

Framing the news: 'bad' mothers and the 'Medea' news frame

Nicola Goc

Abstract

Since three-year-old Madeleine McCann went missing from a Portuguese resort in May 2007, the world's news services have carried parallel news discourses about this event: one focusing on the search for the child and hypothesising about the identity of the "evil" predator who allegedly kidnapped her; and the other focusing on the "bad" parents who left their children home alone. Since Madeleine's disappearance there have been many twists and turns in the police investigation, and even more twists and turns in the ongoing news coverage, with both feeding into a strident public discourse which positions the event within conflicting moral frames. The dominant frame centres on the behaviour of the McCanns, and in particular on the mother, Kate. The media framing of the event adopts a style reminiscent of that used in the pre-digital era, in speculation about Lindy Chamberlain's role in the disappearance of her daughter Azaria in outback Australia in 1980. Kate McCann has become the central figure in the public discourse about the missing toddler. She has been judged as either guilty or innocent of her child's disappearance, and depicted in ways which suggest she is a "bad" mother. This paper maps the news coverage and public discourse on the disappearance of Madeleine McCann and draws parallels with the 1980 disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain in outback Australia. In doing so, it uncovers a recurrent and disturbing meta-narrative that places both mothers in a deviant "Medea" frame.

Introduction

When three-year-old English girl Madeleine McCann went missing from a holiday villa in Portugal in May 2007, her disappearance immediately attracted media attention around the world. This was the story of every parent's worst nightmare: the disappearance of a child while on holiday in a foreign country. With each passing week and no firm leads on what happened to the toddler, the media coverage relied on speculation and rumour; eventually the media turned on the mother. By July of that year I was struck by the disturbing similarities between the reporting of this case and the media's coverage, a decade earlier, of the disappearance of six-year-old Jon-

Benét Ramsey from her home in Colorado in 1996. Even more striking similarities were apparent when the reportage of the McCann case was compared with the coverage of the disappearance of 10-week-old Azaria Chamberlain in the Australian outback in 1980. In each of these cases, the journalists involved were supposedly engaged in the simple reflection of reality in their news accounts, in accordance with the widely held notion “that every news story springs anew from the facts of the event being recorded” (Bird & Dardenne, 1988, p. 66). However, the evidence suggests they were in fact creating damning news stories based not on hard facts, but on rumour and speculation. As Fursich argues, in acknowledging that journalism has had a “privileged position as a central institution for establishing what is to be considered as objective and true, and even commonsense”, it is important for journalism scholars to analyse “which spectrum of facts is permitted by this mediated reality and what is silenced” (Fursich, 2009, p. 246). By applying narrative analysis to news texts from three case studies, this study exposes a disturbing pattern in the creation of news, raising the question: Why are journalists, and we as a society, compelled to create binary oppositional frameworks of “good” and “bad” mothers as a way of understanding the sudden and mysterious disappearance of young children from their “homes”?

Journalists are socialised into creating formulaic news narratives and, as Gamson and Modigliani (1989) and others (Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974; McNair, 1998; Johnson-Cartee, 2005) have argued, journalists create news stories from particular organisational story structures, or news frames. “Media frames”, Gitlin tells us, are “largely unspoken and unacknowledged”, and “organise the world both for journalists who report it, and, in some degree, for us who rely on their reports” (1980, p. 7). Across three continents and three decades media narratives have placed innocent mothers within what I call a “Medea news frame”, a frame which allows for the creation of blaming news discourses that are not only prejudicial towards these particular mothers, but also assist in the construction of prejudiced representations concerning maternity in general. “Medea” refers to the archetypal murdering mother of ancient Greek literature. In 430BC, Greek playwright Euripides transformed the Medea of Greek legend into the archetypal “bad” mother when he placed a dagger in her hand and had her murder her children in a fit of jealous rage. This mythical story of a mother so enraged by jealousy that she killed her children to spite their father, has endured for more than 2000 years. In modern times, I will argue, Medea symbolises mothers who step outside of the boundaries defining acceptable maternal behaviour.

Myths, whether communicated through fiction, drama or news discourse, play a “critical social role in reinforcing existing ideas, values, and beliefs” (Lule, 2001, p. 15). The Medea news frame powerfully reinforces the evil mother trope. But as with all myths, the “actual truth or falsity of the story is irrelevant, what is important is that the story and the ideas it embodies are accepted and believed to be true” (Sykes, 1970, p. 17). The resilience of the Medea myth, and its use in framing news discourses about mothers whose children go missing in unexplained circumstances, is of central interest in this paper.

Just as humans have always “passed on their cultural histories, values, and norms through narratives” (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 149), since the advent of the newspaper journalists have created news that has “played a significant role in the formation of public knowledge, contributing in no small way to the widely shared beliefs about public events, places, actors” (Schudson, 1995, p. 3). Journalists have the capacity either to uncritically reinforce social values through the perpetuation of myths, or to challenge these values. In the case studies presented here, journalists overwhelmingly chose to uncritically reinforce the Medea myth and in so doing created highly prejudicial news discourses that framed Kate McCann, Patsy Ramsey and Lindy Chamberlain (now Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton) as murdering mothers – despite a lack of evidence.

