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‘It Would be Better for the Newspapers to call a Spade a Spade’: The British Press and Child Sexual Abuse, c. 1918–1990

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On 3 January 1929, a Miss Cooper from Birmingham addressed the National Union of Women Teachers’ annual conference and moved a resolution calling for more female police officers. Her chief concern was for the safety of children in public parks, ‘where many... cases of indecency and assault take place’. ‘At present,’ she declared, ‘mothers simply dare not allow their children to go into the parks unless they can go with them to look after them, because of the pests of society who frequent these places.’ Women police would drive away these threatening men, as they would the ‘other pests which crowd our streets with their motor cars, and wait for young people to pass by’. The resolution was carried, as was another calling for the establishment of a committee of inquiry, with at least half female membership, to investigate ‘the numerous cases of child assault’.<sup>1</sup>

Miss Cooper’s intervention – supporting a campaign promoted by a number of women’s groups during the 1920s – attracted the attention of both national and local newspapers.<sup>2</sup> *The Times* ran a brief report summarizing the speech under the discreet headline ‘Women Teacher’s Conference’; the *Daily Mail* was even more concise but ran the story under the punchier title ‘Park Pests’.<sup>3</sup> A little more detail was provided by the *Manchester Guardian* (‘Women Teachers – Resolution in Favour of More Policewomen’) and the *Western Daily Press* (‘Park Pests – Demand for More Women Police’), while the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* highlighted ‘Children’s Danger in Public Parks’.<sup>4</sup> In each case, though, Miss Cooper’s words were recorded without elaboration or analysis, and there was no editorial comment, either about the problem of sexual assault or the role of women police. The resolution was crowded out by numerous other news stories and curiosities; *Mail* readers glancing further up the column would doubtless have been intrigued by a longer piece about ‘5,000 Ping Pong Balls’ ordered by speed-record holder Major Henry Segrave for his new motor boat. The issue of what we now term child sexual abuse was fleetingly visible, before being pushed aside by the more pressing concerns of editors and journalists.

In recent years, the importance of the media in publicizing, defining and debating child sexual abuse has become inescapable, and has been the subject of several scholarly studies.<sup>5</sup> Media influence has two main elements. First, the media have a powerful agenda-setting role

– that is, they select and prioritize certain topics for prominent and sustained attention, while marginalizing others.<sup>6</sup> From the 1980s, and even more during the 2010s, the media’s interest in child sexual abuse pushed it to the forefront of public discussion, prompting official enquiries, policy responses and action from voluntary organizations, as well as encouraging those who have suffered abuse to report it.<sup>7</sup> Second, the media ‘frame’ issues or events in specific ways – that is, in the words of Robert Entman, they ‘select some aspects of a perceived reality to make them more salient, thus promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/ or treatment recommendation’.<sup>8</sup> Several scholars have noted, for example, that the media for a long time concentrated their attention on attacks from strangers, thereby downplaying abuse within the home and misrepresenting the nature of the risk to young people.<sup>9</sup>

This research on the media has focused, however, almost exclusively on the period since the mid 1970s when ‘child abuse’ and ‘child sexual abuse’ became accepted terms, ‘paedophile’ entered the public lexicon, and media interest gathered pace. As a result, we have very little knowledge of how the press approached this topic in earlier decades of the twentieth century – how it responded to individuals such as Miss Cooper who tried to turn the spotlight on the problem and challenge the authorities to tackle it. There is, by contrast, a valuable literature on legal, medical and psychoanalytical discussions of adult-child sexual contact and the efforts of feminist and morality campaigners to raise awareness of how society could better prevent, treat or punish sexual abuse.<sup>10</sup> Louise Jackson has recently provided the first robust assessment of the number of prosecutions in England and Wales, calculating that in the 1920s over 500 people a year went before the courts for sexual offences against children, rising tenfold to over 5,000 by the 1960s.<sup>11</sup> Lucy Delap has explored a range of personal disclosures of abuse in mid-twentieth century Britain, demonstrating that despite the powerful social pressures to maintain privacy and sexual discretion, ‘such abuse was far from unmentioned and unmentionable’.<sup>12</sup> This work recognizes that ‘child sexual abuse’ is a concept that is discursively constructed in relation to changing understandings of gender, sexuality and age, and with references to different legal regimes, and has only become mainstream since the 1980s.<sup>13</sup> There are, of course, dangers in projecting contemporary categories and diagnoses onto the past.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the notion of an ‘age of consent’ – raised from thirteen to sixteen in 1885 – has very long historical roots, and in the late nineteenth century women’s groups and organizations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), sought to raise public awareness about the threats faced by young people. The press were centrally involved in this campaign,

with W. T. Stead's infamous 'Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' crusade in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in July 1885 highlighting the evils of child prostitution.<sup>15</sup> As Jackson has observed, 'Although Victorians had no umbrella term that was uniformly applied, they would certainly have recognised the term "child sexual abuse"'.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the twentieth century various descriptions were used for 'contact' and 'non-contact' sexual assault of young people, including indecency, outrage, grave offences, molesting, tampering and perversion, but these were united by an understanding that such practices were inappropriate and illegal, even if there were debates about how damaging they actually were to the child involved.<sup>17</sup>

The press has a particular value for historians examining this unfolding and uneven process of definition. Newspapers were (and are) miscellanies which printed content from a wide range of different sources – from official institutions such as Parliament and the law courts, to pressure groups, voluntary organizations, businesses and private individuals. This material was shaped by the specific and changing editorial policies and practices of each newspaper, which determined how different stories would be prioritized and framed. Newspapers, therefore, provided arenas in which there was a discursive contest over the meaning of, and appropriate responses to, adult-child sexual contact. Because of their chronological continuity, newspapers offer one of the most sensitive means of studying changes over time in the public discussion of child sexual abuse. They were, moreover, hugely influential: Britain was a nation of newspaper readers, consuming more copies per head of the population than any other country in the middle decades of the twentieth century. In the early 1950s the London-based national dailies had a combined circulation of 16.6 million copies per day, and Sunday papers sold just over 30 million copies per week; over eighty-five percent of the population read a paper every day.<sup>18</sup> Although television gradually replaced the press as the dominant media form, overall circulations declined only gently until the end of the century, and newspapers retained much of their cultural significance, especially on topics such as sexual abuse, which received little attention on television until the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> The press not only influenced public opinion, it also informed the work of, and prompted responses from, politicians, policy-makers, the police and campaigners. Newspapers, in short, were powerful forces shaping the public and professional understanding of child sexual abuse.

