

January 2007

Through the Looking Glass: How the Mass Media Represent, Reflect and Refract Sexual Crime in Ireland

Michael J. Breen

Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/icr>



Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Breen, Michael J. (2007) "Through the Looking Glass: How the Mass Media Represent, Reflect and Refract Sexual Crime in Ireland," *Irish Communication Review*. Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 1.

doi:10.21427/D71D92

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/icr/vol10/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals Published Through Arrow at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Irish Communication Review by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@tudublin.ie, arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, brian.widdis@tudublin.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License](#)

Through the Looking Glass: How the Mass Media Represent, Reflect and Refract Sexual Crime in Ireland

Michael J. Breen

Michael J. Breen, PhD, is Head of the Department of Media & Communication Studies and Senior Lecturer, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. This research was carried out when the author was a Government of Ireland Fellow in 2003/2004 funded by the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences.

Introduction

The publication of the Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland (SAVI) report (McGee, 2000) was a landmark event in the documenting of sexual crime in Ireland. The core of the report was based on the results of a survey of more than 3,000 members of the general public about their attitudes and beliefs and their own lifetime experiences of sexual violence. Commissioned by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre and carried out by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, the report chronicled as never before the extent of sexual abuse and violence in Ireland. The results were startling.

One in five women (20.4 per cent) reported experiencing contact sexual abuse in childhood with a further one in ten (10.0 per cent) reporting non-contact sexual abuse. In over a quarter of cases of contact abuse (i.e. 5.6 per cent of all girls), the abuse involved penetrative sex — either vaginal, anal or oral sex. ... One in six men (16.2 per cent) reported experiencing contact sexual abuse in childhood with a further one in fourteen (7.4 per cent) reporting non-contact sexual abuse. In one of every six cases of contact abuse (i.e. 2.7 per cent of all boys), the abuse involved penetrative sex — either anal or oral sex. ... One in five women (20.4 per cent) reported experiencing contact sexual assault as adults with a further one in twenty (5.1 per cent) reporting unwanted non-contact sexual experiences. Over a quarter of cases of contact abuse in adulthood (i.e. 6.1 per cent of all women) involved penetrative sex. ... One in ten men (9.7 per cent) reported experiencing contact sexual assault as adults with a further 2.7 per cent reporting unwanted non-contact sexual experiences. One in ten cases of contact abuse in adulthood (i.e. 0.9 per cent of all men) involved penetrative sex. (McGee, 2002, Executive Summary)

These figures clearly indicate the need for further research and the authors of the report identify several strands of research that need to be done. Among these they include a strand for media research:

The role of the media is crucial in developing an accurate and comprehensive understanding of sexual violence among the general public. Strategies to support the media in its representation of sexual violence should be considered as part of the public awareness campaign (McGee et al., 2002: 290).

This paper is part of a response to that recommendation. It seeks to identify the nature and extent of media reporting on sexual crime in Ireland, with a specific emphasis on the reporting of such crime in the national newspaper of record, *The Irish Times*.



Theory & Literature

The literature dealing with the power of the press in shaping and informing public opinion is extensive, as is the literature dealing with the reporting of sexual crime.

It is well established that the mass media play a role in the formation of public opinion. They are also selective in the messages transmitted, they are directive in trying to shape and mould opinion (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). While there are clearly external forces at work in terms of what enters the news, it is abundantly evident that there is much left to the choices of the individual editor or journalist, as well as many influences that act from within media organizations (White, 1950; Breed, 1960; Weaver, 1979; Schudson, 1989; Salwen & Garrison, 1989; Shoemaker, 1991). The media carry out a surveillance function for the public. The central task confronting the media is to engage the attention of the public and then to activate that public without overwhelming it with information by distinguishing effectively between that which is important and that which is not.

Agenda setting theory states that those issues that receive prominent attention in the media become the problems the reading and listening publics regard as the nation's most important. Lippmann referred to the 'pictures inside the heads' of individuals which were altered by information (1922: 5). He also developed the idea that the 'pictures' influenced by the media were not a matter of random chance, but arose directly from media choices (p.12). Items only get placed in the news stream if they are a matter of media routines or if they are made into an issue in some fashion (p.15).

Whatever about the manner of how items get into the news stream, it is those items that have influence, for clearly the public cannot be influenced by that of which it does not have any knowledge. As Cohen puts it:

That is to say, then, that the press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about (1963: 13).

McCombs and Shaw (1972) examined the connections between media content and issue salience, building on Lippmann's assertion that it is the 'pictures in our heads' that drive our behaviours. Expanding on Cohen they wrote:

Agenda setting is considerably more than the classical assertion that the news tells us what to think about. The news also tells us how to think about it. Both the selection of objects for attention and the selection of frames for thinking about these objects are powerful agenda-setting roles. Central to the news agenda and its daily set of objects — issues, personalities, events, etc. — are the perspectives that journalists and, subsequently, members of the public employ to think about each object (1993: 62).