In the first instance, these three mothers were condemned by the media and the public for not fulfilling their maternal duty to keep their children safe while in their care, and then they were further condemned because they did not behave “appropriately” in the glare of the media spot-

light. They were attacked because they failed to conform to society's expectations of what it is to be a "good" mother. Kate McCann and Lindy Chamberlain were critically identified as being "too hard" because they controlled their emotions in front of the cameras and refused to cry; Patsy Ramsey, on the other hand, was condemned because of her overt displays of emotion before the cameras. These women were "damned if they did and damned if they didn't", by a media and public eager to blame the mother.

The McCann, Ramsey and Chamberlain stories tell of every parent's hidden anxiety: is my child safe while she/he is sleeping? From the first news reports these stories captivated the public, and they continue to capture the public's imagination. Barnett suggests events become news when they "shatter the fairy-tale notions we have about love, home, and the family" (Barnett, 2006, p. 419). These stories also work for the media because they have the ingredients of one of the most powerful archetypal narratives, the fairytale, with the sinister disappearance of a sleeping beauty, an evil stranger, a wicked witch, and, in the case of Azaria Chamberlain, a monstrous wolf. Like myths and folk stories, fairy tales have huge appeal because they speak to our collective unconscious, reinforcing cultural beliefs that have been passed on from generation to generation. Fairytales, like myths, help to maintain cultural customs that subordinate women and support the dominant patriarchy. The "good" women in fairy stories are those who are silent, passive and beautiful. Women who have goals outside the household, who are dominant and outspoken, are invariably "bad" women. These three women were framed as "bad" women and "bad" mothers, in part because they refused to be silent and passive, and because their presence in the public sphere, before the glare of the cameras, was unsettling.

While the media coverage of the disappearances of the children of Kate McCann and Lindy Chamberlain demonstrates particularly striking similarities, I also want to draw attention to similarities in the coverage of the death of Patsy Ramsey's daughter to argue that there is a pattern in the creation of maternal news narratives. This repetitive pattern not only affects the way society and the media understand mothers whose children disappear or die in unexplained circumstances, but also reinforces the stereotypical characteristics of maternal identity in general. There are several key similarities in the three cases considered here:

- A child taken from its bed in the night;
- An additional "exotic" twist (the dingo; the foreign country; the beauty pageant);
- A bungled police inquiry in the days and weeks after the disappearance/murder and no firm leads months after the inquiry began;
- Parents who try to "manage" the media;
- Parents who try to "manage" the police inquiry;
- Parents with a strong religious faith;
- Parents, particularly the mother, behaving in a manner considered unacceptable;
- Female children.

Lindy Chamberlain and Azaria

When 10-week-old Azaria Chamberlain disappeared from a tent at a camping ground at Uluru (then known as Ayers Rock) in outback Australia in August 1980, the story immediately captivated media and public attention. When Lindy Chamberlain claimed a dingo had taken her baby, there was widespread public support for the Chamberlains and the Northern Territory police came under increasing pressure to find the missing baby (just as Portuguese police came under pressure to find Madeleine, and a decade ago Boulder police were pressured to find JonBenét's killer). Azaria's bloodstained jumpsuit, singlet, booties and a nappy were found near a dingo lair a week after she disappeared. An inquest in February 1981 concluded that a dingo had indeed

attacked the baby. However, with no body found, lingering doubts about the identity of the killer remained, with some complaining that the unemotional demeanour of the mother immediately after her daughter went missing was suspicious. Indeed, the suspicions of the NT police led to a second inquest at which an English pathologist, Dr James Cameron, gave evidence that an ultraviolet photograph he had taken of the jumpsuit showed Azaria's neck had been slashed and on the back of her jumpsuit he had found the imprint of an adult female hand. He also argued that the baby had been buried in the jumpsuit (Bryson, 1985). With this damning forensic evidence, public and media opinion turned against Lindy overnight, just as it would do for Kate McCann when revelations of forensic evidence emerged in 2007.

Lindy Chamberlain was charged with the murder of her daughter. The Crown attested that she had cut the baby's throat while seated in the car, had hidden the body in the car and later buried it, and later still had dug the baby up, taken off the clothing and reburied the body, planting the clothing elsewhere. Her husband Michael was accused of being an accessory in the disposal of the body. Lindy Chamberlain was convicted of Azaria's murder and sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour in one of Australia's toughest prisons, Darwin's Berrimah Jail. Her second daughter was born in prison and taken from her immediately after birth. Lindy Chamberlain served four years of a life sentence in jail, and then in 1986 Azaria's missing matinee jacket was found in a dingo's lair, providing new evidence which eventually led to her acquittal.

