

# Sexual Offending, UK Media and Policy Distortion

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- I am the second of the exchanges.
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# Purpose of the presentation

- To review UK media impact on UK (particularly England) sexual offending policy and responses from 1990s to present day
- To illustrate policy distortion with a key case study
- To reflect on lessons learnt and future strategies

# But media influence in this area is..

- Not a recent phenomenon.
- William Thomas Stead and Victorian prostitution
- Media coverage for good and positive policy outcome

# W.T. Stead

- In 1871 he became the youngest newspaper editor in the UK, *The Northern Echo* in Darlington, and later the *Pall Mall Gazette*.
- He used the papers as ‘an engine of social reform’.
- Campaigned against child prostitution: “the ghastliest curse which haunts civilised society, which is steadily sapping the very foundations of our morality.”

# The campaign

- ‘The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’.
- The story opened respectable society's eyes to the world of London vice where “vicious upper-class rakes” could enjoy to the full “the exclusive luxury of revelling in the cries of an immature child.”
- Stead bought a 13 year old girl ‘Eliza Armstrong’ for £5.00 (and went to prison for it)! ‘The Five Pound Virgin’.
- Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885 which, among other things, raised the female age of consent from 13 to 16.



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# Moving forward in time

- Stead identified an ‘inspection’, ‘investigative’ and ‘reporting’ role for the press-arguably the start of the UK’s infamous tabloid journalism.
- A reforming role on government, policy and key institutions.
- Informing, responsible and educating press.

# Sex Offending and UK media (press)

- 1990s saw a growing preoccupation with sex offending.
- ‘Paedophile’ used 1,312 times in UK newspapers 1992-1995; by 1998 712 articles in just first four months of year (Cobley 2000).
- Cleveland and ‘satanic abuse’, Butler-Schloss inquiry (1988) gave impetus.

# The rise of the 'predatory paedophile'

- 'Predatory paedophile'- the most hated offender.
- The rise of *BBC Childwatch and ChildLine*.
- Construction of 'stranger-danger'.
- Daily Mail, 13 March 1998, '*For Our Children's Sake, Keep These Men in Prison*' (Sydney Cooke, Robert Oliver, the 'Dirty Dozen' and manslaughter of Jason Swift).
- Murder of James Bulger.
- Murder of Sarah Payne and News of the World '*name and shame*' campaign: '*Sign here for Sarah*'. News of the World, 30 July 2000, p. 1;
- Paulsgrove estate vigilante action.

# Potential impact of media

- Increased social visibility of the issue
- ‘Framing’ of cognitive schema and implicit understandings of CSA
- ‘Disinformation’ and inaccuracy (Willis et al 2010).
- Political and policy (over) reaction.

# One key impact: a case study

- “...legislative measures have often been introduced swiftly in response to media coverage and perceived public concern” (Davidson, 2008:171).
- “Study respondents admitted to relying on the media to inform them of events, trends, and current criminal justice statistics. To this end, a cycle emerges in which high-profile cases lead to extensive media coverage, which permits public outcry and concern and influences public officials’ perceptions. Public officials then feel the need to respond to their and the public’s concerns prompting more media attention, and the cycle continues. In sum, sex offender policies appear to be based on personal opinion, public perception, and media coverage of sex offenders and specific sex crimes, particularly those against children.” (Sample and Kadleck 2008).
- ***The Child Sex Offender Disclosure Scheme (England and Wales).***

# The child sex offender public disclosure scheme

- Actually a very limited ‘Sarah’s Law’
- Low take up against projections (585 enquiries in total across 4 pilot areas, 2400 enquiries had been projected)
- Applications actually dealt with-315
- Number of disclosures actually made- only 21 across 4 pilot areas (4% of all applications processed)
- Children actually protected-the claim of 60

# More recent position on applications and disclosures

- Between August 2010 and 2012, 2712 applications were made across 39 participating UK police forces, with 299 disclosures made, a disclosure ratio nationally of 1:9.
- London Met Police covering a population of 7.8 million had 27 applications with 7 disclosures made (Wall, 2012).

