

“The Sickest Television Show Ever”

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Paedogeddon and the British Press**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the controversy caused by Paedogeddon, a one-off special of the Channel 4 series *Brass Eye*, broadcast on 26 July 2001. Although the program sought to satirize inconsistencies in the way the British media treats and sensationalizes child sex offenders and their crimes (Clark, 2001), it offended many viewers and caused considerable controversy. Over 900 complaints were made to the Independent Television Commission, almost 250 complaints to the Broadcasting Standards Commission, and 2,000 complaints to Channel 4, “officially” making Paedogeddon the most complained-about television program in British television history at that time. This paper examines the nature of the objections to Paedogeddon as played out on the pages of the British national press and contributes to debates about morally acceptable television. Three themes are identified in the press objections to the mock-documentary: aesthetic arguments; moral and ethical implications; and consequences of ministerial intervention. The nature of these press objections served to prevent an engagement with Paedogeddon’s critique of the media. Further, the analysis illustrates how media discourses and scripts can fix and limit debates surrounding controversial television programming.

**Keywords:** *Brass Eye*; controversial television; pedophiles; press discourses; satire

## ***Brass Eye* and Paedogeddon**

The *Brass Eye* series, and the one-off special, Paedogeddon, was written, produced and presented by Chris Morris. Supporters of Morris hail “him as a comic genius and satirist in the best traditions of Hogarth and Swift, his detractors have demonized him as unacceptably tasteless and needlessly shocking” (Leonard & Born, 2001, p. 4). Morris has been responsible for some of the most controversial radio and television shows in British broadcasting history (*On The Hour*, BBC Radio 4; *The Day Today*, BBC 2), and his pranks and fake news reports, such as announcing the death of media celebrities (for example, DJ Jimmy Saville), have received popular media attention. Morris has been sacked from several radio stations due to his controversial broadcasts. As he takes the “hypocrisy, hysteria, and ignorance of contemporary media as his targets” (Walters, 2002, p. 60), some commentators describe him as a “media terrorist”. Due to its remit to make challenging programs, Chris Morris found an outlet for his *Brass Eye* series on Channel 4.

*Brass Eye* ran for one series in 1997. Through its mock-documentary format, surreal humor, and biting satire, the six-part series focused on topical issues facing contemporary Britain, such as drugs, science, sex, decline, and crime. The series generated a large amount of publicity and critical attention (see Mills, 2004). The series was highly controversial particularly due to celebrities and public figures being “duped” into supporting and promoting fictitious, and often absurd, charities and campaigns. For example, in the second episode, “Drugs”, David Amess MP warned against the dangers and effects of a fictitious drug called “Cake”, and asked parliamentary questions about the drug. The fourth episode, “Sex”, included pedo-type comedy, where Morris, as a mock talk-show host becomes physically aroused when questioning a young female about being sexually abused by her uncle. He

asks questions such as “Was he as handsome as me?” This episode also refers to Belgian’s most popular television show, “Pee-Pee-Klette”, which features a “man dressed as a baby on a penis trike crashing around a play-pen”. Michael Grade, then Channel 4’s Chief Executive, requested numerous edits to, and rescheduling of the *Brass Eye* series. This resulted in a single frame subliminal message “Grade is a Cunt” being included in the final episode, “Decline”. This episode also included other controversial topics, such as a mock-news item reporting that convicted serial-killer Peter Sutcliffe is on day release from Broadmoor Prison in order to write and perform in *Sutcliffe: The Musical*, which will include “singing police chases” and a personal apology by Sutcliffe. Chris Morris and the *Brass Eye* series had established a reputation for causing controversy, thus possibly raising expectations that future *Brass Eye* programs would be equally as controversial and uncomfortable.

The original 1997 *Brass Eye* series was repeated in 2001 as a preface to the one-off special, *Paedogeddon*, and to the DVD release of the series and special later in 2001. The broadcast of *Paedogeddon* was delayed as the initial transmission date coincided with the disappearance of a 15-year-old schoolgirl, Danielle Jones, in mid-June 2001 (see Jury, 2001). *Paedogeddon* was broadcast on 26 July 2001.<sup>1</sup> It sought to highlight and challenge the inconsistent, exploitative, and sensationalist manner in which the media report pedophile crime and the risks posed by pedophiles.

