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Portrayals of child abuse scandals in the media in Australia and England: Impacts on practice, policy and systems

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Introduction

This Directions paper argues that the media has played a key role in placing the issue of child maltreatment and the problems associated with child protection high on public and political agendas over the last fifty years, and that in many respects its influence has grown further in more recent years. However, we will also argue that this influence is far from unambiguous. For while the media has been crucial in bringing the problems into the open it often does so in particular ways. In being so concerned about scandals and tragedies in a variety of institutionalized and community settings, it has portrayed the nature of child maltreatment in ways which deflect attention from many of its core characteristics and causes. In addition, not only does the media have the power to help transform the private into the public, it also has the power - at the same time - to undermine trust, reputation and legitimacy of the professionals working in the field. These are key issues for all those working in the broad child protection field and has been a key tension in public policy in both Australia and England for many years, and something we give central attention to in this paper.

The central focus of this Directions paper is to provide a critical analysis of how the Australian and English media portray child abuse scandals and the impact this has had on practice, policy and systems. We first explore the interests of diverse stakeholders and then discuss issues that arise from media coverage that focuses upon individuals caught up in scandals, while largely ignoring the underpinning structural factors that contribute to neglect and emotional abuse. The many similarities in the coverage in these countries are illustrated. We examine how media portrayals might better inform the public and stakeholders about the complex forces and pressures upon families and communities, and thereby build momentum for public health approaches to early intervention and prevention that address structural factors such as poverty, disadvantage, discrimination and racism. While there is now a whole variety of different media, and newspapers have seen a steady decline in sales, our primary focus here is newspapers for newspapers continue to play the primary role in setting the news agenda and framing social issues. (Greer & McLaughlin, 2011)

Key stakeholders – fraught relationships?

The broad or mainstream community have a clear stake in media reporting of child abuse scandals. Gilbert, Parton and Skivenes have shown that around the globe there are a variety of cultural and other communities, such as Indigenous peoples and people of colour, who experience over representation in child protection systems and, hence, have a stake in media coverage. Within competitive market environments, media organizations shape their coverage to target specific audience preferences and needs as well as the broad community.

Further, there is a variety of stakeholders in the sector, particularly institutional ones such as the police, legal system, health, education and protective authorities. These agencies are typically sensitive, sometimes highly so, about their public image and reputation, and they may go to great lengths to manage information and media in the public domain. They are also active in ensuring that their organizational priorities, interests and imperatives are addressed within the political and policy making environment where media are influential. Governments and politicians, particularly aspiring ones, are major stakeholders who actively engage in public debates about child abuse and neglect, and they can be highly influential as child abuse scandals and tragedies unfold.

Closely associated with these players are professional bodies, researchers, academics and campaigners, many of whom act from different moral, philosophical and political perspectives and motivations. 'Claims makers' can be highly controversial and actively sought out by journalists who are seeking stories that are topical and contain spirited viewpoints. These sorts of stakeholders can be highly active in getting support for public inquiries and are often portrayed as experts, even when their knowledge may be quite specific and limited.

It is regrettable that the voices of children and parents frequently go unheard in media coverage of child abuse and neglect, often because of the ethical issues and confidentiality requirements. If they are heard, maltreated children have usually either reached adulthood or have left care, and their experiences may not be timely to the matters at issue in the coverage, unless it concerns historical or institutional abuse. For parents who are deemed responsible for harm, the coverage typically portrays them pejoratively as 'bad', 'mad', or 'evil'. They are often pilloried and their overall silence and marginalization reinforces public misunderstandings, and aids punitive intervention policy frameworks.

Finally, there are the journalists and media themselves who have stakes, commercial and otherwise, in how stories are constructed and framed. At times they undertake lengthy campaigns to highlight particular issues and failures, and can be instrumental in building momentum for public inquiries into scandals. Journalists, editors and media proprietors are not necessarily dispassionate and impartial bystanders to the reporting of child maltreatment, and at times can be active partisans in the uncovering of scandals, and the naming and shaming of those deemed to be responsible. As Moeller has argued "in today's competitive news environment, children are perceived to be one of the few sure fire ways to attract eyeballs – online, in print and on television" (p. 37); and few issues generate as much high profile, emotionally-charged news coverage and public outcry as the abuse of children.

