

## **Organised child sexual abuse in the media**

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### **Summary**

Organised sexual abuse refers to the coordinated sexual abuse of multiple children by multiple perpetrators. It has proven to be a particularly controversial form of sexual abuse. Initial reports of organised abuse in the 1980s were met with shock and disbelief, followed by a significant backlash as journalists and academics claimed that organised abuse allegations were the product of moral panic” and “false memories”. In the mass media, investigations into organised abuse were presented throughout the 1990s as evidence that public anxiety about child sexual abuse had generated a “witch hunt” in which even the most outrageous allegation of abuse was considered credible. While this argument was advanced by journalists and academics, it developed first in the mass media, where the culture of news production promoted a particularly sceptical view of sexual abuse allegations. Claims of a sexual abuse “witch hunt” were embedded within a broader backlash against feminism and child protection that called into question the prevalence and severity of sexual violence. Journalists and editors took a particularly activist role in the social construction of organised abuse as synonymous with false and exaggerated allegations.

A number of recent developments have fragmented an apparent journalistic consensus over the incredibility of organised abuse claims. The mass media has played a key role in publicising the problem of clergy abuse, focusing in particular on institutionalised cultures of silence and disbelief. Sexual abuse by celebrities and authority figures has also received global media coverage and emphasised the failure of authorities to act on reports or suspicion of sexual abuse. Such media stories directly contest prior claims by journalists that society and major institutions are overly reactive to sexual abuse disclosures. Instead, the contemporary mass media includes expanded opportunities for recognition and reporting on the diversity of sexual abuse including organised abuse. The emergence of social media has also generated new possibilities for reporting, information dissemination and debate on

organised abuse. Accordingly, public discussion of organised abuse has taken on polyvocal and increasingly agonistic qualities, as older tropes about “false memories” and “moral panics” are contradicted by factual reporting on organised abuse investigations and convictions. The capacity of victims, survivors and others impacted by organised abuse to speak for themselves on social media, rather than through the mediation of a journalist, is a key development that introduces a new dynamic of accountability and transparency that had previously been absent in media coverage of this challenging issue.

**Keywords:** sexual abuse, organised abuse, media, crime, moral panic, false memories, witch hunts, social media.

## **Introduction**

The most common narrative about organised abuse goes something like this: In the 1980s, unprecedented media coverage of child sexual abuse generated a “moral panic” in which the general public became deeply anxious about child sexual abuse (Jenkins 1992). This was a milieu comparable to the Salem witch hunts or McCarthyism in which even the most outrageous allegations of abuse were considered credible (Victor 1993). Feminists entered into “ideologically and politically friendly relationships” with religious conservatives expounding “satanic conspiracy theories”, leading to confusion between sexual abuse and imaginary satanic rituals (Nathan 1991, p 81). “Satanic ritual abuse” conspiracies abounded in which adults supposedly met in secret groups, abusing and murdered children during satanic rituals. By the mid-1990s, the lives of “thousands” of people had been destroyed by such allegations (Nathan & Snedeker 1996, p. 3). Children were taken from their parents at the slightest suspicion of abuse, and adults were charged with sex offences on the flimsiest of pretences. However the moral panic over ritual abuse faded by the end of the 1990s (Jenkins 2004, p. 185). In its place is a more sober understanding of the suggestibility of children and the prevalence of “false memories” amongst adults claiming to have been abused as children, particularly when they described organised or ritual types of abuse.

This narrative spans the mass media and academic literature, but it was “first written by journalists, and then adopted by academics” (Cheit 2014: 199). The following essay traces the development of this story from the 1980s to the present day and considers how the contemporary mass media negotiates with the ambiguities and complexities of organised

abuse allegations. The essay does not advance the position that there is a singular “truth” about organised abuse, which is a complex social phenomenon encompassing a diversity of lived experiences and constituted through competing discourses (see Salter 2013). Instead, the essay is interested in the active role of journalists and editors in the social construction of organised abuse, such that its presence in mainstream discourse has been primarily “in the negative (“it does not exist”)” (Mollon 2008, p. 118). The essay describes the emergence of organised abuse allegations in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia and the increasingly incredulous response of journalists and editors in their efforts to report on these complex cases. These three countries have been selected for comparison as analogous English-speaking liberal democracies in which claims of organised abuse have been apparent in the mass media since the 1980s.

Drawing on Kitzinger’s (2000) notion of media templates, the essay demonstrates how patterns of media reporting on organised abuse the US came to inform reporting in the UK and Australia. The subsequent “echo chamber” reinforced a homogenised stereotype of organised abuse allegations that was highly conducive to the claims that the problem of sexual abuse had been exaggerated for ideological reasons. Recent trends in media coverage of sexual abuse have challenged such claims, and the essay closes by considering the uncertain and contradictory state of contemporary media coverage of organised abuse allegations.

### **Media coverage of organised abuse in the 1980s**

Large scale media reporting of sexual abuse emerged first in the USA, where the issue was framed by journalists in the early 1980s as an “hidden epidemic” that had been suppressed by “social denial” (Beckett, 1996). It was not until the mid-to-late eighties that sexual abuse received comparable coverage in Britain and Australia, where journalists also described it as ignored but widespread (Carment 1987; Kitzinger 2000). Child and adult reports were largely accepted in this early reporting as “valid indicators of a previously ignored social problem” (Beckett 1996: 68).

This credulous view of sexual abuse testimony was short-lived. Headlines about the “hidden epidemic” of sexual abuse were quickly followed by a much narrower focus on a small number of child protection interventions involving allegations of mass or organised abuse.

These cases were typically amongst the first multi-victim, multi-perpetrator abuse case in their respective country or jurisdiction, and highlighted the unpreparedness of social workers, the police and the criminal justice system to manage and adjudicate complex sexual abuse investigations (Cheit 2014). These cases clearly met the media threshold for newsworthiness; they were unexpected, dramatic and involved graphic allegations of sexual violence against children. However, media coverage of the complexities and ambiguities of these cases became increasingly selective and thematic over time, amplifying and elaborating on the explanations of the accused that they were caught in a “witch hunt” over sexual abuse.

