

## **Child protection, social work and the media: doing as well as being done to**

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### **Abstract**

*2008-2010 was an exceptional time of considerable media coverage of child protection and social work in the United Kingdom, much of it negative, and some of it personally targeted on individual social workers. The cluster of media stories included the deaths of 'Baby Peter Connelly' and Khyra Ishaq, the kidnapping of Shannon Matthews, and the extreme assaults on two young boys in Edlington, Doncaster. But as shown in this paper, based on the author's personal engagement with the media, the clustering of stories also gave the opportunity to seek to shape the media and editorial coverage and to explain the realities and complexities of seeking to protect children and of social work.*

**Keywords:** Social work, child protection, media

Child protection is not an activity undertaken in a vacuum. It is heavily influenced by contemporary contexts. These contexts include the experiences of families, which may create a platform for more or less adequate parenting; the availability and efficacy of support and assistance for all families, and especially for families in difficulty; the context of service stability or instability; and the context of public perceptions of children's services, and especially services to protect children, which are heavily influenced by media coverage and commentary. The media coverage may even in part have an impact in changing the discourse for child protection (Parton, 2011).

It is this context of the media on which this paper focuses. It is a media context which reflects an absence of trust and faith, and sometimes a hostility towards, professionals (O'Neill, 2002; Seldon, 2009). Whilst reflecting on the media coverage of child protection and social work, much of it negative, this paper, however, also suggests and illustrates how the coverage may in part be reshaped, changing as a consequence some of the context for child protection.

The paper is based not on research but on personal experience. As well as describing

how the media may construct and disseminate accounts of social work, the paper reflects on the author's experience of seeking to influence this media construction and public telling of social work.

### **Being done to**

The view often taken within social work in the United Kingdom, which was emphasised in a recent survey of social workers (Community Care, 2009), is that the media treats social work and social workers unfairly, focusing on what are deemed to be failures or injustices created by social workers and only reporting bad news. The negative distilling, defining and distorting role of the media has been noted by Stanley and Manthorpe in their review of inquiries as 'the media will continue to emphasise the human drama and 'bad news' aspects of inquiries since... these contribute to news value' (Stanley & Manthorpe, 2004, p.8; see also Butler & Drakeford, 2003). This skewed portrayal of social work and social workers by the general local, regional and national media, as compared to the specialist professional press, has both an evidence-base (Galilee, 2006; see also Glasgow University Media Group, 1976; Aldridge, 1990; Aldridge, 1994; Franklin &

Parton, 1991; Franklin, 1999; Ayre, 2001; Ayre & Calder, 2010) and contemporary affirmation, with comments on the 'sustained nature of the negative media images of social work that have been commonplace' (Munro, 2011b, p.122; see also Braun & Robb, 2010; Social Work Task Force, 2010).

When reporters and editors who produce this negative coverage speak about their motivation it is not about selling papers but about taking the moral high ground. For example, at a 'round table' seminar about the media, child protection and social work held in December 2010 by the School of Law at the University of the West of England there were presentations by a deputy news editor of the Daily Telegraph, by an independent journalist who sells stories to newspapers and magazines, and by a senior lecturer in journalism. Each told of their roles in exposing abuse in children's homes and by social workers, and the deputy editor described how he had reported about parents who had had their children unjustifiably "taken away for adoption by social workers", with no concern for accuracy in commenting that social workers had the power to 'take children away' and to have children adopted when there is a legal and judicial process which determines these actions. It was also noteworthy that these journalists chose to tell only about stories of abuse by social workers and care workers, and where they took the moral high ground of exposing this abuse.

