined, with paedophilia being described as a mental illness (Bagley *et al.* 1994), a mental deficiency (Blanchard *et al.* 1999), a brain deficiency (Cantor *et al.* 2008), a developmental abnormality (Lee *et al.* 2002) or as the result of the cycle of abuse (Bagley *et al.* 1994; Howitt 1995; La Fontaine 1990). Consequentially, as there is no single aetiology of paedophilia (McDonald Wilson Bradford 2000; Nurcombe 2000; McCartan 2008a, 2008b), this makes the treatment of paedophiles a complex and difficult issue to resolve, with a range of different approaches existing, including Cognitive Behaviour Therapy programmes (considered in chapter 7 of this volume), community care programmes like Circles of Support and Accountability (considered in chapter 9 of this volume) and drug treatments (considered in chapter 8 of this volume); with different treatments working

better or worse for different offenders (Howitt 1995). The UK currently does not promote a single, all inclusive treatment programme for paedophilic offenders, and as such it can be argued that it does not have an effective treatment programme for paedophilic offenders (Harrison 2007; Brooks-Gordon *et al.* 2004).

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As the media, especially the print media, does not tend to focus on the complexity and heterogeneous nature of paedophiles and paedophilia, this may have affected the public's understanding of paedophilia. Research indicates that child sexual abuse, and paedophilia, is one of the most misunderstood crimes in modern society; particularly, as society denies the occurrence of, underestimates the frequency of (O'Grady 2001), and under-reports paedophilia (West 2000; Simmons *et al.* 2002).

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The public, therefore, tend to see paedophiles as an homogeneous group, who have fixed personality traits that are unchangeable, and as such not advocating treatment, but castration or incarceration (McCartan 2004, forthcoming); which seems reasonable given the public's relative lack of exposure to paedophiles and informed opinion/literature. This has led professionals who work in and around the field of child sexual abuse to suggest that the public have a poor understanding of paedophilia and that this poor comprehension was developed through their exposure to the media (McCartan 2007).

Social Responsibility, the media and paedophilia

As we have previously discussed the media has a degree of influence on individual and social attitudes, contributing to the formation as well as maintenance of moral panics and social risks. This is particularly true of paedophilia, where the media's seemingly slanted reporting appears to have affected the public perception and

attitude to paedophilia, on occasion leading to socially unacceptable behaviour (Bell 2002; Silverman and Wilson 2002; Cross 2005; Breen 2008). Hence, how socially responsible, moral and ethical has the media been in its coverage of paedophilia?

Notions around morality, responsibility, professionalism and ethics are very individualistic, with different people having different beliefs of what is and is not acceptable. This links with the type of media that people expose themselves to, the degree to which they accept the medias interpretation of stories and the point to which they believe the media to be socially responsible (McCartan 2007, forthcoming). The media in the UK, and in any free society, is seen as the **fourth estate**, with the ability to report what they wish with no real obligations (McQuail 2007); however, they are confined to a certain degree by the social norms of the society and culture within which the operate, reinforcing the socially constructed nature of the media and the symbolic relationship that it has with the public. There are certain expectations placed on the press in society, for they have both internal (editorial, corporate ownership, etc.) and external pressures (the government and the public), which helps shape the social and moral responsibility of what they should and should not produce (McQuail 2007). The media argue that they have a responsibility to produce stories which have a social purpose and are relevant (McQuail 2007), providing justification for them to focus on certain sensitive and controversial stories, for example child sexual abuse, terrorism and political scandal. However, in doing so, the media has a dual public interest, in that they have roles and responsibilities that are in the public interest, and as such the public are interested in the way that the media conduct themselves. This means that the press must maintain a high degree of accountability and impartiality, always presenting themselves and their stories in the best light. These notions of best practice tie in neatly with the social responsibility theory of the press, which states

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that the media has obligations to society and in achieving these obligations they have to be truthful, fair and relevant; and although the media have the right to self-regulate they must adhere to professional codes of ethics. These ethical guidelines have become more professional and coherent, with the media, and especially the press, having to atone to the public and government for their stories and stance; particularly with the creation of the Press Complaints Commission.

Despite this proposed idea of media civic duty, social responsibility and self-directed regulation, does the media always act responsibly and morally when dealing with sensitive issues? The media has been criticised for its handling of sensitive and traumatic issues, particularly paedophilia and child sexual abuse with the News of The World's Name and Shame campaign, as highlighted earlier, receiving widespread commendation. Furthermore, there has been speculation that the media, especially the press, sacrifice their core responsibilities in how they report crime, especially socially sensitive crimes, in an attempt to boost sales and make profit (Friendly and Goldfarb 1968; Reiner 2002). However, the media would counter this, arguing that it has acted morally, ethically and responsibly by providing relevant stories that are in the public interest, suggesting that if the public does not want to read the stories it produces then the public would not support it (Cohen and Young 1981; Howitt 1998; Greer 2003). This reinforces the link between the media and the public, emphasising that both are involved in the selection and promotion of certain stories and social campaigns, as the public continually invest in the stories they are interested in and the media only covers those issues which support the public's interests (Gamson *et al.* 1992; Howitt 1998).

