Chapter 13

Media constructions of, and reactions to, paedophilia in society

Kieran McCartan

Introduction

This chapter will address media constructions and representations of paedophilia in modern society, based on the existing literature and current reporting. It will first examine what the media actually is, and this will allow for a discussion of the role and impact of the media on the public. In doing so, the psychology of media influence will be addressed, therefore examining why the media has the impact it does on public opinion and how it can help shape individual attitudes. This will then tie into ideas around the social construction of reality, particularly with regard to social issues, examining paedophilia as a socially sensitive and traumatic topic. The chapter will then address how the media, especially the press, has reported and discussed paedophilia, looking at the language and ideas used with regard to paedophiles and dangerous child sexual offenders, and asking how close to reality these practices are. This will finally lead into a discussion of the social responsibility, morality and ethics of the media, and whether they achieve this in their reporting and presentation of stories concerning paedophilia. In discussing the UK press coverage of paedophilia, the chapter will focus on The News of the World’s Sarah Payne campaign; this will not only demonstrate how the press used this case to raise the profile of paedophilia, cementing it as a moral panic, but will also allow for a discussion concerning media sensitivity and ethics. In closing, the chapter will bring these various strands together to demonstrate the impact of the media’s representation of paedophilia on the
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public and how by changing their approach the media could help change the public perception and social construction of paedophilia towards a more realistic representation that could help in child protection.

What is the media?

Prior to discussing the role and function of the media in depth, it is first important to understand what the media actually is. Although, the media is often discussed in monolithic and homogeneous terms it is anything but. Rather it is a variety of different formats, with different purposes, focusing on different issues all with different agendas (McQuail 2007). As such, the different aspects of the media can be, and often are, at odds with one another. This means that the media in contemporary society is a complex and multi-faceted industry, which is continually adapting in light of modernisation, technological developments, changing social norms and globalisation (McQuail 2007). Consequently, the majority of people living in our global society, not just Westernised countries, will come into contact with multiple media formats as well as various media perspectives and agendas every day. Understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of the modern media is important as it affects the stories being told, the way that they are told, who accesses them, and the impact that these stories have. This is salient, as the media plays an increasingly important role in modern society (Giddens 1991), with regard to crime and criminal justice matters (Howitt 1998; Brown 2003; Gray 2009), particularly in the UK, which has become a media-centred society (Howitt 1998; Cohen 2002). As such, it would be impossible and irresponsible to portray the media as one homogeneous sector. With this in mind, this chapter will focus upon the news and current affairs sector of the media, particularly in the form of the press (i.e., the press and broadcast media).

There are many potential explanations of what the role and the function of the media should be in society; these fluctuate both between and within the various types of media. However, in general, the media is seen as the main method for the dissemination of information, the shaping of public perception and the reinforcement of societal attitudes (Greer 2003). Potentially, the media has a great deal of power and influence in society, in that it can shape and influence public opinion, while at the same time inform society in a quick in-depth fashion that legitimises the subject, thereby re-
establishing the creditability of the story (McQuail 2007). Howitt (1998) argues that the media can affect public opinion by utilising one of three potential models, either the cause-and-effect model, the uses and gratification model, or the cultural ratification model. As such, the media helps shape individual attitudes through a series of psychological and sociological processes including, but not limited to, stereotyping, group processes and norm reinforcement. Research indicates that attitude formation and opinion making are based on many premises, including active and inactive processing, the attitude of the processor, the story being told, and the expertise/reliability of the person telling it (Bohner and Wanke 2009). All of these are relevant with regard to the media, as we come into contact with it on a daily basis and we have very individualised attitudes to it, with research indicating that the general public are invested in and trust their preferred media sources (McCartan forthcoming). Consequently, there seems to be a symbiotic relationship between the media and the public, with the public selecting its media based upon its content and approach and the media producing stories and voicing opinions that the public, or certainly specific sections of the public, want to engage with (Cohen and Young 1981; Howitt 1998; Gamson et al. 1992; Greer 2003). This leads to the suggestion that the media has a dual function of reporting and creating the news (Cohen and Young 1981); however, the degree to which the media would agree with this is a hotly debated issue. Despite this, the media does play some role in the shaping of public opinion (Bohner and Wanke 2009; Gray 2009), societal attitudes (McQuail 2007) and current debates (Silverman and Wilson 2002; Cross 2005; McCartan 2008a; Gray 2009), and thus it would be inappropriate to suggest that it has no impact, although the question has to be, of what extent is this influence? Is it just limited to individual receptors or can the media help form/change social attitudes wholesale?