# Who wants to know?

▶ Out of 159 applications dealt with by researchers (50% of total)-

- I. 87% were parents, guardians, carers
- II. 55% were female
- III. 45% were male
- IV. 98% were white

These are indicative of total users of scheme

# Explanations of low take-up

- BME and socially disadvantaged groups
- Policy misunderstanding of information giving and marketing
- Under-estimation of social context and barriers to take up (e.g. police driven, immediate family contexts, etc)
- Feeling the ‘weight’ of responsibility-key barriers to action

# Concerned about whom?

- 91% concerned about men
- 48% about their ex-partners new partner (applications predominantly from separated fathers)
- 17% about neighbours
- 16% about family members and friends
- Very little concern about ‘stranger-danger’
- People are inquiring about people they know

# Motivations and barriers to using the disclosure scheme

- ▶ The practicalities of making an enquiry/application, including applicants' initial understanding of the scheme from marketing material.
- ▶ The process itself, including their prior knowledge and expectation of the scheme, and how they experienced initial contact with the police about their local scheme.
- ▶ The support and advice they received from significant others to make the application.
- ▶ The individual motivations they had for using the Disclosure scheme.
- ▶ Specific concerns that individuals had, but also the role of generalised concerns about sexual offenders, and a 'generalised anxiety' about paedophiles.
- ▶ Feelings of confidence or anxiety about using the scheme.

# Experiences of applicants

- Firstly think about who is excluded! (and why)- under-representation of BME, and ‘socially disadvantaged’ groups
- Quality of experience-active listening, respect, fairness, and integrity of service delivery were all key components in applicants’ perceptions of satisfaction with the scheme
- Giving ‘voice’ to anxieties
- Procedural quality rather than risk outcomes

# Functional fear versus generalised anxiety

- The scheme actually increased anxiety about paedophiles for most applicants
- The process was reassuring, but outcomes left uncertainty and a generalised anxiety
- No disclosure was not interpreted as no risk
- Unintended outcomes of ambiguity, uncertainty, and anxiety
- ‘Functional fear’ (Jackson and Gray 2010) motivates action to reduce risk.

# Lessons learnt 1

- Policy maker assumptions versus evidence based policy.
- A number of key issues at play here, including political and media lobbying; political concerns with reputational risk and attempts to provide public reassurance about sexual offenders.
- Media pressure was mistaken for public appetite, and political and reputational risk also formed part of the decision-making process of politicians and senior policymakers. (Kemshall 2014; Stout et al 2011).

# Lessons Learnt 2

- Use functional fear rather than generalised anxiety.
- Specific programmes of education and action: ‘Leisure Watch’, Bystander programmes, anti-grooming may be more beneficial.
- Policy led by media is always flawed?
- Victims voices are heard but should they lead?

# Broader lessons and issues

- We are not mere ‘dupes’
- Importance of social networks and context in opinion formation
- ‘Modifying factors’, beliefs and existing schemas, belief and self-efficacy to act

# And influencing the media

- Balance in information we give
- Promotion of accuracy
- Careful use of language
- Respect for victims
- Contextualise offending and avoid stereotypes
- Avoid blamism
- Avoid the creation of ‘monstrousness’

(Chicago Task Force Garcia-Rojas and Clark 2009; Berkley Media Studies Group 2012; O’Neil and Morgan 2010).

# Additional strategies

- Avoid inadvertently activating or reinforcing individual responsibility frames. Much media and professional discussion of sexual offending does this by the use of individual case studies, and a focus on blame and responsibility for offending.
- Consent is paramount.
- Be cautious in using a health frame-does not necessarily link to sexual violence in the minds of the audience.
- Activate the role of communities and contextualise the roots of sexual violence beyond the “family bubble”.
- Consider using local ‘opinion formers’ to carry message.

# Questions to consider

- Can we positively influence media?
- What should the policy distance be from media? (and is media public opinion?)
- Role of victims and victims groups in policy formation?

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