By the mid-1980s, the majority of American media coverage of sexual abuse concerned allegations of organised and ritualistic abuse in daycare centres (Beckett 1996, p. 69), with a particular focus on the seven employees of the McMartin daycare centre in California who were indicted on child sex charges in 1984. A number of current and former students described sexual abuse at the centre, however the most severely impacted children disclosed being abused in strange sexual rituals (Waterman, Kelly, Oliveri, & McCord 1993). The case was polarising, with the formation of opposing advocacy groups arguing, on one hand, that there was a mass conspiracy of abuse at the daycare centre, and on the other, that the case was nothing but a “witch hunt” comparable to the Salem witch trials (Summit 1994). The reference to “witches” was particularly pertinent given some children’s disclosures of ritualistic abuse, which is a form of sexual abuse in which adult sexually abuse children in a ceremonial or ritualistic fashion (Salter 2012).

The McMartin case ran for over seven years. The first trial lasted two years and resulted in a hung jury, as did a second and much shorter trial with a sole defendant. The judge in the second trial declared a mistrial and dismissed all remaining charges. The dismissal of charges was viewed by many journalists as a vindication of their position that the case had been a breach of the defendant’s civil liberties (Cheit, 2014: 85). The strong medical evidence of sexual abuse in some complainant children in McMartin was largely erased in media reporting, as were prior sexual abuse complaints against one of the defendants, as journalists reframed the case as lacking any evidentiary basis (Cheit, 2014).

Around the same time, British media coverage of child sexual abuse was also focused on a contested case involving allegations of mass abuse. In 1987, 121 children from five extended families in the county of Cleveland were taken into care after being diagnosed with sexual abuse by two local paediatrician. The children’s parents formed a lobby group and gained the

support of a politician as well as the police surgeon, protesting their innocence and demanding the return of their children. Most, although not all, children were subsequently returned to their families (Campbell 1988). The major escalation in media coverage of child sexual abuse in Britain in the late 1980s can be largely attributed to reporting on Cleveland, although this was not neutral or factual reporting (Kitzinger, 1996: p 320). Content analysis found that the media took an adversarial approach to the case, in which journalists privileged the claims of accused parents and were highly critical of the doctors and social workers involved (Donaldson & O'Brien 1995). The "broad thrust" of media coverage of Cleveland "was that these were innocent families falsely accused by over-zealous and incompetent paediatricians and social workers" (Kitzinger 2000, p 63). Campbell (1988) notes a number of facts about the case that contested this media narrative but went largely unreported, including the strong forensic evidence of sexual abuse of some children in the case, and the prior convictions for sexual abuse amongst some of the accused fathers.

In Australia, initial reporting about physical and sexual child abuse in the mid-1980s was followed by a significant escalation in media coverage of sexual abuse triggered by sexual abuse charges at a Sydney daycare centre in 1988 (Hatty 1991). Police alleged that children had been transported from the daycare centre to a motel where they were sexually assaulted by one of the daycare owners, dressed as a clown called "Mr Bubbles". In 1989, the director of public prosecution withdrew all charges against the four defendants, relying in part on testimony from American defence expert Dr Underwager that the children's witness statements had been improperly solicited. While the case constituted a "watershed moment" for sexual abuse in Australia (Hatty 1991, p. 261), media coverage of the "Mr Bubbles" case was relatively nuanced. Journalists focused on police failures in the management of the case, and questioned the decision of a magistrate in the pre-trial hearing to dismiss the charges. The credibility of defence expert Underwager was challenged in a television feature by the current affairs show 60 Minutes, where Underwager was described as an "advocate" for men accused of sexual abuse (Munro 1990). However, retrospective reporting of the case, beginning in the 1990s, began to re-situate the case within a "moral panic" framework as evidence of the hysterical excesses of child protection and over-protective mothers (Sinclair 1995). Much like the McMartin and Cleveland case, forensic evidence of sexual abuse amongst the complainant children in the Mr Bubbles case, and the prior conviction of one of the alleged perpetrators for indecent assault, became absent in media reporting on the case.

During the 1980s, across the US, Britain and Australia, a limited period of media focus on sexual abuse as a social problem was eclipsed by an international shift in attention to contested allegations of mass and organised abuse. Coverage of these allegations raised questions about the credibility of children's testimony and the motives of those working in child protection. Organised abuse and the prospect of false allegations provided a novel and dramatic "twist" on the story of sexual abuse, which journalists felt had become "boring" over the course of the decade (Kitzinger 1996). However the narrowing of media attention also reflected a hardening of journalistic sentiment against sexual abuse allegations. The majority of editors and journalists in the 1980s were male (Van Zoonen 1994) and they expressed considerable personal discomfort with the topic of sexual abuse (Skidmore 1998). Steeped in the masculine culture of news production, many journalists suspected that the issue of sexual abuse had been exaggerated by the women's movement and were incredulous at the claims being made by therapists and social workers (Kitzinger 1996). The effect of mass media coverage of "contested" cases such as Cleveland, McMartin and Mr Bubbles was that "care professionals, rather than abusers" became "identified as the main threat to children" (Kitzinger 1996, p. 320). In all three cases, the press exhibited a similar propensity to downplay or ignore the available evidence of abuse in favour of a more simplistic narrative of "false allegations".

### **The formation of organised abuse "media templates"**

Kitzinger (2000, p. 61) argues that the Cleveland case and other high-profile abuse investigations came to function in the mass media as "media templates" that were used by journalists to "make sense" out of subsequent abuse allegations. Simplified (mis)interpretations of well-known cases provided a general structure for reporting on organised abuse that was transposed from case to case, imposing an artificial homogeneity on otherwise diverse cases (Kitzinger, 2000). As more allegations of organised and ritual abuse began to surface in the early 1990s, media references to Cleveland and iconic cases such as McMartin situated these new incidents within an "interpretative framework" in which child protection services and therapists were understood as prone to solicit and act on false abuse allegations (Kitzinger 2000: 64). A particularly influential media template coalesced around the McMartin case, based on the proposition that a "witch hunt" based on "fantastical" ritual abuse allegations could be "triggered" by a single complaint, usually from a woman deemed

mentally ill or otherwise “hysterical” (Cheit, 2014). By the early 1990s, American journalists claimed to have uncovered dozens of cases that fit this template, although when Cheit (2014) reviewed the cited cases, the majority included no allegation of organised and ritual abuse. Indeed, some of the cases involved confessions, convictions and other compelling evidence of criminal activity (p 93). It was only through highly selective reporting that such cases could be compared to McMartin, which itself was subject to considerable revisioning in the media.