Patsy Ramsey and JonBenét

In 1996 there were disturbing resonances in the media coverage and public discourse surrounding Patsy Ramsey, the mother of JonBenét. Patsy Ramsey is still considered by many to be the major suspect in her daughter's death. Steve Thomas, a key Boulder city detective in the case, wrote a best-selling book, *JonBenét: inside the Ramsey murder investigation*, naming Patsy Ramsey as the murderer, and claiming John Ramsey was protecting his wife:

In my hypothesis, an approaching fortieth birthday, the busy holiday season, an exhausting Christmas Day, a couple of glasses of wine, and an argument with JonBenét had left Patsy frazzled. Her beautiful daughter, whom she frequently dressed almost as a twin, had rebelled against wearing the same outfit as her mother [to the Whites' Christmas Day party]. (Thomas, 2000, p. 12)

The tragic story of JonBenét Ramsey began on Christmas night 1996, when Patsy Ramsey found a ransom note on the stairs leading from JonBenét's bedroom. Hours later, John Ramsey found the body of his daughter in the basement wine cellar of their sprawling Boulder home. According to the police report, JonBenét was covered with a blanket, her wrists were tied above her head, her mouth was covered with tape, and a nylon cord was wrapped around her neck. The autopsy report revealed she had been sexually assaulted and had suffered a blow to her head which left an eight-and-a-half inch fracture (Schiller, 1998).

Reflecting on how the story "gained legs" as a major news story, CNN's Brian Cabell said:

It was the sort of story you'd quickly dismiss—it didn't have a national feel to it. But when it emerged that the child had been a beauty pageant queen, the story became sexier. That's what we played up. [...] I knew that the story had some titillating elements. (Cabell, cited in Schiller, 1998, p. 78).

Within a week, Cabell had secured an exclusive interview, and on New Year's Day 1997, the Ramsey interview took up half of that night's news bulletin and created national interest. Cabell later said he had felt "uneasy" about Patsy Ramsey's comment during the interview: "Keep your babies close to you. There's someone out there." He said, "it seemed dramatic, if not melodramatic. I was taken aback, but as a TV correspondent, I thought, 'Boy, there is a sound bite'" (in

Schiller, 1998, p. 76). The interview was a major scoop for CNN, but had unforeseen consequences for the Ramseys. The Boulder media were offended by the exclusive that had shut them out of the story. They had previously been scathing of the Ramseys and had reported highly prejudicial speculation insinuating that they had been involved in their daughter's death. The Boulder police were likewise unhappy about the interview. At the time, the police had been unable to re-interview the Ramseys because their lawyers said they were "grieving and unavailable" (Schiller, 1998, p. 79). Following the interview, the call went out from newsrooms around the country to obtain more pageant footage of JonBenét. A director of All Star Pageants supplied the ABC's Denver affiliate with JonBenét's December 17 All Star Pageant video. Other pageants and organisations also provided footage of JonBenét. Once these videos were aired across the world, they "added a sexual element to the story" (Schiller, 1998, p. 80) which transfixed the public. At the same time, the focus and attention turned on Patsy Ramsey. Any mother who exploited her child in such a way must be a bad mother, and so was likely involved in her daughter's death.

Over the next week the investigation by the Boulder police stalled, prompting them to issue a press release asking the media for information: "If any of you have uncovered information that may be of value to this case, we would appreciate you forwarding the information to the investigators at the Boulder Police Department." (Boulder Police Department, 1997). Like the McCanns, the Ramseys were frustrated by the slow police progress and hired their own private investigator and an expert in criminal profiling. They also hired ex-FBI profiler John Douglas to construct a psychological portrait of the killer and, again like the McCanns, put in place an expensive public relations campaign, set up a website, and offered a substantial reward for information. Under the directive of their manager, they held various interviews and news conferences. These were all moves that immediately turned the media against them.

Media ire, especially on tabloid television and talkback radio shows, was fuelled by claims the police were treating the parents – the prime suspects – with kid gloves by acquiescing to their refusal to be interviewed at police headquarters. Media reports made much of Patsy Ramsey's obsession with her daughter as a beauty queen, condemning her for her parenting choices. Rumours reported by the media outlets included speculation by police detective Steve Thomas that:

there was some sort of explosive encounter in the child's bathroom sometime prior to one o'clock in the morning when JonBenét was pushed against a hard surface inflicting a mortal head wound. She was unconscious, but her heart was still beating. Patsy would not have known that JonBenét was still alive, because the child already appeared to be dead. She panicked and staged a ransom note and shoved her child's body into the tiny unused basement room. (Thomas, 2000, p. 12)

Thomas also conjectured that Patsy Ramsey had caused her daughter to suffer injuries which had the appearance of sexual assault. The Ramseys endured this speculation for years, until finally on August 31, 2000, Patsy Ramsey challenged the Boulder police to charge her: "If you think I did it, let's have a trial and get it over with." (Johnson, 2000, p. 1) She told *USA Today* reporter Kevin Johnson that "being the focus of a murder mystery that still gets worldwide attention" had "drained their finances and led them and their son, Burke, 13, into a cocoon-like existence, without TV or newspapers in their home" (Johnson, 2000, p. 1).