The clear consequence of agenda setting theory is that it is the framers of the news who wield a vast amount of control over how the public views various events and personalities. Agenda setting is not simply a function of journalistic choice. Becker (1980: 530) points out that agenda setting is driven in part by a number of elements including individual desire to be informed, the needs that are met by the mass media, and the ability of the individual consumer to respond to media cues.

According to Iyengar and Kinder (1987), people hold 'tacit theories' regarding national problems. Included in these tacit theories are what they perceive as causes and moral accountability. The notion of tacit theories is interesting. Such opinions, they say, are apparently formed primarily by the media. The public can only make decisions on the information that it has at its disposal, which Iyengar (1991: 132) calls 'accessibility of information', which is highly dependent on the pattern of news coverage. While it is



clear that other elements enter into the accessibility equation, such as political leanings, socioeconomic status, personal values, religious orientation, and cultural perceptions, Iyengar argues that accessibility of information on public affairs is primarily dependent on media content.

The framing of stories is of key relevance in the issue of agenda setting. According to Kitzinger (2000) media templates are routinely used to emphasize only one clear perspective, to serve as rhetorical shorthand/shortcuts, and to help audiences & producers contextualize stories. These templates have a threefold effect: they shape narratives around specific issues, they guide public opinion and discussion, and they set the frame of reference for the future. Research analysis of media templates allows researchers to develop understandings of how reality is framed, how various elements of social life are constructed and how media power is operationalized in society.

Thus 'Vietnam' is a template for a failed or mired war, and is routinely used in relation to the US invasion of Iraq. 'Watergate' refers to political scandals, and is such a strong template the suffix -gate carries its own derived meaning. 'Jamie Bulger' is shorthand for a host of events related to child abuse, child abduction and child murder. And most recently, '9/11' has become a multifaceted template that references a gamut of issues from terrorism to public panic to security to xenophobia. The power of these templates lies in their association. 'Vietnam' references political failure, political cover-up, public protest, military failure, the draft, body bags, tenacious enemies, My Lai, the Tet offensive, war veterans, and, above all, military failure.

Media templates are key events with an ongoing shelf life beyond the conclusion of news happenings. They are defined by their retrospective use in secondary reporting rather than contemporaneous coverage and therein lies their power. Because they are used to explain current events, they emerge of themselves as a point of comparison and as proof of an ongoing problem. Templates are used to highlight patterns in particular issues or social problems. Media templates have a single primary meaning or sense rather than being the focus for debate, and they are rarely questioned.

There are, says Kitzinger, a number of operating implications that follow from the use of templates: simplification/distortion, minimization of alternate textual readings, and osmosis. Simplification and distortion indicate that details may be blurred, dissenting accounts forgotten and various pertinent facts (from past or present) may be misrepresented or disregarded. Minimal opportunity for alternative readings implies that the various events are pared back, often simplistically, to their essence, without nuance, that alternative interpretations from audiences are neither facilitated nor accommodated because the audience is only exposed to secondary accounts of events, and the very events themselves are recalled differently by those who were aware of the contemporary reporting, such is the power of the template. By osmosis Kitzinger means that the meanings attached to template events are, in part, created by the interaction between such episodes and subsequent linked cases. The meaning of media templates may be both reinforced and altered as they are applied to events as they unfold.

The literature on sexual crime provides a second backdrop to this research. Wilczynski's 1999 content analysis of 1,302 child abuse reports in 1995 in New South Wales established that criminal justice agencies were the predominant sources. Incongruity between offender and offence was emphasised and law and order agendas promoted. Abusers in authority situations were 47.2% of all cases (priests, teachers, police officers, scoutmasters, politicians, lawyers, etc). Often the authority status was signalled in headlines: 'Scoutmaster lured children'; 'Priest fondled girl's breast in blessing'. She argues that the large amount of media coverage is certainly not in most instances an indication of quality. Public assumptions about what constitutes real child abuse often remain unchallenged.

A sample analysis of Irish Times reports in 1997 disclosed a single case of child neglect. Only two years earlier in 1995 the Eastern Health Board reported 222 cases of



child neglect while during the same period the Mid-Western Health Broad had 313 reports (McDevitt, 1998).

Other research deals with the different foci used in news reporting of sexual crime. Stephenson (1987) contentiously argues that the escalation of the problem of child abuse might prove to be something of a 20th century cultural myth. Kitzinger (1995) records the disproportionate focus on abuse outside the home. Franklin and Parton (1991), writing about the media reporting of Cleveland and other child abuse cases in the UK, state that events are sensationalized and trivialized, vital issues are misrepresented, and scapegoats are sought.¹ Colling's (2002) work on child abuse in South Africa concluded that:

The results suggest that newspaper reports of child sexual abuse do elicit spontaneous attributional activity, that statements implying offender culpability are the most frequently employed attributional category, and that attributional activity is inhibited by stereotype congruent depictions of abuse (p.1135).

