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# SIGNIFICANT TELEVISION: Journalism, Sex Abuse and the Catholic Church in Ireland

Colum Kenny

MOST CITIZENS OF THE Republic of Ireland describe themselves in their census returns as Roman Catholic, although attendances at church have been declining (O'Mahony, 2008:1). Irish Catholics long endured religious discrimination and persecution under British Protestant rule. Partly for that reason, the Irish media tended to treat the Catholic Church very respectfully or deferentially after the foundation of the independent Irish Free State in 1921 (Fuller, 2002; Inglis, 1998; Kenny, 1997). However, by the closing decade of the twentieth century, Ireland had passed through a period of rapid and remarkable change (Brown, 2004; Ferriter, 2005; Kenny, 2005). Economic, social and cultural factors made it more likely than before that Irish broadcasters would produce programmes critical of clergy and bishops.

Irish Catholics still make a major contribution to social and educational services in Ireland and abroad. However, during the twentieth century, some priests and members of religious orders physically and/or sexually abused children. They were not unique in this respect. Most child abuse is committed by lay people, including some parents, close relatives, teachers and sports coaches, and not all is committed by Catholics.

## **First Public Awareness of Irish Child Sexual Abuse**

Irish television viewers frequently tune into the BBC and other British services and many were able to see, for example, a special edition of *Childwatch* presented by Esther Rantzen in 1986. This BBC programme marked the launch of the UK charity Childline and is said to have been '... a significant intervention into the issue of child abuse, particularly in relation to sexual abuse ... Its timing in late 1986 served both to raise public awareness but also to disturb many previously untouched sensitivities' (Parton, 1991: 93). Child sex abuse by priests was being reported extensively in the United States, from the mid-1980s, raising questions about the possibility of its occurrence elsewhere (Rossetti, 1996:5). According to an official report, commissioned by the Irish state (Ferns Inquiry: 12),

It is generally accepted that awareness of the nature of child sexual abuse in Ireland coincided with high profile cases such as the Kilkenny Incest Investigation in 1993 and The West of Ireland Farmer case in 1995. These cases demonstrated that child sexual abuse was a crime perpetrated by apparently upright and decent members of the community.

However, both of these cases concerned sexual abuse within the family. Evidence of systematic child abuse at Irish institutions first came to public attention not in the

Republic but in Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom. In the 1980s, the activities of paedophiles at the Kincora Boys Home, a Protestant institution in Belfast, were revealed and their ringleader, William McGrath, convicted. McGrath was not only a worker at Kincora but also, as it transpired in subsequent investigations, an influential political activist and agent of the British Intelligence service MI5. It is claimed by Foot (1989: 80—101) that some civil servants, Protestant ministers, politicians and security personnel were involved in a cover-up of what happened at Kincora. If so, then they escaped the legal consequences of their involvement. The scandal has been examined in a book by a noted television journalist in Northern Ireland, Chris Moore (1996).

In the Republic of Ireland, during the twentieth century, the Catholic Church played a central role in running institutions for children. This suited an impoverished state that long struggled to survive after winning independence from the United Kingdom in 1921. It also suited the Catholic Church, because such institutions were a source of revenue from the state and an outlet for the energies of many nuns and clergy. The Republic had a high proportion of boys and girls institutionalised, relative to Britain. Some of these had committed crimes but most simply came from broken or deprived homes. Approximately 29,500 people, born after 1930, were committed by the courts to industrial and reformatory schools. In addition, 'significant numbers, which cannot be accurately quantified' were committed by parents (Comptroller and Auditor General: 2003: i, 72).

