

# Risky Business

Chris Greer examines press representations of child sex abuse in Northern Ireland.

**"FURY OVER FREED CHILD SEX BEAST"**

*News Letter*

**"POLICE HUNT SEX FIEND"** *Belfast Telegraph*

**"EVIL SEX BEAST BEHIND BARS"** *Irish News*

**"PERVERT CHEAT CAGED AT LAST"** *Sunday World*

Press representations of child sex abuse in Northern Ireland transcend the party politics that is normally so characteristic of newsprint journalism in that social order. The Belfast Telegraph and News Letter are openly unionist, the Irish News promotes a nationalist agenda and the Sunday World lies somewhere in between. Though these newspapers reflect the political division in Northern Ireland, their representation of child sex offenders establishes a common enemy against which everyone can unite. Northern Ireland is in a period of transition. Emile Durkheim observed that at times of rapid social change the collective denunciation of society's deviants performs two important functions. It consolidates moral boundaries by clearly distinguishing the 'good' from the 'bad', and it promotes social solidarity. Correspondingly, the

press portrayal of child sex offenders denotes a criminal type that is wholly distinct from 'good' society and provides a space for moral consensus to flourish amidst deep-seated conflict. Northern Ireland is usually discussed in terms of its differences from other jurisdictions. In the demonisation of child sex offenders, however, Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions share something in common. The comments that follow should be of relevance to practitioners and journalists across the UK.

## Prevailing images

Research and experience have repeatedly shown that children are at greatest risk from those they know, frequently from those within the family (Grubin, 1998). Yet cases of intrafamilial abuse are seldom reported in Northern Ireland. It is the cases of 'stranger-danger' that consistently make the headlines. The closeness of so many victims to their abusers is difficult for society - including many journalists - to accept (Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995). It is easier to think about child sex abuse as a danger that can be shut out, rather than something that occurs within the safety of the home. By reinforcing this view, press representations obscure the social reality.

Practitioners who deal with child sex abuse on a daily basis are frustrated by the misleading images promoted in the press. They are especially concerned that the consistent emphasis on the 'otherness' of abusers may have serious consequences. The Chief Executive of NIACRO argues that the press are "not telling the truth about where the risks for our children are. If we say that our whole purpose is reducing victimisation, then people need to know where the risk is". The co-ordinator of the RUC Child Abuse and Rape Enquiry units suggests, "most people think that a sex offender will jump out and grab the first child that walks past their gate. They don't know about the grooming process." Indeed, some feel that misleading representations may in fact misdirect efforts to avoid victimisation. For the Director of the Nexus Institute this might involve: "Bringing their child to the school bus and picking them up from the school bus because they think that somewhere between the school and home some madman will grab them and take them away. Whereas 90 per cent of child abusers will target their own child."

## Increasing social awareness

But these criticisms need to be balanced against the press' positive role. It is beyond question that media coverage has contributed to making visible a problem that was previously hidden. Survivors frequently note its impact on their decision to disclose: "You put it to the back of your mind and try to forget. You try to act like it never happened...and every time you read an article or see it on the TV it brings it up again. It might cause you problems, but at least it is coming up there. If you read somebody else's story you think, 'I'm not the only one'."

Another simply recalled: "It made me feel that I had nothing to be ashamed of".



Julie Grogan

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In addition to the general unease with the issue, organisational, commercial and legal constraints militate against reporting the reality of child sex abuse. Stories are produced within a limited timeframe, preferably in an exciting or dramatic style, with fierce competition from rivals. These conditions promote the coverage of individual cases rather than wider issues like causes, risk and prevention. As one reporter put it, "it's bang, bang, get a story out, and it doesn't necessarily get the reflection it would deserve." Legal restrictions prohibit the printing of information that might identify the child. In cases of incest, excluding names and specifying the charge would help communicate that the dangers are most often in the home. But as another journalist explained, because "a name is always desirable...the charge tends to be blurred" so the perpetrator can be identified. Journalists and practitioners are often wary of each other. Journalists complain that they receive little co-operation from the practitioners they contact. But practitioners maintain that journalists are only interested in events, not wider issues, and confidentiality limits what they can provide. With few exceptions, practitioners in Northern Ireland tend to be reactive rather than proactive in their dealings with the press.

### The way ahead

The development of an ongoing dialogue has been proposed as one possible way forward. Journalists and practitioners could meet to exchange ideas and concerns, discuss ways to better communicate the reality of the problem, and attempt to establish the levels of trust that are central to reciprocal journalist-source relations. The proposition has been discussed with a wide range of key players in Northern Ireland

and, though opposed by some, has won approval from many. The problems with the press representation of child sex abuse will not disappear overnight. There are too many constraints to overcome. But the changes that might result from the proactive engagement of journalists and practitioners in a co-operative dialogue could help increase social awareness by challenging rather than reinforcing the myths that currently prevail.

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### References:

- Kitzinger, J. and Skidmore, P. (1995) 'Child Sexual Abuse and the Media', *Summary Report to ESRC*. Award no. R000233675. Report available from Glasgow Media Group.
- Grubin, D. (1998) *Sex Offending Against Children: Understanding the Risk*, Police Research Series, Paper 99, Policing and Reducing Crime Unit. London: Home Office.