Goddard and Liddell (1994) express specific concern about tabloid reporting, stating:

Child abuse is political and media coverage cannot be avoided. When things go wrong as they can on occasions the temptation to introduce 'legislation by tabloid' may be hard to resist. Given that policy and practice will be influenced by the media, those concerned with child protection need to make greater efforts to use the media constructively (p. 361).

There are clearly a number of issues about the nature and extent of sexual crime reporting, especially in relation to offences against children. As Cheit (2003) put it

Several recent studies suggest that coverage of child sexual abuse is unlikely to be widespread in the sense of covering a wide range of cases. Rather, the cases that receive significant coverage are likely to follow a common pattern in crime reporting: one that exalts the unusual, thereby turning the most uncommon events into the ones that seem common. ... The content of the top 10 stories bears out several traditional concepts of newsworthiness. These stories tended to involve "the bizarre and the unusual," the dramatic, and/or the famous (p. 609).

This paper examines *The Irish Times* coverage of sexual crime over a ten year period in light of the literature documented above. The primary research focus is to document the co-relation between the media portrayal of sexual crime and its reality on the ground, while the secondary focus is to compare Irish coverage with that of the UK and US on the same topic.

Method

The data for the content analysis were drawn from the Lexis-Nexis database. For each year between 1993 and 2002, five weeks were chosen at random using the random selection function in MS Excel. In the event of the same week being sampled in any given year, an additional week was randomly selected. The total number of weeks selected was 50. For each week, the above databases were searched using a date-gate limiter with a search term encompassing variations of sexual crime:

(sex! w/2 (abuse or assault or attack or offence or harassment or molestation)) or rape or bestiality or buggery or incest or (gross w/1 indecency) or paedophil! or (child! w/3 molest!)

¹ In 1987, a significant number of allegations of child sexual abuse were made in the Cleveland area of England. Two consultant paediatricians at a Middlesbrough hospital were responsible for many of these allegations, based on an unproven medical diagnosis termed the anal dilatation test. A Public Inquiry was set up and was chaired by Justice Butler-Sloss. More than 80% of the allegations were found to be false. In 1991, children were taken into care in Orkney following false allegations of ritual abuse by their parents. In 1992, a Public Inquiry criticised Orkney Social Services and produced 194 recommendations for changes in child care practices. In 1994, a government report found that there was no basis to the multitude of satanic child abuse claims.



This term automatically netted all stories related to the search term and variations thereof such as 'molestation of children', 'child molestor', 'sexual abuse' etc. The term 'child abuse' was deliberately omitted from the search as the term is ambiguous, covering physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children as well as child neglect. For the purpose of this paper, matching Irish law, only victims under the age of seventeen were deemed to be children. The MediaWeb library of television news stories at RTÉ was searched with the same terms and programme details were downloaded for each story. While these are not full text data, they do give an account of RTÉ news coverage of the topic.

The stories were downloaded and transferred into an Excel database. The number of stories yielded by this initial search is given in column 1 of Table 1. Column 2 indicates the number of stories remaining after all non-relevant stories were purged; these included stories about sexual crime in other countries, rape in wartime, and EU subsidies for oil-seed rape.

Table 1: Number of stories initially sampled and finally selected by source

	Source		Total
	<i>Irish Times</i>	<i>RTÉ News</i>	
Initial Sample	1127	48	1175
Final Sample	571	38	609

These stories were then coded according to a predefined coding scheme by three independent coders. The full variable list is given in Appendix 1. Scott's pi for each variable was in excess of 0.93 indicating a very high level of intercoder reliability.

The statistics on sexual crime, both known to Gardaí and those in which criminal proceedings were commenced, were drawn from the Annual Reports of An Garda Síochána, 1993-2002. An Garda Síochána supplied the researcher directly with a breakdown of sexual crime according to victim age for the 10 years in question.

Findings

Table 2 shows the breakdown of stories across the sample in terms of sexual crimes against children and adults. Over the ten years, 66.7% of all *The Irish Times* stories in the sample were about child sexual abuse compared to 65.8% in RTÉ.



Table 2: Number and percentage of stories by victim type by newspaper

Victim Type	Source Title		
	<i>Irish Times</i>	<i>RTE News</i>	
Child	381	25	406
	66.7%	65.8%	66.7%
Adult	176	7	183
	30.8%	18.4%	30.0%
Unspecified	14	6	20
	2.5%	15.8%	3.3%
Total	571	38	609
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 3 shows a similar table with a breakdown by specific crime type. *RTÉ News* gives more coverage to rape than any other type of crime, with sexual assault the second most frequent crime. The reverse is true for *The Irish Times*. Murder with sexual assault accounts for only 3% of *The Irish Times* sex crimes coverage whereas it accounts for more than 6% of the *RTÉ* news stories. Sexual harassment constitutes 3.5% of stories in *The Irish Times* but is absent entirely from the *RTÉ News* sample. Incest features in 2.8% of *Irish Times* stories but not at all in *RTÉ News*. It is important to note that in both *The Irish Times* and *RTÉ*, incestuous cases are covered but the term 'incest' appears not to be used.

