

# Media representations of sexual offenders in general media essay



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The mass media is known to be one of the most influential sources of providing news to members of the public. It is also known to have a powerful impact on the public perceptions of specific issues, for example sex offenders (Brayford & Deering, 2012). In order for a story to enter any form of the mass media, it needs to meet certain 'newsworthy' criteria which will help media companies to entice greater audiences, thus increasing overall profit (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Female sexual offending is one particular issue within society which fits all the aspects of the 'newsworthy' criteria. The cases tend to include a sense of seriousness and negativity in which so many of the media's audiences are interested to read/hear about (Greer, 2003). This chapter will focus on how the media represents FCSOs, with particular reference to the Vanessa George case. It will also examine how the mass media are able to influence public perceptions of FCSOs. It is important to note that the majority of academic research involving Child Sexual Offenders and the media focuses on Sexual Offenders in general, rather than specifically FCSO's, therefore this chapter will adapt from the limited research available.

Child Sexual Offenders have longingly received large amounts of negative coverage by the mass media, causing a topic for public debate (Kitzinger, 2004). The media often uses tactics in the form of emotive language, and imagery etc. to influence how the public view certain criminals. One example of this is the use of the iconic image of Myra Hindley within the media reports, which have shaped the way in which society imagines what FCSOs look like (ibid). Even though this was proved to be a co-offending case, it has historically shown how society can view any female involved in these sorts of

crimes as going against the traditional gender scripts that women are incapable of committing such crimes. This relates to the theory used by many feminists that argue that women are described as being “double deviant”, this is where women who commit crimes receive harsher treatment by society as they not only breach the law, but also break feminine norms (Heidensohn, 1987). Thus in terms of FCSOs, it would seem that they should be regarded as the worst form of criminals due to the extreme ways they break the feminine gender roles. This theory could explain why FCSOs receive such negative portrayals within the media. However, a counter argument of this is that females involved in child sexual offending are often viewed by the general public as harmless, and do not perceive their involvement as a form of abuse. Therefore, media cannot possibly provide such negative representations of FCSOs, if they do not believe themselves that FCSO is a problem within society. This is supported by Denov (2002), who states that the public perceive FCSOs to be less serious than male sexual offenders, this could be due to the common belief that women cannot be capable of committing such offenders. Thus the media are likely to also hold such views and focus their attention primarily on issues in society involving male sexual offenders, as they try to serve the interests of the public.

### **3. 2 How the media influence public perceptions of FCSO**

It has been argued by many academics that the media influence the public’s perception of FCSOs, in a way that can be described as a drug, injecting their opinions directly into the minds of its audience. This is often referred to as the hypodermic syringe model (Kitzinger, 2004). This can be argued to hold

a powerful effect, as the amount of emotion produced by these offences could be why the media choose to report on it. As a result of, it causes outbursts of street anger and violence which can be described as a moral panic, creating hysteria (Thomas, 2005; Cohen, 1972) among the public. However, evidence suggests that this has only been presented from the rarity of FCSO cases that are reported on, as the majority of the time society has a 'blind spot' for female perpetrated sexual abuse. This is due to the care-giving roles in which females are socialised to hold towards children (Finkelhor et al. 1988), which again have a habit of being represented in forms of the media; films, news reports, TV etc. Therefore, it could be argued that depending on what ideology the media decide to report on with regards to FCSO's, their portrayal will have a significant impact on how the rest of society view them.

### **3. 3 Media representations of FCSO**

Historically FCSOs have rarely been reported on within media. This may be due to the myth that abuse by a female is seen as harmless and a confused for of love (Gannon & Cortoni, 2010), therefore is not necessarily viewed as inflicting damage on a child, so the media are less likely to report on these cases as they do not fit the 'newsworthy' criteria discussed earlier in the chapter. This could also be a reason why the public generally hold a lack of knowledge around the issues surrounding female child sexual offending. As Strickland (2008) argues, men are traditionally viewed as being the ones to commit criminal offences with aggressive personalities. Consequently, it can be argued that these stereotypes are what make it easy for the media to report on issues, and cases which match these stereotypes that society hold.