In 1994, mounting concerns about the response of Irish politicians to emerging evidence of child sexual abuse was the most precipitate of a number of factors that led to the collapse of a coalition government in Dublin. This occurred when it transpired that authorities in the Republic had not acted promptly to extradite Fr Brendan Smyth to Northern Ireland, where that priest was wanted by the authorities in respect of serious sexual abuse charges. As it happened, Smyth eventually went to Northern Ireland of his own volition and was jailed. The affair reflected underlying political tensions but also suggested that politicians in the Republic of Ireland were in denial about the extent to which evidence of child sexual abuse was emerging. For some time after this row, child abuse still did not receive the thorough official attention that it would later prove to merit. However, from then on the media sustained an interest in the matter. Thus, for example, in November 1994, RTÉ devoted to it a special edition of *Tuesday File*, which included one of the earliest televised interviews with a victim of clerical sex abuse. Priests and bishops tried not to appear unduly defensive. The Bishop of Clonfert, Dr John Kirby, told the *Irish Times* that he did not think that media coverage of the Brendan Smyth case and its aftermath had been 'over the top'. He did feel, however, that recent editorial statements such as 'all priests are not paedophiles' created a presumption that a significant number of them might be, when in fact it was only a tiny minority who were (Pollack in the *Irish Times* 26/11/94). Greer writes that, in Northern Ireland,

The collective impact of the media exposure of these cases [Kincora and Smyth] was to increase social awareness and to transform sex crime, and child abuse in particular, from an issue of private to public concern. The subsequent impact on levels of press attention to sex crimes was enormous (2003:108).

The impact of this media attention on the subject of child abuse was also felt south of the Irish border.

### **'Suffer Little Children' on UTV: the Brendan Smyth Programme**

On 22 October 1995, a special programme on the Fr Brendan Smyth case was screened by Ulster Television (UTV). The extended edition of *Counterpoint* was entitled 'Suffer Little Children'. It is a rather obvious title for such a programme, and use of this and similarly emotive key phrases by media in the USA has been noted (Jenkins, 1996: 55–56). However, an even more emotive aspect of the UTV production was a shot of Fr Brendan Smyth that has been repeated subsequently in many other TV programmes, on both sides of the Irish border. This showed him lumbering across a street, his stocky body and thickset features appearing to register little sign of shame at his having been found out. His movements had been slowed electronically in order to make the panning shot last longer. The slowing down of Smyth's image bolsters the visual impression that this is not a particularly humble and contrite sinner whom the viewer is observing.

The *Counterpoint* programme received extensive coverage in the media throughout Ireland, not least because it published details of what was known about Smyth's doings in Ireland and the United States, and about the patently inadequate if not devious response of Church authorities to them. The short sequence of images of Smyth that were first seen on *Counterpoint*, and then often repeated elsewhere on Irish television, became a sort of sickening, electronic anti-religious icon. Still images of his face appeared frequently in the print media in general stories about sex abuse. Smyth himself came to be regarded by many Irish people as the personification of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. Having served a period of imprisonment in Northern Ireland, he was brought south to the Republic, where he pleaded guilty to a total of 74 charges of indecent and sexual assault committed during 35 years and was again jailed. He was soon joined by other clerics in an unholy pantheon of sexual abusers. These included Fr Ivan Payne, Fr Seán Fortune and Fr Paul McGennis. Adults who had been abused as children came forward to recount their experiences. Public anger mounted, but the reaction of the Irish government was still curiously muted.

It became widely recognised that sexual abuse had taken place within both local parishes and institutions run by religious orders. At some such institutions, there was also a level of physical abuse that far surpassed even the harsh beatings that were common in many Irish schools until the last quarter of the twentieth century. Bleak insights into life in Ireland's industrial schools in the mid-twentieth century have been provided by Doyle (1988) and Touher (2001) among others, although the fact the public generally supported tough school discipline, or 'corporal punishment' during that period is noted by Coldrey (1996).

