

Not the last word: point and counterpoint

An uncomfortable lack of balance?

Writing for the media about child abuse

Chris Goddard

Working with the media is not without risk. Using a piece submitted to the print media, and what happened to it, as a case study, this article suggests that we have to continue to use the media to set the public policy agenda whilst accepting that sometimes our work will be modified.

'A good newspaper', Arthur Miller said, 'is a nation talking to itself'. How many of them are good? Ernie Kovacs, the American entertainer, was actually writing about television when he said that it was 'A medium, so-called because it is neither rare nor well done'. *The Age*, Victoria's broadsheet, is as good as some, and better than most. Our Premier does not think a great deal of it, but that might be a useful measure of how good a job is being done.

I have been an avid reader of newspapers since I was old enough to read one. I have always bought them, believing them to be fragile but essential guardians of many of our liberties. I am concerned about who owns them and how the owners use their purchased power. I suspect newspapers can exert more intensive long-term pressure on government than can the other media, and that the policy makers probably pay more attention to the print media than to radio and television.

My view of *The Age* is probably similar to many others' – much of the paper is excellent while some of it is infuriating. On several occasions, I have come close to giving it up. Some of the anger has been about apparently trivial matters. Several years ago, I complained regularly about the paper's intermittent inability to provide the English soccer results. As a result (pun intended), I bought *The Australian* on Monday. Closer to the heart of *Children Australia*, *The Age* expressed no interest in my research that led to *Dual Tracks and Double Standards* (Goddard 1988) until everyone else had picked it up, in spite of a senior journalist having the information early. Later, Sally Loane did the superb series 'Our children, our shame'.

In recent years, I have written a handful of pieces for *The Age* and *The Sunday Age*, usually on child welfare, although I have also done one or two travel articles. Perhaps I have been lucky, but the freelance work I have submitted has always been treated well.

When I found myself in Sydney with a day or two to spare in April, I took myself off to the NSW Royal Commission into the Police Service. I had never been to such a hearing, and when the subject matter turned to *paedophilia* (see below) I thought that the opportunity was too good to miss. Having read the newspaper coverage, I thought there were aspects that needed closer attention.

*Associate Professor Chris Goddard teaches social work at Monash University and is Director, Child Abuse and Family Violence Unit. Dr. Goddard is Vice President, Victorian Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (VicSPAN), and his latest book *Child Abuse and Child Protection* is published by Churchill Livingstone and is available through Oz Child. Ph: (03) 9695 2211*

Although I have worked in settings that have caused me distress and seen some extremely disturbing scenes (for example, children dying as a result of the abuse they have suffered), I was unprepared for the effect that the Commission had on me. When I returned to Melbourne, I felt compelled to write something of the grotesque nature of what I had seen.

What I wrote was what I think journalists call a *colour* piece; it was not describing the proceedings in detail but providing

something of the atmosphere. It is not something I claim particular skill at, and I think it is hard to do when dealing with such a serious and emotive subject. It is also hard to place such pieces when there are many full-time journalists who are covering the event and who have been given some idea of what editorial staff want. Nevertheless, I wrote and revised the following story:

AN UNCOMFORTABLE LACK OF BALANCE

by Chris Goddard

In this large room, there are massive TV screens, more than a dozen computers, and comfortable chairs set amongst wooden panels and subtle colours. Entry to this room is closely guarded by doors with special locks, by the mechanical checks of metal detectors and x-rays, and by the alert gaze of stocky sheriffs. The room is designed to give those in it a sense of comfort.

I am in the St. James Centre, in Elizabeth Street, Sydney, and the face of Justice James Wood appears on the TV screens. This is the NSW Royal Commission into the Police Service.

Terrible stories are being told here: stories about the alleged child molester who escaped prosecution in spite of the evidence of incriminating videos; confessions of priests heard by priests and no-one else; tales of police surveillance that stops just as success seems assured; and accounts of peripatetic abusers and the erratic protective responses of the law.

