

Playing safe: media coverage of child sexual abuse prevention strategies

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Abstract

This paper examines the media coverage of preventing child sexual abuse. It draws on a content analysis of all press and TV news coverage about child sexual abuse that appeared during a complete 12 month period. The findings demonstrate that the bulk of the coverage was case-based, for example focusing on the Orkney case. There was very little opportunity for broader discussion of general issues of concern, including how sexual assaults against children might be prevented. The coverage of 'prevention' which did exist drew on a very narrow range of debates and was disproportionately concerned with abuse outside the home (abductions by strangers, or abuse within institutions such as schools or children's homes). Discussions about prevention were dominated by reactive news stories generated by particular 'scandals'. The coverage was also largely drawn from a small constituency of official source agencies (such as government officials, court proceedings and police statements). There were few attempts to address the broader social conditions which might facilitate or inhibit sexual violence or to examine explicitly political analyses of the problem.

The paper argues for a more diverse discussion about ways of preventing sexual violence against children, especially assaults by fathers, uncles, brothers and friends of the family. This demands close attention to the ways in which the mass media operate, as well as the priorities of source agencies. The paper points to factors within news production practices which both obstruct and facilitate debate about prevention and concludes by suggesting strategies to promote this issue as a vital part of the public agenda.

1. Introduction

The "Child Sexual Abuse and the Media project", based at Glasgow University Media Group, is a study of the production, content and reception of press and television coverage of sexual violence against children. The media production process is being examined through interviews with journalists, newspaper and television editors and source agencies; the content of the mass media coverage is being documented through a detailed analysis of the national British press and TV news reports and the reception of the coverage is being explored through focus group discussions with 'the public'.

This article focuses on the content analysis of all the press and TV news coverage of child sexual abuse which appeared during 1991. This involved a comprehensive archive of all the 1668 press items and 149 TV news bulletins which covered this topic during that year. Each report was coded onto a specially developed software package, enabling us to search by headline, date,

origin (e.g. which newspaper), name of journalist and format (e.g. an editorial versus a column). Additional details, such as the main topic of the item, how people were described and who was interviewed were also recorded.

2. Findings

Initial findings from the content analysis reveal that 71% of all the press coverage, and 83% of all the TV news coverage was case-based. In other words most reports focused on describing events around one particular incident or set of allegations, rather than discussing areas of general concern. The one exception to this was that a significant proportion of the coverage, 9%, addressed the question of how best to intervene when abuse was suspected. By contrast other general issues, such as the causes of child sexual abuse, or how it could be prevented from happening in the first place received very little coverage. There were only 68 items in the entire press archive (i.e. 4%) and only 12 items in the TV news coverage focusing on prevention. When the press did cover 'prevention' it often did so outside straightforward news-of-the-day reports. A substantial number of the press items about prevention, 40%, were in 'alternative' formats such as letters or feature articles on the women's page. In other words, only 60% of items about prevention were straightforward news reports as compared to 79% of the press coverage in the archive as a whole. Never-the-less the reports are dominated by reliance on official sources. There were 108 citations/quotes from different agencies and individuals in the press reports about prevention. The greatest number of attributed quotations came from government sources such as the Home Office, the Department of Education or the Department of Health. These accounted for 35 (i.e. 1 in 3) of the citations. This dominance of government sources was even clearer in the television news reporting where 8 out of the 12 'prevention stories' were based around an announcement by the Home Secretary about therapy for convicted sex offenders.

Most of the items about prevention were also clearly linked to specific cases such as the series of child sex murders/abductions in August 1991 or abuse in a school (the Crookham court case) or children's home (The Frank Beck case). Within this framework, the reports drew on a narrow repertoire of strategies, usually focusing on one of three tactics:

- a) Alerting parents to the possibility of abduction, and training children to recognise and resist molestation
- b) therapy for abusers
- c) screening anyone working with children (e.g. teachers).

