Journalists as agents and language as an instrument of social control

A child protection case study

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In recent years there has been considerable analysis of how the media create images of crime. The relationship between child abuse and the media has also been subject to greater scrutiny. This article examines the role of one newspaper in a child protection case. The part played by the newspaper in the court case led to an examination of the language used by the media in their representations of children. The researchers found that a child may be objectified in language even when the child's gender is previously identified. The 'gender slippage' may in extreme cases lead to the 'textual abuse' of children, where child abuse is rewritten to lessen the impact on the reader. The authors conclude that the actions of journalists and the language they use require more critical analysis.

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The news 'touches everyone' (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1991:358), and crime has always played a major part in the news (Stephens, 1988; Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994). As has been widely noted (see, for example, Goddard & Liddell, 1995; Goddard, 1996), a significant part of our news is made up of stories of crime (Edwards, 1975).

The media's preoccupation with crime is said to be because it is full of drama, involves life and property, and the ultimate power to deprive a person of his or her liberty (Grabosky & Wilson, 1989). Media coverage of such behaviours is important because most people gain most of their knowledge of crime and deviance from the news (Graber, 1980; Ericson et al., 1987). Crime news, therefore, plays a central role in constructing what is 'deviant' in our society and, by derivation, not only what is 'deviant' but also what is 'normal' (Ericson et al., 1987).

According to Ericson and his colleagues, journalists who write about crime and deviant behaviour thus 'join other agents of control as a kind of "deviance defining elite" who articulate the "proper bounds to behaviour" in our society' (Ericson et al., 1987:3). Ericson argues that journalists do not simply reflect the work of others who define deviance and attempt to control it, but they themselves are active agents of social control.

Such a role has inevitably led to critical scrutiny of the role of journalists in creating images of crime. Lotz, for example, vigorously proposes that:

> Most newspapers in America's large cities appear to be bent on creating the disquieting impression that crime and disorder are rampant. (1991:15)

Others have analysed particular types and aspects of crime, and proposed that reports of crime become distorted. Kinsman (1995), for example, examined media coverage of the abuse of children in an institution and how certain categories of deviance become 'inscribed' by the media. Fraser (1995:33) has written of how 'silences' and 'distortions' have created a particular view of the sexual assault of women.

CHILD ABUSE AND THE MEDIA

The relationship between child abuse and the media is a long and complex one (Goddard & Liddell, 1993; 1995). Media representations of child abuse have increasingly become an important area of study for those interested in child protection and children's rights (see, for example, 'Special Issue' of *Child Abuse Review*, 1996), and the power of the media to influence policy debates has been increasingly scrutinized (Stanley & Goddard, 2000b).

The 'discovery' of child abuse by Dr. Henry Kempe laid the foundations of that relationship. As has been noted elsewhere (Goddard & Saunders, 2000a: 38) the media played a major part in transforming:

> ... the once-minor charity concern called 'cruelty to children' into an important social issue...(Nelson, 1984:54)

According to Nelson, the media occupy a space:

> ... between the private and the public. Their task is to discover, unveil, and create what is 'public'. (1984:51)

Nelson argues that the media 'both **created** and **responded** to the urgency over child abuse' (1984: 51, emphases in original).

This paper examines a particular child protection case. The authors' research analysed the role played by the media in the case and the print media coverage of the events. In turn, this analysis of the media coverage led us to examine in more detail how children, especially vulnerable and abused children, are represented in the print media.

'SNATCHED'

The media story we are examining started on Friday, 28 February 1997. On that day, Melbourne's *Herald Sun* ran this front page under the headline 'SNATCHED' (Burstin, Pountney & Coffey, 1997:1). Underneath the dramatic caption, there was a photograph of the baby with her face partially obscured by the words 'Herald Sun WE CANNOT PUBLISH THE BABY'S FACE FOR LEGAL REASONS'

In brief, the story was that a baby was removed from her mother soon after her birth. The mother, who has what is described as a 'mild intellectual disability', has had two previous children removed from her by child protection authorities (Burstin et al., 1997).

THE CHILDREN'S COURT CASE: THE MEDIA AS ACTORS

The media's influence on child protection policy is now widely acknowledged (Goddard & Liddell, 1995). Less attention has been paid to the media's impact on the outcome of individual cases. On 14 April 1997, some six weeks after the 'snatched' headline, after Supreme Court and Children's Court hearings in March, the Interim Accommodation Order on the baby girl was reviewed at Melbourne Children's Court. The authors attended this hearing.

