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Dynamics of partisan journalism: journalist-source relations in the context of a local newspaper's anti-paedophile housing agenda

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Abstract. This article explores the influence of partisanship on the framing of a local news agenda. Using a case study approach, it explores how one local newspaper in the East Midlands of England, the Nottingham-based *Evening Post*, reacted with hostility to leaked Home Office plans housing high profile paedophiles in its locality (albeit inside the grounds of the local jail). Within weeks, though, the paper's news frame had shifted from hostility toward the Home Office to a more sympathetic news frame reporting how local professionals would manage risks posed by paedophiles in Nottingham. In order to make sense of the local dynamic underpinning this changing news frame the paper uses interview data to explore interactions between local journalists and key protagonists to understand the predictable and unpredictable factors that shaped the terms of their reporting. The article concludes by discussing the significance of partisan dynamics on the framing of a highly charged local and national paedophile-related issue.

Keywords: paedophiles, local press, dynamics of partisan journalism, local news agenda, framing, journalist-source relations

Local newspapers and news sources[i]

When Schlesinger (1990) raised the issue of neglect in empirical studies of news production of journalists and sources, one can be forgiven for thinking that this concern did not extend to understanding how *local* news agendas are formed. Media sociologists have largely approached agenda building research in terms of how sources seek to influence national news agendas (e.g. Schlesinger and Tumber 1994; Palmer 2001). However, while emphasis on journalist-source relations in the national and international news arena reflects the agenda setting importance of the

metropolitan news centres (van Ginneken 1998), it does little to overcome a sense that local news media are peripheral to the main national and international political action.

The notion that local news media are parochial is reflected in stereotyped notions that they report only the "parish pump" (Franklin and Murphy 1991, 1998). The significance of local news media should not be underestimated, however. Consider the interest shown in Britain's local press by Alistair Campbell, Tony Blair's former Director of Communications. A former tabloid journalist, Campbell courted local newspaper opinion as a way of "talking over the heads" of the national press lobby (Wintour 1999). His view is that a "dumbed down" national press ignores Downing Street policy announcements and ministerial explanations. Accordingly, he increased local and regional press access to Westminster lobby briefings as part of a strategy intended to get the Government's message over more directly to voters.

In his latter years in charge of Government communications, Campbell perceived local papers as more malleable and less antagonistic than their national counterparts (Oborne 1999). Accordingly, he mobilised his professional skills as a journalist and began to supply local papers with self-authored articles for publication. Much of his copy emphasised the "positive" impact of Government policies for local communities and regions. This is not to suggest that local newspapers passively accept agendas proffered by well-connected metropolitan sources, however. As recent research in comparative political communication shows, the flourishing state of local news media in developed countries lies in their continuing allegiance to serving "localised" information and communication needs of local publics (Lang 2004).

For example, Deacon and Golding's (1994) study of media coverage of Mrs Thatcher's poll tax shows how Britain's local and regional press resisted official interpretations of anti-poll tax protestors and focused instead on local criticisms and concerns. In the national press, journalists tended toward the Government view that protestors were being stirred up by, and represented, militant groups. However, local journalists recognised that protestors were from all walks of life and consequently, compared with journalists in the national press, "accessed a greater diversity of news sources, with representatives from the voluntary sector, business sector, trades union movement, and the anti-poll tax federations" (Deacon and Golding 1994: 104).

Similarly, Neveu's (2002) more recent study of regional press coverage in Brittany of a farmers' angry protest against inadequate Government subsidies imposed following a collapse in vegetable prices, reveals how newspaper coverage mobilised "injustice news frames" that reflected local concerns. In contrast, national newspapers only paid attention to the farmers' protest when violence occurred. His explanation for the framing of local news coverage as an injustice perpetrated by "outsiders" lies in the dynamics of proximity journalism: "Local journalism … has its roots in a specific territory and is ruled by a peculiar logic that is shaped by … a powerful relationship of dependence between journalists and their sources" (Neveu 2002: 54).

Though based on different European political and local media contexts, Deacon and Golding's and Neveu's case studies underline the local press' especial role as *symbolic representatives* of community (cf. Aldridge 2003). This requires that local newspapers address the concerns and sensitivities of the community in which they circulate (Harrison 1998). However, scholarly myopia has obscured the particular

"concerns and sensitivities" of local newspapers; as if news agendas formed outside of the metropolis add little understanding as to how "popular knowledge" is formed. As Cottle (1993) suggests in the context of his production study of regional TV news in Britain, the study of local news can also tell us much about the way in which popular forms of journalism mediate issues of public concern. This view is apparent in relation to anti-paedophile stories, many of which are rooted in local communities.