Table 3: Number and percentage of stories by specific crime type by newspaper

Specific crime	Source Title		
	<i>Irish Times</i>	<i>RTE News</i>	
Rape	161	10	171
	30.6%	62.5%	31.5%
Sexual assault	311	5	314
	59.0%	31.3%	57.8%
Buggery	11	0	11
	2.1%	.0%	2.0%
Incest	15	0	15
	2.8%	.0%	2.8%
Murder	16	1	17
	3.0%	6.3%	3.1%
Sexual Harassment	13	0	15
	2.5%	.0%	2.8%
Total	527	16	543
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%



Tables 4 and 5 show the data for the reporting of gender in the sampled stories across the news sources. Stories with male victims make up 21.7% of *The Irish Times* stories whereas the RTÉ News sample represents male and female victims in equal numbers.

Table 4: Number and percentage of stories by victim gender by source

Victim gender	Source Title		
	<i>Irish Times</i>	<i>RTE News</i>	
Male	124	8	132
	21.7%	50.0%	22.5%
Female	257	8	265
	45.0%	50.0%	45.1%
Unspecified / Not Applicable	190	0	190
	33.3%	.0%	32.4%
Total	571	16	587
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

In Table 5 we see a similar breakdown for the gender of the perpetrator. *The Irish Times* samples has seven stories with female perpetrators (1.2%) and 417 stories with male perpetrators (73%). There is no example of a female perpetrator in the RTÉ News sample.

Table 5: Number and percentage of stories by perpetrator gender by source

Perpetrator's gender	Source Title		
	<i>Irish Times</i>	<i>RTE News</i>	
Male	417	26	443
	73.0%	100.0%	74.2%
Female	7	0	7
	1.2%	.0%	1.2%
Unspecified/Not Applicable	147	0	147
	25.7%	.0%	24.6%
Total	571	26	597
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The stories were coded for the relationship of the victim to the perpetrator. These data are shown in Table 6 (child victims) and Table 7 (adult victims). In relation to child victims, excluding the 'Other' category, both *The Irish Times* and RTÉ News have 'Authority figures' as the most frequent relationship in the sampled stories (42.6% and 90.0%). The RTÉ news stories have 'Strangers' at 5.0% whereas *The Irish Times* has 2.9% of stories in that category. There is a wide variation in the total percentages for child victims where there is a familial involvement: 16.4% of stories in *The Irish Times* compared to 5% in the RTÉ news stories.



Table 6: Number and percentage of stories by victim perpetrator relationship by source for child victims

Child's Relationship to Perpetrator	Source Title		
	<i>Irish Times</i>	<i>RTE News</i>	
Stranger	10 2.9%	1 5.0%	11 3.0%
Parent	38 10.9%	1 5.0%	39 10.5%
Sibling	3 .9%	0 .0%	3 .8%
Uncle/Aunt	10 2.9%	0 .0%	10 2.7%
Other relative	6 1.7%	0 .0%	6 1.6%
Authority figure	149 42.6%	18 90.0%	167 45.1%
Boyfriend/girlfriend	1 .3%	0 .0%	1 .3%
Other	131 37.4%	0 .0%	131 35.4%
New acquaintance	2 .6%	0 .0%	2 .5%
Total	350 100.0%	20 100.0%	370 100.0%

Table 7, for adult victims, shows a very different distribution. In *The Irish Times* stories, excluding the 'Other' category, the highest number of stories are about 'New acquaintances' (9.3%), 'Authority figures' (9.9%) and 'Strangers' (7.4%). In the RTÉ news stories the breakdown is 50:50 between 'Strangers' and 'Authority Figures'.



Table 7: Number and percentage of stories by victim perpetrator relationship by source for adult victims

Adult Victim's relationship to Perpetrator	Source Title		
	<i>Irish Times</i>	<i>RTE News</i>	
Stranger	12 7.4%	1 50.0%	13 7.9%
Parent	1 .6%	0 .0%	1 .6%
Uncle/Aunt	1 .6%	0 .0%	1 .6%
Other relative	3 1.9%	0 .0%	3 1.8%
Authority figure	16 9.9%	1 50.0%	17 10.4%
Boyfriend/girlfriend	2 1.2%	0 .0%	2 1.2%
Partner/Spouse	5 3.1%	0 .0%	5 3.0%
Other	106 65.4%	0 .0%	106 64.6%
New acquaintance	15 9.3%	0 .0%	15 9.1%
Colleague	1 .6%	0 .0%	1 .6%
Total	162 100.0%	2 100.0%	164 100.0%

Table 8 details the word counts for stories, broken down by victim type and by victimgender in *The Irish Times*. Stories overall about male victims are longer than stories about female victims; this is statistically significant ($t=4.6$, $p<.001$). Child stories are also longer; this is also statistically significant ($t=3.18$, $p<.01$). Stories about male adult victims are longer than stories about female adult victims, and statistically significant ($t=3.41$, $p<.001$).