In 2006, a decade after her daughter's death, Patsy Ramsey died of a recurrence of ovarian cancer. At the time she was still under the shadow of suspicion of involvement in the murder of her daughter. In July 2008, after new DNA evidence indicated a male perpetrator unrelated to the family was responsible for JonBenét's death, the Boulder County District Attorney officially exonerated Patsy Ramsey of any wrongdoing. A news release from the office of the Boulder County District Attorney announced that Patsy and her family had been completely vindicated in the murder (Boulder County Colorado District Attorney, 2008).

Kate McCann and Madeleine

From the moment three-year-old Madeleine McCann was reported missing from the family's holiday villa in Portugal on May 4, 2007, her disappearance became a media sensation around the world. Two days after Madeleine's disappearance, the UK tabloid *The Daily Telegraph* reported:

It is a story that chills the heart of every parent; something that will have stopped each one of us dead yesterday when we heard about Madeleine's disappearance. "There but for the grace of ..." was the single thought that would have united us. (Jardin, 2007)

Less than 48 hours after Madeleine's disappearance people were asking: How could a mother leave her child alone while she went out to dinner? The *Sunday Times* told readers: "British law does not set out the minimum age when parents can leave children alone, but it does stipulate that it is an offence if doing so might put them at risk." (Child watch, 2007) By focusing on the "how could they?" and so labelling Kate and Gerry McCann as bad parents, a distance was created between the McCanns and the rest of us, between the unimaginable horror and our own safe lives, reassuring us that it was all right to be captivated by their story, it was all right to hungrily surf the web for the latest news, because it could not happen to us.

From the beginning, the news discourse was bifurcated into dichotomous news narratives – one portraying Kate McCann as the tragic victim of a terrible crime, the other representing her as the killer of her child. When, in September 2007, the Portuguese police officially named Kate as an arguidi (suspect) and Gerry as an accessory, the Medea trope was unleashed in news headlines: "Maddy's mum to become a suspect", *The Times* reported (2007). The tabloid press were less restrained: "Suspects!" was the headline on the front-page of the *Daily Mirror* (2007). *The Sun* posed the question directly: "Kate McCann: Did you sedate Maddie?" (2007). Upon hearing the news, Lindy Chamberlain told *Newsweek*: "Here we have a mother and there's talk about her being charged for murder and once again they haven't got a body, they've got no facts." (*Bulletin*, October 26, 2007)

Kate McCann and Lindy Chamberlain

Kate McCann, like Lindy Chamberlain, has been publicly judged on the basis of highly prejudicial, lurid and speculative news reports. When Kate McCann was named as an official suspect by the Portuguese police, the tone of the news coverage changed dramatically, prompting Lindy Chamberlain to appear on national television in Australia defending the McCanns (Cazzulino, 2007, p. 6). "I am possibly the only woman in the world who knows what the McCanns are going through in the court of public opinion," she said, appealing for people not to pre-judge the McCanns in the way she had been judged in the 1980s. She said she felt particularly sorry for Kate McCann after hearing reports that the Portuguese police were pressuring her to admit her guilt. "That sounds like a mirror image, doesn't it? Lie and tell us that you did it, and you can go free, tell us the truth and you can't." (Cazzulino, 2007, p. 6) She urged people not to judge the McCanns on the basis of controversial or flimsy forensic evidence, recalling the injustice she had endured because of incorrect forensic reports.

In the manufacture of news about the disappearance of Madeleine McCann, the media once again created news reports from rumour and speculation. At both tabloid and broadsheet news outlets, journalists wrote news narratives within the Medea frame, using unproven allegations and salacious speculation, as had the journalists writing salacious media reports about Lindy Chamberlain, depicting as fact mere conjectures about bloody handprints, slit throats, religious sacrifices, and arterial blood sprays under the dashboard of the family car.

As in the case of Azaria Chamberlain, the absence of a body caused police and media to focus on forensics from other sources. From August 2007, claims emerged daily of new forensic evidence being found, and these generally implied the guilt of the McCanns. The French newspaper *France Soir* speculated that “Maddie” had been drugged by her mother, citing “hard evidence” in the hands of the Portuguese police, and leading the way for other news outlets around the globe to report this new development (*Daily Mirror*, September 14, 2007, p. 1). The *Daily Mirror*’s coverage of this “new development” illustrates how the media boldly and simultaneously employed the two frames of “guilt” and “innocence”. The top half of its front page was devoted to an “exclusive” soft profile of the McCanns, while the bottom half was given over to a story on the allegations that Kate McCann drugged her daughter, under the headline: “Maddy pills overdose”.