Media, social constructionism and moral panics

The media helps shape societal attitudes through a series of sociological processes including, but not limited to, reflexivity modernisation and social constructionism, which can have a lasting and significant impact (i.e., social attitudes and government legislation). Social constructionism is the idea that society is a socially constructed reality that adapts and changes depending on the cognition of the individuals involved (Gergen 1973; Burr 1995); this is why society
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adapts over time and space (Giddens 1991). Social constructionism is shaped by the twin concepts of meaning (the act of defining) and power (the motives for the definition), and is rooted in ideas around language and communication. Social constructionalism places an emphasis on contextualisation and social interaction (Burr 1995), arguing that all concepts are transitory and specific, meaning that society is constructed through the individuals and culture that shape it and, as such, can change over time, with regard to the meaning and power attributed to it by its members’ attitudes, beliefs and opinions. This suggests that social constructionism is closely related to modernisation, because in both process, society and the individual constantly re-evaluate life in relation to new information being produced. This is particularly important with regard to media influence because the media argue that they produce relevant news that is in the public interest (McQuail 2007), meaning that new information is continually being produced and social attitudes are always changing. This can be seen very clearly in certain social issues, especially socially sensitive topics such as paedophilia (McCartan 2009) and child protection (Scott et al. 1998).

Paedophilia is in part a social construction, specifically the labelling and definition of it (for more information on this see, Chapter 1 of this volume), which has partly occurred through the media coverage and representation of paedophilia. There has been a vast amount of media coverage of paedophilia in recent years through a multitude of media formats (print, television, radio, film, etc.) and styles (news reporting, documentaries, opinion pieces, soap operas, etc.); however, the print media, especially particular sections of it (the tabloid newspapers), have focused completely on paedophilia, contributing to its status as a high-profile public interest issue. Hence, paedophilia has become a prominent social issue, a popular social risk, and a modern moral panic (Kitzinger 1999; Cohen 2002; McAlinden 2006). Moral panics, the media and social constructionism are a series of notions that tie together quite well, with the media being one of the main mechanisms in the development and maintenance of moral panics (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Thompson 1998), which can lead either directly or indirectly to the changing of social attitudes and social norms, as clearly seen in the example of paedophilia. Hence, the moral panic is one of the clearest examples of the influence of the media on society.

The concept of the moral panic was first developed by (1971) and then expanded in more detail by Cohen (1972, 2002), who argued that a moral panic is an overblown social concern relating to the negative
or anti-societal actions and/or ideologies of a certain event, group or subculture by society, which sees the actions as being destructive to modern life. Moral panics tend to focus on specific groups of ‘folk devils’, such as paedophiles, young males and drug users (Cohen 2002), who are vilified and branded as deviant by society and suffer from a form of offender apartheid (whereby society excludes and morally rejects them) (Kleinhaus 2002). This is then reinforced though deviancy amplification (that the issue is so salient in society that anything that is related to it is seen as it) (Cohen 2002), leading to an extreme social response that often overshadows the threat of the actual problem (Silverman and Wilson 2002). This in turn creates a need for a solution, generally an emotional response that is not always well conceived and usually with severe repercussions for the current folk devils (Kleinhaus 2002; Silverman and Wilson 2002; Soothill and Francis 2002).