### **Doing as well as being done to**

Social workers and their agencies and managers have been taken to task for their reluctance to engage with the media and encouraged to engage more (Lombard, 2009; Maier, 2009; Munro, 2011a). This reluctance may not be surprising when the expectation is of negative and harassing reporting and exposure. There are also ethical and practical dilemmas for social workers and their agencies in telling about their work whether this is proactively or reactively. Difficulties include protecting the interests of service users by guarding confidential information

(although the requirement that Serious Case Reviews, albeit redacted, be published in full has made this much more difficult). Social workers themselves also may not want the exposure which follows personal professional media coverage. Nor may their employing agencies welcome the attention which can follow media engagement.

The consequence of this general reluctance to engage with the media has been to leave social workers' stories untold and the damning portrayal of social work unchallenged. There are, however, social workers and their agencies who have been proactive in describing what they do, the contribution they make, and the dilemmas and difficulties they experience. For example, Bristol City Council and its social workers and Social Services Director agreed to the making of a series of television documentary 'fly-on-the-wall' programmes, 'Someone to Watch Over Me' (BBC, 2004), which depicted the work of social workers and the lives of the children and families they assisted. It was noted that:

*Hopefully the programmes will open up an area of debate and discussion based on the real working lives of child care social workers. The programmes are intended to be a remedy to the florid or weak representations of social workers occasionally found on TV soaps like 'The Bill' or 'Eastenders'. The series should also challenge other popular stereotypes of social workers. In the main child care social workers are neither inept nor politically correct busy bodies. (Fraser, 2004)*

More recently Coventry City Council allowed filming over six months which was then edited into a BBC Panorama Special called 'Kids in Care' (BBC, 2010) with positive review comments about social work (Brody, 2010; Mangan, 2010). In 2011 Coventry Council again allowed the BBC to film a programme about children, families, social workers and adoption and in 2012 there was the three-part BBC television series on social work and child protection in Bristol (see, for

example, Hudson, 2012). The willingness of Coventry and Bristol Councils to have repeat engagement with the media suggests that the experience can be positive and challenge the often one-dimensional, simplifying portrayal of the social work task.

Individual social workers (Anonymous, 2008; Ferguson, 2008; Jones, S., 2008; McKitterick, 2008) also have a role and contribution to make in telling of their experiences and their contribution, and social workers have been proactive in seeking that the voice of social workers be heard (Taylor, 2009). However, as noted by Munro:

*It is understood that fear of negative coverage can cause reluctance in some workers and their employers to share even positive information. Social workers are [however] the only people who can give a real and current account of how it feels to do their job and have a responsibility to work together with local communications professionals to do this to help effect change. (Munro, 2011b, p.123)*

To assist social workers individually and collectively to tell their stories guidance on contacting and working with the media has been prepared by Community Care magazine (2009) and the Local Government Association (2010). But much of the focus is on proactively getting coverage for good news stories about social work or about reactively responding to requests for comments within media-generated negative stories. There is a third role on which this paper now focuses. There is an opportunity to shape stories which are about to emerge, have emerged and are continuing to be covered. The examples below are all from the period 2008 to 2010, which has been a time of considerable media coverage, largely negative and damning, of child protection, social work and social workers in the United Kingdom (UK).

### **From strings to clusters**

News stories used to come in strings. Now they come in clusters. For example, it was in

1973 that there was the first large scale media coverage of a child protection tragedy in the UK and the subsequent inquiry (Department of Health and Social Security, 1974; Community Care, 1974; Butler & Drakeford, 2011). Maria Colwell was aged 7 when she was killed by her stepfather. Since that time there have been regular and increasingly frequent media stories about the non-accidental death of children (Hopkins, 2007), but usually with a time space between each story.

However, 2008-2010 has had an exceptional cluster of media stories about child abuse with the focus on social workers and their presumed failings. It has been argued that the media coverage has undermined the collective confidence of social workers and others working with children (Elsley, 2010). The result has been what might be termed the 'perfect storm' of recruitment and retention workforce difficulties and escalating referrals and workloads (Graef, 2010; Parton *op cit.*). The Director of Children's Services in Coventry has noted the impact of the dominant media portrayal of social work post- 'Baby P' on trends in social work decision-making, with more child protection referrals, more child protection plans, more care proceedings and more children in care (Green, 2012).