Nonetheless, amongst the diversity of stakeholders and their interests is a general agreement that children should be protected from harm, and that system and service failures need to be redressed. However, the points of disagreement and tension should not be underestimated as these factors impact upon both professional and lay relationships. There are dynamic and multi-level interplays between stakeholders. Their roles, responsibilities, agendas and motivations differ and may be complimentary or opposed. Rivalries, jealousies, synergetic alliances, competitive relationships, and boundary and role disputes abound. And

all these things influence the nature of media portrayals of child abuse scandals in Australia and England, and elsewhere.

How has Australian media portrayed scandals?

Australian media, particularly print media, has a longstanding interest and involvement in child abuse and neglect and has played key roles in bringing scandals and system failures to the public's and politician's attention. For example, the death in 1982 of Paul Montcalm aged 10 as the result of a fire, and the charging of his mentally ill mother with murder, led to both media criticisms and the Lawrence review of the response by officers of the New South Wales Department of Youth and Community Services. Ever since Melbourne's *Herald Sun* led a public campaign in 1990 following the brutal death at the hands of his step father of Daniel Valerio, aged two, the media have been active advocates for system reforms by highlighting the impacts on children resulting from maltreatment, and failures by those responsible for ensuring their safety and wellbeing.

Moreover, the media have been at the forefront of campaigns to highlight major historical system failures and abuses including the Stolen Generation that involved the wholesale removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities, and their placement in institutions, often faith-based, and with white families. Lonne and Thomson noted that Queensland's 2003-04 Crime and Misconduct Commission Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Foster Care resulted from months of leaks and stories in the *Courier Mail*.

Much of the reform of Australian child protection and child welfare systems has come about as a result of official inquiries formed following child deaths, system failures and scandals. Since 1997 there have been 42 federal and state government inquiries (Lonne, 2013). Increases in the numbers of both notifications of suspected harm and children in care have typically occurred during and following inquiries, despite them consistently identifying problematic issues such as poor practice concerning staff supervision and training, risk assessments, engagement with clients, and interagency collaboration. As Lonne and Thomson recognized, the end result of inquiries has often been "reduced public confidence, lower staff morale, recruitment problems, increasingly reactive statutory interventions and an emphasis on proceduralism, compliance and managerial risk management" (pp. 87-88). However, of note is that the recent Victorian and Queensland inquiries into systemic failure did not result from child deaths, and their recommendations have accordingly been aimed at reconfiguring the protective structures, approaches and practice rather than merely legislation and procedures (Cummins, Scott & Scales, 2012; Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, 2013).

In nearly all these inquiries, the media have been a chief catalyst and primary advocate for public disclosure of system failures and holding to account those deemed responsible, particularly governments. Rarely have authorities initiated their own major systemic investigations without the press playing an instrumental part in garnering public and political

support for it, with some notable exceptions being Ombudsmen who are independent investigative authorities who report to parliaments rather than to governments.

Further, the Australian coverage of these scandals has been differentiated not just by the type of media and journalism, for example the extent of sensationalizing stories, but by the focus of criticism and public shaming. There have been four main targets of media coverage: state authorities, particularly child protection agencies; people who abused or neglected children, especially pedophiles, but also their parents ; institutions and care providers looking after children; and Aboriginal peoples and communities.

Some recent examples of negative portrayals of state authorities, such as the New South Wales Department of Community Services (DoCS), are headlines such as ‘Failure of child safety systems’ (*Australian* 19/02/08), ‘DoCS deserted murdered children’ (*Daily Telegraph* 28/06/08), ‘Removal of kids abuse by officials’ (*Australian* 21/01/09), ‘DoCs in dock for neglect’ (*Australian* 26/6/09) and ‘Children at risk failed by state’ (*Courier Mail* 2/12/09). The death of ‘Ebony’ aged 10 years on 3 November 2007 as a result of profound malnutrition led within three days to an Ombudsman’s investigation of the particular circumstances of her death, and within a month to the Wood Special Commission of Inquiry into child protection system failures. The print media expressed outrage and horror at Ebony’s death and were primary agitators for these inquiries. Her parents were both given lengthy jail sentences. The Ombudsman’s report criticised a range of agencies including DoCS, Education, Ageing, Disability and Home Care, Housing and Police for not working together. Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph* headline of 6 October 2009 was ‘Ebony starved in red-tape bungle’.

Of interest is that coverage of Australian scandals rarely identifies and focuses on individuals working in systems, except when citing their evidence to courts or inquiries, although positions such as school principal are sometimes noted. Instead, the focus is on systemic practice and policy failure by the institutions providing care or otherwise responsible for preventing maltreatment. It is notable that television broadcast media do not tend to cover system failure, except when investigative journalists or current affairs radio uncover scandals.