However, this is not the only interpretation of the construction of moral panics. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) indicate three different theoretical perspectives, of which Cohen’s thesis is only one. Cohen’s theory is closely linked to Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s concept of the interest group model of moral panics, which perceives moral panics as unintended and unplanned outcomes of crusades perused by moral groups. The second theoretical perspective is the elite-engineered model where the moral panic is a conscious/deliberate outcome of manufactured campaigns designed to divert attention away from the actual crises. This is closely linked to the work of Hall et al. (1978), who argued that moral panics are mechanisms employed by the ruling classes to mystify the existing crisis in society, and, as such, the media disseminates these panics, but does not create them. The third definition of moral panic that Goode and Ben-Yehuda discuss is the grass-roots model, in which the moral panic is created though the anxieties of the normal public, and these they are reinforced and/or perpetuated by the media or government. According to the grass-roots model, the media and government cannot create moral panics; these panics have to be based on public anxieties that already exist. Although all the models suggested by Goode and Ben-Yehuda, as well as Cohen, have validity, moral panics are complex, and it is difficult to pin down why one social concern becomes a moral panic and another does not. Therefore, it seems likely that a more integrated theory would be better, especially with regard to paedophilia, which has arisen out of the fears of the general public (grass-roots model), in conjunction with a series of media and government campaigns (interest group model). Moral panics therefore seem to be created
from and perpetuated through the interactions between the media, the government and the public.

**Media coverage, moral panics and paedophilia**

Paedophilia has become one of, if not the, most prevalent moral panic of recent years (Kitzinger 1999; Cohen 2002; Silverman and Wilson 2002; Cross 2005), with the UK media, especially the press, discussing paedophilia almost on a daily basis (Critcher 2002; Greer 2003; Davidson 2008). The UK press tends to discuss paedophilia in an inappropriate, generalised, fearful and negative light; this is especially the case with the language and sentiment used to discuss paedophilia, especially by the tabloids (Thomas 2005). UK tabloid headlines have included: ‘Vile sickos sulking in high places’ (Parsons 2003), ‘Paedo caught by perv site’ (Flynn 2006), ‘Lonely heart sicko was a paedo’ (Patrick 2009), ‘My brave girl caged a monster’ (Coles 2007), ‘Paedos have dodgy wiring’ (*The Sun* 2007a), and ‘Pervs on the loose’ (*Daily Star* 2007). However, this emotive and reactionary language is not just limited to the tabloid press; the broadsheets often follow suit, albeit in a toned-down fashion: ‘Don’t betray Sarah now’ (*The Guardian* 2000), ‘Mobs and monsters’ (Younge 2000), and ‘Child-killers on the loose’ (McKie 2000). In conjunction with headlines, this language continues in the articles, with paedophiles being described as perverts, monsters and beasts (Greer 2003; Thomas 2005). The media further complicates the reporting of paedophilia by not distinguishing between the different types of sex offenders (i.e., paedophile, hebophile, child sexual abuser), with all being labelled as paedophiles (Thomas 2005), contributing to a further escalation of the moral panic. This slanted media reporting contributes to the social construction of paedophiles and child sexual offenders as threatening and inhuman, therefore reinforcing the myth of stranger danger (Silverman and Wilson 2002), and promoting the negative social reactions in modern society (Critcher 2002; Silverman and Wilson 2002; Cross 2005). The clearest example of the media significantly contributing to the moral panic of paedophilia can be seen in *The News of the World* campaigns surrounding Sarah Payne.

*The News of the World* ran a series of anti-paedophile campaigns, arguing for stricter government procedures, including the introduction of the public disclosure of sex offender information, in the wake of the abduction, sexual abuse and murder of Sarah Payne in 2000. During the police investigation, the Paynes were approached by
Rebekah Wade then editor of *The News of The World* and now editor of *The Sun* (Wade 2009), who befriended the family and helped to spearhead an anti-paedophile campaign. *The News of the World* wanted to see the introduction of ‘Sarah’s Charter’, which contained 13 policy changes in relation to sex offenders, the last of which was Sarah’s Law (Critcher 2002). Sarah’s Law is based on the USA’s Megan’s Law (Silverman and Wilson 2002), and calls for the full public disclosure of all registered sex offender information in the UK (Critcher 2002). *The News of the World* ran its ‘Name and Shame’ campaign to convince the government to implement Sarah’s Law. The main argument behind Sarah’s law, which is also its Achilles heel, is the premise that public disclosure would have saved Sarah Payne, but this is, unfortunately, untrue. The murder of Sarah Payne happened at the her grandparents’ home where the family were on holiday. Roy Whiting was not actually from Kingston Gorse, where the grandparents lived, and would not have been registered there; thus, the abduction of Sarah Payne was a crime of opportunity. Public disclosure of Roy Whiting’s information would therefore not have alerted the Paynes to his whereabouts and enabled them to prevent the unfortunate events that unfolded.