The euphemistic and fragmentary nature of much of the newspaper coverage of child sexual abuse means that it has been difficult for historians to search for and locate it in any rigorous way. The digitization of several national and local newspapers has transformed the possibilities for this sort of research.<sup>20</sup> This article emerges from a collaborative project,

funded by the EhRC, designed to understand the social, political and criminal-justice contexts of historical child sexual abuse, as part of which we conducted the first sustained interrogation of twentieth-century digital newspaper archives for coverage of this topic.<sup>21</sup> Keyword searches, using terms such as ‘incest’, ‘indecent’, ‘assault’ and ‘paedophile’ individually and in combination with signifiers of age such as ‘boy’, ‘girl’ and ‘young’, were carried out on the databases of leading popular dailies (*Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Express*), elite dailies (*The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Manchester Guardian*)<sup>22</sup> and a number of local newspapers, such as the *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, *Cornishman and Cornish Telegraph*, *Devon and Essex Gazette*, *Essex Chronicle*, *Hull Daily Mail*, *Western Daily Press* and the *Yorkshire Post*.<sup>23</sup> These digital searches were followed up by sampling of important non-digitized titles, including the *Sun*, the *News of the World*, the *Sunday Pictorial* and the *Sunday People*. We produced an extensive database of reporting from the period 1918 to 1990, identifying around a thousand articles from a representative selection of newspapers from across the market, with a range of editorial positions and political affiliations.<sup>24</sup> We do not claim that this search was exhaustive, not least because the inaccuracies of the optical character recognition software used to digitize newspapers means that some instances of the use of a word are inevitably missed. Nevertheless, the research produced an unprecedentedly rich and varied database of content that enabled us to discern the main patterns of change over the period.

This article argues that we can identify three distinct phases in the press coverage of child sexual abuse. Abuse was always visible, but its place on the press agenda changed significantly, and it was framed in different ways. In the three decades after the First World War, the bulk of the coverage in national and local newspapers comprised brief, factual reports of court proceedings, usually under euphemistic headlines that did not draw attention to the sexual nature of the alleged offences. Editors and reporters rarely challenged the definitions and frames developed by legal practitioners and the judiciary, and while occasional criticisms of the law and its enforcement were voiced – as by Miss Cooper – they were given little prominence and were seldom followed up. In this phase child sexual abuse had what can be described as an ‘inconspicuous visibility’: the topic was not silenced or hidden, but it was marginalized and easily missed, especially if one lacked the cultural capital to decipher the euphemisms that cloaked it. During the 1950s and 1960s, the press discussion and representation of sex and sexuality became more explicit in various ways, and newspapers both campaigned and competed on sexual issues more overtly.<sup>25</sup> Sex crimes were reported in more detail and were discussed more widely, and use of psychological and

medical terminology became more common. With the rise of the ‘teenager’, moreover, came a closer scrutiny of youth sexuality. Because child sexual abuse had not yet been clearly defined as a distinctive criminal category, however, it was repeatedly conflated with ‘homosexuality’ or with other forms of ‘deviancy’. It was not so much marginalized now as camouflaged in public discussion: visible, but its outlines and separate identity remained unclear. It was only in the mid 1970s, when ‘child abuse’ was conceptualized as a ‘social problem’ and the terminology of the ‘paedophile’ gained popular currency, that the press placed the issue firmly on the public agenda, and started to deploy it as a symbol of the moral decay brought by ‘permissiveness’. Over the course of the 1980s, child sexual abuse became hard to avoid in the pages of the press, even if in retrospect we can see that the press’s attention was restricted to certain manifestations of it, and the cultures sustaining it were not properly interrogated. The camouflage had been stripped away, but offenders like Jimmy Savile were still able to hide in plain sight.<sup>26</sup>

#### INCONSPICUOUS VISIBILITY: 1918–1940s

Court reports offered newspapers a means of writing about sexual transgression that was legitimized by the authority of the judicial process and the perceived moral need to publicize the punishment of criminality. After 1918, the coverage of child sexual abuse, in its various forms, was mainly limited to these court columns. Cases that reached the national dailies generally involved some unusual element that increased human interest, but euphemistic headlines rarely drew attention to the sexual nature of the alleged offences. ‘The Morrisses Sentenced – Three Years for the Man – 9 Months For The Wife – Judge’s Scathing Comments’ ran the headlines above a case of a thirty-seven-year-old broker who, with his wife, was found guilty of ‘carnal knowledge’ of three girls under sixteen lured into service at his country estate.<sup>27</sup> ‘Mother’s Shock – Sees Stranger With Her Child on Omnibus’, declared a *Daily Mail* headline in August 1927, which focused on the drama of a mother seeing her five-year-old daughter being taken away onto a bus by an unknown man, rather than the subsequent indecent assault charge.<sup>28</sup> More mundane cases were so briefly reported and discreetly placed that they were often not headlined at all.<sup>29</sup>

On Sundays the *News of the World*, in particular, provided fuller and more regular reporting of sexual offences, and the headlines were sometimes more direct, but the euphemisms remained securely in place in the descriptions. ‘Elderly Man Sentenced – Children Molested at Sunday School’ ran a typical report in 1924:

the prosecution stated that a little girl and her brother, aged six, went for a ride with the defendant in his governess cart... On the way, it was alleged, defendant committed an offence. It was because of this offence that the mischief was found out... It was alleged that defendant had been carrying out the practice with them over a considerable period.<sup>30</sup>

The spare, detached language of the courtroom, the lack of descriptive detail, and the trivializing term ‘mischief’, ensured such reports did little to stir the emotions, and enabled the reader to scan and move on.