However, public emotions and opprobrium are certainly stirred up by media portrayals of abusive parents and pedophiles, such as ‘No more chances – Clean up your act, slack parents told’ (*Courier Mail* 25/02/08), ‘inside the mind of a monster’ (*Courier Mail* 10/05/08), ‘Evil dad used own kids as sex objects’ (*Herald Sun* 03/06/08), ‘Children no one cared about killed by father – years of horrific abuse’ (*Adelaide Advertiser* 28/06/08), and ‘Toddler torture verdict – two guilty of murder’ (*Courier Mail* 19/11/08). Online crimes are often treated similarly, for example, ‘online abusers blackmail children’ (*The Australian* 30/06/08), ‘Pedophile ring grows – Third woman faces charges’ (*Courier Mail* 14/10/99) and ‘Pedophile ordered to leave pool’ (*Courier Mail* 30/11/09). These portrayals use emotive and judgmental language to tap into public fear and anxiety about child abuse and its pervasiveness. Horrific stories attract audience attention and tap into a well of public abhorrence about the maltreatment of children. The broadcast media frequently cover these sorts of stories, often

featuring experts, family members and friends who attest to the risks for children and the impacts upon them from abuse. Neglect and emotional abuse rarely feature.

Australian media coverage of institutional scandals often involves faith-based and other entities that work with children including churches, schools, foster agencies and recreational groups. It is often focused on the Catholic Church with stories addressing both local and overseas events including those in Ireland, the USA and the Philippines. Headlines are nearly always pejorative in their orientation, such as ‘Marist brother on child sex charges’ (*Australian* 18/01/08), ‘An abuse of faith’ (*Australian* 22/05/09), ‘Church let abusers go’ (*Australian* 12/06/09), and ‘church adviser questions value of abuse inquiries’ (*Sydney Morning Herald* 26/04/13). Interestingly, they often feature the voices of victims and their families, albeit as adults rather than when they are still children. All major media types address this area and thrive on inquiry revelations, particularly those involving alleged abuse of power and cover ups. After years of media attention and agitation on these scandals, on 12 November 2012 the Australian Government announced a Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, with hearings already given sensational coverage and prominence across the media.

Similarly, stories of Australian Indigenous peoples and communities and abuse are frequent and critical, often portraying them as dysfunctional and dangerous, and linking the story to issues of welfare dependency and social neglect. For example, headlines have included ‘Child abuse rife in Aboriginal communities’ (*ABC PM* 15/06/07), ‘Focus on Aboriginal leaders’ role in abuse’ (*Australian* 22/06/09), and ‘Sex abuse of Aboriginal children shown to be just as bad as ever’ (*Sydney Morning Herald* 01/02/13). Coverage is typically across all media types, and is often associated with inquiries but, importantly, is mostly generalized across this racial group, or Indigenous communities as a whole, rather than about individuals. There is often a pervading sense of hopelessness and helplessness in the portrayal of Aboriginal communities, with their exclusion from the economic mainstream peripherally noted along with housing, health and educational disadvantage, and criminal offending.

How has English media portrayed scandals?

Up until 2008 media portrayal of child abuse in England had been closely interrelated with a whole series of public inquiries into cases where it was felt there had been failures on the part of the protective services – particularly local authority children’s social workers. The first modern high profile inquiry was that into the death of Maria Colwell. Maria, aged seven, died at the hands of her father on 7 January 1973; however there was no national media coverage of the case until after the announcement of the public inquiry into her death in May of that year. In fact, national media took very little interest in the case until the public inquiry opened. For example, *The Times* newspaper had taken little interest in the case but between 10 October, when the inquiry opened, and 7 December, when it closed, the case attracted 320 paragraphs of coverage, most of which was concerned with reporting a blow-by-blow account of the inquiry. There was reporting or comment on the case on 43 days

during the period. The publication of the inquiry report the following year also attracted huge media coverage (Secretary of State, 1974; Parton, 1985).

Maria had been in the care of the local authority in East Sussex in the south of England and at the time of her death was subject to a supervision order. Although the authorities had received numerous calls expressing concerns about her treatment, and the home was visited by a number of professionals, she died a tragic and brutal death. The public inquiry was to prove a key watershed in the publicity given to the problem of what, at the time, was more commonly called 'the battered child syndrome' and the 'non accidental injury to children (NAI)', and the failures of the child protective services themselves (Parton, 1985). The local authority social worker involved with the case came in for huge media criticism and subsequently changed her name.