The clustering, rather than stringing, of continuing new stories reflects increasing news capacity created by twenty-four hour news channels and online continuous news streaming (Meikle, 2009). There is more news space to fill. There are three advantages, however, of news clusters compared to strings. Firstly, they give an opportunity to repeat and drill down messages which are relevant to and can be generalised across stories in a cluster. Secondly, clusters give an opportunity to reshape and re-route continuing stories as 'news', by definition, requires novelty (Rawnsley, 2010). The same static storyline loses interest. Different angles have to be found. Offer the new angles. Thirdly, when stories start to cluster it is possible to anticipate what is ahead which is

likely to be incorporated into the cluster. The task then is to seek to shape in advance the editorial storyline before it is taken into the cluster.

### **The 2008-2010 cluster**

The 2008-2010 social work media cluster started in November 2008 following the publication of the executive summary of Haringey's Serious Case Review (SCR) of 'Child A' (Haringey Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2008). 'Child A' soon became known as 'Baby P', then as 'Baby Peter', and was later identified as Peter Connelly. Peter was 17 months old when he died in August 2007. He had been the subject of a multi-agency child protection plan, and as well as Haringey Council's Children's Services, Peter and his family were also known to and in contact with the police, health services and a voluntary child care agency.

Following the publication of the 'Baby P' first SCR executive summary, The Sun newspaper was particularly trenchant with its attention targeted not on those who had killed 'Baby P' but on those who worked to assist and protect children. Within this targeting the focus was not on the police officers or health workers, who were later shown with their agencies to have been seriously remiss in seeking to protect 'Baby P' (The Telegraph, 2009; The Sun, 2010; The Guardian, 2010), but on the social workers and their managers.

On 14 November 2008, The Sun (2008b) headline over two pages was 'Have You No Shame: No Sackings, No Apologies, No One Taking the Blame... on Behalf of Baby P, The Sun Demands all of this Disgusting Lot be Fired'. Photographs of 'all of this disgusting lot', who were the Children's Services Director, managers and social workers, along with a paediatrician, were then printed with a request that anyone who could give information about them should contact a telephone number or email address given by The Sun.

Politicians from each of the three national parties were attached to the media coverage, with a headline of 'Politicians call for action over Baby P case' (The Times, 2008). Mr Cameron, the now current Prime Minister and then leader of the opposition, wrote a column in The Sun stating that 'Britain's sickened and we're angry too – outraged at the failures that left a child die ... The professionals who let Baby P down must pay the price with their jobs' (Cameron, 2008; see also The Telegraph, 2008b). Mr Cameron also raised the 'Baby P' case at Prime Minister's Question Time (Treneman, 2008; The Daily Star, 2008; The Independent, 2008).

The Sun (2008c) two days later launched a full front page 'Beautiful Baby P: Campaign for Justice', with a petition that 'ALL the social workers involved in the case of Baby P [with their names then printed] should be sacked and never allowed to work with vulnerable children again'. The focus was then turned, in particular, on Sharon Shoesmith, Haringey's Director of Children's Services (The Sun, 2008d). The Sun led the media personalised call for vengeance, but it was not alone (see, for example, Daily Star, 2008; The Telegraph, 2008a; The Times, 2008; News of the World, 2008). The editorial and storyline taken in much, but not all, of the print press was replicated in radio and television coverage which also quickly came to focus on the workers, and primarily again the social workers and their managers, involved with 'Baby P' and his family.