## **Pedophiles and the Media**

In recent years, the figure of the “predatory pedophile” has caused much concern at local, national, and international levels. Debate often centers on the difficulty of knowing what to do with released child sex offenders who have served their

sentence. British media interest in pedophiles released from prison and allowed to live anonymously in the community was amplified by the abduction and murder, during the summer of 2000, of seven-year-old Sarah Payne by a convicted pedophile, Roy Whiting. A popular British national tabloid newspaper, *The News of the World* ran a controversial anti-pedophile “Name and Shame” campaign. Photographs of convicted pedophiles were published and appeals for information on their whereabouts were made via a telephone campaign. The campaign demanded new legislation referred to as “Sarah’s law” giving communities the right to be informed if pedophiles live in their locale (Cowburn & Dominelli, 2001; Silverman & Wilson, 2002; see also Cross & Lockyer, 2004, 2006). Community grievances sparked by the *News of the World’s* naming of a pedophile living on the Paulsgrove estate in Portsmouth, a British coastal town, led to violent vigilante protests involving local women and children (Bell, 2002). Innocent people were mistaken for pedophiles and it was reported that a pediatrician was mistakenly attacked. A number of commentators have argued that the news media’s coverage of “pedophiles-in-the-community” has the “appearance of a recurrent moral panic over contemporary childhood” (Cross & Lockyer, 2004, p. 22; Critcher, 2003; Eldridge, Kitzinger, & Williams, 1997; West, 1996), and that the figure of the pedophile has become a “monster of our times” (Bell, 2002, p. 86).

Since 2000, a number of documentary programs outlining British authority efforts at national and local levels to protect children from pedophiles have been broadcast. These include *Dispatches: Paedophiles* (Channel 4, 2001), *Police Protecting Children: Predatory Paedophiles* (BBC, 2004), and *No More Victims* (BBC, 2004). Television dramas have included storylines involving child sexual offenders (*The Bill*, ITV 2004; *Secret Lives: Paedophilia, Life After Release*, Channel 4, 2007), as have adult cartoons (*Monkey Dust*, BBC, 2003), and films (*The Woodsman*, US, 2004). From the late 1990s the British press and broadcasting were thus sensitized to

pedophile crimes, trials and releases, and the risks posed by pedophiles to individual children and to communities as a whole. In 2001, the Home Office published a green paper on the Sex Offenders Register, which proposed increasing the number and frequency of checks on offenders and increases in the number of people listed (Clark, 2001). It was within this context that Paedogeddon was broadcast.

## **Paedogeddon Content**

Paedogeddon mocked current affairs programming, and satirized documentary aesthetics (reconstructions and camcorder footage of past events) and expositional and interactive documentary modes of representation (Nichols, 1991, 1994).<sup>ii</sup>

Paedogeddon fulfilled two of Roscoe and Hight's (2001) mock-documentary functions: to satirize media practices and critique problematic media constructions; and to deconstruct the documentary project and to challenge objectivity claims and notions of balance. The Broadcasting Standards Commission (2001) identified how Paedogeddon directed its satirical attacks to five main issues: media hysteria; misinformation; the sexualization of children; media hypocrisy and public debate.

The program highlighted that sensationalist media coverage leads to misinformation and hysterical reader responses (Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2001).

Further, demonization of pedophiles by the media forces pedophiles into hiding and hinders the authority's ability to monitor convicted sex offenders. Paedogeddon aimed to illustrate the way(s) in which media hysteria, the demonization of lone predatory pedophiles, and demands for access to the Sex Offenders Register has encouraged a climate of fear in which parents believe the greatest risk of abuse is from lone strangers, when official statistics show that greater risk is posed from people known to the child (Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2001; see also

Macdonald, 2003). Paedogeddon began with a *Crimewatch*-style spoof with a nationwide appeal to secure millions of children into sports stadia across Britain in order to protect them from a pedophile who, later in the mock-documentary, is attacked by a large group of anti-pedophile demonstrators, who place him in a wicker phallus, which they joyfully set alight.

The program also mocked exaggerations of the risks posed by the internet and online sex offences, and the ability of television news and documentaries to “actually construct rather than simply reflect the way we see the world” (Mills, 2004, p. 28).