### ***Dear Daughter* on RTÉ**

Nuns as well as priests were occasionally implicated in allegations of sexual abuse. On 22 February 1996, RTÉ screened *Dear Daughter*, a documentary by Louis Lentin that revealed through interviews what life had been like during the late 1950s and early 1960s for some children at the Goldenbridge Orphanage, Dublin, run by the Sisters of Mercy. The programme did not go entirely unchallenged and a less harsh version of

the institution's history was written by a former Sister of Mercy who had worked at Goldenbridge between 1959 and 1964 (Durkan: 1997). However, one former resident also published a more critical account of that institution (Fahy: 1999).

Because it is a 'drama documentary' that combines both factual reportage and interviews with certain dramatic reconstructions, *Dear Daughter* has been described by one observer as being, '... not, in the strict sense of the word, broadcast journalism' (Horgan, 2004: 209). However, such techniques are quite common in the making of documentaries and the programme subsequently received great attention in the print media and on radio programmes. It further increased the public's level of concern. Then, and again in 2004, the Sisters of Mercy publicly took responsibility for their mistreatment of some children and apologised. In 2004, they also stated publicly that the screening of *Dear Daughter* had had a significant impact on their religious order. One member of the Sisters of Mercy was later reported to have described the effect of *Dear Daughter*, and the subsequent media coverage arising from it, as 'like a tidal wave coming over us'. She 'also divulged that in the weeks coming up to the broadcast of *Dear Daughter* an independent investigation of Goldenbridge was undertaken at the request of the order which found that the allegations contained in the programme were 'credible' (*Irish Independent*, 2/07/04). Although the first to apologise, the order's apology was described as being 'neither fully voluntary nor unconditional' (Raftery and O'Sullivan, 1999: 393). Some innocent priests were now being sworn at or even spat upon as they walked down the street. Not long before, no person would have dared to show such disrespect. When Fr Brendan Smyth died in jail in August 1997, he was buried at night to avoid adverse publicity or disruptive protest.

Gradually, it emerged through media reports that the problem of abusive priests had been known to the bishops for decades and that they had responded to it by either moving priests to other locations or sending them for various kinds of 'treatment', or both. The 'treatment' proved to be manifestly unsuccessful in many cases. The institutional church hushed up abuse not simply to protect itself from criticism but, as some bishops saw it, to shelter the faithful from a source of scandal. The Irish State also responded tardily to the emergence of stories about child sexual abuse. Ministers dragged their feet and appeared to hope that the whole problem might blow over. It did not.

### ***The Boys of St Vincent's and RTÉ***

The main Irish public service broadcaster RTÉ was itself slow to react vigorously to a story which had broken first on the airwaves of Northern Ireland. Despite mounting evidence of institutional abuse going back years, and despite suggestions by a number of people that it should do so, RTÉ waited five years before screening *The Boys of St Vincent's*. This award-winning two-part dramatisation was made for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in the early 1990s. It is based on actual abuse at an institution in Newfoundland by members of a religious order with Irish connections (Harris, 1990). While it is somewhat ponderous in its production style, *The Boys of St Vincent's* has an immediate and obvious resonance for Irish Catholics and its tale of justice being sought was well-received when it was finally screened in Ireland. Despite its flaws, it is difficult not to conclude that its late screening in Ireland represented a residue of the former extreme deference towards the Catholic Church.

The programme's 'heroic' theme is unsurprising, given normal conventions of popular film and television drama (Jenkins, 2001: 71).

In fairness to the public service broadcaster RTÉ, which had been slow to screen *The Boys of St Vincent's*, it was a major journalistic production screened by that organisation in 1999 that finally pushed the Irish government into announcing a series of important measures ostensibly intended to investigate fully institutional child abuse and to provide compensation and justice for the victims or 'survivors' of such abuse. That RTÉ production was a series of three one-hour documentaries directed and written by Mary Raftery, collectively entitled *States of Fear*.