A police officer, accused of the attempted assault of a young boy, was allowed to resign rather than face disciplinary hearings or prosecution. Complaints were made against a Christian Brother but action was taken only after a newspaper publicised the priest's activities. He committed suicide. Perhaps, in the eyes of some, both did the 'decent' thing.

It is not the horror of these tales alone that makes me uncomfortable. In my mind I can see the image of another child, a very long way from this room.

*The child is captured in a wonderful photograph by Dario Mitidieri and can be found on the cover of Rohinton Mistry's latest novel, *A Fine Balance*. The camera has created this image of a beautiful, delicate Indian girl (perhaps three-years-old) perched high on a thin, long pole constructed like a single, three-metre stilt. While holding the striped pole with one hand, she stretches one bangled arm towards the heavens. The key to the photograph is that the pole is itself balanced on nothing else but the extended thumb of an otherwise invisible street artist.*

The image is of a trusting waif, frozen in her vulnerability, far above the invisible but inevitable Indian throng. Her life is held in that one hand.

The talk of the room I am in is about the lives of other children slipping through other hands. There is supposed to be a battle going on here, fought with bar-coded documents illuminated on computer screens. The silky purring of the air conditioners must be masking the sounds of war.

This is a room full of contradictions, of invisible mirror images. Security guards provide tight security for adults while those same adults discuss the lack of protection provided for children: your children, my children, our children. The room is perfectly illuminated by dozens of soft lights apparently leaving no shadow except the darkness that resides in some of us. Lawyers only ask questions when they already know the answers.

Shocking, sordid acts are described in these unsoiled surroundings. The room is full of questions about the failure to ask questions. Crimes are excused as the symptoms of an illness. The lack of attention to detail of those who guard the community's children is described in great detail. The reluctance of small victims, dwarfed by large courts and tall witness boxes, to talk of their experiences is discussed by tall adults in this large court. God's law is being challenged by more fallible legalities.

Incompetence is handled competently here. A lack of care towards children is discussed very carefully, in guarded language. Massive resources are at work – yes, investigating a lack of resources. There are many people here, not all of them on view. There are others who occasionally appear from behind closed doors, all desperately working to create an impression that we care about children.

There are many other ironies. The Sydney Morning Herald calls these stories 'The Pedophile Hearings'. Both words brutally expose the vulnerability of the children. The word pedophilia or paedophilia is a euphemism from the Greek, of course. The paed element means child, and the philia part means fondness or affinity for. How can it be that the term Francophile means someone who is fond of France, has an affinity for the country – not someone who sexually assaults the French? A rapist, using the paedophilia example, would be a gynophile, someone who is fond of women. Let us be clear, the so-called paedophile is someone who preys on children, someone who uses and abuses them.

The irony of calling what takes place in this room a hearing must not go unremarked either. When the crimes were taking place, when reports were made, no-one heard. Those who appear in this room are called witnesses. Yet, when the story is told, the only thing they have witnessed was the inactivity of their colleagues: the failure of the police to police; the failure of the lawyers to use the law; and the terrible failures, the unspeakable betrayal of the church...

I do not know what happened to that young Indian girl, on that pole and thumb. The beautiful photograph captured the terrible image of her, so delicately balanced. Therein lies the greatest irony, my sense of discomfort in this comfortable room.

The lack of interest in individual hurt children has been transformed in this room into massive media interest into a problem wrongly named. The victims are as alone as that girl on the pole and less safe. For there is no delicate balance here. It is all too clear that children's right to protection and to be heard will rarely equal adults' right to defend themselves, if only because adults will translate what is said into language that protects their safe and comfortable world.

So far so good. As I have argued long and often with some of my colleagues in academia, it is hard to work within the narrow limits of 1,000 words or so. Optimistically, I tried the *Sydney Morning Herald* and got a rejection within hours. Not a brutal rejection, it is true ('There's some good stuff in there but we've got our own people traversing the colour') but a rejection nonetheless. I had submitted it simultaneously to *The Age* and a couple of days later got a call from one of the people in the

Features section asking if it could be used for the News Extra section on the following Saturday.