The medias coverage of socially sensitive and traumatic stories can also be criticised, particularly with regard to paedophilia, through the language used and the discussion provided. This is more of an issue for the tabloid press who skim over

complex issues providing simplistic and generalised coverage (Thomas 2005). As already highlighted in this chapter, the language used to discuss paedophilia as well as the approach to understanding paedophilia has contributed to an increase in the public perception of stranger danger, the promotion of paedophile myths and a lack of real insight into the issue. Hence, are the media really acting in a socially responsible way? Does such behaviour by certain sections of the media promote an unrealistic and inappropriate understanding of a complex issue and are they really informing the public of threats to their children as they claim (Wade 2009)? Consequentially, are they being relevant, honest, impartial and acting in the public interest or just reinforcing as well as promoting socially constructed fears?

Hence, questions must be asked about the media's culpability in the stories it reports and way that it does so, thus is the media responsible for the social, political and personal outcomes of its stories? The News of the World's Name and Shame campaign was linked to vigilante action (Silverman and Wilson 2002; Bell 2002; Thomas 2005; McCartan 2008a), consequentially were they responsible for this social unrest? On one level it can be argued that they were, as their story provided the impunities and directed the public's outrage (Silverman and Wilson 2002; Bell 2002), however, on the other hand, you cannot hold the media responsible for the actions of a few who would have partaked in deviant behaviour in any event and consequentially jumped upon a bandwagon (Williams 2004; McCartan 2007). Whilst the media would argue that it is their responsibility to produce socially relevant material and not to sanction, promote or encourage public reaction; they would also say that they are not responsible for individual and social reactions. However, is this merely shifting the blame and downplaying their social responsibility, does this cognitive distortion mean that the media is absolved of all guilt?

The social and ethical responsibility of the media in dealing with socially sensitive, traumatic and difficult stories is important, because it can contribute to both individual and social reactions to these stories, helping to socially construct attitudes and possibly creating further moral panics. This is what has happened with paedophilia in modern society, and the question must be addressed concerning whether the media has acted responsibly, and if not why not?

Conclusions

This chapter has discussed the role of the media in the creation and maintenance of the current crisis of paedophilia in modern society, suggesting that the media, especially the press, has played a central role in the current phenomenon of paedophilia, helping to shape individual attitudes, public opinions and government strategy. However, the media representation of paedophilia has been problematic, possibly socially irresponsible and has contributed to the unrealistic social construction of the realities of paedophilia that exist in modern society. The main conclusion that this chapter comes to is, if the media, especially the tabloid press, took a more responsible, socially conscious and informed approach to the discussion as well as to the reporting of paedophilia this could lead to a more appropriate social construction and a better informed public. Public education through the media is not a recent phenomenon (McQuail 2007), but in the case of paedophilia it may be the best strategy to get the public to engage with a difficult and sensitive issue. In order to improve public education, it is suggested that the media should adapt its coverage of paedophilia in the following ways:

The media should change its approach to discussing and presenting paedophilia. Some have started to do this, especially the visual media, by producing a mixed bag of approaches, including: a more rounded and thought provoking perception of paedophilia through films such as *Secret Life* (2008) and *The Woodsman* (2005) and the portrayal of paedophilic activities in the soap opera *Eastenders*, during 2008-2009; a more controversial perception (*Brass Eye Special – Paedophilia* 2001); or a more factual insight (*The Hunt for Britain's Paedophiles* 2002; *Exposed: The Bail Hostel Scandal* 2006). However, this has only occurred in certain sections of the media, with portions of the print media, especially the tabloids, sticking to the traditional, reactive and emotional approaches of reporting paedophilia.

The media would have to question their social and civic responsibility with regard to paedophilia, for instance questioning whether it is socially, morally and professionally responsible to print the names and addresses of child sexual abusers (Belfast Telegraph 2009; Critcher 2002), especially when they can result in vigilante action (Breen 2008; Silverman and Wilson 2002; Bell 2002; Cross 2005)?

In discussing and reporting upon paedophilia the media, especially the tabloid press, needs to use non-emotive, sensible and more realistic language. This would enable the media to realistically discuss the realities of paedophilia and its potential impact upon society, as such it would also allow them to become more impartial.

The media needs to present the issues and debates around paedophilia in a balanced light, suggesting the possible explanations for the offenders' behaviour, possible treatments and resolutions, and socially positive reintegration strategies; it is not

enough to label these people as sick, mad or otherwise and then socially disregard them.

The media should, as some sections already do, continue to engage with professionals when discussing the realities of paedophilia in an attempt to give a more realistic understanding. Although this can be problematic as professionals do not necessarily have a consistent perception and understanding of paedophilia (McCartan 2008b, 2009) and media representatives are often pressurised by deadlines and space (i.e., copy space, recording time or air time). However, it is still not too much to ask that a more realistic approach is taken. If it was it would mean that the public were able to get the most informative as well as most sensible advice on paedophilia and child sexual abuse; hopefully leading to a reduction in the current moral panic.

The media, specifically the press, needs to decide what their standpoint on paedophilia is, are they enforcing social guardianship or popular punitiveness? The News of the World claimed that it was doing the former, although it seems more likely that it was enforcing the latter.

In conclusion it is important to realise that although the media construction and representation of paedophilia has played an important role in the current moral panic surrounding paedophilia in the UK it is not the only factor; with the public and government also playing a pivotal role. The social construction of reality that is aided by the media can help promote an understanding of paedophilia in modern society and as such allow us to deal with this prevalent social issue in a more realistic and level headed fashion.

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