Celebrities (including singer Phil Collins, DJ Dr Fox, ITN news correspondent Nicholas Owen, freelance TV Presenter Kate Thornton, and ex-football player, now sports presenter Gary Lineker), and politicians (including Conservative MP Gerald Howarth, and Labour MPs Syd Rapson, and Barbara Follett), warned against the devious online methods used by pedophiles to abuse children. News presenter Nicholas Owen warned that a man had “plugged his groin into his computer to get sexual pleasure from the actions of a child playing with Pantou” (a cartoon dog in an online game). Macdonald observes that the “ludicrousness of their assertions revealed the depth of adult ignorance about the very technology they claimed to find so threatening” (2003, p. 127). DJ Dr Fox reported, “Genetically, pedophiles have more in common with crabs than you or me. That’s scientific fact. There is no real evidence for it, but it’s scientific fact”. Phil Collins backed a bogus anti-pedophile campaign wearing a T-shirt with the words “Nonce Sense” emblazoned across the front.<sup>iii</sup> Here the willingness of public figures to pronounce any nonsense they are told is satirized. Paedogeddon illustrates how television, combined with celebrity or political endorsement, can lead to the circulation of misinformation.

Paedogeddon questioned the inconsistencies in contemporary dominant ideologies of childhood sexuality. On the one hand there is public outrage surrounding

pedophilia, and on the other detachment from the commodification of childhood sexuality evident in children’s clothing, advertising, and child beauty contests. The construction of young children, especially young girls, for sexual display was the target of satirical attack in a scene including “tarted-up tots” where a young girl paraded with enhanced breasts (Macdonald, 2003).

Paedogeddon also satirized the voyeuristic nature of media coverage of sex and crime. It criticized media hypocrisy where on one hand the media are vehement in their treatment of pedophiles and pedophile crime, yet on the other hand often provide detailed information of the sex offences committed, and in some cases in “prurient detail” (Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2001). In her introduction to a report on the background of the types of crimes committed by pedophile Jez North, female presenter, Swanchita Haze, notes, “In 1986 Jez North was committed for multiple acts. We believe his story is actually too upsetting to transmit. We only do so tonight with that proviso”.

Whilst recognizing that pedophiles commit horrific crimes and are treated with “the abhorrence which they deserve” (Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2001), the program argued that this did not justify the media’s pre-occupation with demonizing pedophiles rather than addressing the underlying problems of what pedophilia is, the extent of child sexual offences, and how pedophiles and their crimes can be addressed. Paedogeddon questioned whether, or to what extent, the media treatment of pedophiles and pedophilia is accurate and responsible. Towards the end of the program celebrities go through a checklist of characteristics that will help the identification of pedophiles. These include if “someone tells you to take your clothes off in case your thumbs get too hot”, and if “someone shows you a model of your home town and all the houses look like penises”. The broadcast of



Paedogeddon caused considerable controversy. It is to the extent and nature of this controversy that we now turn.

## **Politics of Paedogeddon**

Before transmission Paedogeddon was scrutinized by Channel 4 executives including Michael Jackson (then Channel 4’s Chief Executive), and Vannia Treves (Chairman of the Board). The mock-documentary received support from some quarters following its broadcast. The Independent Television Commission (hereafter ITC) received 411 calls supporting the program (Lyll, 2001) and the Broadcasting Standards Commission received 171 supportive letters (Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2001).<sup>iv</sup>

However, much of the immediate populist response to Paedogeddon was negative. Complaints were made to the Metropolitan Police and there was ministerial intervention from Child Protection Minister Beverly Hughes (who did not see the mock-documentary), David Blunkett, then the Home Secretary, and Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell.<sup>v</sup> The government alluded to the fact that it might strengthen the powers of the ITC to censor offensive programs. Calls were made for Channel 4 to have its license to broadcast revoked and there were claims that Channel 4 could face prosecution under the Protection of Children Act for taking, making, and showing indecent photographs of children. The National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children regarded the program deeply offensive and other campaign groups condemned the program. Channel 4 executives and the show’s producers received death threats and bomb scares were reported at the Channel 4 studios. The program also received a wealth of British media reportage from both tabloid and quality newspapers.