Drawing upon unconfirmed, unsourced police reports, the media speculated that Kate McCann had drugged Madeleine, who accidentally died from an overdose, and later hid her body for almost a month before disposing of it at an unknown site. According to the *Daily Mail*, this theory, sourced from alleged police leaks, was supported by the finding of blood spattered in the resort apartment rented by the McCanns. The misleading headline: “Blood clue found in Maddie’s room” (*Daily Mail*, cited in *The Mercury*, August 8, 2007) fuelled public suspicions. No attempt at balanced reporting was included with these speculative media reports about blood and body fluids. Eventually DNA tests showed that the tiny specks of blood found in the apartment were not Madeleine’s, although news reports carried the rider that “the DNA results were only 72 per cent accurate because the blood sample was not fresh” (Hudson, 2007). The rumour was found to be false, but, as in the Lindy Chamberlain case, the damage was already done.

Lindy Chamberlain had been accused of slitting her daughter’s throat while she sat in the front seat of the family car – now the media speculated that Madeleine’s blood and body fluids had been found in the McCann’s hire car. The press reports of October 16, 2007, were explicit: “Corpse in McCann car” (*Evening Standard*); “It was her blood in parents’ hire car: new DNA tests report” (*Daily Express*). These sensational media reports did not include qualifications that the unsubstantiated forensic evidence might be wrong. Associated Press journalist Charles Miranda wrote of two sniffer dogs, Eddie and Keela, attached to the South Yorkshire Police Department, who had detected human blood in the hire car. The dogs brought to Portugal to hunt for clues were “considered Europe’s best and were hired out for \$1,200 a day plus expenses” (Miranda, 2007a).

Media reports also claimed the cadaver-seeking dogs had detected the “smell of death” on Kate McCann’s bible. Australia’s News Limited newspapers published Miranda’s Associated Press stories throughout 2007, with the *Mercury* newspaper in Hobart headlining one Miranda story: “The scent of a corpse: dogs smell death on McCann bible” (September 10, 2007). This headline, and Miranda’s story, eerily parallels the rumour from the 1980s that the deeply religious Chamberlains (Michael was a Seventh-Day Adventist pastor) had killed their daughter as part of a religious sacrifice. At the time, news reports claimed that Lindy Chamberlain had underlined in red a story in her family bible in which a woman kills a man by driving a tent pole through his head. Now the media speculated that the devoted Catholic McCanns had killed their daughter in a bizarre religious ritual. Miranda reported that the “Portuguese detectives confirmed that Mrs McCann’s bible was a key piece of evidence in the case” (Miranda, 2007a). Miranda told readers that a “Bible with the scent of death and an English springer spaniel called Eddie hold the clues to the case of missing Madeleine McCann – Europe’s most talked-about news story”. His report continued:

It has been reported the bible was found open at the story of how David killed his son. Police say the imputation is Mrs McCann, a staunch Catholic, killed her child after reading the passage or referred to the story to take solace for Madeleine’s accidental death. (Miranda, 2007a)

It was also reported that a “substantial” amount of Madeleine’s hair had been found in the boot of the hire car. Under the headline “Hair find stings parents”, the *Daily Mail* told readers that detectives said there was “so much that it could not be from DNA secondary transfer – only from Madeleine’s body being in the boot” (Greenhill & Seamark, 2007).

London *Times* journalist Janice Turner was one of the first journalists – and remains one of the few – to write of her uneasiness at the media’s treatment of Kate McCann. In an opinion piece, “Face it: we need the McCanns to be guilty” (2007), she told readers a magazine editor had told her she was restraining herself from running a spread on “Mrs McCann’s seemingly infinite supply of summer tops: her heartbreak wardrobe”. Turner asked why so many newspaper mailbag internet forums were brimming with bile:

Why this sudden outburst of dark jokes in *Private Eye* and internet quips about how many children can be carried in a new vehicle called the “Renault McCann”? Is it really fury at what Kate and Gerry McCann might have done? Or is it that the possibility of their guilt has given many permission to vent, at last, emotions they have bottled up all summer long? (Turner, 2007)

Margarette Driscoll of the *Sunday Times* was likewise disturbed at the pack mentality of the British news media. In a story headlined “Too serene for sympathy” (2007) she put forward a possible explanation as to why people were not sympathetic towards Kate McCann: “In the age of ‘misery memoirs’ and reality TV, if you do show stoicism and coolness in the face of trauma, you are despised for it.” Kate McCann’s mother, Susan Healy, told the *Liverpool Echo* that her daughter felt the media was persecuting her because she did not look suitably “maternal”. She told her mother that if she “weighed another two stone, had a bigger bosom and looked more maternal, people would be more sympathetic” (Brown, 2007).