Table 8: Mean of newspaper word count by victim type and gender

		Source
Victim	Victim gender	<i>Irish Times</i>
Child	Male	414
	Female	305
Adult	Male	301
	Female	287

Tables 9 and 10 show the categories of perpetrator professions, in those stories where they are identified as such, for each source. Table 9 is for child victims and Table 10 for adult victims. In *The Irish Times* data, 68.1% of stories about sexual crimes against children, where the profession of the perpetrator is identified relate to clergy and religious. The corresponding figure is 70% for RTE news. The next most common category of perpetrator in *The Irish Times* is 'Teacher/Coach' (13.1%), followed by 'Police/Military' (6.9%). In the RTE news sample, the 'Teacher/Coach' category covers 25% of stories.

Table 9: Number and percentage of stories by perpetrator category by source for child victims

Child Victim	Source Title		
Professional Category	<i>Irish Times</i>	<i>RTE News</i>	
Cleric/Religious	109 68.1%	14 70.0%	123 68.3%
Medical	1 .6%	0 .0%	1 .6%
Teacher/Coach	21 13.1%	5 25.0%	26 14.4%
Police/Military	11 6.9%	0 .0%	11 6.1%
Farmer	3 1.9%	0 .0%	3 1.7%
Other (Named)	7 4.4%	1 5.0%	8 4.4%
Entertainer	1 .6%	0 .0%	1 .6%
Business	2 1.3%	0 .0%	2 1.1%
Professional	1 .6%	0 .0%	1 .6%
Blue Collar	4 2.5%	0 .0%	4 2.2%
Total	160 100.0%	20 100.0%	180 100.0%



The pattern is somewhat different in the case of sexual crimes against adults. In those stories where the profession of the perpetrator can be identified, 'Police/Military' have the highest number of stories in *The Irish Times* (34.5%). No valid conclusion can be drawn about the RTE news sample as there is only one story in the adult category where the perpetrator profession is identified.

Table 10: Number and percentage of stories by perpetrator category by newspaper for adult victims

Adult Victim Professional Category	Source Title		
	<i>Irish Times</i>	<i>RTE News</i>	
Cleric/Religious	4 13.8%	0 .0%	4 13.3%
Medical	4 13.8%	0 .0%	4 13.3%
Teacher/Coach	1 3.4%	0 .0%	1 3.3%
Police/Military	10 34.5%	1 100.0%	11 36.7%
Farmer	2 6.9%	0 .0%	2 6.7%
Business	5 17.2%	0 .0%	5 16.7%
Student	1 3.4%	0 .0%	1 3.3%
Blue Collar	2 6.9%	0 .0%	2 6.7%
Total	29 100.0%	1 100.0%	30 100.0%

The Irish Times stories were also coded for prominence, as being either on page 1 of the newspaper or not. Table 11 shows numbers and percentages of stories for the various professional categories of perpetrators. Overall sexual crime stories with clergy as perpetrators constituted 69.2% of all sexual crime front page stories in *The Irish Times* sample. These figures must be interpreted with caution as the N is quite small.



Table 11: Number and percentage of stories by perpetrator category by front page by newspaper

Professional Category	<i>The Irish Times</i>			
	Page 1		Other Pages	
	N	%	N	%
Cleric/Religious	9	69.2%	104	58.8%
Medical	0	.0%	5	2.8%
Teacher/Coach	0	.0%	22	12.4%
Police/Military	3	23.1%	18	10.2%
Farmer	0	.0%	5	2.8%
Other (Named)	0	.0%	7	4.0%
Entertainer	0	.0%	2	1.1%
Business	0	.0%	7	4.0%
Professional	0	.0%	1	.6%
Student	0	.0%	1	.6%
Legal	0	.0%	0	.0%
Sports	0	.0%	0	.0%
Blue Collar	1	7.7%	5	2.8%
Politics	0	.0%	0	.0%

Table 12 gives the same data for sexual crimes against children only. Of all such stories in *The Irish Times* 90% were about clergy/religious perpetrators but the same caveat as to interpretation applies.