The electronic newspaper database, *LexisNexis*, was used in order to identify news stories, features, readers’ letters, and editorials covering responses to Paedogeddon that were published in both tabloid and quality newspapers during the days immediately following the program transmission, 27-31 July 2001. National newspaper items mentioning “*Brass Eye*” were identified during the data collection. Of the ninety-six news items initially identified in the “*Brass Eye*” search, eighty relevant news items comprised the data set. Forty-five (56%) of these relevant news items were critical of the *Brass Eye* special, 15 (19%) were supportive of the program, and 20 (25%) were neutral towards the program (were neither positive nor negative). The critical news items were then analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994; Boyatzis, 1998; Seale, 2004). Three main themes were identified in the press objections to the mock-documentary. Of the 45 critical news items, 18 (40%) related to aesthetic arguments, 10 (22%) related to moral and ethical implications, and 12 (27%) related to the consequences of ministerial intervention (5 news items (11%) did not fall into these three themes). It is to the three themes that we now turn our attention.<sup>vi</sup>

Newspapers play a central role in generating and constructing debates regarding objectionable and controversial television programming and in determining what can and should not be treated in comic manner (Smith, 1995). In their analysis of David Cronenberg’s film, *Crash*, Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath (2001) found that moral and filmic discursive repertoires used by newspapers to criticize the film shaped some audience responses to the film.

British tabloid discourses around Paedogeddon were swift to create a “sick mock-documentary” framework. *The Sun* labeled the program as the “Sickest TV Ever” (27 July 2001, p. 9), the *Daily Mail* referred to it as “The Sickest TV Show Ever” (28 July

2001, p. 1), and “Unspeakably Sick” (30 July 2001, p. 1), *The People* referred to the program as a “Sick Spoof” (29 July, 2001, p. 2), the *Daily Star* referred to it as a “Sick Hoax” (30 July, 2001, p. 9) and a “Sick Show” (28 July 2001; p. 27), as did *The News of the World* (29 July, 2001).

A number of aesthetic arguments were used in objections to Paedogeddon. Tabloid journalists, celebrities who appeared in the program, children’s charities, and some viewers were presented as united in their disgust at what they perceived as *Brass Eye*’s attempt to generate humor around child sexual abuse. For example, *The Sun*’s “New Low for Channel 4” leading article read:

“We don’t believe making light of the sickest perversion is in any way amusing. Last night’s show may have raised a laugh in trendy wine bars frequented by TV executives who have lost touch with the real world. But to most Britons the defense of our children’s innocence is paramount. Their safety is sacrosanct” (27 July, 2001)

Despite enjoying earlier *Brass Eye* episodes, Charlie Catchpole, in a leading article “This *Brass Eye* Spoofer Takes Satire a Taboo Too Far”, argued “Well, call me old fashioned but I do think there are some taboos and laughing about adults having sex with children is one of them” (*The Express*, 30 July, 2001, p. 13). Mary March, Director and Chief Executive of the NSPCC argued in the *Daily Mail*’s article “The Sickest TV Show Ever: Fury as Channel 4 Repeats Spoof Child-sex Film”:

“This offensive programme trivialises child sex abuse ...The crimes committed by pedophiles against children and young people are among the most abhorrent in the criminal justice system. They are no laughing matter and have no place in satire” (28 July 2001, p. 1)

Further, a readers' letter in *The Independent* maintained Paedogeddon was:

“unfunny and unsubtle, and it lacked the satirical ingredients of wit and irony. Its intended target was the media but the satire totally misfired and, instead, it lampooned child protection agencies and charities” (31 July, 2001, p. 2)

Satirical discourses exploit humor in order to make a serious point and the humor is used as the “sugar coating of the moral pill” (Kernan, 1965, p. 9; see also Kernan, 1959). In his assessment of the “necessary” and “sufficient” conditions of satire, Nilsen (1988) argues that in order to recognize, understand, and appreciate satire, the audience must be able to identify what is satirized. From these media discourses, it is evident that parts of the audience recognized Paedogeddon's satirical tone, but misinterpreted the “target” of the satire, reading the program as an attack on child abuse victims and/or children's charities. These audience members did not acknowledge the reflexive potential of Paedogeddon.