Since the late 1990s, Britain's local press has been concerned with the moral encoding of the allocation of risks surrounding the release of convicted sex offenders from prison. In particular, their concerns over the risk to local communities in which paedophiles have been rehoused have helped construct a powerful symbolic figure of the paedophile as the quintessential "Outsider" who has infiltrated the "decent heart" of the community. This dominant perception of "the paedophile" as existing beyond the community also underlines how popular knowledge of paedophilia has spoken to "collective experiences of fear, risk and anxiety in ways which clearly could not be calmed by appeals to the 'professional' credentials of official agents (whether the police, the probation service or government ministers)" (Collier 2001: 235).

Local journalists covering the release of paedophiles from prison into their particular locale must navigate popular knowledge about the risks involved while constructing partisan reportage that includes facts and interpretations relevant to concerns of their local readership. This requires using sources from within the affected community. In another risk-related context, involving the controversial sighting of toxic dumps near communities in the US state of Wisconsin, Dunwoody and Griffin (1993) point out that that local press coverage relied on "locally anchored" experts who made sense of

risks to the community. Similarly, we explore how one local paper in the East Midlands of England rejected government sources in favour of local penal experts who made sense of risks relating to government plans to house paedophiles locally.

Media and moral populism

The moral encoding of risks posed by paedophiles, alluded to above, has meant that Britain's press viewed paedophiles as a real and present danger. They were not alone. It was a view reinforced by international media interest in organised "paedophile rings" following arrests in 1998 of hundreds of members of the "Wonderland Club", a child pornography Internet group. Around the same time, US news media intensified its interest in *identifying* paedophiles following the 1997 rape-murder of seven-year-old Megan Kanka by a twice-convicted sex offender who lived in the same street in New Jersey (Jenkins 1998). In other words, the figure of "the paedophile" was fast becoming a cross-cultural "monster for our times" (Bell 2002: 86).

However, in a rare self-examination of the British media's moral amplification of the paedophile figure from a journalists' perspective, Andrew Marr noted how paedophile hysteria in late 1990s Britain appeared to be sweeping the country: "Child killers are on the loose. Perverts are everywhere. In terraces and housing estates across the land, vigilante groups are being formed, a righteous citizen's army armed with placards and pickaxe handles to repulse the monster among us" (*The Independent* 9 April 1998). Marr's sardonic tone is intended to highlight the media's role in encouraging acts of vigilantism. However, it also glides over genuine public disenchantment about the release of paedophiles from prison, as well as the role of the press in giving form to this disenchantment.

The media construction of the "predatory paedophile" abroad in the community has come to symbolise the ultimate "neighbour from hell" (Kitzinger 1999). It assumes a particular representation of menace however, as part of popular knowledge that there is "obvious" risk to children by releasing known paedophiles from prison (Collier 2001). While such "knowledge" is almost certainly misdirected, given the relatively low re-conviction rates of convicted sexual offenders (see Silverman and Wilson 2002), public concern about dangerous paedophiles living unsupervised in the community have become absorbed within a rhetoric of contemporary punitive populism reinforced by the popular press and other agencies (Evans 2003).[ii]

Thus, even normally liberal broadsheets have reinforced the iconic figure of "the paedophile" as dangerous. An editorial from *The Independent* newspaper, arising from paedophiles forced to seek police protection from vigilantes, is illustrative: "It is not the habit of liberal newspapers to stand up for the baying crowd [but] if a dangerous paedophile turned up at any neighbourhood slammer, free to walk, every local parent would be, to go to the root of the word, vigilant" (*The Independent* 27 April 1998). The conundrum this creates is summed up by Marr (1998: 23) thus: "We don't want to pay to keep them in police cells. But if they try to leave, we'll have their guts for garters".

The practice of releasing paedophiles from prison into the community underpins public perception that they receive "soft" punishment (Silverman and Wilson 2002). A common assumption is that those involved in the management of paedophiles are unable to effectively supervise their charges because paedophiles are "driven" by their

perversion to repeat offences; *ergo* the only appropriate penal response is to jail them without possibility of release. Also mooted in relation to this point of view is that paedophiles are beyond rehabilitation, which is also interpreted as a "soft" penal response. However, as a number of commentators have argued (e.g. Jenkins 1992; Eldridge et al. 1997; Critcher 2000; Jewkes 2004), such views are reinforced by media constructions of the paedophile, which have the appearance of a recurrent moral panic over the nature of contemporary childhood.