As indicated in Chapter one (Intro), any abuse by females was usually referred to in the media as a 'relation' or 'affair' (Tsopelas et al, 2012) compared to if the perpetrator is a man in which case the reporters often refer to them as 'abusers', again resulting in a lack of reports on cases perpetrated by females. This issue resorts academics to ask the question of whether female perpetrated child sexual abuse is simply underreported by the media due to the above reasons, or if it is so uncommon that there is not enough cases for the media to actually report on.

Nowadays the increasing amount of knowledge and awareness on issues of female child sexual offending has roused strong societal reactions, resulting in the increased coverage of them in the media. Gakhal & Brown (2011) report on how newspapers portrayed female child sexual perpetrators as 'evil monsters'. This has taken a dramatic change from how they were previously portrayed, and has given society a new way of viewing a serious problem that has come to light. One of the most dramatic cases which the media has widely covered is that of Vanessa George. She was a 40-year-old mother of two who worked at a nursery in Plymouth. In December 2009 she was convicted of sexual assault, the making of and being in possession/distributing indecent images of children, and was given an indeterminate prison sentence with a minimum requirement of seven years. In November 2010, there was a serious case review conducted into the case (PSCB, 2010), and it was discovered that the nursery provided an ideal environment for the abuse to be carried out. It found that certain gaps within the system allowed Vanessa to commit these offences, such as the nursery's phone line being out of order, allowing workers to bring their own mobile

phones into the nursery for emergencies. This opportunity presented Vanessa with an excuse enabling her to have her phone in the nursery and thus enabled her to take indecent images of the children. It was also discovered during the investigation of the case that she was in fact part of a co-offending trio, initiated by a male perpetrator named Colin Blanchard from Rochdale. In the serious case review, it was noted that Vanessa had no previous convictions and the abuse only started when she became in contact with Colin over the internet, and was manipulated into committing abuse and then sharing images with him. These particular facts of the case were however expressed in a completely different manner throughout the media reporting on the case.

### **3. 4 Vanessa George case**

In chapter one it was indicated through the study by Mathews et al. (1989) that there is substantial evidence to suggest that many FCSOs actually target victims who are male adolescents, viewing their abuse as harmless. However, this is not the case when looking at the case of Vanessa George (BBC News, 2010). Across all the media coverage on this case it highlighted the serious issues surrounding female perpetrated sexual abuse which are present in the UK, and depending on the different media types, it was reported in extremely diverse ways. In order to understand how the media represent FCSOs, a comparison needs to be made between the various media types using critical discourse analysis. There are many different definitions of critical discourse analysis, however, within this dissertation we refer to it as the analysis of language used in speech and writing – within forms of the media – as a form of ‘social practice’, where specific ideologies

are reproduced through the language in the texts (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

This method is appropriate for this dissertation as it is a way in which we can analyse the language used by the media when reporting on FCSOs, and uncover the hidden ideologies in the text which is used to change the audiences' opinion on the issue of FCSO.

Almost every article written about FCSOs can be analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis, as reporters are required to make certain decisions as to how they want to represent particular ideologies in their article e. g. the terms they use to describe a FCSO, or which quotes to use from members of the public. These can all add to the way the ideology in the text is portrayed overall and thus how these ideologies affect society as a whole (Richardson, 2007).

The three main articles analysed were drawn from three different news outlets which hold conflicting ideological stances. Firstly, "Public enemy number one" was taken from The Sun (Coles, 2011), a newspaper which represents right-wing principles. Secondly, "Vanessa George jailed for child sex abuse" was extracted from The Guardian (Morris, 2009) which expresses mostly liberalism interests. Finally, "Little Ted's was 'ideal' place for Vanessa George abuse" traced from BBC News online (2010b), which is commonly known to represent a centrism approach to reporting.