In local papers, the arrival of the assizes often brought a flurry of local cases to be covered. Here the assumed interest for the reader was in their proximity to the offence, and there was little need to sensationalize or select cases: they were recorded in their awful mundanity. On a single page of the *Essex Chronicle* in November 1933, for example, there were reports of a labourer indicted on ‘six counts for indecency against lads’ (headlined ‘Horrible’); an incest charge involving a father with various members of a family of seven, aged six to seventeen (‘Serious Case from Tilbury’); an indecent assault upon a girl of fifteen (‘Bound Over’); another father charged with incest with his daughter (‘Serious Case’), and a sibling incest case (‘Brother and Sister’). These were in addition to an ‘Abduction Charge’ (a forty-year-old accused of spiriting away a sixteen-year-old girl), an ‘Attack on Girl at Hornchurch’ (no given age, but seemingly over sixteen), and a charge of gross indecency with ‘a male person’ of no given age.<sup>31</sup> Adult-child sexual contacts were not differentiated from other sexual offences, and the use of terms such as ‘girls’ and ‘lads’ for young people both below and above the age of sexual consent further blurred the distinctions – it is impossible in some reports to identify precisely the exact nature of the charge. Faced with this catalogue of illicit activity, though, readers could hardly be unaware of the sexual abuse of children.

Court reporting was a cheap, convenient and reliably interesting form of copy for editors and journalists. It was also a very passive genre: proceedings were edited down to the required length and, apart from the particularly sensational or unusual cases that provoked an editorial reaction, they were not debated, analysed or critiqued.<sup>32</sup> These stories of transgression were essentially forms of entertainment, and, in this period, child sexual abuse cases were rarely used to develop forms of social commentary. They were underpinned by a fatalistic acceptance that such crimes were a regrettable, but inevitable, outcome of the weakness and moral corruption of certain individuals. Where there was any commentary, it

almost always came in the form of extracts from the judge's summing up. This ensured that the press's framing and interpretation of child sexual abuse was dictated largely by the legal establishment – a judiciary, which, as Carol Smart has pointed out, was packed with traditionally-minded men who were often very resistant to the more victim-centred approaches put forward by feminists, and which was also the source of 'the most unreconstructed notion of the child as "vicious" or mendacious'.<sup>33</sup>

Judicial suggestions that girls were complicit in, or tainted by, their abuse, were not uncommon. Reporting from the Devon Assizes in October 1925, for example, the *Devon and Exeter Gazette* recorded a judge's statement 'that it did seem rather regrettable, and a place where the law rather failed, that nothing could ever be done in the case of little girls under sixteen with whom offences were committed and who often, of course, were guilty themselves. Sometimes they were as guilty as the male'.<sup>34</sup> Judges' scepticism about child witnesses emerged in warnings to juries about the danger of relying on the uncorroborated testimony of victims. In a case reported by the *Hull Daily Mail* in 1934, Mr Justice Humphries declared that 'no one would ever be safe' if courts accepted, without corroboration, 'the evidence of a horrible little girl like the feeble-minded creature [in this trial] who has been acting as a common prostitute'. When after an absence of only five minutes the jury rejected the charges against one of the accused (others among a group of nine were found guilty) the headlines, blazoned across the back page, were unpitiful: 'Judge's Stern Comment On Unashamed Girl Witness – Scunthorpe Man Found Not Guilty – Women Often Bring Charges That Are Unfounded, Mr Justice Humphreys – Contradictory Tale'. Justice Humphreys declared his consternation that one sexually experienced girl did not conform to the expectations of feminine self-presentation in such circumstances: she 'had smiled and seemed totally unashamed... cheerfully confessing the kind of life she had led'.<sup>35</sup> This report, and many others, offer glimpses of how much class, gender and ethnicity-based notions of respectability mattered for credibility on the witness stand, as Christopher Hilliard has recently explored.<sup>36</sup> Those who seemed to lack the required respectability, as many working-class children would have done, clearly met with considerable scepticism in both the police station and the court-room.

Judges were aware that the press provided them with a national platform, and they reciprocated by appreciating the role of the press in publicizing the operation of justice. This was especially important in relation to sexual abuse within the family, argued Mr Justice Roche in April 1922, because 'many did not know that incest was unlawful, although they knew it was wrong'. Roche explicitly criticized the euphemistic culture that surrounded the



topic, imploring newspapers ‘to call a spade a spade and state that there had been a conviction for incest or rape instead of referring to an indecent offence’.<sup>37</sup> This was a favourite theme too of Mr Justice Cardie, who had long fought against the hearing of cases *in camera* rather than in open court.<sup>38</sup> In July 1927, he observed :

Again and again he had seen men and women in the dock who, through suppression of the reports of these cases, said they did not know incest was a crime... He hoped no false delicacy would stop the newspapers publishing the convictions so that there could be no excuse for a plea of ignorance.