Nonetheless, the McMartin media template would exert significant effects on international reporting on organised abuse in the 1990s. In Australia, a Sydney Morning Herald report on the Mr Bubbles case in 1990 described the case as a “witch hunt”, and claimed that the first mother to complain about the abuse of her child in the preschool had a psychiatric illness and was “psychotic” (Hills & Hoyle 1990). In fact, the woman in question had not been subject to a psychiatric examination prior to her child’s allegation. The article’s claim was reminiscent of similar (and inaccurate) American reporting on the McMartin case (see Summit 1994). The Sydney Morning Herald article also claimed that the children’s allegations of abuse had “hardly a shred of factual corroboration”, when a number of the complainant children were diagnosed with strong medical signs of sexual assault (Oates 1996). The Press Council adjudication of a complaint against the Sydney Morning Herald article above concluded that “the case put by the article for largely dismissing concern over children’s reports of abuse was greatly overstated”, and advocated for a “much more careful and thorough approach” to the sexual abuse of children (Australian Press Council 1990). The press largely ignored this recommendation and instead early organised abuse cases such as McMartin and Mr Bubbles were constituted as symbolic templates that would prove central to subsequent media coverage on organised abuse throughout the 1990s. The sceptical tone and framing of retrospective reporting on organised abuse cases reflected the strong convictions of many journalists that these allegations constituted an injustice against the accused. In the context of what one journalist described as “several cock-ups by social workers all over the bloody country”, many in the press corps concluded it was self-evident that their job was to “side” with the accused (Kitzinger 2000: 66).

## **The media construction of organised abuse in the 1990s**

By the turn of the 1990s, media coverage of sexual abuse turned from a focus on child victims to adult survivors (Beckett 1996: 70). High profile celebrities began speaking publicly about childhood abuse by fathers and other male authority figures. In the USA, civil and criminal statutes of limitations were removed in a number of states to enable adult survivors of child abuse to pursue charges against their alleged abusers. This included testimony based on “recovered” memories of abuse that, for some adults, emerged in the context of therapeutic treatment after a period of apparent amnesia (Brown, Schefflin, & Whitfield, 1999). In response, an influential lobby group of accused adults formed, claiming that adult complaining of child sexual abuse suffered from a “false memory syndrome” and were afflicted by vivid but false recollections of sexual abuse. The concept of “false memories” originated in experimental psychology, where researchers have argued that adults can be implanted with fictional memories of sexual abuse which they subsequently recall as biographical events. These claims were based on laboratory experiments in which adults try to recall lists of words, or are misinformed that they had a childhood experience that they did not. Proponents of a “false memory syndrome” claimed that these experiments were generalizable to therapy and forensic interviews, where, they argued, adults and children were encouraged or pressured to remember incidents of abuse that never took place. Such a “syndrome” has never been recognised by a mainstream mental health organisation but the concept drew on entrenched tendencies within psychology, psychiatry and the legal profession to dismiss women as highly suggestible and prone to hysteria (Campbell 2003). Exaggerated caricatures of organised and ritual abuse allegations featured prominently in “false memory” discourse as the paradigmatic example of false allegations (Salter 2013).

The speed with which the “false memory” lobby attracted sympathetic media coverage is notable. Between 1992 and 1994, almost three quarters of all media coverage of sexual abuse in the USA focused on the subject of false allegations and false memories (Beckett 1996: 70). Kitzinger (1998) makes the point that women’s organisations had to work for years or decades to garner media attention on issues such as rape and domestic violence, but media coverage of “false memories” arose “simultaneously and symbiotic” with the formation of “false memory” lobby groups in the early 1990s (p 189). The denials of accused parents resonated strongly within a journalistic culture already suspicious of sexual abuse allegations (Kitzinger 2004: 83). The majority of media coverage presented the “false memory” position as scientifically credible and did not identify that these arguments originated with lobby



groups for people accused of sexual abuse (Sinclair 1995). In Kitzinger's (1998) sample of British news coverage, 60% of newspaper articles on the subject presented "false memories" as a pressing social problem. Less than one in ten articles took a critical view.

Media coverage of "false memories" was contextualised within a broader media "backlash" against claims about the prevalence and impact of sexual violence (Atmore 1999). Reporting on sexual abuse included explicitly misogynist and homophobic sentiments that "radical feminists" and "lesbians" working in therapy and child protection were manufacturing false allegations of abuse as part of a supposed attack on men (Atmore 2003). Accused men were seven times more likely to be quoted in newspaper coverage about "false memories" than the person (most often a woman) recalling the abuse (Kitzinger 1998: 190). Some male journalists wrote openly of their resentment at the visibility of sexual abuse allegations (Kitzinger 1998). "False memory" lobby groups actively mobilised against journalists, therapists and academics who were critical of the movement (Calof 1998; Stanton 1997). In this milieu, female academics and professionals were reluctant to speak out against the "false memory" position for fear of being pigeon-holed as "hysterical" women or ideological zealots (Kitzinger 1998: 190).