For example, public concern about lenient punishment for sex offenders has led the media to take the issue of the threat that paedophiles pose to communities into their own hands "because they perceive the statutory services as ineffective and unable to fulfil their statutory responsibilities" (Cowburn and Dominelli 2001: 414). The rape-murder of four girls in Belgium in 1995 by Marc Dutroux, a released paedophile, amplified European media interest in the failure of authorities to punish paedophiles. In Britain, media interest in paedophiles released from prison and allowed to live anonymously in the community was crystallised by the abduction and murder, in 2000, of seven-year-old Sarah Payne by a released paedophile, Roy Whiting.

News media and inter-agency politics

Whiting's conviction gave the British press carte blanche to criticise agencies involved in supervising convicted paedophiles and set in train "processes which led to the policy makers and 'the professionals' losing control of the [paedophile-in-the-community] policy agenda" (Kitzinger 1999: 212). As Critcher (2002a: 530) points out about public debate about sex offenders' supervision in the community following the Whiting trial, the press agenda emerges as pivotal: "It mediates between policy

and public agendas, constructs the public agenda and seeks to influence policy agendas".

The news media's role in mediating between policy and public agendas is by no means relevant only to the vexed issue of paedophiles living in the community. Schlesinger et al. (1991) have noted how the crime and criminal justice fields routinely intersect with political disputes between individual actors and agencies, which spill over into the public arena. They point out that the policy community use the news media to address each other. In doing so, this "raises questions about a conception of 'primary definition' that tends to assume a closed circle of definers" (Schlesinger et al. 1991: 404). In the context of growing anti-paedophile sentiment, this has resulted in some sections of the news media making a strategic entry into the child protection policy arena.

This is exemplified by the activities of the national Sunday tabloid newspaper, the *News of the World*. The paper pursued a controversial "naming and shaming" campaign (Critcher 2002b; Bell 2002; Lawler 2002). This included publishing photographs of convicted paedophiles and calling for information on their whereabouts via a telephone "hotline". Supported by the NSPCC, a "pro-child" pressure group with established links to the policy community and Government, it demanded new paedophile legislation referred to as "Sarah's law" (after the Sarah Payne case) giving communities the right to know if known or suspected paedophiles live in their area (Silverman and Wilson 2002; Cowburn and Dominelli 2001).

This issue received media attention in 2000 following disturbances on the Paulsgrove estate in Portsmouth, on Britain's south coast. Grievances sparked by the *News of the World's* naming of a paedophile living on the estate, led to community protests (Bell 2002). Some broadsheets, taking their cue from agencies working with sex offenders, argued that the protests were evidence that naming and shaming undermined the work of professionals involved in paedophile supervision. However, for some local newspaper editors it remains a bone of contention that within the Sex Offenders Act 1997, sex offenders released from prison can receive public housing but only professionals involved in their supervision have the right to know where they live.

This particular concern formed part of a broader set of grievances levelled against both the paedophile housed in the Paulsgrove estate, but also those agencies that made the decision about where to house him. And as Critcher (2003) points out, local newspapers gave voice to these sorts of grievances and which sought to protect their communities. Indeed, it is salient to point out that the *News of the World* borrowed the idea of naming and shaming from an anti-paedophile campaign originally conducted in the southwest of England and reproduced in other parts of the country.

Vigilante journalism

In 1996, the *Bournemouth Echo* in Dorset made use of confidential police files on sex offenders living in the region and published 38 photographs and last known addresses of convicted paedophiles. In 1997, the *Manchester Evening News* "outed" 28 convicted paedophiles and other sex offenders living locally, while in 1998, both the *Hartlepool Mail* and the *Oxford Mail* argued that it had a public duty to notify its readers of convicted paedophiles known to be living secretly in their area. Many other

local newspapers keep informal registers of sex offenders, often with photographs supplied from police and other official records (Travis and Ahmed 1998), which are then used by anti-paedophile campaign groups to identify individuals (Birkett 1997).