### ***States of Fear on RTÉ***

Although newspapers and RTÉ radio programmes had for some time been reporting the subject of child abuse, and a number of RTÉ television programmes had dealt with it to a certain extent, *States of Fear* now had a special impact. Produced and directed by Mary Raftery, and transmitted on 27 April and 4 and 11 May 1999, the short series was very widely reported and discussed in the media, its content generating extensive coverage by other journalists. This was front-page news and, as with other influential television programmes mentioned here, not merely a matter of chatter in the TV review section or among opinion columnists. Both broadsheets and tabloids reacted, and the radio airwaves were filled with anxious discussion about the implications of what people had seen on *States of Fear*. There was no longer any possibility of the government continuing to look the other way.

So concerned were senior ministers by the potential political impact of *States of Fear* that, on the 11 May 1999, just as the last programme in the trilogy was about to be transmitted that night, the Irish government made a major announcement. This was reported immediately and prominently by broadcasting media, and in the national newspapers the following morning. In its statement, the government apologised publicly to those who had been abused as children in institutions. This meant, in effect, that the government also accepted partial responsibility for what had happened down the years and effectively accepted at least some legal liability for damage done. The Irish *Taoiseach* (prime minister) Bertie Ahern of political party Fianna Fáil said:

On behalf of the State and of all citizens of the state, the Government wishes to make a sincere and long overdue apology to the victims of childhood abuse for our collective failure to intervene, to detect their pain, to come to their rescue.

The Government then announced measures aimed at providing compensation from public funds and making further investigations. Ms Justice Mary Laffoy of the High Court agreed to chair an official Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, established in 2000.

### **Media Coverage of Nora Wall**

The public were becoming accustomed to a stream of revelations, and a climate existed in which accusations might be too readily believed. This was illustrated by the strange case of Nora Wall. She and Paul 'Pablo' McCabe were convicted in July

1999 on a charge of raping a ten-year old girl at St Michael's Child Care Centre in Cappoquin, Co Waterford. McCabe had a string of criminal convictions, including for assault, indecent assault and malicious damage. At the time of the alleged offence, in the late 1980s, Wall had been a nun. Sentencing Wall and McCabe, the presiding judge said that he found nothing in favour of either of them. Yet, just days later, an appeal court quashed their convictions following disclosure of errors in their trial, including a failure by the State to reveal certain allegations and statements by third parties that undermined the credibility of the prosecution's witnesses (*Irish Times* on 24/07/99 and 28/07/99).

During the trial, media devoted much attention to lurid allegations against the pair. Wall's alleged actions and inactions presented even the more staid newspapers with colourful copy (e.g. in *Irish Times* on 11/06/99). Once their convictions were quashed, the Director of Public Prosecutions accepted 'fully and ungrudgingly' that she and McCabe were entitled to be presumed innocent of all charges against them. He took the unprecedented step of publishing an account of the mistakes in the case. Kevin Myers (1999) and others raised questions about publicity surrounding the trial. Horgan wrote that Wall's trial 'had been extensively – indeed, sensationally – reported in all the media. There can have been few occasions in the past few decades in which the public mind-set, created in large part by those media reports and confirmed by the jury verdict and the trial judge's comments, has been so directly challenged' (*Irish Times*, 26/08/99). Eight missionary sisters pronounced themselves 'appalled by the moral bankruptcy of the country to which we have returned' (*Irish Times* 27/12/99). Breen (2000) noted how Brendan Smyth had been implicitly and gratuitously linked by some media to the Nora Wall case, through the inclusion of his picture as an illustration, or otherwise. The Wall case rapidly slipped off Ireland's media agenda, at least until 2009 (Downes et al.; Commission, ii, 372-3). Clerical child sexual abuse did not.