EXAMPLES OF HEADLINES ABOUT 'PREVENTION'

I. Training children/ alerting parents

A VIDEO CAMPAIGN TO BEAT MONSTERS [Star, 3.7.91]

GUIDE TO KEEPING SAFE THIS SUMMER [Today, 19.8.91]

IT'S OKAY TO BE RUDE IF IT WILL SAVE YOUR LIFE, CHILDREN TOLD [Telegraph, 16.8.91]

PLAY SAFE TO KEEP YOUR CHILD FREE OF A MONSTER [Express, 17.8.91]

II. Therapy for abusers

SEX PERVERTS FACE THE AWFUL TRUTH, IT COULD SAVE OUR CHILDREN [Sunday People 25.8.91]

JAIL TREATMENT WILL AIM TO STOP DANGEROUS FANTASIES [Independent 8.6.91]

WE'LL CURE RAPISTS [Today 8.6.91]

FACE TO FACE WITH EVIL: JAILED CHILD MOLESTERS CONFRONT THEIR VICTIMS' AGONY AS PART OF A 'CURE'. [Mail 21.01.91]

III. Monitor abusers/ Screening staff

PUPIL PROTECTION LAWS DUE [Independent, 13.4.91]

PRIVATE SCHOOL PUPILS TO GET NEW SAFEGUARDS [Times 13.4.91]

CLOSE DOORS ON KIDS' HOMES CREEPS [Sunday People, 13.10.91]

NEW CURBS ON PERVERTS [Mirror 15.2.9]

There were very few reports which explored alternative theories about how to prevent the sexual victimisation of children. Strategies such as training for parenthood, paying greater attention to children's rights or the provision of better resources for children's homes were the main topic of only two or three items each and these were particularly likely to appear in 'alternative' formats, rather than being straightforward reports of a press conference. For example, none of the following three items about children's rights and provisions in children's homes were straightforward mainstream news reports: THE LITTLE BASTARDS' WE WOULD RATHER FORGET [Editorial, Independent on Sunday 1.12.91]; CHILDREN WHO SHOULD BE HEARD [Letter, Independent 4.12.91]; THE SAD TRUTH ABOUT OUR FORGOTTEN CHILDREN [Article, Women's page, Mail 5.12.91]

There were only a handful of items in the press which attempted to explore broad social, and explicitly political, theories about the underlying causes of sexual abuse, or how to prevent it. One of these was an article which appeared in the Mail which identified the causes of child abduction and rape as, among other things, geographical fragmentation and sexual liberation:

"In the 1950's and 60's [...] (t)remendous shame was attached to publicly deviant behaviour; now the shame has disappeared from nearly all behaviour. Sexual liberation means that everyone is urged to express their true sexual natures unashamedly - and the message is transmitted to the child molester as much as to the bashful teenager". [Mail, 25.6.91]

In spite of the role of the Women's Liberation Movement in highlighting sexual violence and theorising about the underlying cause, feminist perspectives on sexual violence are notable by their absence. We could not find a single report about prevention in 1991 which cited any representatives from the extensive network of grass-roots support services established by feminists. There were only two reports about preventing child sexual abuse which even mentioned theories such as 'male socialisation' or 'power' - one of these reports included a statement about masculinity by Ray Wyre, who works with sex abusers; the other briefly cited, or rather parodied, a statement which was attributed to a social worker with 'a largish body' 'jeans' and a 'determinedly unmade up' face. [Times 19.10.91]

The other striking feature of these reports about prevention is the disproportionate focus on abuse outside the domestic home and family network. We analysed the reports by the nature of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Three categories of relationship were used: 1) Assaults by strangers; 2) Assaults by those working with children (e.g. teachers); and 3) Assaults by friends and family (usually fathers, uncles, stepfathers and grandfathers). Within articles about prevention, this last category of abuser received very little attention. Some of the items discussed prevention strategies (such as therapy for the abuser) in non-specific terms, without stating the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. However, of those which did specify, the majority focused either on 'stranger-danger' or on assaults by staff in schools or children's homes. Thus 47 items concerned preventing children from being abducted by strangers or being abused by teachers or care workers, only 2 items focused on preventing abuse within the family and both these addressed the role of the child's mother e.g. 'WHEN A MOTHER IS WRONG TO STAY MUM' [Sunday People 27.10.91].

