

Writing about wrongs

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Originally published in
The Drama of Cleveland:

A monitoring report on press coverage of the sexual abuse of children and controversy in Cleveland

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(Published by the Campaign for Press & Broadcasting Freedom and the Standing Committee on Sexually Abused Children, 1989)

Anyone relying upon the popular British press for accurate information about almost any subject should be forgiven for their naivete. Post Wapping, proprietors like Rupert Murdoch and editors like Michael Gabbert have succeeded in transforming the function of newspapers. More precisely, they have made explicit what has been implicit for many years.

Newspapers, especially the tabloids, are commodities whose front pages tell us more about how to market a perishable product than about what is happening in society. Sex and violence are increasingly used as sales gimmicks with little thought for the brutalising effect of irresponsible over-exposure.

Most newspapers still sincerely believe that their craft is not just about communication technique but also about providing us with useful information. Unfortunately, they are only one part of a newspaper *production* process. A reporter may collect valid information, but in the *process* of its translation into print, the raw material is shaped and styled to sell a product rather than to inform.

When commenting about the shortcomings of the British press we are now dealing with a double set of delusions – journalists who still think they are performing a socially useful service, and readers who still believe that there must be some truth in it if it is in the papers. Neither would expect literal truth in advertising, but both continue submit to the myth that in newspapers facts are sacred.

The crisis about sexually abused children in Cleveland offered a classic example of the use of disturbing news as a marketing technique. Newspapers daily out-bid each other for sensational headlines and eye-catching front pages, not to make sure everyone learned the true facts of the situation, but in an attempt to outsell their rivals.

The prurience of the tabloids was mirrored by equally dubious appeals to public anxiety in the 'quality' papers. While the different ends of the newspaper spectrum may not compete directly against each other, all of the national press jostle for position in the ubiquitous news marketplace – keen to out-do radio and television bulletins with more detailed and more enduring material.

The popular press played upon an almost hysterical anxiety which they had themselves helped to generate. The serious papers offered hastily compiled 'in-depth' assessments in the guise of a more reflective approach. Although many of the pundits considered that the crisis was more a case of sloppiness on the part of other professionals, in truth the sorry tale of Cleveland was a tribute to sloppy journalism.

One reason why no-one was prepared for the story is that few newspapers ever take the trouble to consider issues until they are knocking on the door. In part this may be a consequence of the desperate desire to keep costs down by maintaining a low complement of knowledgeable staff, and reliance on agency copy.

However, it was significant that the press, notorious as they are for generalisation, consistently referred to parents as the potential abusers, instead of acknowledging from the outset that the overwhelming majority of abusers are *men*, and the majority of abused children are *girls*. Once again, faced by evidence that males are most likely to be the perpetrators of violence against females the press ducked its responsibility, and allowed readers' minds to run riot with bizarre notions of who might be engaging in what permutations of abuse against whom.

Perhaps there are two lessons here for those who write about sexual abuse of children. Firstly, they owe it to the abused children to acknowledge who are the most likely abusers – men, and men who are known to their victims. Only when this is publicly recognised can we hope to tackle the underlying problems which lead to abuse occurring. And secondly, why not let the people know precisely what sexual abuse means?

In an age when sexual innuendo itself is frequently displaced by overt sexual description for titillatory purposes, why are the press so coy when it comes to writing about sexual abuse? There are valid arguments against describing in forensic detail specific cases of violence against the person, but there can be few more dangerous things than ignorance when dealing with so taboo a topic as sexual abuse.

It may be argued that it could cause additional trauma for the abused to publish details of what might have happened to them. But one of the most comforting aspects of any kind of therapy is the knowledge that you are not alone, that other people know and so might understand the reactions and feelings of the abused. In any case, such concerns were far from the thoughts of a press which, once it gets its teeth into a story, gives little thought to the impact of reporting upon those most directly concerned.

Yet the children at the centre of the Cleveland controversy were never given a voice in the nationals, even via the words of other abused children who might willingly have supplied some indication of the trauma they were suffering. Instead the Cleveland children were depicted either as appendages of aggrieved parents or simply as helpless victims.

Society needs to hear their story. While there may have been legal reasons why they could not be quoted directly, the public would have benefited from hearing their side of the story. It is important that the powerless are not relegated to the status of objects and referred to merely as victims. To have no voice is to be isolated, and isolation is the one thing that an abused child must not experience once the abuse has been acknowledged.

By using terms like 'child sex abuse' newspapers run the risk of somehow implying that the child is a knowing (and willing?) participant in a sexual act. Journalists must ask themselves what 'child sex' is meant to mean. There can be little doubt what 'sexual abuse of children' means, and this is the term which should be employed, however awkward it may seem on the page.

Similarly journalists, especially those responsible for the design and layout of pages, should consider the implication of the atmosphere they conjure up when presenting a story. Sordid sexual scandals, the activities of the criminal underworld and any behaviour regarded by the press as somehow deviant or secretive all appear to merit a film-noir style of presentation.

The seediness of much of the reporting about the Cleveland case was reflected in the manner in which some aspects of the story were put over – the printed equivalent of the hooded, silhouetted or computer distorted images much loved of investigative TV reporting. When there is universal acknowledgement within the caring professions of the need for openness and frankness about the extent and detail of sexual abuse of children, equating it with a squalid sub-culture can only be counter-productive.