Central to media coverage of sexual abuse during this period was the controversy over "satanic ritual abuse". As previously explained, ritual abuse involves the organised sexual abuse of children structured around ceremonial ordeals (Salter, 2012). Throughout the 1990s, media commentary alleged that "radical feminists" were inciting false allegations of "satanic ritual abuse" (Wakefield & Underwager 1994, p. 43) due to their deep-seated "fear of male sexuality" (Guilliat 1996, p. 263). The label "satanic ritual abuse" was frequently appended in the media to any sexual abuse case deemed "fantastical" or "unbelievable", regardless of whether ritual abuse was alleged or not (Cheit 2001). Therapists and social workers involved in ritual abuse cases were deemed to be proponents of a "conspiracy theory" of Satanists, and were accused of manufacturing false allegations for ideological reasons (Salter, 2013). This was a discourse in which terms such as "witch hunt", "moral panic" and "false memories" were used interchangeably to characterise organised abuse allegations as the ridiculous elaborations of out-of-control therapists and social workers, rather than the disturbing disclosures of deeply vulnerable children and adults.

Against this backdrop, child protection interventions involving ritual abuse became highly controversial. For example, in 1991, nine children from four families on the Scottish island of

Orkney were taken into care under suspicion of abuse. Some of the children disclosed that their parents were sexually abusing them in collusion with each other, with a local minister was named as the alleged ringleader of the abusive group. The children's allegations were alarming and included multi-perpetrator sexual abuse, electrocution and the deliberate infliction of burns (Nelson 1991). Media focus on the case was intense, constituting a quarter of all national press coverage on child sexual abuse in 1991 in the United Kingdom (Kitzinger, 2004: 80). The press took an activist stance in this case, providing the claims of the accused parents and their allies with twice as much coverage as those of social service representatives (Skidmore, 1998). Some journalists became closely allied with the parents while particular newspapers actively campaigned on their behalf (Kitzinger 2004: 83).

Media attention had a determinative effect on the outcomes for the children in Orkney, as child protection procedures bent under the weight of public pressure (Nelson 2008). Within two months, the children were returned to their homes at the order of a local sheriff, who concluded that the actions of social services in removing the children was fundamentally flawed, although he accepted that the children may have been abused (Kitzinger 2004: 80). Indeed, the children's comments and behaviour while in foster care were concerning, including ongoing disclosure of abuse, sexualised behaviour and fear of returning to their parents (Nelson 2008). The decision to return the children was shortly reversed on appeal however the case was not pursued any further. Public sentiment would have been very hostile to any further intervention for these children, so they were allowed to remain with their families without adjudication of the evidence of sexual abuse (Nelson 2008).

Journalistic attitudes and practices in the Orkney case were influenced by prior coverage of Cleveland (Kitzinger 2004) but there other factors at play that privileged the denials of accused parents. Firstly, social services are legally inhibited from publicising details about child protection interventions and are often wary of media attention (Goddard 1994). This created a vacuum of information that accused parents actively sought to fill. In Orkney, journalists "were faced with the 'trench mentality' of the social work department and simultaneously offered unlimited access to parent's accounts of the removal of their children into care" (Skidmore 1998: 212). Secondly, the denials of the accused can be freely broadcast but there are significant legal issues in covering the perspectives of the women and children making the allegation (Kitzinger, 1998). Unproven allegations must be handled carefully by the press due to the possibility of defamation or interference in a criminal investigation while the barriers to covering the perspective of those denying the allegations are considerably

lower. Third, there was a lack of due diligence on behalf of journalists, who evinced a high degree of certainty that they knew what was “really” going on in these cases (Kitzinger 1996). Kitzinger (1998: 200) documented instances in which journalists published information provided to them by men accused of sexual abuse without interviewing the alleged victim or checking the factual basis of the story. This created a milieu in which alleged abusers could circulate false information through a largely credulous press while the professionals involved were unable to correct the record (Goddard 1994).

### **Changing media landscape and organised abuse coverage**

Media reporting on organised abuse throughout the 1990s had a major effect on public opinion about such allegations as well as formal responses to child sexual abuse. For instance, in the UK, organised abuse was disavowed by government agencies as a recognised form of abuse (Scott 2001). Organised abuse victims continued to present to social and mental health services, although professionals learnt to downplay the organised aspects of their disclosures to avoid public criticism and to secure better outcomes for their clients (Nelson 1998). Ritual abuse, in particular, became an “unspeakable” experience of abuse synonymous with “false memories” (Scott 2001). However, from the early 2000s, significant shifts in mass media reporting on sexual abuse began to delegitimise the tenets underlying “false memory” discourse and the “witch hunt” narrative of organised abuse.

Stories about the sexual abuse of children by priests had been accumulating in the global media throughout the 1990s, however their impact was somewhat muted, as church representatives wielded significant influence over media outlets and worked to protect their institutional reputation (Knopf 2016). Some commentators tried to articulate the issue of clergy abuse into their preferred vocabulary of “false memories” and “moral panics” (e.g. Jenkins 1996) but abuse by clergy proved to be a “poor fit” within this framework. Firstly, media scepticism of sexual abuse was partially grounded in the claim that Christian “zealots” were exaggerating the problem, but clergy abuse allegations suggested the opposite: that various religious bodies have been largely unresponsive and in fact collusive in the sexual abuse of children (Keenan 2012). Secondly, it is notable that a majority of clergy child sexual abuse complainants in the United States have been male (John Jay College Research Team 2004). Narratives of confabulated or malicious rape allegations are culturally associated with female, rather than male, complainants (Gaarder 2000), and the

preponderance of boys and men as victims of clergy abuse arguably increased the public legitimacy of clergy abuse.

In 2002, the Boston Globe ran a series of Pulitzer Prize-winning articles on the sexual abuse of children by priests in the local diocese (Rezendes 2002). The coverage of these allegations and the subsequent trials and lawsuits were unprecedented in intensity, eclipsing the prominence of “false memory” reporting of the 1990s (Cheit, Shavit, & Reiss-Davis 2010). The New York Times ran front page coverage of sexual abuse by Catholic priests for forty one consecutive days in 2002 (Plante & McChesney 2011, p. 9). American journalists had been the primary broker of “false memory” discourse and the “witch hunt” narrative around sexual abuse and organised abuse (Kitzinger & Reilly 1997) so this change in tone was both dramatic and internationally significant. The issue of clergy abuse received significant subsequent coverage in Europe in 2010 (Pew Research Centre 2010) and has been prominent in Australia due to a series of public inquiries over the last decade (Salter 2016). The effect of such stories has been to diminish the power of the arguments that society has “over-reacted” to sexual abuse, and that child and adult disclosures of abuse are often confabulated or malicious. Clergy abuse stories have instead foregrounded the impact of a sceptical and disbelieving milieu on abuse victims, and the complicity of powerful institutions in protecting abusive men.