### ***Stolen Lives on TV3***

Privately-owned national television station TV3, which was not renowned for devoting resources or time to serious documentaries, recognised the public appetite for stories about clerical sexual abuse. During 1999 and 2000, that station commissioned a three-part series, collectively entitled *Stolen Lives*. The series helped to keep public attention focussed vividly on the effects of child abuse. Directed by Louis Lentin of Crescendo Concepts, the programmes were entitled 'Our Boy's Stories' (24 October 1999), 'We Were Only Children' (31 October 1999), and 'Philomena's Story' (5 November 2000). However, the last of these was strongly criticised by both the Sisters of Mercy and the Catholic archdiocese of Dublin as unfair and untruthful, most particularly in respect of an allegation of group rape involving nuns and a priest. Shortly before its transmission, TV3 offered the Sisters of Mercy what the latter religious order described as 'a totally inadequate means of right of reply'. Opinion columnist Breda O'Brien agreed

The picture painted of life in St Anne's is so unrelentingly appalling that in simple justice, opportunity should have been afforded the Sisters of Mercy to state their side of the story. TV3 might well counter that two days before the broadcast they offered the Sisters of Mercy and the Diocese of Dublin slots

of 90 seconds each after the programme in which a TV3 announcer would read a statement from them. However, a statement read by a TV3 employee would have little impact against 48 minutes consisting mostly of close-ups of Philomena Byrne's tear-stained face (*Irish Times* 11/11/00).

Criticism of the programme raised questions about the broadcasting of emotional and uncorroborated allegations relating to alleged events long past. The scandal of sex abuse in the Irish Church had been clearly revealed by the Irish media before the *Boston Globe*, in 2001 and 2002, ran its influential, investigative stories about abuse in the Boston archdiocese that led to the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law (*Boston Globe*; Rezendes). Yet, even after such media coverage, the response of the Catholic Church continued to attract much criticism.

For its part, the Irish government was also struggling to respond in a way that would satisfy the public. In 2002, a deal brokered by a retiring government minister, Michael Woods (during the final days of the 28<sup>th</sup> Dáil/Irish parliament), allowed religious orders to escape most of the financial liability arising from a growing number of legal actions by survivors of sexual abuse. Under that deal, the terms of which have been severely criticised, the State agreed to use public funds to make up a substantial shortfall when courts award compensation (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2003: i, 72-101). Then, in September 2003, Judge Laffoy resigned as chairperson of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, blaming the government for failing to support her work with adequate powers and resources. The government tried to defend itself. Judge Seán Ryan agreed to succeed her.

### ***Suing the Pope on BBC 2***

Ulster Television, RTÉ and TV3 having played their part in the unfolding story, BBC 2 now stepped forward. On 19 March 2002, it transmitted 'Suing the Pope'. Produced by Sarah MacDonald for *Correspondent*, a current affairs series, the programme included moving interviews with victims of abuse in the Irish diocese of Ferns, where Brendan Comiskey had been bishop since 1984. At the centre of that abuse had been Fr Seán Fortune (O'Connor, 2000; Ferns Inquiry, 2005). Ironically, Fortune, like Bishop Brendan Comiskey himself, was associated with a communicative, if not garrulous, element among the clergy of the Catholic Church. Their populist presentational style and embrace of the media was acceptable to Vatican authorities and to the Irish hierarchy at a time when some of those proposing other and deeper reforms within their Church experienced contempt or victimisation.

For its programme, the BBC unearthed an old clip of Fortune participating in a studio discussion on that longest-running popular Irish TV series, *The Late Late Show*, where he spoke ambivalently about homosexuality and morality. While the Irish media has generally distinguished between homosexuality and paedophilia throughout its coverage of the unfolding scandal, Fortune's performance on that occasion rang hollow alongside the stories of his male victims, as the BBC now relayed them. In May 1999, Fortune had committed suicide while awaiting trial. His victims, who felt cheated of justice by his act of self-annihilation, welcomed the BBC programme.