By mid-September, with the allegations mounting against Kate McCann, the press pack was baying for her blood, with 17,000 people having signed an online petition calling for social services to remove the McCann twins from their parents’ care. The anti-Kate sentiment was bolstered when the 2007 Man Booker prize-winning novelist, Anne Enright, entered the public debate in October with a scathing article in the *London Review of Books* (2007). By speculating that Kate McCann had drugged Madeleine, Enright gave literary and intellectual weight to the abuse that Kate had already endured, and then exposed the core of her annoyance at Kate McCann and the media: “We are obliged to lay eyes on her all the time,” she wrote, admitting that this “makes harridans of us all” (Enright, 2007). Enright talked of Kate McCann’s “flat sadness” and the “very occasional glimpse of a wounded narcissism that flecks her public appearances,” adding that she herself has “never objected to good-looking women”. She also wrote about her husband’s speculation that the “Tapas 9” had been involved in wife-swapping, and she even considered how the body of a dead child could fit into the boot of her own car. She admitted that in August, “the sudden conviction that the McCanns ‘did it’” swept over her own family holiday in a “peculiar hallelujah”. She cuttingly wrote: “We do not forgive them the stupid stuff, like wearing ribbons, or going jogging next day, or holding hands on the way into mass.” Enright told readers she “disliked the McCanns earlier than most people” and was angry with them for their failure to accept that their daughter was probably dead: “I wanted them to grieve, which is to say to go away.” And yet she admitted to an obsession with the case and to searching for interviews with the McCanns “late at night, on YouTube”. Many have questioned how a writer as sensitive as Enright could be swept up in this vicious blaming discourse, and why she felt so compelled to write a personal reflection and critique of the disappearance of three-year-old Madeleine that is so devoid of empathy for the grieving parents. How could Enright, whose novel (*The gathering*) is regarded as a “haunting portrayal” of a fictional family’s grief and loss, so brutally hold forth about another, real-life mother’s grief and loss? Perhaps Enright’s intemperate and ill-timed opinions reaffirm

the potent pleasure we all find in making judgments about the mother thrust into the public gaze through the unexplained or suspicious disappearance of her child.

Lindy Chamberlain says Kate McCann has been through the worst thing that can ever happen to a parent – the loss of a beloved child and the “gut wrenching incomparable agony of not knowing exactly what’s happened”. She said:

What are we doing being a public jury again? How can you apologise to me and do this again to someone else? Life is not a TV show. You can’t have the answers nicely packaged in an hour. Sometimes there are no easy answers. The life of the McCann family is not a reality TV show for you to live vicarious horror and trauma through. They are a real family just like my family was. (Chamberlain-Creighton, 2007)

Lindy Chamberlain remembered the pressure she had been under and said she expected Kate McCann would be feeling similar strain. “Nothing can make anyone else understand. It’s impossible, like learning to swim while drowning. There’s no textbook to say, ‘this is how to handle it, this is what’s going to happen next, this is the way you can go through it’. It doesn’t happen.” (Chamberlain-Creighton, 2007)

In early 2008, the McCanns began legal proceedings against British newspapers the *Daily Express* and *Daily Star*; and their Sunday editions, for their highly prejudicial news coverage. In March 2008, the news group capitulated, offering a public apology to the McCanns and paying out £550,000 in damages. All of the group’s newspapers carried unprecedented front-page apologies to Kate and Gerry McCann for publishing more than 100 articles on the disappearance of Madeleine suggesting they had played a part in the disappearance of their daughter. The *Daily Star* embedded their apology into their banner with the heading: “Kate & Gerry McCann: Sorry”, while the *Daily Express* ran with a larger story underneath the banner which carried the same headline. The *Daily Express* apology read in part:

The *Daily Express* today takes the unprecedented step of making a front-page apology to Kate and Gerry McCann. We do so because we accept that a number of articles in the newspaper have suggested that the couple caused the death of their missing daughter Madeleine and then covered it up. We acknowledge that there is no evidence whatsoever to support this theory and that Kate and Gerry are completely innocent of any involvement in their daughter’s disappearance. We trust that the suspicion that has clouded their lives for many months will soon be lifted. (Kate and Gerry McCann: we are sorry, 2008)

Five days before this very public mea culpa, the Express group removed all McCann stories from its websites, a practice which, in the world of electronic archiving by companies and institutions, will have significant repercussions for scholars in the future. Media commentator Roy Greenslade said the fact that the news group had capitulated without a fight suggested their legal advisers had told them “they had no chance of winning if the case went to trial” (Greenslade, 2008). Greenslade wrote in his media blog that the “apologies from the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Star* brought all journalism into disrepute”. He argued that the news group’s practice was:

no journalistic accident, but a sustained campaign of vitriol against a grief-stricken family. The stories were not merely speculative, but laced with innuendo which continually made accusations against the McCanns on the basis of anonymous sources and without any hard evidence. (Greenslade, 2008)

Discussion

These three case studies demonstrate three “Medea” news narratives, showing how the news media creates monsters out of mothers who transgress what is considered appropriate maternal behaviour, and how in the most horrific circumstances society can turn on the mother who does not fit into standard perceptions of what it is to be a “good” mother.

Almost 30 years after Lindy Chamberlain’s vilification by the Australian media and public, and a decade after Patsy Ramsey’s vilification by the American and global media, it seems nothing much has changed. Why is this so? Why do journalists continue to create prejudicial and judgmental news narratives about maternity? Several things appear to be going on here: the blurring of the boundaries between the private and public spheres; society’s “voyeuristic thirst for details of others’ private lives” (Easton, 1997, p. 1, cited in Calvert, 2004, p. 6), which is being fulfilled by a proliferation of reality television, prime-time infotainment shows, celebrity and “true confession” magazines; the seepage of “soft news” and infotainment into news bulletins and the hard news pages of even the most “serious” news outlets; the commercialisation of news; and a growing concern at the perceived breakdown of family and community values, often expressed in terms of the concomitant link between motherhood and social disorder.