This trend has been reinforced by prolonged coverage of sexual abuse scandals involving high-profile figures. In 2011, the exposure of British pop icons Stuart Hall and Jimmy Savile (posthumously) as prolific sex offenders, and the arrest of retired football coach and serial child sex offender Jerry Sandusky in the USA, inaugurated a new phase of public scrutiny of abuse allegations against public figures. These stories include descriptions of sexual offending for the duration of the 1980s and 1990s to which the authorities, police and media were largely unresponsive. In the case of Savile and other “celebrity” offenders, the media was directly implicated as a key site of child sexual exploitation since abuse was taking place on media premises. This has called into question the role of media culture in minimising or even covering up child sexual abuse, and destabilised public perceptions of media objectivity in reporting on the issue. Other revelations of the inner workings of the media, such as the “phone hacking” scandal in the UK, contributed to the recognition that journalistic culture and prerogatives are sometimes counter to the public interest (Keeble & Mair, 2012). The independent review into the conduct of the BBC in relation to the sexual offences by Jimmy Savile and Stuart Hall identified a ‘macho culture’ that normalised sexual harassment and

sexual coercion in the organisation, in which complaints from minors and young women of sexual abuse were overlooked or trivialised (Smith, 2016).

As the strength of discourses of “false memories” and “moral panics” has weakened, there is a lack of consensus around what, if anything, allegations of organised abuse signify. The various organised abuse scandals of the 1980s and 1990s were catalysts for the standardisation of sexual abuse investigation protocols, resulting in the successful prosecution of the kinds of complex cases that had stumbled in the 1980s (Salter, 2013). However the legacy of previous media templates and a general milieu of disbelief are apparent. For example, successful investigations and prosecutions of organised abuse cases involving “satanic” rituals amongst other disturbing features have been reported in Louisiana, USA (Hastings 2009) and in Kidwelly, Wales (Morris 2011). Media coverage has been focused, largely, on the facts of these cases and some of the challenges facing their investigation. These challenges included the persistence of organised abuse media templates and their legacy of denial. After a number of convictions were secured in the Louisiana case, the prosecutor said in a media interview, “I had McMartin (the California preschool scandal) thrown in my face a lot during all this”, which impacted on how evidence was presented at trial (Hastings 2009).

In the United Kingdom, media-driven scepticism surrounding organised abuse allegation has contributed to the suppression of victim complaints over a number of years (Salter & Dagistanli 2015). Subsequent media exposure of the mass and organised abuse of teenaged girls by groups of men in Rochdale, Oxford and elsewhere have had a strongly racialized focus on the exploitation of “white” girls by men of “Asian” or “Middle-Eastern” background, with the frequent presentation of race and religion as the determinative factor in organised abuse (Salter & Dagistanli 2015). There has been comparatively limited media interest in comparable organised abuse cases involving “white” perpetrators, which Salter and Dagistanli (2015) argue highlights an implicit racial politics in which sexual sadism is projected onto “Othered” ethnic groups or developing countries. Nonetheless, there is an increasing policy and legal shift towards the recognition and criminalisation of organised abuse in the UK, including the launching of a national Action Plan on Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation (Department of Education, 2011).

Middleton (2015) suggests that evidence for the diversity and severity of child sexual abuse, including organised abuse, has accumulated to a “tipping point” that exceeds prior attempts at

denial and minimisation. However, there has been limited reflection in the mass media on the implications of this evidence for entrenched journalistic assumptions and approaches to complex sexual abuse cases. McMartin and other organised abuse “template” cases continue to be invoked in a symbolic fashion by journalists, albeit often in an increasingly “historicizing” way that paints the 1980s and 1990s as a period of “panic” that society has since transcended (Richardson 2015). Hence, older narratives about “witch hunts” and “false memories” persist in the mass media in a contradictory fashion alongside reporting of contemporary cases of organised abuse.

This is illustrated by the so-called “VIP paedophile” scandal that emerged in Britain following the death of Jimmy Savile in 2011. Savile was a major figure in British pop culture from the 1960s. His sexual offending against children and women was something of an open secret in the media and entertainment industries during his career. After his death, the television broadcast of a damning documentary triggered over 450 people to contact the police alleging that they had been sexually abused by Savile (Gray & Watt 2014). This included seven potentially actionable complaints dating back to 1963 that police had not acted upon (HMIC 2013). It emerged that, in one investigation of national significance, Savile was named by multiple children as one of a network of high profile and well connected perpetrators who sexually abused children at parties held at “posh” houses (Cowburn 2012). Savile also figured in allegations about a “paedophile ring” centred on a children’s home on the isle of Jersey (Fairweather 2012).

Police investigations into Savile’s activities expanded to include allegations against a number of other high-profile men. In early 2015, police reported that they were actively investigating 261 politicians, celebrities and sports stars, whom the press has dubbed “VIPs” or “Very Important Persons”, facing allegations of sexual abuse (Whitehead 2015). These investigations were labelled a “witch hunt” by some, but police were considered vindicated by a number of prosecutions, including well-known publicist Max Clifford and entertainer Rolf Harris (Smith 2014). Revelations that popular politician and media figure Cyril Smith, who passed away in 2010, physically and sexually abused a number of boys in institutions for vulnerable and at-risk children further sharpened public concern about institutional responses to child sexual abuse, particularly where well-known men were involved (Danczuk & Baker, 2014). The situation escalated in 2013 and 2014 with a series of explosive claims from senior Labour party politicians, notably Tom Watson, regarding a politically connected network of child sex offenders said to have operated in the 1970s and 1980s. This prompted the

establishment of a public inquiry in July 2014 by then-Home Secretary Theresa May into “appalling cases of organised and persistent child sex abuse” (BBC News, 2014).