*The News of the World*’s ‘Name and Shame’ campaign ran for two consecutive Sundays, 23 and 30 July 2000, and published the details, including photographs, of some of the UK’s most prolific paedophiles and child sexual abusers, the paper arguing that public disclosure was the most effective mechanism to allow parents to protect their children, appropriately and successfully, from sexual abuse. Whether the campaign led to parents feeling safer and better able to protect their children is debatable, but it did seem to be a causal factor in the Paulsgrove riots of the same year (Critcher 2002). During the campaign, the newspaper received mixed reactions, with condemnation by policymakers and the government (Dodd 2000; Morris 2000) and mixed reactions from the media, who, while it supported Sarah’s Charter, condemned public disclosure (Hodgson 2001; Critcher 2002). The Payne family, however, were positive about the campaigns (Day 2001), and seemingly widespread public support (Critcher 2002) allowed the newspaper to justify its actions (Hodgson 2001). The campaign was successful in the implementation of 12 of its 13 conditions in Sarah’s Charter, excluding a full Sarah’s Law (Critcher 2002).

The British government’s reaction to Sarah’s Law was interesting, as it fluctuated quite significantly. The government initially rejected Sarah’s Law, claiming it would drive paedophiles underground, off
the register, and make them a greater potential threat to children (Plotnikoff and Woolfson 2000). These concerns were reinforced, as Sarah’s Law is in direct opposition to the Human Rights Act 1998, which guarantees people, among other things, a right to privacy (for more information on this, see Chapters 4 and 14 of this volume). However, the government’s opinion on the viability of this controversial law has changed in recent years, becoming complex, confusing and worryingly inconsistent. Although the government initially rejected Sarah’s Law (Dodd 2000; Morris 2000), it then reconsidered its position (Assinder 2006; BBC 2006), agreed to implement it (The Sun 2007b), and then quickly backtracked, rejecting the entire premise (Travis 2007). The government then agreed to pilot partial public disclosure, whereby parents, carers and guardians are allowed to ask whether anyone with access to their children has a history of sexual offending, and single mothers are allowed to check on the past histories of new partners. The police provide relevant information, using due care and attention, and all material revealed is done so with the greatest of confidentiality in mind (Home Office 2007; BBC 2009). It has recently been decided that, following this successful pilot, which saw no public disorder or vigilantism, but also did not seem to evidence a high enquiry rate, the procedure will be extended within the police forces involved. Full evaluation will take place at the end of 2009, at which point a decision will be made as to whether to roll the scheme out nationally (Home Office 2009).

The News of the World’s campaign was, therefore, partly responsible for the moral panic surrounding paedophilia that swept Britain at the start of the twenty-first century, and which is still in existence today. At the time, few could have known that the death of one little girl (Sarah Payne) and the actions of one newspaper editor (Rebekah Wade) would have had such an inflammatory effect on the public (Critcher 2002; Silverman and Wilson 2002). The development of the name and shame campaign shows how The News of the World seized on public concern and reinforced social boundaries, while at the same time promoting a level of unrealistic fear and paranoia over an already sensitive issue (Silverman and Wilson 2002). The newspaper played on the irrational fear of parents, warning of stranger danger, and the corruption of the nation’s children as a result of the sexual practices of a number of harmful deviants. However, it must be asked whether the paper manipulated and exploited the Paynes’ tragedy for its own commercial gain. Both the Paynes (Day 2001) and Rebekah Wade (Wade 2009) have denied this. This has not, however, been true in all high-profile cases of media influence; for example, in
the Madeline McCann case, the parents here felt betrayed and used by sections of the press (Leicester Mercury 2009), with whom they had initially had a good relationship and who had initially helped to publicise their case.