Bishop Comiskey refused to engage in depth with the BBC programme-makers, but was shown stepping from his car while singing the title of a popular feminist



anthem, *I Will Survive* (which he actually warbled as 'We will survive'). He proceeded to decline an interview as he shut the door of the church on the TV reporter. Soon afterwards, with RTÉ preparing to repeat that BBC programme, Comiskey resigned. The government subsequently established an inquiry into abuse in the diocese (Ferns Inquiry, 2005: 1)

Other television programmes widely discussed in the media have included *Sinners*. This was a special drama about life in one of the Magdalen laundries, which were institutions run by nuns and staffed mainly by unmarried mothers. Directed for the BBC by Aisling Walsh, from a script by Elizabeth Mickery, it was first transmitted on 26 March 2002, on BBC One, and then screened by RTÉ One on 23 March 2002, before being repeated on BBC One on 30 April 2003. That same year, Walsh also directed a film for theatrical release, *Song for a Raggy Boy*, about an Irish reformatory school in the 1930s. Magdalen asylums also featured in *The Magdalen Sisters* (2002). Written and directed by Peter Mullan, this won the Golden Lion Award for Best Picture at the Venice Film Festival 2002. However, straight factual current affairs continued to be at least as telling in some respects as the most cleverly produced feature film could be. The nature of the material was simply fascinating for television viewers, as they watched people openly discuss in primetime the horrible details of abuse in a society where sexual references had, for so long in the twentieth century, been either avoided or heavily censored.

### 'Cardinal Secrets' on RTE

On 17 October 2002, a television programme again sparked widespread news coverage in the other media and immediate reaction from the authorities of church and state. Produced by Mary Raftery and presented by Mick Peelo for *Primetime*, the leading current affairs series on RTÉ One, 'Cardinal Secrets' catalogued failures by Cardinal Desmond Connell and the Dublin archdiocese to control abusing priests. This programme helped to propel the Irish Catholic Church itself into finally setting up its own inquiry into sexual abuse. However, this was abandoned when the State indicated, in late 2002, that it intended to hold an official inquiry into the bishops' handling of child abuse complaints generally, similar to that already planned for the diocese of Ferns. However, not until late 2005, three years later, was that further official inquiry actually initiated and its scope was then limited.

Writing soon after the transmission of 'Cardinal Secrets', Patsy McGarry (2002a), religious affairs correspondent of the *Irish Times*, thought that, 'RTÉ, radio and television, excelled itself in its coverage of the fall-out from the *Prime Time* programme, 'Cardinal Secrets'. As it did with the programme itself'. McGarry, himself a former pirate radio broadcaster, also commented on the important role that television had played in the whole debate. 'It needed TV', he wrote. 'Years of excellent investigative print journalism on paedophile priests in Ferns was unable to achieve the same impact as 50 minutes of victims and their families telling their stories to camera', he said. McGarry paid one of many media tributes to the continuing work of RTÉ's Mary Raftery, saying,

This extraordinary woman has shown what good investigative journalism can achieve. Because of her *States of Fear* programme we have the Laffoy [later Ryan] Commission, now addressing how children were treated in institutions

in Ireland. And it seems likely that, thanks to her and Mick Peelo's work on 'Cardinal Secrets' – and the fall-out therefrom – we will soon have a statutory inquiry into clerical child sex abuse in the Republic. Their programme has helped galvanise public and political will in unprecedented determination to root out this great rot once and for all.

### **General Irish Media Coverage of Sex Abuse**

The print media certainly helped to tell the story of child abuse. Popular daytime national radio shows, especially those of RTÉ's Marian Finucane, Pat Kenny and Joe Duffy, also played a role. Yet it has been the sight and sound of survivors of child abuse on television that has most obviously driven the Church and State into significant admissions and major reactions. The impact of such negative publicity on innocent priests could be considerable. In September 2002, the then president of the National Conference of Priests of Ireland, Father John Littleton, expressed his concern that, 'In the ongoing and justified efforts by some media to report on the child sexual abuse issue all priests are being tarnished and labelled. Sometimes there is little attempt to find balance or context.' (McGarry, 2002b). One priest told a journalist that, 'Sometimes I'm afraid to wear a collar going down the street, but you'd feel like a coward not wearing it.' (*Sunday Tribune*, 27/10/2002).