The attention given to the abuse of children in care was a particularly important development in 1991 that was due, in part, to the Frank Beck case. Similarly, concern about 'stranger danger' was generated by the sex murder/abductions of several children during the summer of 1991. These attacks led to headlines which billed abduction as 'Every Parent's Nightmare'. 'After three child-killings, a climate of fear mars the summer holidays. [...] Tim Raymond asks how to guard against the ultimate nightmare' [Sunday Times 18.8.91] Some of the papers produced special guides to children's safety and the headlines conjured up the image of a nation in shock: 'WEEP, 3 children murdered in 100 hrs as Britain sinks to a new low' [the Sun 14.8.91]. Such concern is understandable, but make one wonder why there is no comparable attention given to the prevention of sexual assaults and murders within the family home, especially given that between 150 and 200 children meet their death every years at the hands of their own parents and a large proportion of reported sexual assaults are by relatives or friends of the family. [NSPCC fact pack 1992]

3. News production: Explaining the news coverage of prevention:

The nature of this media reporting relates to the routines of news coverage and the priorities and practices of journalists and editors. In order to understand this it is necessary to examine the news gathering strategies of the media (including their relationship to sources and the routines of 'daily news' production) and to consider the ways in which dominant ideologies inform the news agenda.

Journalists and editors operate within clearly defined routines in order to select and present the 'news-of-the-day'. Their routines of selection implicitly involve a process of interpretation of all the 'potential' news (Cohen & Young, 1981). This does not usually include examining the underlying causes of any social issues whether that be war, industrial disputes, crime or sexual violence (e.g. GUMG, 1976; Chibnall, 1977; Hollingsworth, 1986; Soothill & Walby, 1991). Instead, the media provide a framework within which events are debated (Cohen & Young, 1981). Media research has therefore been concerned to examine the agendas that are set: what are the boundaries and limitations concerning what is to be

included, what is 'legitimate' and 'non-legitimate' information within media production?

The broad content analysis of the 1991 news coverage of child sexual abuse revealed that most items in the press were routine 'case-based' reports and that a high percentage of the news coverage is actually done by 'general' reporters - people working on shifts whose job it is to report a whole range of news stories. Most coverage, 78%, is written by unnamed journalists or journalists who only wrote up to 3 or 4 articles on child sexual abuse in the entire year. Journalists with a specialist knowledge of some sort thus only deal with a minority of the coverage.¹ Thus the majority of reports concerning child sexual abuse are informed by 'general' news values associated with the news-of-the-day such as immediacy and drama (Chibnall, 1977). They are also often produced within the framework of newsworthiness associated with the coverage of crime and deviance, an area of news gathering which relies heavily on official sources such as the police, court reports and the Home Office/Scottish Office (Erikson et al 1987; Chibnall 1977).

The 'prevention' of child sexual abuse as a general topic does not have an inherent natural news-life all of its own. It does not fit into a 'news-of-the day' approach in the same way as the progress of a trial, for example, and this partly explains why the coverage of prevention that does exist is often reactive and attached to particular events (e.g. it is covered on the back of a particular court case or inquiry). Saturation coverage of dramatic events such as Cleveland, Rochdale and Orkney has now also led to a resistance to addressing the general topic - a situation described by some journalists we interviewed as 'child abuse fatigue'. This 'fatigue' negatively informs the news selection process to exclude a great deal of coverage about child sexual abuse.

The dominance of government sources in prevention items is partly explained by the 'crime news' framework, but also by the simple fact that government sources are authoritative, and also have announced some specific initiatives (for example about treatment for offenders). However, in the 'prevention' debate government agencies have also been placed on the defensive by particular events involving failures in official systems (such as schools). Their predominance as a source is not, therefore, a simple reflection of their 'power', it also connects to the nature of the stories during 1991 which included 'scandals' at boarding schools and children's homes, institutions for which the government was seen to bear some responsibility. The fact that most of the reports about prevention are reactive, rather than pro-active may also reflect the lack of pro-active initiatives by potential source agencies: their failure to address the general problem of long term prevention strategies (whether this be through campaign initiatives or straight-forward publicity strategies). This failure, in turn, may be due to the structural constraints on child protection agencies (Grazio, 1981). It is also perhaps due to the fact that short term protective measures, such as school-based prevention programs, hold greater appeal because they appear to hold the potential for preventing abuse without attempting to confront the wider political implications and 'without the institution of major new social programs' (Finkelhor, 1986, 225).