The mother, the father and child protection services each had legal representation. What was particularly interesting was the presence of a fourth lawyer. The fourth lawyer was not representing the child as many concerned with children's rights might have hoped. The fourth lawyer was representing the *Herald Sun*. The *Herald Sun* itself was represented because they wanted to publish photographs of the family. They declared that they wanted to publish photographs of the father, mother and child, or the mother and child, or the child alone. The *Herald Sun*, therefore, had three positions but ultimately they wanted a photograph for their newspaper.

A photograph was described by the *Herald Sun*'s lawyer as 'the best means of getting a story across'; 'a photo makes the article more widely read'; there would be 'no harm to the child's welfare'; there might even be 'benefit to the child's welfare'; 'pictures sell newspapers'; there is a 'balancing act between public's right to know against welfare of the child' – and 'they weigh equally' (Children's Court proceedings, observed 14.4.97).

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The Children's Court magistrate, after hearing these arguments, rejected the application by the *Herald Sun*. No further photographs appeared. It is interesting to note that, in spite of the presence of journalists from the *Herald Sun* in the courtroom, there was no coverage in the newspaper of the application to publish photographs.

At one level, this is a case study of the importance of 'visuals', or pictures, on whether a story gets a run in a newspaper. As Philo (1993) has demonstrated in his examination of the media coverage of the Ethiopian famine in 1984, the disaster has to be big and the pictures dramatic (1993). Without further photographs, the story of the 'snatched baby' received little further coverage. If photographs had been available, it is possible to speculate that her story would have gained far greater prominence.

In newspapers, a picture is still 'worth a thousand words' (Aldridge, 1994:28). Hartley (1982) also stresses the importance of news photographs in the print media. They play:

> ... a crucial role in the construction of meanings for a story – partly because of their apparently 'unarguable' rendition of the world. (1982:181)

The aggressive means of their acquisition has recently been brought into question (see, for example, Benthall, 1993). The use of photographs may also involve an invasion of privacy (see, for example, Hulteng 1985).

At another level, this is also a case study of the role of the media in creating, or attempting to create, news. The application by the *Herald Sun*, if successful, would have had possible ramifications for the privacy of others not photographed, for example the children already in care. There is a certain irony in that discussions about privacy in writing about media ethics frequently focus on the right of the public to know about the activities of public officials (see, for example, Black, Steele & Barney, 1999). The media, however, did not regard it as essential to report their own activities in this case.

THE OBJECTIFICATION OF CHILDREN

It is not the purpose of this paper to debate the rights and wrongs of the particular child protection case. The Victorian Department of Human Services, rightly or wrongly, argued that the baby was 'at risk' if returned to her mother, given the mother's track record of her two previous children being in long-term care.

A background story, also published on 28th February under the headline 'Where child protection failed' (Pountney & Coffey, 28.2.97:2), beautifully summed up the predicament of protective services, describing failures that included Daniel Valerio, Dillion Palfrey and Amanda Clark (failures categorised as doing too little,

where children died) and the Children of God case (a failure categorised as doing too much, where it was alleged children were removed unnecessarily). These episodes have clearly become what Kitzinger identifies as the 'media templates' which are 'instrumental in shaping narratives around particular social problems' (2000:61)

It is the contention of this paper that the rights of the baby girl (the so-called 'snatched baby') were not adequately considered by the *Herald Sun* in the application to publish photographs in April, if not abused by the publication of her photo with her face partially blacked out in February. In the child protection case we are examining, it is our contention that, in spite of its avowed concern that the interests of the baby girl were at the heart of its news coverage, the *Herald Sun* was in effect objectifying the baby, treating her (and the requested photograph of her) as an object to assist in the paper's circulation.

LANGUAGE, CHILDREN AND CHILD PROTECTION

Given that language is concerned with 'expressing meanings' (Goddard, 1998:1), it is surprising that the language used to describe child abuse and child protection has been subject to so little scrutiny. There has been some analysis of the language used to describe child protection workers. Franklin and Parton (1991:16-24), in their assessment of media reporting of child protection, found that coverage in some cases was based on social workers:

> ... as ineffectual, wavering individuals, lacking professional judgement and unable to recognize situations which required them to intervene... In short, they were designated in media reporting as wimps or fools. (1991:16)

This 'wimpish incompetence' (Franklin & Parton, 1991:16) dominated media descriptions of cases where children died in spite of the involvement of helping professionals.