In considering this problematic demonising by the media of “deviant” forms of maternity, one useful entry point is provided by Hartley’s thesis that the concept of readership is more important in the history of journalism than that of power (Hartley, 1998, p. 50). The role of the news media, Hartley argues, is to gather and inform and also to influence readership through teaching rather than through power. Hartley argues that the giant modern institutions of media, government and education are in fact converging around a desire to influence readerships via cross-demographic communication, and their inter-connections include the same quest to influence the hearts and minds of readers. He argues that the “feminisation, sexualisation and suburbanisation of the ‘public sphere’ of critical debate” has been of crucial political importance: “It is from the so-called private sphere of personal identity, domestic life and everyday culture that some of the most important contemporary political movements have arisen: the women’s movement, environmental and peace movements, for instance.” (Hartley, 1998, p. 51; see also 1992a; 1992b; 1996). Over the past four decades, this process has seen the news media develop a news-value paradigm that allows for a greater inclusion of private sphere topics and issues within hard news discourse. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s with the advent of the second wave of feminism, the rapid shift of women into the workforce, including into news journalism, has continued unabated in the 21st century. Hartley argues that “the ‘classic’ public domain has taken on more and more of the issues that were once regarded as private, ordinary or unworthy, so that now the front pages of even the most conservative newspapers of record are suffused with feminised images and privatised news” (Hartley, 1998, p. 51). While this shift into “soft news”, or as some have termed it, the “tabloidisation” of news (see Gitlin, 1997; Saltzman, 1999; Carey, 2002), has been seen in many ways as positive (Hartley, 1996; Shattuc, 1997; Turner, 2004) and has led to a democratisation of news discourse, the shifting of power from the news elite to “ordinary” people has also allowed for disproportionate scrutiny of women within the domestic sphere, compared with the scrutiny of men within the domestic sphere. The opening up of the private sphere to news discourse came at a time when there were growing anxieties over the future of the family, in the context of what some commentators saw as a rapid decay of community and family values, commonly expressing these concerns in a way that allowed for a link to be made between social disorder and motherhood.

The shift towards increased reportage of “soft news” is also interconnected with the “hyper-commercialism” of the media, and the failure to communicate news under the umbrella of the Fourth Estate as a primary public duty, as the public’s right to know. News has been taken out of its “public duty” frame and within commercial organisations it is now seen as a profitable commodity to be bought and sold; as a commodity, it is encumbered with all of the commercial

imperatives of the marketplace. Hyper-commercialisation, according to Vavrus (2007), “works in tandem with post-feminism”, and is a “consumer-friendly ideology featured in so much news reporting on women” (Vavrus, 2007, p. 47). However, this commercialisation of news and the blurring of the private/public spheres often operates to the detriment of women’s discursive control and agency. The “bad mother” news story has gained increasing popularity in recent times. In a quest to create sought after news in a highly competitive world, journalists find themselves vying for the latest scoop and the exclusive interview; when the public’s interest continues unabated, as it did in the three case studies discussed in this paper, journalists find themselves caught on a news manufacturing treadmill, faced with the imperative to churn out even more sensational stories. The frantic quest for the scoop leads to the production of news obtained from dubious sources, based on rumour and innuendo. This type of journalistic practice does not create well-researched, measured, ethical or credible journalism. And it seldom works to women’s benefit.

When journalists combine this competitive journalism with the age-old practice of drawing upon known stereotypes and myths to make sense of the inexplicable, a reporting environment is created in which innocent mothers can find their tragic experience represented in terms of the Medea frame. When creating news stories about children who go missing or are murdered on the streets, journalists create stories that reflect society’s fear of the evil unknown male; but when children go missing from their own homes, or are murdered in them, it is the mother, the wicked witch of fairytales, the Medea of myth, who is quickly appropriated for the news frame. The message remains clear: the gendered public/private sphere remains intact, and when a child dies or disappears from the safety of its bed at night it is the mother who is primarily to blame. Douglas and Michaels argue that in America in the 1990s “the big, national news stories focused increasingly on a mother’s private, subjective terrain” (2004, p. 170), and that these stories contributed significantly to a “vigilante culture in which mothers had to be carefully policed because they are, potentially, their own children’s worst enemy” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 170). According to Douglas and Michaels, there was also something more to these news narratives:

The three-hundred-pound gorilla of fear lurking in these stories, the one never spoken about but always there, was this: Were feminists right, that women did not have some built-in maternal instinct? If so, what did that mean for the future of the society? (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 170)

While women have increasingly taken on roles in the public sphere, there has been no accompanying dramatic shift of responsibilities for childcare and housekeeping. Women have suddenly found themselves in a world where enjoying equality means they are required to be all things, all the time: the perfect wife, the perfect homemaker, the perfect mother, and the perfect employee. As Forna has argued in her 1999 book *Mothers of all myths*, women are still seen as the primary caregivers and motherhood, like religion, continues to be “inextricably linked with themes of sacrifice and dedication, and thus the good mother is one who endures” (Forna, 1999, p. 105). Kate McCann was caught up in that which Forna calls the “double standard of mothering which tells wealthy women that they are good mothers if they give up work to stay at home with their children but encourages poor women to work” (Forna, 1999, p. 113).