Journalists must also become more aware of the valid reasons for the apparent secrecy which surrounds professions where confidentiality is essential. No-one would respect a social worker, or a doctor, or a lawyer, who blabbed about the personal affairs of a client. And while

some professional codes of conduct may seem to smack of restrictive practices, it would help if journalists were aware in advance of how little they could legitimately expect to get out of someone who is personally involved in a professional capacity.

Social workers may need to develop a new approach to the media, but it is unhelpful and possibly downright damaging, for the press to condemn people out of hand just because they will not talk to them. We are not talking here about the rich and powerful, but about people whom society expects to handle some of the most unpalatable aspects of its failure. If a journalist's job is to inform, the least the press can do is to explain the function of a social worker or consultant paediatrician or police surgeon, and to challenge instances of unnecessary secrecy instead of berating carers for responsible adherence to confidentiality – something that journalists expect the public to understand when they want to protect their sources.

There may be few agencies to whom reporters could have turned for guidance about how to tackle the issue of sexual abuse, but they might have glanced at the NUJ Code of Conduct to which most journalists are supposed to adhere. The first twelve clauses speaks to their 'duty to maintain the highest professional and ethical standards'. Clause 3 says that a journalist must 'strive to ensure that the information s/he disseminates is fair and accurate, avoid the expression of comment and conjecture as established fact, and falsification by distortion, selection or mis-representation'.

Clause 4 instructs them to 'rectify harmful inaccuracies' and to 'ensure that correction and apologies receive due prominence and afford the right of reply to persons criticised when the issue is of sufficient importance'. This may not be within the power of the individual journalist, but it is certainly something which collective action could achieve.

Clause 5 discourages obtaining information by underhand means unless justified 'by overriding consideration of the public interest', and stresses the journalist's right 'to exercise a personal conscientious objection' to the use of such means. Subject to the same consideration, Clause 6 says that 'a journalist should do nothing which entails intrusion into private grief and distress'.

If all journalists adhered to the Code, which has been devised from within their ranks, reporting of the Cleveland case, and many other major stories, would have been markedly improved. Unfortunately few members of the public are aware that the NUJ is willing to investigate and conciliate when grievances arise because journalists ignore the code, or that the union may impose punitive sanctions against the offenders. Not surprisingly those most antipathetic to the Code of Conduct are highly paid hacks on the national papers whose output is most often in breach of its clauses.

There is another more significant responsibility which the press must also address – that is their own complicity in the culture of sexual misbehaviour. Apart from glorying in the sales potential of salacious stories, many popular papers, and some of the quality papers on occasion, relish the opportunity to juxtapose news about sexual misconduct and violence with titillatory pictures, advertisements and humorous commentary on the seedier side of life.

In particular the classic pornographic image of the schoolgirl tease or nymphomaniac – which may itself have a particular significance in terms of fathers' ambivalent attitudes towards their daughters – is often employed by the tabloids to titillate male readers. Just before the Cleveland case hit the headlines, *The Sun* ran a 'Baby Look At You Now' series of page 3 pin-ups in which naked women were displayed alongside photographs of them as young girls. On 28 April, under a headline 'It's Kids Stuff For Corinne', the caption that accompanied pictures of Corinne aged 5 and naked aged 22 read: 'Corinne is a big girl now...what boy wouldn't love her to come out and play! But that's enough now you naughty rascals, you can have another page three babe tomorrow'.

On page six of the same issue, *The Sun* splashed news of a National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children report on the increase in child molestation under the banner headline 'Sex Abuse Horror of Under 5's'. Until journalists acknowledge the consequences of

such double standards and dubious preoccupation with sexual innuendo and titillation, there will be continued confusion in the press when it is confronted with crises like that in Cleveland. No amount of public moralising can undo the harm done to abused children, nor protect others from the risk of molestation and rape, while the press continues to treat sex as a commodity to sell newspapers.

For the abused child the person she learns to fear most is precisely the authority figure who has been able to impose his will and insist on her silence, apparently with impunity. Some abused children come to think of their assailant as somehow acting within his rights. When public expression of sexuality, as portrayed by the press, appears to confirm the same attitude, the quiescence of the abused child becomes less surprising. How can that child believe it has any rights to respect as a human being when the media denies it the dignity of voice, but plays along with the view that adults can indulge their sexual whims as they wish – so long as they don't get caught.

The anxiety that haunts abused children is that *they* will be in the wrong if they tell on daddy, or uncle or the man next door. Yet daily they can watch their assailant openly enjoy the spectacle of equally quiescent pin-ups.

If the Cleveland case serves only to break the taboo on discussion, it may help save future generations from the risk of sexual abuse. Sadly, there is little evidence that the press have learned their lesson, and as the repercussions of Cleveland drift into the past the sexual abuse of children may well be deemed not newsworthy – unless of course a salacious new angle can be dreamt up. But as it disappears from the front pages, neither the issue nor the actuality will go away. Meanwhile soft-porn as a sales technique will continue to gain currency, unless journalists begin to take their social responsibilities more seriously or both advertisers and readers show their abhorrence by voting with their feet.