Corby and colleagues found that between the publication of the Colwell Inquiry report in 1974 and 1985 there were 29 further inquiries into deaths as a result of abuse, with considerable similarity between the findings. Most identified a lack of interdisciplinary communication; a lack of experienced front-line workers; inadequate supervision; and too little focus on the needs of the child as distinct from those of the parents. Up until 1987 all public inquiries had been concerned with the deaths of children at the hands of their parents or immediate carers, and the child protection professionals were portrayed as having failed to protect the children from serious harm and death – they had done too little too late.

However, the 'Cleveland affair' story which broke in June 1987 was very different. This time, during a period of a few weeks, 121 children were kept in Middlesbrough General Hospital, in the local authority of Cleveland in the north east of England, against the wishes of their parents on statutory 28 day 'place of safety orders' on suspicions of sexual abuse. The campaigning of the two local Members of Parliament together with local and national media was crucial in bringing 'the affair' to public and political attention. A number of techniques for diagnosing and identifying child sexual abuse - particularly the use of the anal dilatation test, the use of anatomically correct dolls and 'disclosure' work - were all subject to considerable critical comment. A public inquiry was established on 9 July 1987, took evidence between 11 August 1987 and 29 January 1988, and was published in June 1988 (Secretary of State, 1988). The inquiry was to prove the major political drive for the passage of the 1989 Children Act which continues to provide the primary legislative framework for child welfare and protection work in England (Parton, 1991).

Not only was this the first scandal and public inquiry concerning sexual abuse, it was also the first where it was concerns about *over*-intervention as opposed to *under*-intervention that were central, and involved the actions of paediatricians and other doctors, as well as social workers. As a result, two apparently contradictory images of child protection professionals and services were evident in media portrayals at the time. They were characterized as both 'fools and wimps', and thereby failing to intervene authoritatively to protect children, but also as 'villain and bully', intervening in a heavy-handed way and taking children into care unnecessarily (Franklin & Parton, 1991). Such media images have continued ever since and, in many respects, have become ever more highly charged.

This was particularly evident in relation to the brutal death of Victoria Climbié in February 2000 in the north London borough of Haringey. Victoria was born in Abidjan in Ivory Coast in November 1991 and arrived in London, via Paris, with her aunt Marie Therese Kouao in April 1999. In the following ten months she was known to four local authority social services departments, three housing authorities, two police child protection teams, two hospitals, and a family centre. Yet, when she died on 25 February 2000, the pathologist found the cause of death to be hypothermia, which had arisen in the context of malnourishment, a damp environment and restricted movement. He also found 128 separate injuries on her body as a result of being beaten by a range of sharp and blunt instruments. The aunt and her boyfriend were convicted of her murder on 12 January 2001. The court case received huge media coverage and the government established a major public inquiry chaired by Lord Laming. This inquiry report was published on 28 January 2003 (Laming, 2003) and, according to Parton, was used by the government as the springboard for a fundamental re-organization of local authority children's services, driven through by the passage of the 2004 Children Act. A central rationale for the changes was to ensure that no such tragedies happened again, and that there would no longer be a need for such high profile public inquiries.

However, just at the point when all the major changes were supposed to be in place, another major scandal hit the headlines. On 11 November 2008 two men were convicted of causing or allowing the death of a 17-month old child on 3 August 2007. The child was known at this point simply as 'Baby P' as his identity and that of his mother and her boyfriend had to be protected for legal reasons. The baby's mother had already pleaded guilty to the charge. During the trial the court heard that 'Baby P' was used as 'a punch bag' and that his mother had deceived and manipulated professionals with lies and, on one occasion, had smeared him with chocolate to hide his bruises.

There had been over 60 contacts with a variety of health, social care and police professionals and he was pronounced dead just 48 hours after a hospital doctor had failed to identify what subsequently proved to be a broken spine. What was seen as particularly shocking was that he had been the subject of a child protection plan with the London borough of Haringey – the same borough which had been at the centre of the failures with the Victoria Climbié case.

Immediately the media response was very critical of the services and professionals involved. The depth of anger expressed was much stronger and more prolonged than anything seen before, including the reaction to the deaths of Maria Colwell and Victoria Climbié. But this time the reaction was in response to the end of the court case, and no public inquiry was established. Very quickly the issue of child protection was politicized and scandalized to a new level of intensity that continued from November 2008 into mid-2010. This was fuelled by a series of other cases from different parts of the country where it was deemed that professionals – particularly social workers – had failed in their responsibilities to the children involved and the wider community. It had an immediate impact on day-to-day policy and practice. The numbers of referrals to child protection agencies increased and the number of children admitted into care and subjected to statutory interventions increased considerably.