The hierarchy employed the services of some professional public relations consultants but still appeared unable or unwilling to respond to the media in an open, comprehensive and effective fashion. If all bishops did not actually regard the Irish media as an 'enemy of the church', forcing it to address internal problems in new ways (Cozzens, 2002, p. 92), many were very suspicious when it came to talking to journalists. Priests themselves were highly critical of their bishops' handling of the scandal, and many acknowledged that the media's coverage of child sex abuse had its positive side. But they and others also thought the media coverage of clerical sexual abuse was disproportionate to coverage of sexual abuse in other professions (*Sunday Tribune*, 27 October 2002; Quinn, 2005).

A survey supported by the hierarchy itself, in 2003, found that the 'wider church community' (including laity) generally viewed media coverage of child sexual abuse favourably, although some thought that the media were 'destroying the Catholic Church's reputation in Ireland'. The researchers' finding that 84 per cent of people thought the media coverage 'beneficial' may be compared to a survey four years earlier that found 51% believing that media handling of the church scandals had been fair. This difference suggests that increasing media exposure of and to the problem had effectively served to justify in the public mind that very reporting (Goode et al., 2003: 62, 66; McGarry, 1999). Even one critic who believed that, among media in the developed world, the Irish media were most hostile towards the Catholic Church acknowledged that media had done some good work in exposing the story of child sexual abuse (Twomey, 2003).

### **Discussion of Television Coverage**

Documentaries, by their nature, tend to concentrate on personal experiences and to favour interviewees who tell stories in an engaging fashion, and whose features convey their emotions in a way that may be enhanced by televisual 'close-ups'. Their narrative structure is lent dramatic force when producers can employ imagery of looming

Victorian institutions, candles and crucifixes, as well as sound effects that include children at play or in class, and religious choirs or music. Notable in a number of the Irish programmes, as well as these techniques and features, was the occasional use of black and white instead of colour to render short re-enactments or historical references darker and more threatening. The predominantly case-based approach to the problem of most prominent Irish television programmes was consistent with that of press and television coverage of sexual violence against children in Britain, as analysed by the Glasgow University Media Group (Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995: 48).

Television stations sometimes try to attract audiences by concentrating on what is most graphic and shocking. Thomas notes that 'the reporting of sex crime by the media and the double-edged relationship the media has with such offending has been well-documented'(2000:16). The involvement of the Catholic Church makes it all the more tempting for producers to transform child abuse, in particular, 'from a social problem into a social spectacle' (Costin et al., 1996: 7). However, media professionals do not always give in to such temptations. Thus, Mary Raftery omitted from her *States of Fear* that frequently repeated image of Fr Brendan Smyth lumbering across a road that was described above. Raftery told me that she deliberately decided to omit the image precisely because she felt that it was misleading. In her opinion, it reinforced a mistaken belief that priests who had committed abuse were 'dirty old men' whereas, in fact, many of them had been young at the time of their first offences. Images of Smyth, and of dismal old buildings that once served as childrens' institutions, may also have lodged in the public consciousness and obscured the fact that the vast majority of abusers are not priests but are relatives and friends of the family. As Kitzinger (1999: 9) noted in another context,

The ubiquitous photograph of Myra Hindley, taken on her arrest in the 1960s [for her part in notorious murders of children in England], has a key place in public consciousness, while images of suspicious strangers and dangerous wasteland proved more potent than images of dangerous uncles or threats from within the family home.