Table 12: Number and percentage of stories by perpetrator category by front page by newspaper for child victims

Professional Category	<i>The Irish Times</i>			
	Page 1		Other Pages	
	N	%	N	%
Cleric/Religious	9	90.0%	100	66.7%
Medical	0	.0%	1	.7%
Teacher/Coach	0	.0%	21	14.0%
Police/Military	0	.0%	11	7.3%
Farmer	0	.0%	3	2.0%
Other (Named)	0	.0%	7	4.7%
Entertainer	0	.0%	1	.7%
Business	0	.0%	2	1.3%
Professional	0	.0%	1	.7%
Student	0	.0%	0	.0%
Legal	0	.0%	0	.0%
Sports	0	.0%	0	.0%
Blue Collar	1	10.0%	3	2.0%
Politics	0	.0%	0	.0%



Table 13 shows the Garda crime statistics for sexual crimes. These data are drawn from the Annual Reports of An Garda Síochána. Table 14 shows similar data but only for those under 18. These figures were supplied to the researcher by An Garda Síochána, but they were unable to supply an age breakdown for 1998 and 1999. It is important to note that the categories for sexual crime were changed in 2000 with the introduction of the Pulse computer system. For the purpose of clarity in these two tables, all crimes of rape, including male rape, are included in the rape category. Similarly all crime of unlawful carnal knowledge of under-15 and under-17 females have been folded into a single category.

Table 13: Garda Crime Statistics for sexual offences 1993-2002

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total
Sexual assault	368 63.67%	382 61.81%	604 68.33%	551 67.36%	602 60.62%	598 61.15%	431 56.19%	549 60.53%	1048 65.62%	1626 68.61%	6759 64.31%
Aggravated sexual assault	14 2.42%	9 1.46%	17 1.92%	8 0.98%	11 1.11%	11 1.12%	5 0.65%	12 1.32%	18 1.13%	24 1.01%	129 1.23%
Rape * inc Sec. 4	143 24.74%	184 29.77%	191 21.61%	180 22.00%	256 25.78%	292 29.86%	218 28.42%	290 31.97%	401 25.11%	497 20.97%	2652 25.23%
Buggery	12 2.08%	9 1.46%	17 1.92%	34 4.16%	80 8.06%	29 2.97%	78 10.17%	23 2.54%	36 2.25%	94 3.97%	412 3.92%
Unlawful carnal knowledge	27 4.67%	18 2.91%	40 4.52%	34 4.16%	34 3.42%	30 3.07%	27 3.52%	15 1.65%	78 4.88%	102 4.30%	405 3.85%
Incest	14 2.42%	16 2.59%	15 1.70%	11 1.34%	10 1.01%	18 1.84%	8 1.04%	18 1.98%	16 1.00%	27 1.14%	153 1.46%
TOTAL	578 100%	618 100%	884 100%	818 100%	993 100%	978 100%	767 100%	907 100%	1597 100%	2370 100%	10510 100%

Table 14: Garda Crime Statistics for sexual offences against persons under 18, 1993-1997, 2000-2002

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	2000	2001	2002	TOTAL
Sexual assault	250 69.60%	267 71.60%	391 71.70%	288 69.20%	310 65.00%	87 58.80%	106 55.50%	141 57.80%	2067 67.30%
Aggravated sexual assault	7 1.90%	5 1.30%	5 0.90%	4 1.00%	4 0.80%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	4 1.60%	33 1.10%
Rape	53 14.80%	69 18.50%	85 15.60%	71 17.10%	97 20.30%	48 32.40%	67 35.10%	47 19.30%	576 18.80%
Buggery	9 2.50%	5 1.30%	11 2.00%	13 3.10%	20 4.20%	4 2.70%	5 2.60%	13 5.30%	90 2.90%
Unlawful carnal knowledge	30 8.40%	20 5.40%	47 8.60%	35 8.40%	41 8.60%	5 3.40%	8 4.20%	18 7.40%	239 7.80%
Incest	10 2.80%	7 1.90%	6 1.10%	5 1.20%	5 1.00%	4 2.70%	5 2.60%	21 8.60%	67 2.20%
TOTAL	359	373	545	416	477	148	191	244	3072



Tables 15 and 16 should be examined together. Table 15 is a summary of the Gardai sexual crime statistics 1993-1997 and 2000-2002. Table 16 represents the same period from the content analysis data. In the official statistics, the most common crime against children is sexual assault (67.29%). The same is true of the content analysis data (76.4%). The figures for rape in relation to children are also broadly similar, 18.8% in the official statistics and 16.9% in the media reports. Incest accounts for 2.2% of the official statistics but 5.1% of the media reports. In relation to adults, the official figures indicate that sexual assault is the most common offence (64.3%) whereas the media reports have rape as the most frequent (67.3%). In the comparisons between adults and children, a different picture emerges. In the official figures rape is committed almost three times as often against adults as against children (73.1% v. 26.9%) whereas in the media reports it appears twice as often (62.6% v. 37.4%). According to the Gardai the majority of victims of sexual assault are adults (63.9%) whereas media reports imply that children are overwhelmingly more commonly such victims (85.8%). In the official statistics, buggery is a more common crime against adults (70.5%) whereas in the media reports the reverse is true (66.6% for children) but the N here is very small.