For example, the number of applications to courts for care proceedings by local authorities increased nationally from 6,488 in 2008/09 to 11,055 in 2012/13. The case was to prove a key watershed in the politics of child protection in England.

The role of *The Sun*, a tabloid Murdoch News International-owned newspaper, was central. On 15 November 2008 the newspaper launched its *Beautiful Baby P: Campaign for Justice* which included a petition to demand the sacking of four Haringey staff, including the Director of Children's Services, plus the paediatrician who examined him two days before his death. The newspaper also demanded that 'Baby P's killers be locked away so long that they will never see the light of day again' (p.6). Gordon Brown's Labour government was immediately on the defensive, with falling political polls and bleak economic news. *The Sun* had supported the winning party in every general election since 1992 and its support was seen as crucial.

Two weeks after launching its campaign *The Sun* delivered a petition to the Prime Minister containing 1.5 million signatures, claiming it was the biggest and most successful such campaign ever. In addition, a large number of *Facebook* groups, comprising 1.6 million members, were set up in memory of 'Baby P' and seeking justice for his killers. This weight of expressed opinion put considerable political pressure upon Ed Balls, the Minister responsible for children's services; he needed to be seen to be acting with authority and tried to take control of the situation. In December he used the powers vested in him to direct Haringey to remove the Director of Children's Services and later that month she was sacked by the council without compensation and with immediate effect (she subsequently won her case for unfair dismissal by the Council).

In April 2009 Haringey also dismissed four other employees connected to the 'Baby P' case – the Deputy Director of Children's Services, the Head of Children in Need and Safeguarding Services, the Team Manager, and the Social Worker. In addition, the paediatrician was suspended from the medical register, and the family doctor who saw 'Baby P' at least 15 times, and was the first to raise the alarm about the abuse, was also suspended from the medical register. The sackings sent shock waves through all children's services and engendered considerable anxiety and insecurity across all local authorities.

David Cameron, then Leader of the Opposition, made considerable political mileage out of the case. He not only attacked the failures in relation to the protection of children from severe abuse, but used the case, and the others that quickly followed in its wake, as clear examples of the failures of the Labour government more generally, particularly in relation to its social policies for children and families (Warner, 2013a; 2013b). Parton has recently argued that child abuse scandals had become something of a proxy for a whole variety of debates about a range of political issues concerned with the efficacy of health and welfare professionals, and arguments about the nature and direction of social policy provision and the state of society more generally, and the media played a central role in this.

Following the case of Maria Colwell the media played the key role in portraying a widespread image of 'blame and failure' which was seen to characterize child protection

services and systems. This intensified considerably from the November 2008 onwards and the role of *The Sun* newspaper was pivotal in this. While similar developments could be seen in Australia, the emotional intensity generated, and the pressures placed on professional staff in England, is somewhat exceptional to the point where suspending and sacking the senior managers and practitioners involved in such cases has become a key feature of the work.

Comparing Australia and England

Australia and England, which share many social, cultural and political characteristics, show similar trends in reporting, including disclosing tragedies and uncovering systemic failures to the gaze of the public. However, there are differences in focus and tone. As we have seen, England has taken a much more hostile attitude toward social workers, and increasingly their managers, than to other health professionals or police. This can be career destroying, or worse, for the individuals involved. By comparison, the Australian media embraces public advocacy roles but is relatively tame, generally maintaining a focus upon systems rather than individuals. Scandals, institutional abuse and system failures receive considerable attention, especially when there are investigative journalists involved, significant political agendas being pursued, and an accountability agenda is shaped as shaming and blaming those involved. While this article compares Australia and England, Chenot, and Niner and colleagues have identified similar patterns elsewhere.

Nonetheless, there are other explanations for the differences evident in media reporting, although the precise reasons are difficult to determine. While News Corporation newspapers are dominant in both countries there is far less competition from rivals in Australia, and it is arguable that as the Leveson Inquiry heard, there are significant competitive pressures on English publications to bend the rules and sensationalize matters in order to successfully compete for readers (Leveson Inquiry, 2012). Tapping into emotive issues like child abuse scandals does sell papers within the competitive English environment. Further, political divisions in England have historically been more divisive than is found in Australia, and this may contribute to media portrayals being more socially conservative, critical and blaming. On the other hand, a broadly-based Australian value of a 'fair go', particularly for the underdog, is another pressure that restricts how far media criticisms can go when criticising individuals who undertake public service. It is likely that newspapers could expect a public and political backlash if they resorted to the kinds of public vilification they have used in England

Media portrayals and their impacts

In both these countries, the media plays an important but bifurcated role in the coverage of child maltreatment, the positive side being raised public awareness, ongoing program reform, and increased resources for child protection agencies. Yet, there are also negative impacts upon these systems. Hence, it is important to ask the question – how does highly critical media coverage influence practice, policy and systems? This is complex given the many stakeholders and their interests, and their multifaceted relationships. Thus, what some may see as a benefit, others may perceive as a negative impact.