Most source agencies who deal with news coverage of child sexual abuse do have good press and PR systems in place, even if they often experience restrictions to their work due to limited resources of time and money. However children's charities and other voluntary agencies are often pushing against strong ideological factors which influence the media coverage of child sexual abuse, as well as having to confront public unease with the subject of incest. This has been commented on by one interviewee from *Kidscape* who revealed:

"We have found that one of the difficulties about getting across messages about children abused by people they know is that very often it's not a message people want to touch. I think people concentrate far more on the 'stranger danger' aspect of child abuse because [...] people are not hideously embarrassed about talking to their children about it; advertisers, people who want to sponsor us, it's a subject they're happy to talk about. People don't want to be associated with child abuse as incest [...] it's a message we try to get across to the press but they're very wary, [...] it's not a fun subject, it's likely to put readers off, may upset readers, and it's easier and safer to concentrate on strangers and bullying" (*Kidscape* 1994).

Media discussions about prevention, and particularly about how to prevent child sexual abuse within the family, may also be inhibited by the 'hard news' imperatives of news reporting. The news values of TV news have been described as 'male news' by a senior women journalist from the BBC (McGregor, 1992) and this perspective is echoed by source agencies who spoke to us about the dominance of 'male values' within coverage of child sexual abuse. Concern about the underlying causes of sexual violence, particularly sexual violence within the home, does not fit easily into this framework, especially as it is difficult to address the question of how to prevent incest without having to consider the problem of the institution of the family and to reflect on some of the feminist critiques of male sexuality. The exclusion of broad political debate about prevention may thus be partly due to the male-dominated nature of the mass media and the lack of credibility attributed to feminist perspectives and source agencies. Interviewees from feminist organisations complained to us about journalists always wanting to interview a 'victim' and not requesting a contribution to a debate or further understanding (Kelly, 1994). Such dismissal or misrepresentation of feminist accounts of sexual violence is also documented in Soothill & Walby analysis of the media coverage of sex crimes (Soothill & Walby, 1991, 149)

4. Conclusion

The factors described above have clear implications for those working in the field of child sexual abuse who wish to promote mass media discussion of prevention. Firstly, the data confirm the importance of using a 'news peg' and being ready to capitalise on 'newsworthy' events in order to promote the prevention debate and try to counter the "tabloidisation" of news. For example, the scandal around the Frank Beck case provided the opportunity for some alternative sources, such as the Association of Young People in Care, to gain a

voice on the national British television news and take the opportunity to challenge official wisdom. Secondly, our analysis suggests that one way of counteracting 'child abuse fatigue' may be to target those specialists such as Social Affairs/ Social Services correspondents who will push against this resistance within news organisations. It may also be particularly productive to target alternative formats within the press such as features and the letters pages and to nurture contacts with particular journalists, including women's page editors and columnists.

Thirdly, our analysis points to the importance of creating 'news-of-the-day' events and new initiatives which would attract media attention. The success of some prevention initiatives in attracting media attention suggests that the problem does not lie with the media alone. The new Zero Tolerance campaign against violence, run by Edinburgh District Council, for example, has attracted considerable press and television coverage (see Kitzynger & Hunt, 1994; Kitzynger, in press) and previous research conducted at the Glasgow University Media Group has demonstrated the positive impact of initiatives from non-government organisations such as the Terrance Higgins Trust on the media reporting of AIDS (Beharrall & Miller, 1993).

Finally, it is important to continue to raise the question of how child sexual abuse can be prevented in the long-term and to keep issues, such as conditions within children's homes, on the public agenda even when immediate media attention fades. Potential source organisations also need to insist on the importance of addressing the most common forms of abuse (by male relatives and friends of the family) instead of only responding to media panics about 'stranger-danger'. If the debate about preventing child sexual abuse is permitted to remain as a debate about the relative merits of different schemes for teaching children to say no, providing therapy for abusers and screening staff who work with children, then some of the most important questions are being left out of the equation. To focus on empowering children as the answer to sexual danger is an abdication of community responsibility (Gilbert, 1990) and to concentrate on protection strategies without prevention strategies is ultimately to apply band-aids only. (see Calvert, 1990; Kitzynger, 1990) . Short term protection strategies need to be combined with longer term primary prevention initiatives and a vision of a society in which child sexual abuse no longer exists.

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¹ By "specialist knowledge" we are referring to a) journalists who are Specialist - Crime, Social Services, Legal, Health etc., and b) those whose continued and heavy coverage of a case or series of cases gave them time and opportunity to become involved in the issues. Quantity of involvement, however, does not necessarily equate with the quality of one's journalism or the nature of the coverage. For example, some of the journalists involved in the Orkney case certainly seemed to prioritise 'drama' over other possible news values.