Table 15: Total counts, row and column percentages for sexual crime 1993-1997 and 2000-2002

		U18	Adult	All
Rape		576	1566	2142
	Row %	26.9%	73.1%	100.0%
	Column %	18.8%	27.5%	24.4%
Sexual assault		2067	3663	5730
	Row %	36.1%	63.9%	100.0%
	Column %	67.3%	64.3%	65.4%
Buggery	90	215	305	
	Row %	29.5%	70.5%	100.0%
	Column %	2.9%	3.8%	3.5%
Incest	67	60	127	
	Row %	52.8%	47.2%	100.0%
	Column %	2.2%	1.0%	1.5%
Aggravated sexual assault		33	80	113
	Row %	29.2%	70.8%	100.0%
	Column %	1.1%	1.4%	1.3%
Unlawful carnal knowledge		239	109	348
	Row %	68.7%	31.3%	100.0%
	Column %	7.8%	1.9%	4.0%
TOTAL	3072	5693	8765	
	Row %	35.0%	65.0%	100.0%
	Column %	100%	100%	100%



Table 16: Total counts and percentages for sexual crime 1993-1997 and 2000-2002 from *The Irish Times* and RTÉ news

Category of crime Specific crime	Child	Adult	Total
Rape	43	72	115
Row%	37.4%	62.6%	100.0%
Column%	16.9%	67.3%	31.9%
Sexual assault	194	32	226
Row%	85.8%	14.2%	100.0%
Column%	76.4%	29.9%	62.6%
Buggery	4	2	6
Row%	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
Column%	1.6%	1.9%	1.7%
Incest	13	1	14
Row%	92.9%	7.1%	100.0%
Column%	5.1%	.9%	3.9%
Total	254	107	361
	70.4%	29.6%	100.0%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Discussion

The findings detailed provide some insight into media reportage of sexual abuse in Ireland, as represented by *The Irish Times* and RTÉ news. In both these sources, stories about child abuse are twice as frequent as stories about sexual crimes against adults, although the Garda statistics report that the opposite is true. (One important caveat here is that the Garda crime figures are often questioned in terms of their reliability, but it is certainly reasonable to suggest that sexual crime is underreported to the Garda, based on the evidence of the Rape Crisis Centres and other agencies.) Sexual crime against children is over-reported in the media and sexual crime against adults is under-reported. Stories with female victims predominate, in keeping with prevalent data from the SAVI report that women are more likely to be victims of sexual crime than men. Perpetrators in the media reports are overwhelmingly male, with little reporting of sexual crime female perpetrators, although the SAVI report indicates a higher incidence of female perpetration than is evident in the media reports.

Within the media reports of sexual crimes against children, 15.6% of such crime is attributed to parents or family members, 3% to strangers and 45% to authority figures. This contrasts very strongly with the SAVI figures which suggest that strangers are responsible for about 20% of child abuse, 16.8% by family members (fathers, uncles, cousins, siblings) and 4.6% by authority figures (clergy, teachers).

Victims of sexual crime are also differentiated on the basis of the amount of coverage. In *The Irish Times*, male child victims get most coverage followed by female child victims. Among adult victims, male victims get more coverage than female victims. In those



stories where the profession of the perpetrator of sexual crime against a child is identified, 68.3% focus on clergy/religious perpetrators, although SAVI indicates that such perpetrators are responsible for 3.2% of child sexual abuse. Similarly, 14.4% of such stories are about teachers and coaches as perpetrators, whereas SAVI indicates that the true figure for this category is about 1.2%.

Rape of children is over-reported and rape of adults under-reported. The rape of adults is also more frequently reported than the sexual assault of adults although sexual assault is a much more prevalent crime against adults than rape. Compared to the official figures, the sexual assault of children is also over-reported.

The nature of coverage outlined above is problematic in some respects. While there are important points of convergence between the media reports and official statistics, there are also areas of strong dissonance. In particular, the focus on sexual crimes against children prevents the development of appropriate public outrage about sexual crimes against adults. Current media reportage of sexual crimes against children is inadequate in that it fails to document the totality of the nature and reality of such crimes.

It would also be highly desirable to extend the current research beyond the two chosen media forms, as these do not constitute the total spectrum of Irish news media. It would also be useful to investigate whether linear forms of reportage are different from non-linear forms, and whether the content of radio reporting is different from television reporting which is heavily reliant on visuals.

The mass media exert powerful influences in society. In relation to the uncovering of sexual crime against children, the media have been major players by revealing the extent of a problem that had been hidden for many decades. The cases of Brendan Smyth and the McColgan family² are excellent illustrations of what the media can achieve. While much has been done, much remains to be done. The reporting of the findings of the SAVI report, summarised at the top of this paper, did not produce the kind of outrage that might have been expected given what was revealed. At the time of writing this paper, *The Irish Times* itself had only 22 references to the report since it was published in April 2002.