Misrepresentations and Distortions

The coverage of child maltreatment is characterized by the omission of many details, with nuance and depth in understanding often being washed away. Studies of media representations of child abuse have demonstrated that the focus is more often an over representation of criminal matters, particularly relating to child sexual abuse, and of stories containing the ‘bizarre and unusual’ (Cheit, 2003; Cheit, Shavit, & Reiss-Davis, 2010; Hove, Paek, Isaacson, & Cole, 2013; Saint-Jacques, Villeneuve, Turcotte, Drapeau, & Ivers, 2011). Abusers, especially pedophiles, are typically top of the list for public identification, thereby tapping into public fear and anxiety about ubiquitous risk of harm to children. The voice of parents and children is typically absent in these portrayals, and the detail and complexity of practice and policy reform agendas can also be bypassed.

A further consideration in media reporting concerns the confidentiality inherent in child protection agencies and juvenile courts, which often means that information is usually only accessible to media when police are involved and, hence, leads to an over focus on criminal matters, particularly sexual and physical abuse. This is distinctly at odds with the bulk of substantiated maltreatment to children which entails neglect and emotional harm. So the end result is a public that is largely misinformed about the prevalence and impacts of the major types of maltreatment. Furthermore, this veil of secrecy around neglect, in particular, often means child protection workers’ roles and family support practices remain misunderstood, thereby leaving them open to media and public censure.

The Prevalence of Child Maltreatment

These representational distortions by coverage can be compounded by media discussion of child maltreatment that takes place primarily through the lens of scandal and, hence, the public are often largely disconnected from any wider appreciation about what harms children, how their welfare might be improved, and how such issues are related to wider social and economic forces and structures. Such an appreciation would begin by focussing upon what we know about the prevalence of child maltreatment and what some of the prime causes might be.

An authoritative review of research on the prevalence of child maltreatment in ‘high-income countries’ in *The Lancet* (Gilbert et al, 2009) concluded that every year between 4-16 per cent of children were physically abused and one in ten were neglected or psychologically abused. During childhood between 5-10 per cent of girls and up to 5 per cent of boys were exposed to penetrative sexual abuse and up to three times that number were exposed to some form of sexual abuse. The review also concluded that the numbers of cases of substantiated child maltreatment known to official agencies only accounted for a tenth of this total. In addition, exposure to multiple types and repeated episodes of maltreatment was also associated with increased risks of severe maltreatment and psychological consequences. Child maltreatment was found to substantially contribute to child mortality and morbidity, and had long-standing effects on mental health, drug and alcohol misuse, risky sexual

behaviour, obesity and criminal behaviour, which persisted into adulthood. The review suggested that neglect was at least as damaging as physical or sexual abuse.

Such findings have been subsequently confirmed in the most comprehensive research on the prevalence of child maltreatment ever carried out in the UK (Radford et al, 2011). The research also demonstrated that child maltreatment did not only arise because of the acts and behavior of parents. Sexual abuse, in particular, was perpetrated in a wide range of relationships and in a variety of different contexts, but was usually perpetrated by males who were known to the child. A high proportion of both physical assault and sexually-harmful behaviour was being carried out by peers and siblings. The study underlined the important link between child maltreatment and certain social divisions, particularly in relation to gender and social class.

Both these studies explicitly locate their work in a public health approach to child maltreatment. They were clearly sceptical of the ability of individualized forensic child protection systems on their own to seriously address the widespread social problem of child maltreatment. Such an approach also recognizes that the cultural and political context in which current policy debates takes place, fuelled and often driven by the media, make it very difficult to address the major complexities and challenges involved.

Consequences of blaming orientations

In our view, vitriolic media portrayals aimed at blaming staff also serve to reinforce a dominant institutional narrative that can be characterized as “We are good people who are in the frontline of a terrible social problem, and the nasty press are shameful”. In doing so, it hinders the sort of institutional critical reflection necessary to facilitate ongoing practice, policy and system reforms. Furthermore, such coverage helps to maintain an institutional reliance upon confidentiality laws and defensiveness to protect staff from threatening exposure of practice and system failures.