However, the inquiry has failed to provide leadership or clarity as allegations of organised abuse by powerful men has continued to unfold. The first two people appointed to chair the inquiry, Baroness Butler-Sloss and lawyer Fiona Woolf, stepped down following criticism that they had links to men who might be scrutinised by the inquiry. In 2015, May announced that New Zealand High Court judge Dame Lowell Goddard would chair the inquiry, which was given new statutory powers. “Child exploitation by organised networks” was named as a specific area of investigation for the inquiry. Later that year, it emerged that the inquiry had accidentally deleted six weeks of online submissions of evidence from survivors of child sexual abuse. The inquiry had not taken oral testimony from any child abuse survivor by mid-2016, two years after the inquiry was announced, prompting media claims that survivors had lost faith in the inquiry (Parmenter, 2016). Statements from Goddard that sex abuse survivors lack the “objectivity, independence and impartiality” necessary to provide guidance and oversight to the inquiry were the subject of significant public criticism by survivor groups (Frampton, 2016). In August 2016, Goddard resigned as chair of the inquiry citing its “legacy of failure” (Laville, 2016).

During this period, clashes emerged between journalists who were accused of lending allegations of organised abuse too much credibility, and those accused of perpetuating a culture of silence and cover-up. On one hand, recurrent examples of the sexual abuse of children by well-known men drove a mass media narrative that implicated the media, amongst other institutions, in systemic child protection failures. On the other hand, the most widely available interpretive frameworks for journalists to understand organised abuse allegations were those media templates embedded in highly sceptical discourses of “false memories” and “moral panic”. A new media receptivity to organised abuse has been countered by the remobilisation of these discourses, particularly where ‘historical’ allegations of organised abuse by well-known men have proven difficult to substantiate. For instance, in 2014, online news site Exaro began publicising a number of stories based on the statements of a man known pseudonymously as “Nick”, who described organised abuse by his stepfather and a group of high-profile men in childhood (Conrad, Watts, & Varley-Winter 2014). Most explosively, Nick described witnessing three murders in the course of his abuse. The stories prompted police to contact Exaro in order to interview Nick about his allegations (Conrad & Watts 2014), whereupon police established a dedicated taskforce (dubbed Operation

Midland) to investigate them further. The general thrust of Nick's allegations was supported by two other alleged male victims (Wood 2015), as well as British woman Esther Baker (who has waved her right to anonymity) (Hencke & Watts 2015). There are criminal proceedings regarding Baker's allegations at the time of writing.

The response of the mass media was mixed. Exaro's exclusive stories were widely covered by national and international press and played an important role in the background to the establishment of the national abuse inquiry. Early commentary from well-known sceptics such as David Aaronovitch described the allegations as a "classic panic" in the style of previous abuse controversies (Aaronovitch 2014). However the tone of most press reporting was restrained and factual. Although journalists were sceptical about the murder claims in particular (O'Neill 2016), police had publicly described Nick's allegations as "credible and true" (BBC News 2014). There was mounting criticism of Exaro's role in bringing these allegations to light, with one witness "Darren" pulling out of a police investigation and complaining about Exaro's conduct in encouraging him to publicise his allegations, after journalists from the Telegraph identified him and attempted to interview him at his house (O'Neill 2015). While Darren maintained the truth of his allegations, he blamed Exaro for the subsequent negative media attention, which included details about his past that had not been in the public domain. There was public criticism of Exaro's involvement in publicising Nick and Darren's allegations and facilitating their contact with police (O'Neill 2015).

Developments in the case were the subject of extensive discussion and conflict on social media between journalists at Exaro and other media outlets, as well as interested bloggers and social media users. A few of the alleged victims took to Twitter to speak for themselves, including Esther Baker, who sought to reject pejorative mass media characterisations of herself and other Exaro sources. This included at times a direct contestation with "false memory" discourse and a rejection of journalistic attempts to situate her case within established media templates. For instance, in October 2015, the Sunday Times printed a front page article "VIP sex cases linked to false memory", which erroneously claimed that Baker had received "controversial" therapy prior to making her allegations, and this therapy which could have produced "false memories" (Gillespie & Rayment 2015). After a complaint by Baker, this claim was later corrected by the Sunday Times (Baker had received no such therapy), which also acknowledged that the article erred in linking Baker's allegations to the Cleveland scandal. On the day that the article was published, Baker was in contact on Twitter with the two journalists who authored the piece to publicly dispute the factual assertions in



the article. She received an apology on Twitter from one journalist for not calling her to ask her for comment before publication, and her corrections to the article were widely shared on Twitter and Facebook.

In early 2016, the police investigation into Nick's allegations closed without laying any charges. At the time, police emphasised that it was "not uncommon" for investigations to end without charges when the evidence gathered did not meet a criminal threshold, and that "officers found no evidence" that they were "knowingly misled" by Nick (Metropolitan Police 2016). This was an outcome described the mass media as an "embarrassment" to the police (Evans 2016) and confirmation that the investigation was a "witch hunt" (Adams 2016). Writing in the Times, O'Neill (2016) described Nick's allegations as a "hotchpotch of rumours" concocted from online "conspiracy theories". The clear implication of this coverage was that Nick's allegations lacked *prima facie* credibility and should never have been reported by Exaro or investigated by police, alongside the implication that Nick confabulated his allegations. Well known investigative and evidentiary challenges to substantiating complaints of "historical" abuse, as foregrounded by the police in their media statements, were thus reworked to support pre-existing narratives about institutional over-reactivity to sexual abuse allegations, and characterisations of organised abuse complainants as fantasists and attention-seekers.