In January 1932, summing-up in a case of a fifteen year-old girl who had been impregnated by her brother, McCardie was ‘glad’ that the press was ‘willing and anxious to tell the public something of the horrible facts that exist in the social life of some people’.<sup>39</sup> Such comments were useful ammunition against critics who argued that the press gave such cases too much attention. Anxieties about the damaging moral effects of divorce court reporting had led to restrictions being imposed by the 1926 Judicial Proceedings (Regulation of Reports) Act; in 1933 the Children and Young Persons Act extended these restrictions to cases involving under-sixteens. As the press was still allowed to publish a précis of charges – the judge’s summing up and submissions on points of law – this had little impact on the reporting of child sexual abuse cases, which rarely went any further.<sup>40</sup>

Judicial encouragement to ‘call a spade a spade’ did not, however, embolden newspapers to address child sexual abuse beyond the court columns in any sustained way. During the 1920s, the campaigning activities of women’s organizations helped to generate political pressure for reform of the laws governing sexual offences.<sup>41</sup> The Criminal Law Amendment Act 1922 restricted some of the available defences in respect to indecent assault on under-sixteens, but reformers called for a more wide-ranging survey of the problem. In November 1923, the *Portsmouth Evening News* reported Margery Fry, the Secretary of the Howard League for Penal Reform and one of Britain’s first female JPs, calling for the appointment of a ‘committee to inquire into the frequency of assaults on children’. ‘Too long had there been a conspiracy of silence’, she declared, and demanded that the public be ‘acquainted with the figures of the crimes, and what steps were being taken’.<sup>42</sup> The short-lived Labour government of 1924 eventually acceded to these demands, and in 1925 the Departmental Committee on Sexual Offences Against Young People made a number of recommendations for improving practice in this area, which included collecting data about

sexual offences against children, providing more considerate treatment of victims, and appointing more female police officers to facilitate better supervision in parks and places of entertainment.<sup>43</sup> These policy debates were reported, briefly, but the coverage was factual and passive without editorial intervention.<sup>44</sup> One of the reasons that the political and legal establishment was able to ignore the 1925 report, despite the lobbying from women's organizations, was that the press showed little interest in keeping the issue high on the public agenda. This policy inertia was the context for Miss Cooper's 1929 demand for action against 'Park Pests', and for the establishment of a further committee of inquiry. The following year, the *Manchester Guardian* reported that Miss Kelly, a member of the Departmental Committee, moved a resolution at the National Council of Women's conference 'deploring the delay in introducing legislation' to implement the Committee's recommendations, despite what she highlighted as an 'astounding increase' in sexual crime.<sup>45</sup> With the press reluctant to prioritize the issue, and the legal establishment unconvinced of any need for reform, campaigners struggled to keep the issue on the agenda into the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>46</sup> The wartime evacuation of children into new homes may have created new opportunities for abuse, but as newsprint rationing severely reduced the size of newspapers and attention turned to the horrors of the global conflict, there were few incentives for newspapers to disturb the morale of a home front supposedly united by the 'Blitz spirit'. For ordinary readers, occasional euphemistic court reports were the only jarring reminders of an issue that the press, and the political and legal authorities, were willing to marginalize.

#### CAMOUFLAGE: 1940s–1970s

In the three decades after the Second World War, social change, the transformation of the media environment, the rise of psychological modes of thought and the gradual sexualization of British culture, altered the visibility and understanding of adult-child sexual contact. National daily and Sunday newspapers became both more explicit and more creative in their approach to sex, not least because of the emerging competition from television. Rather than rely on court reporting for titillation, the popular press made much more frequent use of investigative features, advice columns, reader surveys, celebrity gossip and pin-up photography. At the same time, crime reporting became more sensational and made greater use of medical and psychological terminology.<sup>47</sup> As public and political interest in the 'teenager' as a new social category grew, the sexuality of young people, and the threat of its 'corruption' by their elders, became inevitably a topic of widespread debate.<sup>48</sup> Yet in the absence of a clear category of 'child sexual abuse', the press discussion of offences against

children often remained confused and poorly targeted. Dangers to children were still routinely associated with ‘homosexuality’, and policy debates quickly became subsumed in wider discussions about the decriminalization of adult male homosexuality, as proposed in the Wolfenden Report of 1957 and eventually enacted in the 1967 Sexual Offences Act.<sup>49</sup> The issue of child sexual abuse was far from hidden, but it remained camouflaged.

These shifts can be seen most distinctly in the pages of the *Sunday Pictorial*, edited or overseen for most of this period by Hugh Cudlipp, the most dynamic and influential popular journalist in mid-century Britain.<sup>50</sup> The *Pictorial*’s circulation was steadily rising, eroding the advantage of the market leader, the *News of the World*: its weekly sales grew from around four million in 1947, to 5.2 million in 1951 and 5.5 million in 1960: it would therefore have reached some twelve to fifteen million, mainly working-class, readers each week.<sup>51</sup> In its pages cases of abuse started to generate journalistic investigation and different solutions were considered. After the (unsolved) rape and murder of five-year-old Eileen Lockhart in 1948, for example, the *Pictorial* not only produced a standard news report, it also printed a feature about ‘child murder’ discussing the issue with ‘psychologists, teachers and the police’. As well as reiterating the usual advice (‘Do not allow children to play in isolated places. Warn them not to accept presents from strangers... But do not allow them to build up a bogey-man complex’), the feature addressed the sexual element of the case and underlined the need to keep young people informed: ‘Sex education is important – once children are old enough to understand your explanation’.<sup>52</sup> The paper was aligning itself with reformers who were attacking the culture of euphemism and reticence that still surrounded sex.<sup>53</sup> A similar feature about ‘sex criminals’ in July 1951, after three child murders in the first half of the year, was more explicit. ‘Children must be warned that such things happen and taught the common-sense precautions’, advised veteran journalist Sydney Jacobson: ‘If they have already had some instruction about sex from their parents, they will find it easier to understand, and will be less frightened. Rather than demand a punitive ‘law-and-order’ response to ‘sex crimes’, Jacobson put his faith in the expertise of professionals, and called for a degree of empathy with the criminals:

it calls for understanding, skilled treatment and, above all, early recognition of the mental sickness that produces these crimes. Such work is being done now little by little, by the small patient army of probation officers, social workers, children’s officers and psychiatrists. Their work is often overlooked, and sometimes made fun of but the real solution is in their hands. Our horror at what has been done must not blind us to the fact

that the sex criminal does not spring fully armed from the ground. Behind every adult sex offender, there is an unhappy boy who has somehow never learned, as others do, to love his fellow beings.<sup>54</sup>