Perhaps more importantly, the media gaze upon individual failures and organizational performance, when seen alongside an overall focus upon maltreatment crimes, also leads to a lack of attention upon social and structural factors which are known to contribute to the much more prevalent issues of neglect and emotional abuse. The fear and anxiety that is engendered for child protection workers and related health, education and police staff promotes risk-averse practice and a slavish adherence to policies and procedures, often ignoring the specific familial and community circumstances that exist. Good practice subsequently becomes “I have followed the rules”, rather than “I have done the proper thing in this particular situation”.

Protective systems are fundamentally human and relational, and the impact of these sorts of punitive and blaming portrayals upon staff attitudes and behaviour should not be underestimated. Even though very few actual staff ‘casualties’ result from this sort of media-driven public vilification, other staff watch and listen, take note of the punitive process, and act accordingly. In a further twist, staff and agencies can become even more sensitive to public criticisms, and evermore likely not to release information into the public domain.

Fearing public reactions makes these systems less likely to embrace principles of transparency in public administration, thereby making it more necessary for external agents, the media included, to see them as hiding something and therefore needing public exposure and inquiries to “uncover the truth”.

Further, punishing and blaming errant parents, rather than helping them, is an approach often supported within media portrayals of abuse and neglect incidents. Perhaps the most significant impacts have been to change the role of everyday community members to be informers of risky behaviours rather than providers of social support and guidance to stressed parents and vulnerable children. The demonizing of parents as bad and dangerous has served to increase the alienation of already marginalized groups, particularly those in Indigenous and other socially-excluded communities. Stereotypes, racial and otherwise, abound in media coverage and help to perpetuate social and legal interventions that target particular groups who are seen as troublesome or errant. In this light, we should not be surprised that particular groups are over represented in our protective systems.

Politicization of child abuse

The increasing politicization of child abuse and neglect has gone hand in hand with system failure controversies. As civic-minded politicians and others have rightly campaigned for system reforms, often allied with journalists and media organizations, there has been an increasing realization that the scandals are not neatly contained within traditional Left-Right political deliberations. Rather, they represent administrative and other failures of the underlying processes within forensically-oriented systems, which rely upon investigation as the service rather than more public-health approaches that utilize early and preventive interventions. Hence, it is much easier for those in opposition to argue for change than it is for those in government. Many more politicians have made a name for themselves as system critics than have system defenders.

Increased resourcing

There are often clear pay offs for protective agencies, particularly in resource terms, following media attention on system failures. Public administration entails competitive relationships between various government entities for increased resources to meet growing service delivery demands. Media calls for system overhaul increase the resource competition between public services and foster rivalries and distrust. Inquiries into, and media portrayals of, service delivery failures almost inevitably result in organizational reconfigurations, program overhauls and bigger departmental budgets. Negative media portrayals do involve pain, especially for staff ‘casualties’, morale and confidence, but this is usually followed by gain, at least in resources, if not public reputation.

Inquiry-driven reform

It is clear that media focus on scandals and system failures is often responded to by political decisions to hold inquiries to ‘get to the bottom of the matter’ and recommend reforms. In the past, inquiries have often led to net widening of intake systems that have

sought to reduce organizational risk. Media attention about severe child abuse has been associated with increased notifications of suspected abuse to authorities and to greater numbers of children placed in care, which Chenot has called ‘foster care panic’. Unfortunately, this has often led to protective systems being overwhelmed by service demands. It has also contributed to the shifting of organizational risk by agencies that are wary of the public opprobrium and attendant impacts on staff. Hence, a range of strategies have evolved including command and control management approaches, scientizing systems through the use of risk assessment tools, increased reliance upon proceduralism and legalism, and a resultant de-emphasis of the importance of relationally-based practice as a cornerstone to facilitating necessary change in parental behaviours and familial relationships.

Yet, the initiation of inquiries has important benefits other than the uncovering of unjust and harmful organizational practices. Like many publicly administered agencies, child protection authorities understandably find it difficult to advocate publicly for fundamental system reform. Rather, it is often a perceived loss in public confidence about child protection agencies that drives media to campaign for inquiries in the hope that reform will improve performance and lead to better protective outcomes.