Despite this, moral panics are important, as they are thought to reinforce popular ideas and stabilise social order (Hier 2003), by emphasising the core social beliefs (Thompson 1998) and reinforcing social norms. This means that the moral panic of paedophilia works to reinforce current social and cultural attitudes with regard to childhood, public protection and social order.

**Media coverage of paedophilia versus the realities of paedophilia**

Despite the high-profile nature of paedophilia in the UK media, the realities and complexities of paedophilia are not fully discussed. This is especially true of the tabloid press; for instance, The News of the World and The Sun, do not discuss the reality of threats of abuse to children from within the home (incest, domestic violence, and neglect), which are far more prevalent in society than the threats from solitary, sexual predators (Howitt 1995; Briere and Elliott 2003). Consequently, it is important to highlight the realities of paedophilia, especially as research indicates that, despite the current high-profile nature of paedophilia, there is no easily accessible or widely accepted definition or explanation of the causes, the behaviour, or the most effective treatments available (McCartan 2008a). This complexity and ambiguity are exacerbated when paedophilia is considered in tangent with other forms of childhood sexual abuse, especially child sexual abuse, which is often used as a blanket term to cover all childhood abuse and all child sexual offenders (Rind et al. 1998).

Hence, the complexity of paedophilia, especially the heterogeneous nature of its offenders (Taylor 1981; Wilson and Cox 1983; La Fontaine 1990; Dobash et al. 1996; Blanchette and Coleman 2002; Cantor et al. 2005), the potential aetiologies of their paedophilic offending (Bagley et al. 1994; Howitt 1995; Blanchard et al. 1999; Lee et al. 2002; Cantor et al. 2008), their victims (O’Carroll 1980; Howitt 1995; Silverman and Wilson 2002; Taylor and Quayle 2003), their offending behaviours (O’Carroll 1980; La Fontaine 1990; Taylor and Quayle 2003), and their treatments (Howitt 1995; Brooks-Gordon et al. 2006; Harrison 2007). All this is never really examined by the media, especially the print media, and therefore this may affect the public’s
understanding of paedophilia. Research indicates that child sexual abuse and paedophilia are one of the most misunderstood crimes in modern society, particularly, as society denies the occurrence of, underestimates the frequency of (O’Grady 1994), and under-reports paedophilia (West 2000; Simmons et al. 2002). The public, therefore, tend to see paedophiles as a homogeneous group who have fixed personality traits that are unchangeable, and so do not advocate treatment, but rather castration or incarceration (McCartan 2004, forthcoming). This seems reasonable given the public’s relative lack of exposure to paedophiles and informed opinion/literature. This has led professionals who work in and around the field of child sexual abuse to suggest that the public have a poor understanding of paedophilia and that this poor comprehension was developed through their exposure to the media (McCartan 2007).

Social responsibility, the media and paedophilia

As we have previously discussed, the media has a degree of influence on individual and social attitudes, contributing to the formation as well as maintenance of moral panics and social risks. This is particularly true of paedophilia, where the media’s seemingly slanted reporting appears to have affected the public perception and attitude to paedophilia, on occasion leading to socially unacceptable behaviour (Bell 2002; Silverman and Wilson 2002; Cross 2005; Breen 2008). Hence, how socially responsible, moral and ethical has the media been in its coverage of paedophilia?