In other circumstances, however, social workers are not described as 'fools or wimps' but as 'villains or bullies' (Franklin & Parton, 1991:19-24). Franklin and Parton analyse in some detail the media coverage of the Cleveland affair in the UK and its concern to 'scapegoat' individuals (1991:26).

The *Herald Sun* clearly placed child protection workers in the latter category of 'bullies' in the case we are examining, as the language used demonstrates:

> Child protection workers have snatched a young mother's baby from the operating table within minutes of the birth. (Burstin et al., 28.2.97:1)

> ...workers barged into the Victorian hospital's delivery room. (Burstin et al., 28.2.97:1)

> Child protection workers who took a newborn baby from her mother minutes after birth planned the military-style swoop last October. (Burstin, 1.3.97:2)

The phrases 'military style swoop' and 'secret baby snatch' were still being used nearly four weeks later (see, for example, Burstin, 25.3.97:3).

As Smitherman-Donaldson and van Dijk have noted in regard to racism, the old proverb that 'sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never hurt you' is patently false:

> ... through many types of discourse, dominant group members and institutions discriminate against minority group members... (Smitherman-Donaldson & van Dijk, 1988:11)

The critical study of discourse has increasingly been recognized as providing important insights, for example into sexism and racism (van Dijk, 1985) and representations of children and child abuse (Goddard & Saunders, 2000a & b; Saunders & Goddard, in press; Goddard & Saunders, in preparation).

Research by Goddard and Saunders (2000a & b) has shown that children are particularly disadvantaged in media representations. The so-called 'snatched baby' demonstrates that children may be objectified in the language used by journalists as well as by the actions journalists take. The *Herald Sun*, in this case, provides an example: '...workers barged into the Victorian hospital's delivery room to seize her newborn daughter', and the mother was reported as saying, 'I just want my baby girl back' (*Herald Sun*, 28.2.97:1). By the following day, this baby girl was suffering 'gender slippage' or 'gender loss' (see Goddard & Saunders, 2000a:42).

> **A babe in whose arms?**
>
> The issue of who will be given the care and custody of this infant can only be determined by an informed Supreme Court, after hearing and testing all of the available evidence.
>
> But disturbing issues, far broader than those affecting the rights of the infant and *her* handicapped mother, have emerged in this young woman's battle to keep her child...
>
> Other issues involve whether the Department of Human Services erred in not advising the woman earlier of its plans to take her child immediately *it* was born. (*Herald Sun* Editorial, 1.3.97:22, emphases added)

This gender loss was also evident in *The Age*:

> **Lobbyists back ruling to take child**
>
> The baby *girl*, born at a country hospital on Wednesday, is the 23-year-old woman's third child...
>
> Child protection workers took the baby from *its* mother at the hospital after a local magistrate conducted a bedside hearing granting interim custody to the department. (Kermond & Boreham, 1.3.97:11, emphases added)

Such gender loss or gender slippage is not uncommon in the *Age* (see, for example, Gregory, 2000 for a more recent example) but is surprising. The *Age* is proud of its 'code of conduct' and advertises it frequently. The advertisements use excerpts from the Code and one concerning children is often used: 'special care should be taken when dealing with children (under the age of 16)' (*Age*, 10.6.00, Section 2:11). The care does not always extend to the language used to describe children.

Research suggests that this objectification of children in language is commonplace. Perhaps using the word 'it' allows the writer and audience to distance themselves from the pain and horror of such cases. It may be easier to deny the rights of objects. Examples have been found in a range of

newspapers, in Australia and overseas (Goddard & Saunders, 2000a & b).

IS 'IT' IMPORTANT?

In a broad range of media texts, covering both tabloid and quality, broadsheet papers, a child may be called 'it'.

> **Children in care crisis 'worsens'**
>
> The Department of Community Services had squandered millions of dollars while doing little to improve a State care system in which one child could have as many as 1,000 people making decisions about its welfare...(Bernoth, *Sydney Morning Herald*, Wednesday, 30.7.97, emphasis added)

Such discourses are important for a number of reasons. Hartley (1982) argues that the manner in which stories are told in the media, and the way issues are represented, are important issues because:

> When we learn to speak, we learn much more than words. From the very beginning we use language not just to name things, but, more importantly to work out how to behave towards other people and the world out there. (Hartley, 1982:1)

Fairclough (1995:7) recognizes that social struggles are 'acted out' in language:

> ... texts negotiate social relations between people in circumstances of doubt or confrontation... (Fairclough, 1995:7)

Bell (1991) also suggests that the language used by the media affects language in the wider society.