This was the beginning of a cluster of considerable media attention on social work and child protection throughout 2009 and 2010. The 'Baby P' story and the focus on Sharon Shoesmith and the social workers continued, but other stories about children fed into the cluster. These included (but there were more) the coverage about Shannon Matthews, a nine-year-old girl who was reported missing but then found to have been 'kidnapped' by her own mother and the mother's partner's uncle in a plot to get payments from the media and a reward payment (Daily Mail, 13 November 2008;

The Sun, 2008a; Daily Mirror, 2008), and with more media commentary following the publication of the Serious Case Review summary (Kirklees Safeguarding Children Board, 2010):

*Neglectful. Filthy. And living with a paedophile. So why did social workers decide that little Shannon Matthew's mother was not such a bad parent!* (Daily Mail, 2010d, p.21)

*SHANNON SCANDAL. Council ruled out taking her into care 5yrs before kidnapping... social workers and other agencies were involved with the Matthews family for 13 years.* (The Sun, 2010c, p.3)

There was also extensive media coverage in November 2008 at the time of the trial of a man who had abused his two daughters for much of their childhoods and made them repeatedly pregnant (The Guardian, 2008b; The Independent, 2008c; Daily Mail, November 2008b), media coverage which also re-emerged in 2010 with the publication of the Serious Case Review Executive Summary (Sheffield Safeguarding Children Board, 2009) and the criminal trial:

*SHAMELESS. Yet again officials line up to apologise for a child abuse scandal that should never have happened... We saw the same ducking of responsibility over Baby P... The least we are entitled to expect is that those who have failed so disgracefully should pay the price.* (The Sun, 2010b, p.9)

*100 care workers, 28 agencies, 16 case conferences, countless complaints of abuse, 18 pregnancies, and 7 children. Yet no one is blamed for failing to stop this evil father from raping his daughters.* (Daily Mail, 2010c, p.6)

Other stories within the 2008-2010 cluster included the extreme assault on two young boys in Edlington, Doncaster by two brothers aged ten and eleven years (Doncaster Safeguarding Children Board, 2010). Once

again the attention was turned on social workers with a headline of 'Catalogue of social work failures to be kept secret' (Daily Mail, 2010a) and 'Child services blunder staff face panel rap' (Daily Mirror, 2010). As with 'Baby P' Mr Cameron, still then leader of the Conservative opposition, contributed to the story, commenting about 'broken Britain' (Daily Telegraph, 2010; The Observer, 2010).

And in Birmingham there was the death by neglect and starvation of Khyra Ishaq (Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board, 2010), aged seven, with the Daily Mail publishing the photographs of four social workers and an education officer under the heading of 'The Buck-passers Who Could Have Saved Her' (Daily Mail, 2010b). With several child deaths and subsequent serious case reviews in each area, Birmingham (BBC, 2009; Birmingham Mail, 2009b) and Doncaster (Daily Mail, 2009; The Times, 2009; The Guardian, 2010a) Councils and social workers became a particular focus of media attention.

### **Seeking to influence the media**

But amongst the largely hostile and negative media coverage and comment on child protection, social work and social workers it was possible to tell a different story, to repeatedly comment on the realities of practice, and to raise dilemmas for discussion and debate. There was a considerable media appetite for comment and information to fill pages and minutes, and with some parts of the media seeking to present a picture of complexity and balance. The examples below are based on the author's experience of proactively as well as reactively engaging with the media about the child protection stories during 2008-2010.

### **Repetition and driving points home**

Within the 2008-2010 cluster of news stories points which were made over and over again were about the decision making which had to be made with incomplete information as compared to what became known and with

the benefit of hindsight; the need to ration time and attention across a larger number of children and families; that social workers give their professional lives day-after-day to successfully assisting and protecting children and vulnerable adults; that this is work which is often distressing and sometimes personally threatening; and that the media and political response was itself dangerous and damaging. The examples below show how these points were echoed in editorials in the print press:

*The same voices who are so keen to diagnose gaping wounds in society are often also the most given to attack the profession that administers the social bandages... The fallout from the Baby P case only sharpens the hideous trade-offs, by increasing the demand for social services at the same time as reducing the supply of people willing to provide it. Many children's departments report their workload as having risen by a third. (The Guardian, 2009)*