I awoke on Saturday morning to try and find my copy of *The Age*. It is delivered, wrapped in plastic, by someone who enjoys lobbing it into the recesses of our garden and, I suspect, watching me stagger around in a dressing gown looking for it. This is what I found.

WHEN SILENCE IS OFFENSIVE

by Chris Goddard

In this large room, there are huge TV screens, more than a dozen computers, and comfortable chairs set among wooden panels and subtle colors. Entry is closely guarded by doors with special locks, by the mechanical checks of metal detectors and X-rays, and by the alert gaze of stocky sheriffs. The room is designed to give those in it a sense of comfort.

I am in the St James Centre, in Elizabeth Street, Sydney, and the face of Justice James Wood appears on the TV screens. This is the NSW Royal Commission into the police.

Terrible stories are being told: stories about the alleged child molester who escaped prosecution in spite of the evidence of incriminating videos; confessions of priests heard by priests and no-one else; tales of police surveillance that stops just as success seems assured; and accounts of peripatetic abusers and the erratic protective responses of the law.

A police officer, accused of the attempted indecent assault of a boy, was allowed to resign rather than face disciplinary hearings of prosecution. Complaints were made against a Christian Brother but action was taken only after a newspaper publicised the priest's activities. He committed suicide.

There is supposed to be a battle going on here, fought with bar-coded documents illuminated on computer screens.

This is a room full of contradictions. Guards provide tight security for adults while those same adults discuss the lack of protection provided for children: your children, my children, our children. Lawyers only ask questions when they already know the answers.

Shocking, sordid acts are described in these unsoiled surroundings. The room is full of questions about the failure to ask questions. Crimes are excused as the symptoms of an illness. The lack of attention to detail of those who guard the community's children is described in great detail.

Incompetence is handled competently here. A lack of care towards children is discussed very carefully, in guarded language. Massive resources are at work – yes, investigating a lack of resources. There are many people here, not all of them on view. There are others who occasionally appear from behind closed doors, all desperately working to create an impression that we care about children.

The irony of calling what takes place in this room a hearing must not go unremarked either. When the crimes were taking place, when reports were made, no one heard. Those who appear in this room are called witnesses. Yet, when the story is told, the only thing they have witnessed was the inactivity of their colleagues: the failure of the police to police; the failure of the lawyers to use the law; and the terrible failure, the unspeakable betrayal, of the church. (Reprinted from *The Age* 27 April 1996)

At the time, I was rather upset about what had happened. It was placed directly under a story by Karen Middleton entitled 'Need for perspective in the hunt for paedophiles'. Middleton's

piece focussed particularly on claims that *paedophilia* was being confused with *homosexuality*.

The irony of this will not escape those familiar with Ray Wyre's work which coincidentally was being quoted on the same day in *The Weekend Australian*. On Friday, Wyre had appeared (courtesy of a satellite link from England) before the NSW Royal Commission.

The Age failed to cover his evidence but it was reported in *The Weekend Australian* by Amanda Meade (1996):

Mr Wyre said some paedophiles hid behind allegations of homophobia as a means of avoiding accusations.

'People who were suspicious didn't say anything because they were scared of being accused of being homophobic', he said. (*The Weekend Australian* 27 April 1996)

It is very interesting to observe that, every time there is extensive media coverage of any form of child abuse, within days the apologists appear. Within the velvet glove of calm reason the iron fist of caution is soon apparent. *The Age* of 27 April 1996 also carried this report by Middleton and Murdoch:

DOWNER WARNS OF FALSE PAEDOPHILE CLAIMS

By Karen Middleton and Lindsay Murdoch

Anybody making false child-sex accusations against Australian diplomats could be expect to be exposed by a proposed independent inquiry into allegations of paedophilia within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Foreign Minister, Mr Downer, warned yesterday.