Notions around morality, responsibility, professionalism and ethics are very individualistic, with different people having different beliefs of what is and what is not acceptable. This links with the type of media that people expose themselves to, the degree to which they accept the media’s interpretation of stories, and the extent to which they believe the media to be socially responsible (McCartan 2007, forthcoming). The media in the UK, and in any free society, are seen as the fourth estate (i.e., the idea developed by Burke in late eighteenth-century England to discuss the power of the press; he likened it to the other ‘estates’ of power and social control that existed at the time, and to a degree still exist today: the Lords, the Commons and the Church), which results in their believing that they can, and generally do, report what they wish with no real obligations (McQuail 2007). Despite this sense of autonomy, the media are confined to a certain degree by the social norms of the society and
culture within which they operate, reinforcing the socially constructed nature of the media and the symbolic relationship that they have with the public. There are certain expectations placed on the press in society, for they have both internal (editorial, corporate ownership, etc.) and external pressures (the government and the public), which help shape the social and moral responsibility of what they should and should not produce (McQuail 2007). The media argue that they have a responsibility to produce stories which have a social purpose and are relevant (McQuail 2007), providing justification for them to focus on certain sensitive and controversial stories, such as child sexual abuse, terrorism and political scandal. However, in doing so, the media have a dual public interest, in that they have roles and responsibilities that are in the public interest, and as such the public are interested in the way that the media conduct themselves. This means that the press must maintain a high degree of accountability and impartiality, always presenting themselves and their stories in the best light. These notions of best practice tie in neatly with the social responsibility theory of the press, which states that the media have obligations to society and in achieving these obligations they have to be truthful, fair and relevant; and although the media have the right to self-regulate, they must adhere to professional codes of ethics. These ethical guidelines have become more professional and coherent, with the media, and especially the press, having to account to the public and government for their stories and stance; particularly with the creation of the Press Complaints Commission.

Despite this proposed idea of media civic duty, social responsibility and self-directed regulation, does the media always act responsibly and morally when dealing with sensitive issues? The media have been criticised for its handling of sensitive and traumatic issues, particularly paedophilia and child sexual abuse with The News of the World’s ‘Name and Shame’ campaign, as highlighted earlier, receiving widespread commendation. Furthermore, there has been speculation that the media, especially the press, sacrifice their core responsibilities in how they report crime, especially socially sensitive crimes, in an attempt to boost sales and make profits (Friendly and Goldfarb 1968; Reiner 2002). However, the media would counter this, arguing that it has acted morally, ethically and responsibly by providing relevant stories that are in the public interest, and suggesting that if the public does not want to read the stories it produces, then the public would not support it (Cohen and Young 1981; Howitt 1998; Greer 2003). This reinforces the link between the media and the public, emphasising that both are involved in the selection and promotion
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of certain stories and social campaigns, as the public continually invest in the stories they are interested in and the media only covers those issues which support the public’s interests (Gamson et al. 1992; Howitt 1998).

The media’s coverage of socially sensitive and traumatic stories can also be criticised, particularly with regard to paedophilia, through the language used and the discussion provided. This is more of an issue for the tabloid press, who skim over complex issues, providing simplistic and generalised coverage (Thomas 2005). As already highlighted in this chapter, the language used to discuss paedophilia, as well as the approach to understanding paedophilia, has contributed to an increase in the public perception of stranger danger, the promotion of paedophile myths, and a lack of real insight into the issue. Hence, are the media really acting in a socially responsible way? Does such behaviour by certain sections of the media promote an unrealistic and inappropriate understanding of a complex issue and are they really informing the public of threats to their children as they claim (Wade 2009)? Consequently, are they being relevant, honest, impartial and acting in the public interest or just reinforcing as well as promoting socially constructed fears?

Hence, questions must be asked about the media’s culpability in the stories it reports and way that it does so. Thus, is the media responsible for the social, political and personal outcomes of its stories? The News of the World’s ‘Name and Shame’ campaign was linked to vigilante action (Bell 2002; Thomas 2005; McCartan 2008a), so were they responsible for this social unrest? On one level, it can be argued that they were, as their story provided the incitement and directed the public’s outrage (Bell 2002; Silverman and Wilson 2002), however, on the other hand, we cannot hold the media responsible for the actions of a few who would have engaged in deviant behaviour in any event and consequently jumped upon a bandwagon (Williams 2004; McCartan 2007). While the media would argue that it is their responsibility to produce socially relevant material and not to sanction, promote or encourage public reaction, they would also say that they are not responsible for individual and social reactions. However, is this merely shifting the blame and downplaying their social responsibility? Does this cognitive distortion mean that the media is absolved of all guilt?