There are, however, other reasons for closely analysing language and texts. The use of 'it' depersonalises the child. In the area of child abuse and child protection representing a child as 'it' rather than as 'she' or 'he' may reduce the child's individual circumstances. By becoming an object, the child is less than a subject.

Society has long denied the painful experiences of children. An object, by definition, is not expected to speak or act. The child, and his or her experiences, become removed from the all important context. Naming a child as 'it' may help us deny or reduce the child's experiences and thus contribute to what amounts to the 'textual abuse' of children (see Goddard & Saunders, 2000a).

Research into the language used by the print media to describe child abuse and neglect demonstrates that such 'textual abuse' is commonplace. The serious and repeated sexual abuse of a ten-year-old girl by her stepfather, for example, has been described as 'an affair' and 'a relationship', with perpetrator and victim described as 'a couple' (Goddard & Saunders, 2000a:43-44). The use of such language reduces a serious sexual crime against a child to a representation of 'a consensual relationship between adults' (Goddard & Saunders, 2000a:44).

This phenomenon of objectification and 'gender slippage' may contribute to a continuing denial of children's painful experiences.

TOWARDS CHANGE

According to Bell (1991:30), those who critically analyse the media have come to expect an unhappy response, what he terms 'the porcupine reaction of news personnel'. He cites Lazarsfeld (1948:115) who also found that there was a 'nervous reaction to criticism'. (There are interesting parallels here with the media coverage of child protection.) Bell notes that hostile responses from the media are created by the expectation that:

> ... the best outcome the media can hope for ... is to be damned with faint praise. (Bell, 1991:31)

Meyers (1997), in her examination of the news coverage of criminal violence against women, suggests that change is possible. She argues that recognising the problem is the first step, and that educating journalists and their editors is the next essential move.

Some of the research concerned with language presented in this paper has made a small impact in one area. The presentation of some early work (Goddard, 1997), at the Sixth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect in Adelaide, led to a report by a journalist on the *Sydney Morning Herald*. One of the Assistant Editors on the newspaper, after being given a copy of the paper, sent the following memorandum to all journalists:

> **Babies are people.**
>
> That may sound obvious enough. Sometimes we seem to forget it.
>
> At a recent conference on child abuse, Dr Chris Goddard of Monash University's Child Abuse and Family Violence Unit said this:
>
> ***The media need to take care that their coverage of child abuse does not cause more abuse of children.***
>
> Goddard produced articles in which babies and children who had been abused were referred to as 'it'.
>
> Some of the articles used 'it' even where the sex of the abused baby or child had been identified clearly in the text.
>
> Sometimes we don't know the sex of the abused child. Goddard suggests we use 'he' or 'she' or 'his' or 'her'.
>
> True, it's a clumsy form of words. but it's better than 'it'.
>
> Goddard also warned against cavalier descriptions of child sexual abuse.
>
> One broadsheet newspaper, writing on the persistent rape of a girl by her stepfather, referred to it as a 'relationship' and an 'affair' while the rapist and his victim were called a 'couple'.
>
> That's precisely the sort of language rapists and child abusers use to rationalise their crimes. They should get no help from us.
>
> Ian Hicks,
> Assistant Editor
> 27 October, 1997

CONCLUSION

We noted above that journalists are active participants in 'defining and shaping' deviance and are described as 'social-control agents' (Ericson et al., 1987:3). According to Ericson et al. (1987), journalists also strive for objectivity, accuracy and balance in the

stories that they write. Journalists recognise that they need to be attentive to the possible impact of their work:

> Since journalists are interpreters of other people's lives and organizational arrangements, they must strive to be fair with these people and offer an objective and balanced view... (Ericson et al., 1987:104)

In spite of this desire for 'objectivity', the case of the 'snatched baby' demonstrates that children can be used as objects by the media in a number of ways. Journalists and lawyers acting on behalf of a newspaper sought to publish photographs of a baby and her family who were subject to child protection intervention. The actions of the journalists and lawyers, however, were not themselves regarded as newsworthy.

Just as journalists may be agents of social control, the language they use may be an instrument of such control. The 'snatched baby' was also objectified in the language used by the journalists, and described as 'it' in spite of her gender being clearly identified. The child so described, we suggest, becomes an object and less than a subject. This phenomenon of objectification and 'gender slippage' may contribute to a continuing denial of children's painful experiences. □

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