In the absence of child deaths and scandals in both Australia and England, there has nonetheless been an increasing use of major inquiries to identify systemic failures and recommend changes to policy, practice and systems, for example, the recent Munro review in England and the Victorian and Queensland inquiries in Australia. While there is media coverage of newsworthy aspects of these reviews, this is without the focus upon individual staff and is much less vitriolic and accusatory in orientation. Consequently, there may be a revival in public confidence in the system as well as support for the ongoing protection of children and, hence, there are tangible benefits for many stakeholders.

Public health approaches

We have already highlighted the positive benefits of media attention stemming from educating the public about the nature of maltreatment. However, current media coverage does not often see the promotion of public health approaches as newsworthy, particularly when compared to scandals. Further, public health approaches embrace early intervention and prevention strategies that focus on the social determinants of maltreatment, and they aim to provide supports and aid necessary to help struggling families and avoid the situation deteriorating to a point where statutory intervention is required.

However, the public is rarely informed by the media about these approaches and services, except where they fail to identify and prevent severe abuse. In view of the dominance, at least in official figures, of neglect and emotional harm, rendering aid to address the negative impacts of low incomes, social marginalization and exclusion has direct benefits for the capacity of families to cope with poverty, inadequate housing, and social and structural factors that affect their health and wellbeing. Yet, these programs struggle for public and government support when compared to statutory interventions because, in our view, the media largely ignore them preferring instead to focus on more sensational incidents,

particularly where someone can be found to be at fault. In this sense, the media coverage clearly hinders necessary reform. Perhaps there is an inherent difficulty in providing a convincing argument about the public benefit from investment in programs for the poor and most marginalized?

Conclusion

In this Directions paper we have argued that the media has a critically important role to play in ensuring that the problem of child maltreatment comes into the public domain. It has been at the forefront of a profound realization by society of the size and impact of the problem and has been a steadfast advocate for the right of the state to intervene into the privacy of family life in order to protect children and render needed assistance. The media has directly led to the public being informed about maltreatment and being prepared to do something about it. However, as Krugman suggests, the Western world no longer needs enlightenment of child abuse as an issue but, rather, a focus on whether or not programs are effective.

Perhaps most importantly, investigative journalism has exposed the iatrogenic impacts of our historical and contemporary approaches to addressing the social problem of child abuse and neglect, albeit through sensationalized coverage of scandals and inquiries. We need to recognize the positive and negative impacts upon practice, policy and systems, including the provision of significantly higher resources to expand services and address problems. It is important to ask where we would be without an active investigatory media that exposes system failures.

However, there are also counterproductive aspects to contemporary media coverage, which is driven by a highly competitive environment that demands journalists and media entities deliver news in a timely fashion, and in ways that are succinct and appealing to a broad diversity of audiences, if not always accurately. The media tends to over focus on criminal matters, notably sexual and physical abuse rather than neglect and emotional maltreatment. Such coverage distorts the public understandings of the nature of child maltreatment. This is compounded by a lack of voice for parents and children, and a simultaneous pejorative narrative that portrays parents as dangerous and requiring punishment. In addition, the focus on individuals helps to hide the social and structural determinants of maltreatment, such as poverty and social exclusion, and allows public health approaches to be largely ignored, or at least downplayed for their roles in helping struggling families and preventing harm. This hinders reform.

It seems clear that sensationalized coverage has contributed to increasing politicization of child abuse, often expressed through calls for inquiries, which in turn have contributed to our systems becoming risk averse and punitive in their orientation. Inquiry-led reform has entailed considerable pain for those deemed responsible for system failures and tragedies. The highly negative English coverage, for example, has often focused on blaming individual staff, thereby affecting staff morale and reinforcing organizational narratives that hinder reflection and transparency. While the coverage in Australia has been far less vilifying, it has

nonetheless contributed to organizational problems including recruitment and retention, and organizational sensitivity to criticism.

Reforming our systems to make sure they provide help to families in need and also ensure children are protected from maltreatment are social policy imperatives. The media will always remain pivotal to these goals, albeit in ways that can also misinform the public through focusing on the criminal matters of sexual and physical abuse, and largely ignoring neglect and emotional maltreatment and their underlying causes. We need to recognize and respond to the multiple roles the media plays, but also seriously question how our protective systems relate with the media. Rather than merely fearing the media and resisting transparency, agencies would do better to reflect on their own approaches and embrace the positive benefits that flow from media scrutiny, thereby rebuilding public confidence in their performance. In particular, proactive engagement of media to examine the compelling human interest stories entailed within public health approaches is needed, along with increased transparency and exposure of the ways in which families are helped and their health and wellbeing promoted.

Key Words: Child abuse and neglect; inquiries; media coverage; media portrayals; scandals; system reform

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