Paedophile "outing" campaigns also highlight the cannibalistic relationship between national and local press agendas, as well as pointing to the potential of the local press to frame the terms of populist debate. As Kitzinger (1999: 20) points out: "many of the national stories about paedophiles began life on the front page of local papers and some neighbourhood protests were sparked by local press reports rather than vice versa". Campaigns manifest apparent consensus on the need to protect communities from "dangerous outsiders". Thus, while anti-paedophile newspaper campaigns represent the paedophile as the classic "outsider" deserving of symbolic removal from the community, anti-paedophile vigilantes advocate literal physical removal.

This includes local newspapers intervening in the regulation of paedophiles by, for example, supporting public demands that they be removed from the area. As Collier (2001: 235-6) observes, the friction this generates in those communities where paedophiles are housed has served to "legitimate feelings of despair and helplessness which were being so powerfully expressed by those who could not understand why such men were being released from prison in the first place". At the same time, anti-paedophile campaigns are not a straightforward "nimby" (i.e. "not in my back yard") reaction toward those "outsiders" perceived as a threat to the moral and social order.

Kitzinger (1999) also notes that local newspapers connect to local concerns in order to survive. And as Murphy (1976) made clear in his pioneering study of the local

newspaper industry in Britain, reflecting local issues but avoiding controversies is part of the task of embedding oneself as a major player in the locality. Thus, campaigning is a core task for local editors as they seek to sustain their papers' self-definition as "important movers and shakers with whom a loyal readership will identify" (Aldridge 2003: 500). Paradoxically, though, local press campaigning in Britain is anchored not in locality but by human universals (e.g. "the safety of children") intended to appeal "to as many inhabitants with a stake in local issues as possible" (Aldridge 2003: 497).

In making sense of local press interest in "paedophiles-in-the-community", it is important to recognise how popular notions of "retribution" and "just desserts" coalesce around the perceived role of statutory services as ineffective when it comes to protecting children. This echoes with Franklin and Parton's (1991) account of news reporting of "easily duped" social workers, whose inability to supervise their charges renders children more rather than less at risk. Indeed, media intervention in managing the threat that paedophiles pose to communities is now a major concern of agencies working with sexual offenders (Silverman and Wilson 2002). Their concerns are unlikely to be met with popular support, however, because our obsession with knowing where paedophiles are housed has become enmeshed with the idea that we will be safe from them so long as they are not our neighbour (Furedi 2002).

In the local media environment, where journalists champion local grievances, the "outing" of sex offenders is a "coming together" of media and community activism in the face of (usually) political or policy grievances caused by the world external to those communities. In the case of anti-paedophile campaigns, this raises the interesting point that while releasing paedophiles from prison is very controversial,

there appears a “right minded” consensus that local papers seek to articulate and cultivate. As Silverman and Wilson (2002) suggest, hostility to the practice of housing paedophiles without local consultation is one such area of consensus and a consequence of community grievances about this practice residing on the margin of the agenda for police, probation services, councils and other agencies.[iii]

Research design and case study

At this juncture, we turn our attention toward findings from a case study of one local news event set in motion by leaking of information by the Nottingham branch of the Prison Officers Association (POA) to Nottingham’s *Evening Post* newspaper. Thus, in May 1999, the paper received information from POA whistle blowers that the Home Office was secretly building accommodation for paedophiles inside the prison grounds. The Home Office and its official representatives immediately became the focus of local anger. We provide some relevant details of the paper’s response to the news leak in order to sample the flavour of mediated opposition to the housing plan. However, our principal aim is to explore the normally hidden dynamics surrounding the shifting local news frame on housing paedophiles in Nottingham. This has involved talking to journalists and sources, to try to get beyond the text to explore the dynamics that influenced the paper’s framing of the Home Office plan.

While the dynamics of journalist-source relations in this case study of the local press are complex, the decision taken to house paedophiles inside Nottingham Jail is less so. The housing plan (it was never a formal paedophile housing policy as such) was born out of political necessity. This is illustrated by the difficulties of housing two high profile paedophiles, Sydney Cooke and Robert Oliver (one of whom was

eventually housed inside Nottingham Jail). Each had been convicted of child sexual offences prior to a 1997 Sex Offenders Act, which otherwise would have required their movements after release to be supervised.[iv] Both had received death threats while in prison and were reportedly in fear for their lives. Efforts to house the men in probation and bail hostels had resulted in over 40 public disorder incidents ostensibly caused by local newspaper demands that they be removed from their area.