Other objections went beyond aesthetic arguments to challenge the moral and ethical limitations of Paedogeddon. Tapping into a pre-existing “documentary fakery” journalistic frame (Winston, 1999) that emerged in the 1990s as a result of increasing concern regarding faking of people and events in factual documentary programs (*The Connection*, ITV, 1996; *Undercover Britain: Guns on the Street*, Channel 4, 1996; *Too Much Too Young: Chickens*, Channel 4, 1997), some of the press criticism focused on the deception used by Paedogeddon producers. Celebrities and politicians who appeared in the program reported they were informed that the program was a serious anti-pedophile campaign that would be circulated to schools. Sarah Arnold in *The News of the Worlds'* exclusive reported:

“Yesterday furious MPs Syd Rapson and Gerald Howarth slammed Morris for being conned into appearing. “They told me it was a programme warning children of the dangers of pedophiles on the internet and it all seemed above board” said Mr Rapson. “I was shown lots of genuine stuff on the internet and wanted to help raise the issue.” Instead he was tricked into speaking about “inflatable trousers” worn by pedophiles” (29 July, 2001, p. 1)

Others maintained that celebrities and other public figures would be suspicious of similar campaigns in the future due to the program’s deception. A spokesperson for Nicholas Owen concluded that: “when prominent people are asked to work with charities in the future they could be put off” (*Daily Mail*, 31 July 2001, p. 4).<sup>vii</sup> In an article entitled “Charity’s Fury at TV Child Sex Comedy” a National Children’s Home spokesperson argued “This may make it harder to engage public figures in supporting organisations that raise awareness of child abuse” (*The Sun*, 28 July, 2001).

The moral threats posed by Paedogeddon underpinned many of the criticisms of program. Children, especially those who have experienced sexual abuse were portrayed as the primary victims of the program’s satirical attacks. For example, Mike Darvill, a *Sun* journalist reported reaction from Mr Cathcart who works with victims of abuse and drew the following conclusion about the show’s impact:

“I simply cannot believe Channel 4 have let this go out. We deal with 12 to 18 year-olds, some of whom have mutilated themselves because they’re so haunted by what they’ve gone through at the hands of pedophiles. Many youngsters stay up until 10.30pm – and if they’d been watching it would have brought back all the nightmares” (27 July 2001, p. 9)

Preventing harm to others who are regarded as unable to handle “problematic” material is a primary justification for negative responses to problematic discourses (see Barker et al, 2001). Lockyer and Pickering refer to this as the technique of “pronominal displacement” – the “shifting of first party grievance onto an identified third party” (2001, p. 641). This technique is used to imply that the critical response to a “problematic” media discourse is not merely subjective, nor personal, but that the complainant is sensitive to possible effects on the part of others.

Whereas tabloid news discourses largely criticized what they interpreted as inappropriate topics for humor, and highlighted moral and ethical objections and consequences of broadcasting Paedogeddon, the quality press tended to favor an alternative discursive framework. Critical attention was devoted to considering the consequences of ministerial responses to the Paedogeddon broadcast. In a *Guardian* editorial column entitled “*Brass Eye* was Degrading: But the Government is wrong to interfere” (31 July 2001, p. 17) attention focuses on Labour Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell’s “political interference”, reporting “We are not against scrutiny of the media: it is a powerful interest that needs to be checked like any other. But that is what the ITC is there for – not the culture secretary”. A readers’ letter by Ian Crockett under the headline “Freedom to Broadcast” read:

“... I fear that this collusion between government and the media could be interpreted as the control freaks in Labour attempting to manipulate television schedules to continue producing even more mind-numbing, vacuous rubbish ...” (*The Independent*, 31 July, 2001, p. 2)

Defenders of Paedogeddon have argued that it sought to satirize how, despite living in a media-saturated and information-rich society, little critical analysis and reflection takes place in British society (Ward, 2005). Analysis of British newspaper discourse

following the broadcast of Paedogeddon shows that important events and issues generate limited critical reflection. The nature and tone of the media discourse reflected, in varying degrees, precisely the types of populist reactions to the issues that Paedogeddon sought to criticize and challenge. Although press coverage considered aesthetic judgments, moral and ethical implications of the mock-documentary, and the implications of ministerial intervention, there was little attempt to critically reflect on the aims of Paedogeddon, or to consider alternative interpretations of the emotive and moralizing “sick mock-documentary script” established early after the initial broadcast of Paedogeddon. This script was used by the populist press to fix the level of debate in subsequent coverage of the program controversy, thereby affirming the power of the media to shape and determine the nature of public debate.