The social and ethical responsibility of the media in dealing with socially sensitive, traumatic and difficult stories is important, because it can contribute to both individual and social reactions to these
stories, helping to socially construct attitudes and possibly creating further moral panics. This is what has happened with paedophilia in modern society, and we must ask whether the media has acted responsibly, and, if not, why not?

Conclusions

This chapter has discussed the role of the media in the creation and maintenance of the current crisis of paedophilia in modern society, suggesting that the media, especially the press, has played a central role in the current phenomenon of paedophilia, helping to shape individual attitudes, public opinion and government strategy. However, the media representation of paedophilia has been problematic, possibly socially irresponsible, and has contributed to the unrealistic social construction of the realities of paedophilia that exist in modern society. The main conclusion that this chapter comes to is that if the media, especially the tabloid press, took a more responsible, socially conscious and informed approach to the discussion as well as to the reporting of paedophilia, this could lead to a more appropriate social construction and a better informed public. Public education through the media is not a recent phenomenon (McQuail 2007), but in the case of paedophilia it may be the best strategy to get the public to engage with a difficult and sensitive issue. In order to improve public education, it is suggested that the media should adapt its coverage of paedophilia in the following ways:

- The media should change its approach to discussing and presenting paedophilia. Some have started to do this, especially the visual media, by producing a mixed bag of approaches, including a more rounded and thought-provoking perception of paedophilia through films such as Secret Life (2008) and The Woodsman (2005), and the portrayal of paedophilic activities in the television soap opera EastEnders, during 2008–9, a more controversial perception (the television programme Brass Eye Special – Paedophilia (2001)), or a more factual insight (the television programmes The Hunt for Britain’s Paedophiles (2002) and Exposed: The Bail Hostel Scandal (2006)). However, this has only occurred in certain sections of the media, with portions of the print media, especially the tabloids, sticking to the traditional, reactive and emotional approaches to reporting paedophilia.
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• The media would have to question their social and civic responsibility with regard to paedophilia; for instance, whether it is socially, morally and professionally responsible to print the names and addresses of child sexual abusers (Critcher 2002; Belfast Telegraph 2009), especially when this can result in vigilante action (Bell 2002; Silverman and Wilson 2002; Cross 2005; Breen 2008)?

• In discussing and reporting upon paedophilia, the media, especially the tabloid press, needs to use non-emotive, sensible and more realistic language. This would enable the media to realistically discuss the realities of paedophilia and its potential impact upon society; this would also allow them to become more impartial.

• The media needs to present the issues and debates around paedophilia in a balanced light, suggesting the possible explanations for the offenders’ behaviour, possible treatments and resolutions, and socially positive reintegration strategies; it is not enough to label these people as sick, mad or otherwise and then socially disregard them.

• The media should, as some sections already do, continue to engage with professionals when discussing the realities of paedophilia in an attempt to give a more realistic understanding. Although this can be problematic, as professionals do not necessarily have a consistent perception and understanding of paedophilia (McCartan 2008b, 2009), and media representatives are often pressurised by deadlines and space (i.e., copy space, recording time or air time). However, it is still not too much to ask that a more realistic approach be taken. If it were, it would mean that the public were able to get the most informative as well as most sensible advice on paedophilia and child sexual abuse, hopefully leading to a reduction in the current moral panic.

• The media, specifically the press, need to decide what their standpoint on paedophilia is – are they enforcing social guardianship or popular punitiveness? The News of the World claimed that it was doing the former, although it seems more likely that it was enforcing the latter.

In conclusion, it is important to realise that although the media construction and representation of paedophilia have played an important role in the current moral panic surrounding paedophilia in the UK it is not the only factor; with the public and government also playing a pivotal role. The social construction of reality that is aided
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by the media can help promote an understanding of paedophilia in modern society and as such allow us to deal with this prevalent social issue in a more realistic and level-headed fashion.

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