This reformist approach, not surprisingly, was controversial. The following week, under the headline ‘Sex Offenders: a Terrible Story’ Jacobson responded directly to parents who ‘demand greater penalties for perverts’. His article highlighted the scale of the problem, with ‘new reports of children and young girls being molested’, from around the country, including ‘three cases in forty-eight hours’ in Epping Forest. ‘Angry readers’ had advocated ‘the death penalty, flogging, sterilization and castration... But none of them is the answer’. Long sentences were certainly required, he argued, ‘even when there has been no serious bodily injury to the victim’. More important was that this time in prison should not be wasted: ‘offenders should have every facility for psychiatric treatment’. Unfortunately, though, ‘such facilities do not now exist’, and they needed to be expanded.<sup>55</sup> Jacobson’s articles were more nuanced than Douglas Warth’s notorious ‘Evil Men’ series about homosexuality the following year, and demonstrated that the popular press did not invariably invoke punitive and moralistic solutions to sexual offences.<sup>56</sup> Yet with debates about different types of ‘sex offenders’ and ‘perverts’ running consecutively, it was not difficult for different strands of argument to become intertwined.

In the same issue as Jacobson’s first piece, the *Pictorial* printed on the front page the initial results of its investigation exposing as an imposter and abuser ‘Reverend Terence Ingram’, or ‘Father Ingram’, the head of the London Choir School at St Michael’s College, Bexley, Kent.<sup>57</sup> Ingram was accused of lying about his qualifications and of beating boys with ‘irrational violence on the slightest provocation’, while one mother claimed that her son had been ‘physically and morally corrupted’ by him.<sup>58</sup> Ingram served a writ against the paper to close down the story, but this was dismissed two years later, and Ingram was eventually convicted of five serious offences against three ex-pupils, and sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment.<sup>59</sup> A number of cases of abuse in independent schools led to widespread press coverage and parliamentary questions about the role of the Ministry of Education in ensuring that schools did not appoint teachers convicted of sexual offences.<sup>60</sup> ‘A recent case’, complained a *Mirror* editorial in March 1954, ‘showed that a man [Christopher Peter Moore] gaoled for offences against boys had been running private schools between three spells in prison! How many more innocent children must be sacrificed...?’<sup>61</sup> Again, however, the problem of abuse in schools was conflated with the issue of regulating the activities of

homosexuals. 'If You Love Children, This Is The Urgent Lesson Of The Evil Father Ingram', wrote Colin Valdar, the *Pictorial* editor, once Ingram was convicted: 'how many other private schools, without effective supervision, are exposing children to the "care" of known homosexuals?'<sup>62</sup> This elision of offences against children with homosexuality ensured that the specific issue of child sexual abuse got lost as the question of homosexual law reform decisively rose up the public agenda in the mid 1950s.

The same conflations and confusions were evident in the debates provoked by this more explicit press coverage of sexual offences. When a columnist in the trade paper *World's Press News* expressed his anxiety that the reporting of 'perversion' would encourage imitation, he specifically identified 'appalling attacks on children'. Although serving 'as warnings to parents', he worried that these stories aroused 'maniacal instincts in other men who are normally quiescent'.<sup>63</sup> Two days later, an *Observer* editorial agreed that featuring 'sex crimes, particularly offences against young persons and children, does great harm' because 'persons with an inclination to a particular form of crime are apt to imitate what they read about'.<sup>64</sup> As the debate about press responsibility progressed, however, it tended to focus on the reporting of 'homosexuality'. In February 1954, the Labour backbencher George Craddock asked the Home Secretary, Sir David Maxwell-Fyfe, to investigate 'the danger to public morale caused by wide publicity in the Press of gross and unnecessary details in cases of homosexuality'.<sup>65</sup> In Cabinet the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, argued that an amenable backbencher should be encouraged to introduce a Bill restricting the reporting of homosexual offences.<sup>66</sup> Maxwell-Fyfe successfully opposed these demands with a defence of open justice, and highlighted the practical difficulty of distinguishing 'between homosexual offences and other sexual offences'.<sup>67</sup> The Cabinet agreed that setting up a committee to investigate the wider issues of homosexuality and prostitution would be preferable to taking measures against the press.<sup>68</sup> The social value of reporting child sexual abuse was recognized but, once again, it remained camouflaged within a wider debate.