Makers of the Irish documentaries considered above worked closely with groups of Irish survivors who are articulate and informed about the causes of child abuse. There is nothing to suggest that they or other media professionals in Ireland have allowed debate or allegations about 'false memory syndrome', or even the fact of actual false allegations, to distort their coverage of the primary problem, as may have happened elsewhere (see, for example, Kitzinger, 1996). The question of whether or not they have paid sufficient attention to feminist perspectives on abuse, as considered by Atmore (1996) in the case of media coverage of two cases in New Zealand/Aotearoa, lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Raftery's conscious decision to avoid using such a compelling if clichéd sequence is a reminder of the agency of Irish media professionals in the process of reporting child abuse. Like their counterparts elsewhere, they are neither simple mirrors of reality nor funnels for public prejudice and ignorance:

An entirely critical view of the media's role also ignores the awful truth that some problems (for example, the cruelty to and abuse of children in some

children's homes in the UK, and the carelessness of child protection systems in Australia) would have continued unabated if it had not been for detailed media exposure (Goddard, 1996:308).

### **Bertie Ahern Acknowledges (Some) Media Effects**

Indeed, on 5 July 2004, giving evidence to the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (at institutions), Taoiseach Bertie Ahern acknowledged that discussions in the media had helped to shape official reactions to the abuse problem. Since then, both Davidson (2007) and Meyer (2007) have noted the influence of media coverage of child abuse on public opinion and political reaction to abuse outside Ireland, while Breen states in the context of Irish sexual crimes that, 'The power of the media as an influence for public policy cannot be overstated'(2007:20). However, there was a limit to Mr Ahern's generosity towards journalists, for he linked his government's formal apology of 1999 (above) directly to his personal experience of meeting survivors of sexual abuse rather than give credit specifically to the RTÉ *States of Fear* trilogy. Yet it was during the days that *States of Fear* was airing, and amid much media publicity concerning its content, that the Government suddenly said sorry and announced its decision to set up a commission of inquiry into institutions at which children were abused.

### **Conclusion**

Members of Catholic religious orders in Ireland are generally appalled by what has emerged about the abuse of children in their care, even if some orders and bishops have had continuing difficulties coping with the crisis (Kenny, 2008; 2009). Bishops have acknowledged that the media played a positive role in respect of discovering child abuse. One fruit of their own efforts to come to terms with the scandal was a report, which they funded, by an independent team from the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (McGee, Garavan et al., 2002, and a related book by Goode, McGee and O'Boyle, 2003). In my opinion, passing references in that book to the role of media in respect of child abuse scandals would have benefited from further reflection and from the involvement of persons with greater knowledge of media issues.

The media have, occasionally, been over-zealous and unfair to members of the Catholic Church and have had to apologise for certain errors. For example, the Broadcasting Complaints Commission, a statutory body, upheld a complaint against an RTÉ Radio 1 *Liveline* programme broadcast on 7 October 2003. This concerned the burial of women who had worked in High Park Convent in Drumcondra, Dublin. The Commission found that, 'significant inaccurate claims made during the programme went unchallenged'. It added that, 'the programme approached an emotive subject from a biased perspective and the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity were not afforded a fair right of reply' (www.bcc.ie; decision no. 31/04). RTÉ accepted that it had made mistakes.

Some allegations aired by the media have referred to people who are dead or are too old to respond to them effectively. The published details of allegations sometimes refer only to an institution, thus tarring all of its members with the same brush regardless of the innocence of at least some of them. As to whether or not the media has treated convicted child abusers reasonably, there do not spring to mind any major Irish media excesses in the coverage of released paedophiles such as those that concerned Wilson and Silverman (2002) in their British study. Breen (2007: 20) has

expressed some concern about the representation of sexual crime in general on RTÉ and in the *Irish Times*.

The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse issued its final report on 20 May 2009, sparking extensive media coverage of its finding that ‘sexual abuse was endemic in boys’ institutions’. The report remarks upon the general lack of interest shown by Irish newspapers in respect of child abuse in the middle decades of the twentieth century (iv, 229–33 and 453). Despite any imperfections and mistakes, television journalism has played a key role in helping to ensure that people at last know about behaviour that was kept secret for far too long.

## AUTHOR

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