This was attended by media coverage of the reputational damage incurred by persons of interest and their families during Operation Midland. However characterisation of Exaro's reporting, and the establishment of Operation Midland, as tantamount to a breach of due process was somewhat confounded by the fact that no charges were laid. Furthermore, the most significant breach of privacy that occurred during Operation Midland was undoubtedly the extraordinary press conference held by former parliamentarian Harvey Proctor, who named himself and nine other men as persons of interest (three of whom were living, and six deceased). During the press conference, Proctor claimed he was the victim of a "witch hunt" and made public details of the allegations against him and the nine others (Ward, 2015). It was reported that Proctor had not asked permission of the three living persons of interest, or the surviving families of the six others, to publicly identify them, nor did he inform them of his intention to do so (Whitehead, 2015). Initial media incredulity at Proctor's dramatic statements gave way after the closure of Midland to largely sympathetic recounting of the impact of the investigation on his life and reputation. The more nuanced position advanced by police, namely that historical abuse allegations are difficult to prove but should

nonetheless be investigated, was overlooked in the mass media amidst a familiar reassertion of the “false memory” and “moral panic” tradition of sexual abuse reporting.

Nonetheless, in the age of social media, journalists are no longer guaranteed the final or definitive word on abuse allegations. This has been evident in the active contestation of mass media coverage of the “VIP paedophile” allegations on social media, which in turn has impacted on mass media reporting. For instance, in two programs for BBC Radio, David Aaronovitch argued that the “lessons” of organised abuse allegations in the 1980s and 1990s about the unreliability of sexual abuse testimony have been lost amid a new “panic” about “VIP paedophiles” (Aaronovitch 2015a, 2015b). In response, Sarah Nelson and Tim Tate, journalists specialising in child abuse, wrote separate online articles contesting Aaronovitch’s analysis. Tate pointed to the erasure of evidence of organised abuse in Aaronovitch’s narrative (including convictions in organised abuse cases) and the inclusion of inaccurate information (Tate, Tim 2015). Nelson emphasised that she provided factual information to program’s producers that contested their sceptical approach but was excluded from the final broadcast (Nelson 2015). Journalist and commentator Beatrix Campbell also wrote an extensive rebuttal (Campbell 2015a, 2015b). Their contributions were widely shared on social media and subsequently covered in the mass media (Milmo 2015). Importantly, the critiques of Aaronovitch’s programs were not knee-jerk defences of the “VIP paedophile” allegations. Indeed, Tate has been publicly critical of Exaro’s coverage and approach (Tate, T. 2015). Instead, these online responses have called for increased nuance and appreciation of the complexity of organised abuse allegations rather than the uncritical reproduction of “moral panic” and “false memory” discourse. These were criticisms that Aaronovitch was drawn to respond to on social media and in an extensive blog post (Aaronovitch 2015c).

### **Summary and future directions**

Mass media coverage of organised abuse allegations has generally turned on simple binaries of “true” allegations, involving corroboration, investigation and prosecution, and “false” allegations, produced by “false memories”, “moral panics” and “witch hunts”. Portrayals of alleged victims and perpetrators were similarly polarised, although these subject positions are fluid, as alleged perpetrators can be characterised as victims (of the media, police or their accusers) and vice versa. Editorial and journalistic decisions about the respective credibility

of sources have played a determinative role in the social construction of organised abuse. The denials of the accused and the claims of “false memory” lobby groups resonated strongly within the masculine and sceptical culture of the newsroom. In contrast, the counter-arguments of other experts or alleged victims lacked strong sponsorship within journalism and were frequently overlooked, and could be legally problematic to cover. This generated a highly asymmetrical account of organised abuse, and contributed to a milieu of disbelief throughout the 1990s.

In the early 2000s, it was precisely this milieu of disbelief that would become the subject of international media coverage. While there is limited evidence of journalistic reflection on the media’s contribution to failures to act on abuse reports, stories of clergy abuse and “VIP” offenders have drawn legitimacy away from prior bold assertions that organised abuse allegations are necessarily false. The varieties of sexual abuse are receiving wider media coverage. This only foregrounds the same questions that arose in the mid-1980s when organised abuse was first reported; questions that were, arguably, prematurely foreclosed by the media’s turn to “false allegations”. How should the mass media report on contested abuse allegations when ignoring them might be against the public interest (indeed, publicising allegations can be crucial in encouraging other witnesses to come forward), but publicising them may damage the reputation of people not convicted of a crime? What is the public status of sexual abuse allegations that fall short of meeting a criminal standard, particularly when those allegations are severe and serious? And when allegations of organised abuse are proven, what is their broader significance? Simplistic media templates and tendencies towards polarised reporting continue to obscure these important questions about the media’s role and conduct in publicising organised abuse allegations.

There has been a significant lack of transparency and accountability in journalistic approaches to organised abuse allegations. Mass media reporting on organised abuse allegations has routinely misrepresented the facts and minimised the complexity of the evidence. Cheit’s (2014) conclusion that these cases have been misconstrued in the mass media “by design, and not by accident” (p 86) can be at least partially explained by Kitzinger’s (2004) description of a male-dominated journalistic culture that suppressed the voices of victims and their advocates throughout the 1990s. However the popularisation of the internet, and particularly the growth of social media, has introduced new communicative opportunities for alternative perspectives on organised abuse. The dominance of mass media

narratives on organised abuse has fragmented into multiple perspectives that are bought into engagement and outright contestation with one another. For some journalists, this is likely to be viewed as a new iteration of “moral panic” but such an interpretation can no longer be asserted without the possibility of robust contestation by those most directly affected. The implications of these new power dynamics continue to unfold as sexual abuse coverage takes on an increasingly multi-nodal quality.

## **Review of key literature**

Despite the controversies that it has attracted, there have been relatively few empirical inquiries into the prevalence or dynamics of organised abuse. A comprehensive review of child protection cases across the UK undertaken by Gallagher et al. (1996) found that organised abuse reports constituted 2% of sexual abuse cases reported to police and 3% of sexual abuse cases reported to child protection services. Recognising the multiplicity of abuses and contexts of abuse evident in each case, the authors concluded that ‘there was no typical organised abuse case’ but rather ‘a set of factors that tended to cluster’ (p 226). Drawing on existing research and qualitative interviews with adult survivors, Salter (2013) suggests a three-fold typology for organised abuse cases that recognises the common ‘clustering’ of factors across the diversity of organised abuse:

1. **Network abuse** describes networks of mostly extra-familial male abusers acting on a shared sexual interest in minors. These groups generally display a preference for one gender or another and usually target post-pubescent victims, employing a combination of ‘inducements, threats and emotional manipulation’ to coerce the child into sexual activity’ (Salter, 2013 p 30). Examples of network abuse include recent cases of so-called ‘street’ or ‘sex grooming’ in the UK, where men pose as the ‘boyfriends’ of vulnerable teenagers in order to coerce them into sexual exploitation. The internet can also facilitate the formation of abusive networks.