## **Discussion**

Programs that ridicule, satirize, and reflect on established media discourses are potentially controversial because they offer the “audience an opportunity to reflect on the wider cultural acceptance of factual and sober discourses and potentially to move towards a position of critical awareness, distrust or even incredulity of such discourses” (Roscoe & Hight, 2001, p. 185). Although all media forms are limited in the extent to which they can challenge established discourses, the reflexive potential of discourses like Paedogeddon is particularly hindered by the limitations of the satirical technique, which rarely, if ever, offers conclusions or solutions to the issues it raises. To take one example, Paedogeddon includes a scene which satirizes American child beauty pageants and the sexualization and commodification of children. Referring to them as “tarted up tots” the voice over asks “how long before we see this in Nuneaton or Diss?” The camera then focuses closely on a child whose

father opens her top to reveal that she has enhanced breasts (which are pixilated). An on-looker says, “Wow, are they real?” and the mother replies, “Well, they are enhanced”. Another on-looker says, “Oh, they are so cute”, to which the mother says, “Well, we didn’t want to go too big”. Although this scene draws attention to a sense of complacency about the commodification of childhood sexuality evident in beauty contests and elsewhere in children’s fashion and advertising, it does not provide an analysis or explanation of the situation or offer any conclusion. This limits how informative or critical its satirical attack can be, and for the *Brass Eye* audience this limitation was exacerbated as some viewers did not appreciate the critical stance taken towards the topic.

The ITC ruled that contemporary program-makers and broadcasters have the right to produce satirical programs, even on sensitive topics, such as pedophilia, so it was reasonable for Channel 4 to commission *Paedogeddon*. Channel 4 did however break two parts of the ITC’s program-making code – for offending some viewers and for its failure to provide adequate on-air warning before the program was broadcast that what followed was a satirical program. The ITC concluded that the pre-transmission warning given before the initial broadcast may have led some viewers to expect an “authentic” documentary (2001).<sup>viii</sup> Channel 4 was ordered to apologize for breaking these parts of the program code.<sup>ix</sup>

However, it could be argued that *Paedogeddon* had already been suitably framed by the repeating of the original *Brass Eye* series before the one-off special, and that the audience would be expecting uncomfortable satirical viewing. Further, one of the themes identified in the press coverage - aesthetic arguments – suggests that both viewers and non-viewers *had* recognized the satirical intent of *Paedogeddon* and that they found it problematic not because of their misunderstanding of its form, but because of its *topic*. Those readers who identified themselves as enjoying previous



*Brass Eye* episodes, but found Paedogeddon problematic further support this conclusion. For these viewers, pedophilia, or *any* mention to it per se, was simply not a ‘laughing matter’.

Indeed, when Paedogeddon was repeated again in May 2002, it was prefaced with a warning about the offence it might cause in direct response to the ITC ruling. This time one and a half million viewers, 200,000 more than the original showing, watched it. Despite framing from the media coverage following the original Paedogeddon transmission and this pre-transmission warning 50 new complaints were received (Anon, *The Independent*, 15 May, 2002).

Thus, Morris identified the limit to how audiences were willing to conceptualize and understand child sex offenders and the risks posed. Journalists, readers, charities, politicians, and celebrities discursively justified this limit via a number of themes identified in the critical press coverage (aesthetic arguments, moral and ethical implications, and consequences of ministerial intervention). These discursive themes directed attention away from seriously engaging with the questions raised by Paedogeddon, towards more acceptable and normalized ways of dealing with the uneasy topics of pedophiles and their crimes.

Few mock-documentaries are as hostile as Paedogeddon, and program controversies of such magnitude as that caused by the *Brass Eye* special are rare in British broadcasting. It may be that Paedogeddon was controversial not only because of the mock-documentary’s demand for a reflexive audience response, or because it was not adequately framed as satire, but because of its particular challenge to the dominant media scripting of pedophilia that had resonated in British press and broadcasting since the late 1990s. Paedogeddon appealed to a set of beliefs about media representations of child sexual abusers, the risks posed by

pedophiles, the problems associated with the sexualization of childhood, and the moral and ethical limits of celebrity and political endorsement that are virtually absent in the British media and yet to be shared and normalized in British society.