*[The judge] warned that employment processes could be subverted by political or media pressure unless those involved took extra care to act with "scrupulous fairness". He wondered who might take on the important job of Director of Children's Services if they faced being fired summarily... [and the editorial goes on to note] The system has failed not only Peter Connelly but also the people responsible for his care. (The Times, 2010b, p.1)*

### Shaping emerging stories

As story clusters start to emerge it also becomes possible to work with the media in advance to seek to shape the editorial lines of new stories which are likely to be covered. This may be in response to journalists who are preparing stories to join a cluster and are seeking professional and technical briefings or a broader overview of the practice and policy context. The opportunity is to inform and to shape the possible story direction. None of this may be explicitly reported or

referenced so it may go unrecognised, but it can be influential.

Examples included working with a Channel Four television journalist several weeks before the publication of the Khyra Ishaq Serious Case Review summary to give a picture for how it might have been for the workers at the time. Amongst all the other work they were tackling what they then knew may not have led them to have given greatest attention to the concerns about Khyra compared to the more serious and immediate concerns they were having to tackle about other children. This was especially so in a service which was already being recognised, including within Birmingham Council itself, as in organisational difficulty and with considerable workload pressures (Birmingham Mail, 2009b).

A further example was the briefings given to journalists ahead of the sentencing of the father who had abused and dominated his daughters (Sheffield Safeguarding Children Board, *op cit.*), where the complexities were described of families who frequently move from area to area, with parents covering their tracks, disrupting the build up of information and knowledge over time, and intimidating workers who themselves become fearful of becoming subject to complaint (Butler, 2010a).

### Influencing moving storylines

Once a story has started to be reported there is a media search for new angles and new comment. Journalists themselves may challenge the weight of existing storylines with which they are uneasy and uncomfortable (see, for example, Campbell, 2008; Graef, *op cit.*; Laurence, 2008; Toyne, 2008). Briefings given to assist the re-shaping of storylines may or may not be referenced in the subsequent report, but the example below (see also Butler, 2010b; Donovan, 2010) followed discussion with the journalist:

*When the balance sheet is drawn up of Labour's attempts to reform public services... there is one sorry tale that needs to be added to the deficit column. It is an unedifying story of idealistic ambition's unintended consequences, an obsession with accountability, a deluded faith in technology, alternate penny-pinching and flamboyant unfunded commitments, and always a preoccupation of playing to the Murdoch media. This has been the poisonous recipe that Labour has applied to child protection and by the time the full extent of this chaotic legacy becomes clear, the party will probably have long since left office. (Bunting, 2010)*

The quickest moving, and possibly most dramatic, storyline movement in the 2008-2010 cluster was on Friday 22 January 2010, which was the day the Edlington boys were sentenced. At 11.30 am the story focused on the horrific actions of the boys, on their previous criminality and anti-social behaviour, and on the terrible experience of their victims. Following interviews with Sue Berlowitz, the Deputy Children's Commissioner for England, Camilla Batmanghelidjh, the founder of Kids Company, and with the author, on BBC Radio Five Live, SKY News and BBC News Channel, by the 1 pm news broadcasts the story was refocusing on the terrible neglect the Edlington boys had themselves experienced and which may have contributed to their violent behaviour. The attention turned to the parenting the boys had had and to their family life. Following further interviews and comment by 3 pm there was also a focus on the domestic abuse experienced by the boys' mother. Throughout there was appropriately a continuing recognition of and comment about the terrible experience of the young victims of the Edlington brothers' violence, but the discussion and debate was widening and subsequently there was press comment which included:

*Every day, social workers are being asked to make sophisticated judgements... When*

*they get those judgements wrong, as happened in Doncaster, they risk being mercilessly and publicly criticised. Yet they aren't given the training, the time, the freedom or the resources to produce the results we want. (Russell, 2010; and see also Daily Mail, 2010a; The Times, 2010a)*

### **Getting ahead of the game**

It is also sometimes possible to take pre-emptive action when decision points in stories are just ahead. For example, in the week before Mr Balls', the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, planned media conference in December 2008, when the hastily undertaken OFSTED reinspection he had commissioned of Haringey would be reported, the author worked with SKY News to prepare and present a five minute long 'Letter to Mr Balls' in November 2008. This was shown over and over again in the three days prior to the media conference. The message was do not create further instability in child protection services by announcing knee-jerk changes so as to be seen to be doing something in response to the media clamour, but do give recognition to the professionals who spend their working lives protecting children.