2. **Institutional organised abuse** occurs when one or more staff members engage in or arrange the sexual abuse of children in their care. This emerged as a major scandal in the 1980s. In a sample of 270 substantiated sexual abuse complaints in American child care, Finkelhor and Williams (1988) found that 17% involved allegations of multiple perpetrators (p 38). Increased oversight and screening of institutional arrangements appears to have

reduced the risks of institutional organised abuse, nonetheless public inquiries and criminal investigations continue to highlight cases (Salter 2013, p 32-33).

3. Familial organised abuse describes cases where multiple adults abuse children within the family and facilitate their abuse by others. The involvement of familial perpetrators in organised abuse has been documented for over thirty years but has been poorly recognised by investigators, who have tended to focus on extra-familial exploitation. Familial organised abuse remains particularly difficult to detect, investigate and prosecute, although it often involves abuse of considerable severity and duration (Salter 2013, p 34).

Gallagher et al. (1996) emphasised that organised abuse cases can escalate to the perpetration of ‘bizarre and sadistic practices’ such as forcing children to ingest human waste or engage in bestiality (p 227). These practices include ritual abuse, an infrequent but documented form of sexual abuse, particularly in cases of multi-generational incest (Cheit 2014: 160). Ritual abuse has been examined in qualitative research with adult survivors by Scott (2001) and Salter (2012; 2013). There is considerable awareness of the interlinked issues of organised abuse, ritual abuse and related psychological sequelae amongst mental health professionals, with surveys in the United States, Britain and Australia finding that between 10% and one third of mental health workers have encountered such a case and take the disclosures of clients seriously (for a summary, see Salter & Richters, 2012). There have been significant clinical developments in the recognition and treatment of the psychological disorders associated with organised abuse, however, with a few exceptions, there remains a dearth of criminological and social scientific research into the phenomena.

### **Further reading**

*Armstrong, L. (1994). Rocking the cradle of sexual politics: What happened when women said incest. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.*

This book reflects on the major changes in public discussion of sexual abuse in the early 1990s, written by one of the pioneers of the sexual abuse survivor movement. Armstrong is critical of an individualising and pathologising turn in sexual abuse discourse away from the public and political framing of the issue in the 1980s.

*Campbell, S. (2003). Relational remembering: Rethinking the memory wars. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.*

Campbell provides a philosophically informed discussion of “false memory” discourse and its implications for the status of women’s testimony and citizenship. She highlights the linkages between memory, narrative and personhood and questions how women’s agency and identity has been undermined by populist notions of “false memories”.

*Cheit, R. (2014). The witch-hunt narrative: Politics, psychology and the sexual abuse of children. Oxford: Oxford University Press.*

This book provides a comprehensive synthesis of the forensic basis and court proceedings in several major American organised abuse cases, alongside a meticulous analysis of media coverage of those cases. Cheit highlights how the media narrative surrounding these key cases deviated from the facts in important ways as journalists constructed the argument that a sexual abuse ‘witch hunt’ was afoot.

*Greer, C., & McLaughlin, E. (2013). The Sir Jimmy Savile scandal: Child sexual abuse and institutional denial at the BBC. Crime, Media, Culture, 9(3), 243-263.*

This article provides a useful history of Jimmy Savile and analyses the scandal that unfolded after his death in relation to his sexual offending, including the apparent complicity of his employer the BBC. Greer and Laughlin examine the factors that enable the development of institutional abuse scandals that had previously been rumoured but otherwise suppressed.

*Hechler, D. (1988). The battle and the backlash: The child sexual abuse war. Lexington, Massachusetts; Toronto: Lexington Books.*

This is the authoritative account of the competing claims of social movements around child abuse in the United States during the 1980s and their reception amongst journalists. Hechler provides a prescient overview of the competing interests in media debates on child abuse and the key role that organised abuse cases played in the development of a backlash against child protection efforts.

*Keenan, M. (2012). Child sexual abuse and the Catholic Church. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.*

Keenan presents an interdisciplinary and meticulously researched account of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church that emphasises the role of institutional culture and authority in clergy abuse.

*Kitzinger, J. (2004). Framing abuse: Media influence and public understanding of sexual violence against children. London; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press.*

This book presents a theoretically innovative and empirically informed account of media coverage of child sexual abuse in the UK. Through qualitative research with journalists, editors and news consumers, Kitzinger demonstrates how the internal power dynamics and culture of the press shape reporting on child sexual abuse, as well as the active role of audiences in interpreting and responding to sexual abuse stories.

*Salter, M. (2013). Organised sexual abuse. London: Glasshouse/Routledge.*

This book provides an overview of the history and debates of organised abuse, with a summary of media controversies and available empirical literature. Through an analysis of life history interviews with adult survivors of organised abuse, the book calls for a re-appraisal of organised abuse as a serious but largely overlooked and misunderstood form of gendered violence.

*Salter, M., & Dagistanli, S. (2015). Cultures of abuse: 'Sex grooming', organised abuse and race in Rochdale, UK. International Journal of Crime, Justice and Social Democracy, 4(2), 50-64.*

This article compares the activist stance of the mass media in investigating and exposing a racially-charged case of organised abuse in Rochdale in 2012 with previous allegations of organised abuse in Rochdale in 1990. The authors argue that race has played a critical role in media assessment of the credibility of organised abuse allegations.

*Scott, S. (2001). Beyond disbelief: The politics and experience of ritual abuse. Buckingham: Open University Press.*

Scott provides an overview of debates on ritual abuse and the impact of sceptical media coverage on UK child protection policy and practice. Her analysis of life history interviews with ritual abuse survivors emphasises the broader context of their lives and the embeddedness of ritual abuse within patterns of routine child abuse and neglect.

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