He repeated yesterday his pledge to ensure the proposed inquiry would be ruthless in pursuit of the truth in relation to the allegations.

'If they turn out to be incorrect then people involved need to be dealt with under Australian law', Mr Downer told ABC radio. 'If they turn out to be false then the people making the allegations are behaving in a vexatious and very damaging way and we will expose that'. (Reprinted from *The Age* 27 April 1996)

(Remember you read it here first. Many of the claims that children have been molested will prove to be, like Mark Twain's death, an exaggeration. Those that claim such abuse occurs are, at best, misguided and, at worst, malicious.)

I hear many stories from colleagues and others concerned with children's rights about the difficulties experienced in getting their views into print. We have no choice but to persist.

We can use the tactics that others have found successful. Max Liddell and I outlined some of these in a recent issue of *Child Abuse Review* (Goddard & Liddell 1995). They included: getting to know the journalists who cover children's issues; understanding and using the rules; providing background to issues even when open communication is not allowed; encouraging others with more freedom to write letters; and, where possible, writing opinion and analysis pieces to further the debate. (Goddard & Liddell 1995, pp. 362-363)

Soon after the events of April, I received an excellent book by John Hurst and Sally White (1996). Both authors have worked in journalism and academia, and their insights into the conflicts inherent in media coverage of important events will fascinate

anyone who is interested in this area. *Ethics and the Australian News Media* provides a service, for example, by giving us the Australian Press Council Principles, the Herald and Weekly Times Professional Practice Policy, and the Journalists' Code of Ethics amongst others (see pages 270-297).

At a time when most agencies are struggling to find the money to meet demand, and media coverage of programs might make all the difference, there is a great deal to learn from this book. In spite of the extensive interest by the media in child welfare, child welfare agencies have generally been slow to use the power of the press. There are important lessons in this text.

Hurst and White (1996, p. 51) cite Jim Macnamara's thesis on the power of public relations work in setting the agenda for public policy debate. Macnamara (1993, quoted in Hurst & White 1996) surveyed journalists and their use of 150 press releases by 27 companies. On average, a single media release was used five times, while one was used 69 times. As Hurst and White say:

Media releases can provide the raw material for news stories. It is when they provide the whole story that ethical concerns arise. (1996, pp. 50-51)

Clearly, child welfare agencies need to use more press releases.

I have calmed down since April 27th. Of course, *The Age* did not behave unethically. They decided that they could use only a part of my story. I should have insisted on them taking the whole story or nothing at all. Journalists suffer such indignities almost every day. Some would say that my work was improved by rigorous editing.

Children are not the only members of society who are dependent on the media to stand up for them. Within days of my disappointment I had forgiven *The Age*, for they had produced an outstanding series of investigative reports (by Tim Pegler and others) into the plight of people with intellectual disabilities in Victoria.

Entitled 'Victoria's Forgotten People', this is journalism (and advocacy) at its best. Good journalism is 'a nation talking to itself', as Arthur Miller said. It is also about caring for others, a rather unfashionable sentiment today. It is important that we talk to each other even if only part of what we say is communicated. ✪

REFERENCES

- Goddard, C. 1996, 'When Silence is Offensive', *The Age* 27 April 1996.
- Goddard, C. and Liddell, M. 1995, 'Child Abuse Fatalities and the Media', *Child Abuse Review* 4 (special issue), pp. 356-364.
- Hurst, J. and White, Sally A. 1996, *Ethics and the Australian News Media*, Macmillan, South Melbourne.
- Meade, A. 1996, *The Weekend Australian* 27 April 1996.
- Middleton, K. 1996, 'Need for perspective in the hunt for paedophiles', *The Age* 27 April 1996.
- Middleton, K. and Murdoch, L. 1996, 'Downer warns of false paedophile claims', *The Age* 27 April 1996.