Other examples of seeking influence ahead of decision points were:

- An interview with the Birmingham Mail (2009a) headed 'Professor says Birmingham social workers need to be backed by the council and community' when the council were considering what action to take in relation to front-line workers and managers after media coverage of children's deaths.
- A letter in The Sun about the 'danger [of Doncaster Council] turning on its workers, including those who stayed despite the chaos, which is hardly going to make it safer in Doncaster' (Jones, 2010a), and with similar warnings in a letter in Community Care (Jones, 2010b), column in The Guardian

(Author's own, 2010c), and within interviews with BBC Radio Sheffield.

- A column in *Community Care* (Jones, 2010d) in the week ahead of the GSCC registration decision about 'Baby P's' social workers asking that the GSCC 'take into account wider workload performance, and the organisational and inter-agency context' and 'not repeat the mistakes made with Lisa Athurworrey', the social worker for Victoria Climbié (see Laming, 2003).

### Moving into hostile territory

It is the continuing media interest and coverage of particular stories which gives the opportunity to seek to get an argument aired ahead of decisions being taken.

However, there is a divide between the media with a mass audience which has a track record of being hostile to social work and social workers, and a media with possibly a smaller audience which is more sympathetic towards social workers. In working with the media are social workers essentially just talking to themselves and their allies? This in part may be true. More people read *The Sun* everyday than *The Guardian*, but more social workers may read *The Guardian* than *The Sun*. To extend the influence of argument to a wider public it is necessary, therefore, to seek coverage in what may be the less accessible, but possibly more fertile in terms of size of audience, media. A few examples:

- A column in the *News of the World* (Jones, 2008) about the government's damaging and destructive actions for child protection.
- An example has been given above of having a letter sympathetic to social workers published in *The Sun* (Jones, 2010a, *op cit.*).
- Frequent interviews on Talk Radio stations such as LBC, as the social work cluster of stories continued.
- A BBC Television *News Night* (18 January 2010) interview by Jeremy Paxman about the risks and limitations

of publishing serious case reviews in full.

### Concluding comment

The period 2008-2010 was a time of considerable media coverage about child protection and social work in the UK. Much of it was negative, and some of it was abusive and threatening towards individual social workers and their managers. It did, however, also present an opportunity to tell the public about the work of social workers, the dilemmas and difficulties presented by this work, and why the work is important. Examples have been given above of working positively with the print press, radio, television and online media to influence and inform their coverage of social work. In particular, being proactive with the media even when the focus is on 'bad news' presents possibilities to shape stories. In the era of 24 hour online and television news and talk radio more time and space has to be filled and novel angles on continuing stories have to be found. This is an opportunity as much as a threat for social work and for all those working to protect children.

It would also be informative to research the impact of media coverage on the public's knowledge and opinions about social work and also on the impact on social workers themselves. For example, when there is the next documentary programme or series about social work it might be possible to survey the views of those who watched the programme(s) pre- and post- programme. But this is more difficult with the drip-feed of largely negative comments about social work, especially in the tabloid newspapers. Continuing to monitor how social work is projected throughout the media is still of importance, however, firstly in being aware of what information and understandings are being offered to the public and then seeking to challenge these portrayals when necessary and appropriate. Secondly, it would be of interest to know how much the prevalent media portrayal of social work is accepted by the public or whether the public at large is



more discriminating in what it accepts and agrees as their own picture of social work.

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