It was left to the recently formed self-regulatory body, the Press Council, to police the explicitness of reporting, and it quickly laid down a marker, ruling in 1955 that the *Hull Daily Mail's* account of a rape of a girl of eleven was too detailed. 'That [such cases] should be reported – and in some instances reported at length – cannot be disputed,' the Council ruled. 'But, as exemplified almost daily in British newspapers, such reporting can be done without going into unsavoury detail.' Repeating the 'abhorrent elements' might affect 'those subject to demoralisation by reading them', including adolescents and children.<sup>69</sup> A similar ruling against 'Unnecessary Indecency Detail' was made in 1961 against the *Middlesex County*

*Times* for a report ‘of grave offences against a young girl’.<sup>70</sup> Newspapers generally adhered to such exhortations, retaining euphemisms and silences where necessary, even in such high-profile cases as that of the so-called ‘Moors Murderers’, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley. The murders were presented as sadistic and satanic; coverage of the trial in 1966 included speculation about Brady and Hindley’s psychological profiles and their fascination with extreme and occult literature.<sup>71</sup> Their specific interest in children remained understated, and some papers actually reduced their coverage as the trial progressed, such was the gruesome nature of the evidence.<sup>72</sup> The press’s dark fascination with ‘evil’ strangers such as Brady and Hindley, who were characterized by their distance from society and social norms, both discouraged consideration of broader social, cultural or policy issues, and misrepresented the balance of threats from within and outside the family.

Fears about evil strangers and abusive teachers were compounded by an awareness that young people were maturing earlier, both physically and emotionally, and seeking outlets for their burgeoning sexuality. During the 1950s, the popular press repeatedly warned parents that young people could no longer be treated as they had before the war. In 1956, for example, the *People* offered, with typical hyperbole, ‘The Gravest Warning To Parents Ever Printed’. ‘Doctors have discovered that well before the modern boy or girl reaches 14 years of age they have matured physically into men and women’, the paper explained, yet ‘...parents, unaware of this, are bringing up their teen-age children to a pattern laid down in their families perhaps two generations ago’. This parental ‘ignorance’ was responsible not only for the ‘increasing number of young girls who become moral delinquents’ but also ‘the growing revolt of teen-age children against parental control’. The paper concluded that the ‘14-year-old of today is the 16-year-old of 50 years ago’, with obvious implications for the age of consent.<sup>73</sup> In 1958 the *Pictorial* produced a major four-part series about the ‘revolution in school-age and teenage morals that has been kept secret from parents’. The paper used the testimony of four doctors to ‘shock parents and guide the footsteps of the young’, and featured examples of eleven and twelve year-old girls becoming pregnant, boys of fourteen and younger committing indecent assaults, and a ‘schoolgirl under sixteen [who] “obliged a whole football team” in the fields before going home after a match’. Adults were told that the children who resisted the trend to promiscuity were those ‘whose parents have... answered sex questions straightforwardly from the earliest days’. Parents could not afford to wait until puberty, but ‘must get it into their heads that sex interest in children begins as early as two or three years old’.<sup>74</sup>

The ‘teenager’ was a symbolic construct onto which was loaded many of the anxieties about social change, and the attention on the sexual pleasure-seeking of young people reflected a broader set of concerns about a more hedonistic, consumerist and secular age.<sup>75</sup> By the mid 1960s these stories of youth sexuality were enmeshed in wider narratives about sexual ‘permissiveness’ (including topics such as premarital sex, the contraceptive pill and abortion) and the rise of youth culture (‘Beatlemania’, the ‘mods’ and ‘rockers’ and the emerging counter-culture). This diffuse set of fears only periodically crystallized into a focus on the adult exploitation of youth sexuality through abusive behaviours, and when it did, the imprecision of the language used often weakened the impact. Child sexual abuse remained camouflaged.

#### THE EMERGENCE OF THE ‘PAEDOPHILE’

On 25 May 1975, the *Sunday People* front page featured photographs of three men under the headline ‘The Vilest Men In Britain’:

These are faces of three leaders of a society whose aim will horrify every parent in the country. They are members of P.A.L. – the Paedophile Action for Liberation. Paedophile means literally: “Lover of children.” But these vile men do not talk of normal love of a child. They mean SEX WITH A CHILD.<sup>76</sup>

The paper knew that it needed to define the term ‘paedophile’ for its readers because, as Mathew Thomson has noted, it was ‘virtually non-existent in Britain’ before the 1970s.<sup>77</sup> This report, which explained how members of the group sought to ‘seduce young children of both sexes’ and ‘get the law changed to make the revolting practice acceptable’ was an important moment in the introduction of the concept of ‘paedophilia’ into mainstream public life, and it generated an immediate reaction. While MPs demanded action and petitions were drawn up, individuals mentioned in the article were attacked and bricks were thrown through the window of the PAL headquarters.<sup>78</sup> The Press Council rejected complaints that the report was irresponsible, concluding that the language used, although strong, did not ‘go beyond what is acceptable in a free society’.<sup>79</sup> Two years later, a similar organization, the Paedophile Information Exchange (PIE) generated an even more ferocious press response. From late August until mid September 1977, there were articles almost every day in the national press highlighting and denouncing, the activities of PIE and its leader, Tom O’Carroll.<sup>80</sup> Outraged editorials were penned, readers’ letters printed and investigations into child pornography and

child prostitution launched.<sup>81</sup> Although press coverage would peak and trough over subsequent years, the problem of child sexual abuse had been placed firmly on the public agenda, and the paedophile would become one of the defining evils of the late twentieth century.<sup>82</sup>

We can identify three key reasons for this shift. First, social work practitioners, medical professionals and feminists developed new languages and definitions of abuse and sexual violence. Physical child abuse was put onto the public agenda by the work of the American paediatrician Henry Kempe on ‘battered child syndrome’, and the public inquiry into the death in 1973 of seven year-old Maria Colwell at the hands of her step-father.<sup>83</sup> Psychologists in the 1970s became more concerned about the damaging impact of adult-child sexual contact and started to employ the language of ‘paedophilia’.<sup>84</sup> At the same time, feminist writers and campaigners highlighted the extent and influence of male sexual violence, both in the home and outside it. As Ian Hacking has argued, new terminology brought fresh ways of thinking about old practices.<sup>85</sup> Even if journalists did not accept all the arguments of social work or feminism, the key texts were widely discussed and the language of ‘abuse’, ‘harassment’ and ‘sexual violence’ filtered into common use, enabling adult-child sexual contact to be conceptualized as a specific and serious harm, rather than as one part of a problem of sexual ‘immorality’.<sup>86</sup>