The Sun, known for its exaggeration of the truth in order to attract the attention of more readers, reports on the case of Vanessa George as being one that has caused so much outrage and shock from the public, that the police actually needed to step in to stop the amount of abuse aimed at her

from the public. The way the article presents these dramatic views is interesting for Critical Discourse Analysis, as it is outwardly bias in presenting only the feelings expressed by the parents of possible victims, rather than facts on the case. Therefore, the analysis made, might be able to support the theory that the facts on the case are actually spun to present a particular viewpoint - in this case, that FCSOs are extremely disturbing to society - and uses particular language which is aimed to influence their audience into holding the same opinions. This is evident in the following quotes: " Public enemy number one", " Sick b\*\*\*\*", " The van taking Vanessa George to prison is attacked" (See appendix 1 for more examples). All of the following use emotive language to express the disgust and anger felt by many members of the public. This supports Gakhal & Brown's (2011) argument that the media provide stereotypical portrayals of all sex offenders in general, using words linked with " monsters" & " evil perverts". Moreover, these choice of language in articles help provide a negative perception of FCSOs. The fact that the reporter purposely used a collective noun in the article title - " Public enemy number one"-, suggests that they are trying to provide an ideology that Vanessa is hated by all members of the public, and that the audience should also imitate these feelings. While analysing this article, it was found that the only quotations and opinions used, were that of parents involved in the case, who naturally hold bias views. This, itself shows how the reporter wanted to present only one ideological viewpoint. Furthermore, it can be argued that this negative portrayal of Vanessa George, a FCSO, in the media reinforces the argument previously put forward by Heidenson (1987) regarding female offenders as displaying " double deviance".

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On the other hand, the article in The Guardian expresses a more balanced stance, presenting the audience with facts of the case. Its use of imagery shows how Vanessa was part of a co-offending trio, and although she solely committed the abuse in Little Ted's nursery, she was in fact in contact with two others; one (Colin Blanchard) who, as argued by the reporter, was coercing her to commit the offences. They reported that Vanessa was "besotted" with him. Therefore, it shows that the ideology in which this news article is trying to present is not just about viewing FCSOs in a negative light, but more that they want to present the factual issues that society is facing, for example the influence male sexual offenders have on females to force them to also commit sexual offences. However, when analysing this article, it can be argued that it is somewhat bias, as it uses post-modified terms such as 'paedophile' which often disguises the fact that the choice to commit these crimes is not just down to sexual preference but is actually a way in which an offender exploits and holds power over children (Kelly, 1998). It also links to the same ideology presented in The Sun, by describing Vanessa in a negative light "Cold" and "calculating". These quotes do, nonetheless, come from the Judge in charge of the case, thus using a more reliable source, than that used by the Sun, to reproduce the ideologies through language.

The way in which The Guardian provides a balanced stance, can be argued to be similar to how the BBC reports on the case of Vanessa George. This is due to the way the BBC provide the facts of the case and refer to the serious case review (discussed earlier) as well as other reliable sources such as the councillor for Plymouth's Efford and Lipson ward, in order to add to their own

reputation of being a dependable source. When analysing this article it is clear that the reporters' ideology behind this article is to provide the public with the facts, and try to prevent a moral panic among the public, by reporting on the positive responses professionals have had to the case. The reporter used passive verbs such as 'reassured', and quotations from Ofsted "Ofsted has already implemented a number of changes", in order to show the public that society are able to learn from the mistakes made in this case in order to prevent future cases. However, the BBC used a disturbing 'criminal style' image of Vanessa, which imitate the reporter techniques used in the Myra Hindley case, which, as discussed earlier, add to the stereotypical image of what FCSOs look like (Kitzinger, 2004). Therefore, it could be argued that no matter what type of media, there is always some form of bias in the way reporters want to present their ideology through the language and images they choose to use. Another observation made when analysing this article, is its subheading title 'Explicit culture', which then goes on to report on the co-offending details of the case. The fact that the reporter has used a subheading, as well as the chosen language, shows that they are trying to make their audience aware of the increasingly serious problem of co-offending child sexual offenders within society.

From this Critical Discourse Analysis it is clear that all types of the mass media report in different ways; some use stereotyping FCSOs as a powerful influential tool, others are more objective by presenting the facts of the case. All, however, have had a positive impact as they have raised some new issues that society face with regards to FCSO. Although, a lot of work still needs to be done with all areas of the mass media, in order to educate

reporters so that they appreciate the gravity of the issues surrounding FCSO and the traumatic results they can present both victims and general members of the public with, when providing representations on FCSO's (Tsopeles et al, 2012).

Actively representing their voice