The power of the media as an influence for public policy cannot be overstated. It is therefore critical for Irish society that, in the matter of sexual abuse and violence, its citizens are as well informed as can be about the reality of the problem. The current patterns of reporting are somewhat deficient in this respect. This is especially true in relation to the level of reporting on sexual crime against adults. As the SAVI report indicates, 42% of women respondents reported some form of sexual abuse or assault in their lifetime, as did 28% of men respondents. This is clearly an ongoing social problem and tackling it into the future will require comprehensive and accurate media reporting.

² Brendan Smyth was a Norbertine priest who was convicted of child sexual abuse crimes in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The media played a significant role in highlighting the inadequate response to his crimes by the Catholic Church and by the state and led to the downfall of the government in 1994. The McColgan children went public in revealing years of abuse by their father, Joseph McColgan, who was sentenced to 238 years in prison in 1995. The McColgans' courage in coming forward publicly was seen a landmark in encouraging other incest victims to take action against their abusers.



References

- Becker, L. B. (1980) 'The mass media and citizen assessment of issue importance: A reflection on agenda-setting research.' in Wilhoit, G. C. and de Bock, H., (eds). *Mass Communication Review Yearbook*, 1. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Breed, W. (1960) 'Social control in the newsroom: A functional analysis' in Schramm, W. (ed.) *Mass Communications*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Cheit, R. E. (2003) 'What hysteria? A systematic study of newspaper coverage of accused child molesters'. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 27(6).
- Cohen, B. C. (1963) *The Press and Foreign Policy*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- Collings, S. J. (2002) 'The Impact of Contextual Ambiguity on the Interpretation and Recall of Child Sexual Abuse Media Reports'. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 17(10).
- Franklin, B. and Parton, N. (1991) *Social Work, the Media and Public Relations*. London: Routledge.
- Goddard, C. and Liddell, M. (1994) 'Child abuse fatalities and the media: lessons from a case study'. *Child Abuse Review* 4(4).
- Iyengar, S. (1991) *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Iyengar, S. and Kinder, D.R. (1987) *News that matters: Television and American Opinion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kitzinger, J. (2000) 'Media templates: patterns of association and the (re)construction of meaning over time' *Media Culture & Society* 22(1).
- Kitzinger, J. (1995) 'Rocking the cradle of sexual politics - what happened when women said incest'. *Feminism & Psychology*. August, 1995: 5(3).
- Lippmann, W. (1922) *Public opinion*. New York: Macmillan.
- McCombs, M. and Shaw, D.(1972) 'The agenda-setting function of the mass media'. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36.
- McDevitt, S. (1996) 'The impact of news media on child abuse reporting'. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 20(4).
- McGee H. and Dublin Rape Crisis Centre (2002) *The SAVI report : sexual abuse and violence in Ireland*. Dublin: Liffey Press in association with Dublin Rape Crisis Centre.
- Salwen, M. B. and Garrison, B. (1989) 'Press freedom and development: United-States and Latin-American views'. *Journalism Quarterly* 66 (1).
- Schudson, M. (1989) 'The sociology of news production'. *Media, Culture & Society* 11(3).
- Shoemaker, P. J. (1991) *Gatekeeping*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Shoemaker, P. J. and Reese, S. D.(1996) *Mediating the message: Theories of influences on mass media content*. White Plains, N.Y: Longman.
- Stephenson, A. (1987) 'The Media and the Child Abuse Explosion'. *Media Information Australia*. 46.
- Weaver, D. (1985) 'Media agenda-setting and public opinion: Is there a link?' in Bostrom, R. N. and Westley, B. H., (eds.) *Communication Yearbook*, 8. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- White, D. M. (1950) 'The "GateKeeper": A case study in the selection of news'. *Journalism Quarterly*, 27.
- Wilczynski, A. and Sinclair, K. (1999) 'Moral Tales: Representations of Child Abuse in the Quality and Tabloid Media'. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 32(3).



APPENDIX 1

The coding scheme involved the following variables:

Story ID

Source Title

Date

Year

Page

Words

Category of crime

Crime type (specific)

Victim gender

Victim age then

Victim age now

Victim's Profession

Victim's relationship to Perpetrator

Victim's marital status

Perpetrator's gender

Perpetrator's age then

Perpetrator's age now

Perpetrator's Profession

Perpetrator Identified

Perpetrator's marital status

No of allegations or charges

Stage of legal process

Sentence in Months

Story genre

Perpetrator's Professional Category

Headline descriptor victim

Headline descriptor perpetrator

Headline descriptor crime

Story focus

Region of country

Perpetrator cannot be named for legal reasons? Y/N

Actual Incest

Headline perpetrator gender

Headline victim gender