It may be that the critical awareness of dominant discourses of pedophilia which Paedogeddon aimed to stimulate is particularly difficult to instill given that this topic is one that the British public had been sensitized to from the late 1990s – and about which few people are willing to consider in any way other than the normalized media conceptualizations. What this controversy appears to reveal then is the power of some media scripts to fix the level of debate around a controversy and re-establish existing frameworks of understanding for making sense of it. Little attempt was made in press responses to Paedogeddon to engage with the program’s deconstruction of media discourses around pedophilia and the sexualization of children; instead these focused on whether the topic was a fit one for comic treatment, whether it would offend or harm some viewers, or who was the most appropriate regulatory body for dealing with the program. Nor did they wholly take on board the program’s critique of media outrage and hysteria as responses to pedophilia, or its mockery of journalists’ disregard for evidence about child sex abuse, and the use of celebrities and other media figures as appropriate spokespeople on serious social issues. Such discursive closure represents a failure to engage with the difficult and serious issues around child sex offences and offenders, opting for superficial and sensationalist discourses. As Bishop notes, “we can criticize the media, and have our criticism taken seriously, only within the framework created by the media” (2000, p. 9).

In this respect, the production and reception of Paedogeddon demonstrates the complex and paradoxical role played by the media in controversies surrounding some of the most difficult contemporary social issues – the *Brass Eye* team provoking controversy by challenging existing views and media discourses and the

British press sustaining that controversy whilst closing down that challenge, refusing to find its “serious comedy” funny, and to take it seriously.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Paedogeddon was repeated on Saturday 28 July 2001 at 12.05am.

<sup>ii</sup> Nichols (1991, 1994) identifies five documentary modes of representation: expositional, observational, interactive, reflexive and performative. Mock-documentaries play with the expositional, observational and interactive modes of representation (Roscoe & Hight, 2001). Documentaries using the expositional modes formulate the text around a social problem and then seek solutions or answers to the problem. Audiences are directly addressed and producers, writers and presenters are objectively conveyed as value-free, unbiased and balanced, whilst adhering to a specific line of argument. Interactive modes centre on the interaction between the documentary maker and documentary subject. It utilizes the ‘talking head’ expert or witness, and may function as an oral history to reconstruct the past. The documentary maker may appear in this mode of documentary through asking questions and comments. Interactions with various social actors form the basis of this type of documentary and the audience is positioned as ‘secondary witness’ (Roscoe & Hight, 2001).

<sup>iii</sup> A ‘nonce’ is UK slang for a convicted sex offender.

<sup>iv</sup> Paedogeddon was nominated for two British Academy Television Awards (Baftas) in April 2002, for best comedy and for the most innovative show.

<sup>v</sup> As Media Editor of *The Times*, Raymond Snoddy observes, ‘Irate members of the public are a start, but you can’t have a programme row of historic proportions without ministerial intervention, preferably one who hasn’t seen the programme’ (Snoddy, 2001, p. 20).

<sup>vi</sup> It has been noted, for example, by Gray (2005), that different types of objections towards media texts (such as moral and aesthetic objections), are often used in combination. However, for the purpose of the paper, critical newspaper items were

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coded according to the theme that was most dominant (as identified by the content of the headline, the subheading, and the principle stance taken in the main text).

<sup>vii</sup> It is interesting to note that Nicholas Owen had earlier appeared in the “Science” episode of *Brass Eye*, warning viewers about the (fictitious) effects of “heavy electricity”. Owen explained how “Geeta is 15 years old, and now because of heavy electricity she is only eight inches tall. Now just imagine that. She can’t speak, but she must feel quite dreadful”.

<sup>viii</sup> The pre-transmission warning read: ‘Now on 4, a *Brass Eye* special which takes an uncompromising look at the subject of paedophilia. This programme contains some scenes which viewers might find disturbing’.

<sup>ix</sup> An apology was broadcast on Channel 4 at 10pm on 20 September 2001: “The Independent Television Commission has instructed Channel 4 to apologise for offence to viewers by the *Brass Eye* Special, broadcast at 10.35pm on Thursday 26 July and repeated after midnight the following night. Channel 4 has a remit to make challenging programmes, and the ITC accepted that a satire on public and media attitudes to paedophilia fell within that remit. However, the ITC felt the warning before the program did not give enough information on what to expect, and needless offence was caused to viewers caught unawares. Channel 4 took care to ensure no harm was caused to children who took part, but this was not apparent to viewers, some of whom found children’s participation particularly shocking. Channel 4 apologies to viewers who were offended’ (ITC 2001, p. 2). The Broadcasting Standards Council agreed in part with ITC’s ruling as it deemed the pre-transmission warning clear and adequate (BSC, 2001).