Second, legal reforms in the 1960s started to make more precise distinctions between different types of sexual behaviour. The 1960 Indecency Against Children Act sought to close loopholes in the complex series of laws governing sexual offences against under-sixteens, and was the first piece of legislation to refer to children as a gender-neutral category.<sup>87</sup> The partial decriminalization of consenting adult male homosexuality in 1967 clarified the distinction between the ‘homosexual’ and the ‘paedophile’, and enabled the slow process in which the press identified the latter, rather than the former, as a social ‘problem’. The state regulation of sexuality was now politicized and contested in new ways, and various groups, including the Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation movements, pushed for more radical change. It was in this climate of debate that paedophile rights organizations believed they might get a hearing. Opponents of permissiveness meanwhile gathered to preserve traditional morality in organizations such as the National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association (NVALA, founded by Mary Whitehouse) and the Festival of Light. Moral entrepreneurs and interest groups enabled the press to put human faces to specific issues, and keep them in the headlines by creating ‘pseudo-events’ or offering comments to sustain attention and controversy.<sup>88</sup> PIE remained a magnet for press attention well into the 1980s, by which time



other campaigners, welfare groups and moral entrepreneurs, including the NSPCC, Parents Against Injustice (PAIN) and the Conservative MP Geoffrey Dickens were regular sources of press releases or newsworthy events.<sup>89</sup>

Third, there were significant changes in the newspaper market in the wake of the Rupert Murdoch's relaunch of the *Sun* in 1969. The *Sun*'s dramatic circulation growth suggested that popular journalism would succeed in the television era by becoming more sexually explicit, more sensational and more provocative in its editorial positions. These lessons quickly spread through Fleet Street: the mid-market *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* became tabloid in 1971 and 1977 respectively, the *Mirror* started including topless pin-ups, and in 1978 the *Daily Star* launched as a downmarket rival to the *Sun*. Amidst these changes, crime reporting was increasingly seen not just as a form of entertainment, but as a way of addressing political or social debates.<sup>90</sup> In combination, these shifts enabled child sexual abuse to be presented as a well-defined, and serious, social problem; for it to be widely and explicitly discussed by newspapers now both deeply interested in, and highly attuned to, changes in sexual culture; and for these debates to be seen as important contributions to wider political and cultural contests over the future of Britain.

The main themes of the press coverage of child sexual abuse since the mid 1970s have been discussed elsewhere.<sup>91</sup> What is important to highlight here is how editorials and opinion columns often prioritized particular political and social interpretations of the problem. Where previously offences against children had been one element in a broad spectrum of sexual immorality, the gradual acceptance of the Wolfenden principle that (consenting) adults should have freedom of choice where no public harm was involved ensured that the boundaries protecting young people took on a new symbolic significance. Where those boundaries should lie was not agreed. In the mid 1970s organizations such as the Sex Law Reform Society and the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) called for a lowering of the age of consent to fourteen and revisions to the laws on incest, while some judges called for 'maturity' rather than age to be considered in sexual offence cases.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, PIE was allowed to affiliate to the NCCL from the late 1970s to the early 1980s.<sup>93</sup> Opposing paedophile-rights groups, therefore, meant taking a stand in a broader debate about legislative reform and cultural change, and popular papers of both left and right invoked the 'common sense' of ordinary readers against 'permissive' elites. 'The idea of sex between adults and toddlers is totally repulsive to the overwhelming majority of mature people', observed a *Daily Mirror* editorial in August 1977 when PIE was first exposed: 'The *Daily Mirror* is a tolerant newspaper. But tolerance has its limit. And this is it'.<sup>94</sup> The *Mail* editorial on the

same day was similarly insistent on the need to take a stand against what it feared was the inexorable tide of liberal reform:

Can anyone, knowing the history of the past few years, be certain that given sufficient 'trendy' support, the belief that there can exist such a being as a 'consenting' child, will not tomorrow become a popular cause? Because the barriers have been pushed so far back, no one can be certain where the line will eventually be held... If ever there is a barrier at which we can stand and state: 'This far and no further', then surely this is it.<sup>95</sup>

During the 1980s, with Thatcher in power and 'permissive' reforms off the political agenda, the discussion of child sexual abuse was shaped by wider anxieties about rising crime, urban decay and family breakdown. In August 1983, a brutal sexual attack on a six-year-old boy in Brighton prompted a wave of editorializing about moral decline. In an editorial headlined 'The Tide of Evil', the *Express* argued that recent decades had seen a significant weakening of the controls on our 'darker and baser interests'.

The old values and taboos – containing the accumulated wisdom and experience of countless previous generations – have been jeered and sniggered out of court by a tiny minority of cultural radicals and their fellow-travellers... A culture blazoning forth the message 'No restraint' will produce behaviour to match.<sup>96</sup>

The *Daily Mirror* agreed that although the police might catch the assailants of the Brighton boy, and though PIE might be banned, the problem went much deeper: 'We live in an age where sex is exploited commercially without cease... The frontiers of what is permissible are pushed out without remorse and the only standard is profit... We have created a climate where the outrageous amuses as many as it disgusts.'<sup>97</sup> Such interpretations lent credence to Thatcher's 'Victorian Values' rhetoric, and cast doubt on a Labour Party associated with the perceived sexual radicalism of feminism, gay rights organizations and the 'loony left'.<sup>98</sup>