From the 1980s news organisations became interested in the deviant maternal subject, fuelled by stories such as the ultimate maternal delinquent, the murdering mother, exemplified in the global news coverage of Lindy Chamberlain’s conviction for the murder of her baby daughter. Suddenly deviant mothers were of high news value. Children deprived of maternal nurturing became “latch-key” children, and “deviant” mothers became the focus of meta-news narratives: “crack cocaine mothers”, “single mothers”, “teenage mothers”, “career mothers”, and so on. The message was clear: “to fail to be utterly self-sacrificing all the time was deviant” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 171). The binary “good” versus “bad” mother frame became a commonly employed news paradigm.

The feminisation of news media in the past 40 years, including the embedding of “soft” news stories about “private” or “domestic” issues into the “hard” news pages of newspapers and into news broadcasts, has ironically allowed for the creation of news narratives that continue to constrain mothers in accordance with Tennyson’s 19th century ideal of: “man for the field and woman for the hearth” (Tennyson, 1847, line 437). Forna contends that images of mothers are “created by popular culture to reflect and sometimes to manipulate a set of values about what constitutes exemplary mothers” (Forna, 1999, p. 118). Today, with the focus on celebrity culture, it is celebrity mothers who find themselves framed as “good” or “bad” mothers in front-page news. Douglas and Meredith argue that the “cultural treacle” of the “celebrity mom profile”, with its key features “refined, reinforced and romanticized” was the most influential media form used to sell the “new momism” in the 1980s (2004, p. 110, 113):

Rising out of the ashes of feminism, and repudiating its critique of the narrow confines of middle-class motherhood, the celebrity mom profile was an absolutely crucial tool in the media construction of maternal guilt and insecurity, as well as the romanticizing of motherhood, in the 1980s and beyond. (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 113)

In recent times, the excessive news coverage of celebrity mothers such as Britney Spears, Madonna, Angelina Jolie and Nicole Kidman has not only continued to reinforce a woman’s primary role as a maternal subject, but also constrained her to the “good” or “bad” mother paradigm. And when things go wrong within the private sphere, as in the cases of Lindy Chamberlain, Patsy Ramsey and Kate McCann, news narratives continue to frame mothers according to 19th century ideals and to use the mother as a scapegoat for society’s concerns over the perceived collapse of “family values”. The media tried these women in the court of public opinion, not because there was clear evidence linking them to the disappearance and deaths of their children, but because these women did not reflect the motherhood ideals of sacrifice and dedication expected by the media and society. This study demonstrates the enduring nature of the Medea myth over time, and signals its effectiveness in the reinforcement of a pervasive cluster of values associated with Western maternity. In Victorian terminology, a “good” mother is one who endures, who accepts that it is her lot to “suffer and be still” (Ellis, 1845, cited Vicinus, 1972, title page).

Lindy Chamberlain left her baby alone in a tent while she socialised with friends; she was a “strange, emotionally detached woman” (Burnett, 2007); she did not reflect the ideals of sacrifice and dedication: she was a “deviant” mother. Patsy Ramsey lived her former beauty queen life through her young daughter; she exploited her daughter for her own gratification; she was a hysterical, over-emotional woman; she did not reflect the ideals of sacrifice and dedication: she was a “deviant” mother. The “composed”, “beautiful”, “rail-thin” Kate McCann left her children alone in a Portuguese villa while she dined with friends; she was “unnaturally cold and distant” (Burnett, 2007): she was the antithesis of the motherhood ideal of self-sacrifice. While Kate McCann is the media’s latest Medea, she follows in the footsteps of Lindy Chamberlain, Patsy Ramsey, and others including Sally Clark, Donna Anthony and Trupti Patel (see Goc, 2007; 2009). If journalism is to continue to have a “privileged position as a central institution for establishing what is to be considered as objective or true and even common sense” (Fursich, 2009, p. 246), it is important for news journalists to accept the responsibilities that come with their privileged position. The former editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, C. P. Scott, once said that newspapers have a “moral as well as a material existence” (1921, cited in Singer & Ashman, 2009, p. 4). Journalists indeed have a moral duty to the public to report fairly, but while journalists continue to create highly prejudicial news narratives which place innocent mothers within a Medea news frame, journalism will fail in its public duty.

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Author

Nicola Goc is a lecturer in journalism, media and communications at the University of Tasmania in Hobart.

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