By incubating a nostalgia for the consensual morality of the past, these editorials also discursively erased the anxieties of earlier decades about sexual offences against children. 'We have to accept the bitter fact that the old carefree days many of us remember with joy, when we played in the fields, went on bicycle rides, picknicked and gathered bluebells in the woods... are gone forever', lamented Lynda Lee-Potter in the *Mail* in September 1985. When she argued that 'Our streets, our public parks, our meadows and our country lanes today are

tragically places where our children are permanently at risk', she was, of course, unaware of the echoes with Miss Cooper's words from 1929.<sup>99</sup> Reprising the theme the following April, Lee-Potter argued that 'Thirty years ago you were still a child at 15. Today if you're a girl you may well be on the pill, addicted to nicotine, drugs and sleazy pop songs with lyrics which extol the "virtues" of whoredom'.<sup>100</sup> It was, in fact, almost exactly thirty years since the *People* had published its warning about early maturing teenagers. Forgetting this past was essential to the credibility of the argument, however: if the values of the 1950s had not prevented sexual offences then, why would they now?

This ahistorical rhetoric of 'family values' and 'common sense', shared by Thatcher and much of the popular press, led to the prioritization of punitive, law-and-order solutions for child abuse, rather than trusting in the expertise of psychiatrists, social work professionals and medical practitioners. Such scepticism of 'experts' emerged strongly in the coverage of the 'Cleveland Scandal' of 1987–8, with the *Daily Mail* leading the attack on paediatricians Marietta Higgs and Geoffrey Wyatt, who had controversially recommended the removal of children from their families after diagnosing abuse.<sup>101</sup> It also generated pressure for heavier sentences for paedophiles. 'At last the law gets tough', proclaimed a *Mail* editorial in December 1988 after a judge handed down a life sentence to a 'child-sex attacker': the judge 'spoke for us all when said that society is sick of the increase in child abuse'.<sup>102</sup> Ultimately, it would lead to the *News of the World's* 'Naming and Shaming' campaign, when in 2000, in the wake of the murder of school-girl Sarah Payne, the paper printed the names and whereabouts of convicted child sex offenders.<sup>103</sup> Fifty years after a Sunday paper pleaded with readers to trust in the 'small patient army of probation officers, social workers, children's officers and psychiatrists', its rival was encouraging the public to take matters into their own hands.<sup>104</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

This evidence from the pages of the press challenges conventional narratives about the public discussion of child sexual abuse, and, more broadly, chronologies of sexual change in modern Britain. Sexual offences against children were never 'hidden' from public sight in twentieth-century Britain, and across the period there were campaigners, like Miss Cooper, trying to draw attention to them. In the three decades after the First World War, however, it was easy and convenient for male-dominated newsrooms to marginalize them. Court reporting was a form of entertainment rather than a source of social analysis, and even when judges called for greater boldness, journalists clung to the security of the euphemism. This marginalization was

made simpler by the issue's lack of political salience and the limited public profile of critical voices; the absence of coherent legal categorizations for offences against children also enabled them to be disguised under the imprecise terminology of 'indecenty'. After the Second World War, the increasing explicitness of the press, the desire of influential Fleet Street editors and journalists to investigate and debate sexual issues, and the growing interest in youth sexuality combined to ensure that the topic would receive greater, and, at times, sustained, attention. The prominence and depth of the press features and investigations about sexual offences in the 1950s, in particular, has not been fully recognized, and offers further reason to question histories of 'permissiveness' that focus on the 1960s.<sup>105</sup> Yet the lack of conceptual clarity about the relationship of offences against children to other forms of illegality, such as 'homosexuality', made it hard to isolate them as a specific problem, and they remained camouflaged in broader discussions of 'vice'. From the mid 1970s this situation changed significantly. New terms and conceptual approaches became available to define the problem of 'child sexual abuse' and to identify the 'paedophile' as a major threat, and interest groups operating in this field took on a new prominence. Equally as important, a more sexually explicit and politically outspoken post-Murdoch press had new incentives to take up the issue as it became politicized first in the contests over 'permissiveness', and then in the 'law-and-order' debates of the 1980s. Journalists and opinion writers became practised in packaging cases of child sexual abuse to exemplify social developments; for the many commentators advocating a return to traditional morality, moreover, there was a powerful motivation to efface the prevalence of abuse in earlier decades. Widely accepted histories of the recent past, with the rhetorical conviction that 'sex began in 1963', encouraged misleading assumptions about the 'pre-permissive' society.

By the 1980s it was easy to believe that a long-ignored problem had been brought into the limelight, and the press presented itself as a fearless crusader for truth. With hindsight, however, we can see how many gaps and silences remained. Opportunities to expose the activities of serial abusers such as Jimmy Savile and Cyril Smith went begging, and there was little scrutiny of institutions housing or schooling children. While undoubtedly constrained by the libel laws, journalists all too often did not want to 'rock the boat' or endanger their access to politicians and celebrities.<sup>106</sup> The lack of attention to the past, moreover, has obscured how the coverage of child sexual abuse is still shaped, and distorted, by many of the assumptions and practices developed in earlier decades. The general acceptance of judicial perspectives, entrenched in the passive reporting of the judge's summing-up, fed through into gendered reporting betraying a suspicion of female sexuality and a belief in the responsibility of

women and girls to protect themselves from abuse. Despite some notable exceptions, the widespread adoption of populist, punitive law and order rhetoric drew heavily on long traditions of moral grandstanding and crusading. The language of the ‘sex beast’, and the dark fascination with individual perpetrators, has equally deep roots, but has served to marginalize any sustained consideration of how abuse might be related to wider power relationships or social identities. If, by the final quarter of the century, the press was, at last, calling ‘a spade a spade’, many of the old attitudes lingered on.

## **Adrian Bingham**

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