This helps to make sense of the Home Office decision to develop Crown property sites to house high profile paedophiles. The benefit of using Crown property is that secure accommodation for paedophiles can be provided without any official, lengthy, public consultation process[v] - and the concomitant dangers of public disorder and vigilantism. Amongst Crown property identified as secure enough to house paedophiles was Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Nottingham, a high security Category A prison in the East Midlands of England. Housing paedophiles inside prison grounds can therefore be seen as an attempt to find a stable solution to the political crisis of where to house sex offenders post-sentence.[vi] This was not a view shared by the major local opinion leader, the Nottingham-based *Evening Post* newspaper.

Nottingham *Evening Post:* news discourses and frames

Owned by Northcliffe Newspapers Group Limited, Nottingham's *Evening Post* newspaper is part of a stable of 106 regional titles. It is Nottingham's only paid-for local newspaper and has a monopoly position in a city and region of about 350,000 inhabitants. It is currently ranked 12th in The Newspaper Society's 2004 league table of Top UK Regional Evening Ranked by Circulation. It has a circulation of 75963 (JICREG 2005), though industry figures suggest that local newspapers are read by an

average of 2.7 readers per copy sold (The Newspaper Society 2004). This takes the paper's average daily readership to around 205,000.

A content analysis was conducted on the *Evening Post's* coverage of the plans to house paedophiles in Nottingham prison. The *Evening Post* reported on the paedophile housing plan from 20 May 1999 until 19 July 1999 (a total of 61 days), when the first resident moved in. Across this period the paper carried a total of 91 items on the topic. Sixty per cent of items were news stories, 33 per cent of items were readers' letters devoted exclusively to the paedophile unit and the remaining 7 per cent of items were editorial/opinion pieces. Of sixty-one news stories/editorial/opinion pieces, 15 per cent appeared as the front-page story. From the content analysis we have identified two distinct news frames, which shifted from (i) opposition to the Home Office plan and anger over Government silence and lack of local consultation about the plan; to (ii) promotion of a public information campaign about risk management strategies for paedophiles living in the local community. The following selected examples illustrate the flavour of the local paper's news coverage.

For example, the paper reported how "Stunned prison officers contacted the *Evening Post* after being told about the plans at an internal briefing". It continued: "Neil Mason, secretary of the Nottingham branch of the Prison Officers' Association, said: 'They could not have picked a worst place. It is dangerous for us and for the local people and their children'" (20 May 1999). The following day's front-page headline confirmed apparent official Government silence about the plan: "Home Office stays tight-lipped on city sex offender plan" (22 May 1999). It quoted a prison officer: "How can we have open Government when there is no consultation on plans like

these? No one in the community was told a thing". An accompanying editorial noted: "Answers have not been forthcoming from Nottingham Prison or the Home Office". Two days later, the paper confirmed its formal position on the issue: "We insist the Home Secretary thinks again. If he does not we pledge to give the people of Nottingham as much information as we can about the people he sends".

Within weeks a second news frame emerged focusing on plans to manage future paedophile-related risks. Under the headline, "Notts police and probation service explain their joint plan to protect local people as paedophile unit is prepared: contract to reduce risk" (8 June 1999), the paper reproduced a question-and-answer-session involving local police and probation officials and a Home Office spokesman. A subsequent article, "Those for and against the plan have a say" (10 June 1999), incorporated local politicians and protestors opinions. A front-page article, "Sex fiend moves in: first arrival at paedophile unit" (19 July 1999), reported that "The first of Britain's most notorious paedophiles was brought into Nottingham Prison today under a veil of darkness". On 23 July 1999, the paper published the front-page story, "The Real Demons". It reported a local probation official's view that the more significant child abuse issue for the region concerned paedophiles currently living incognito and thus "not as securely supervised in the community as the prison-housed paedophiles".

Dynamics of partisan journalism

The shifting *Evening Post* news frame raises a number of questions: How did the paper's initial news frame relate to Home Office communication of the prison plan? What fuelled the paper's hostility toward Home Office sources? Which local factors shaped the paper's subsequent framing of the housing issue? How were journalist-

source relations in the local environment subsequently constructed? To answer these questions we draw from a corpus of 12 semi-structured interviews conducted by the authors with key protagonists involved in the Nottingham anti-paedophile story.

We identified protagonists from the 61 news stories/editorials/opinion pieces noted above. They include: *Evening Post* journalists; national and local press officers, national and local penal professionals, and local community activists. The semi-structured interview schedule enabled detailed investigation of themed issues and topics including: the role of the local paper as a 'key player' in the community; the impact of local news values on journalists' relations with potential and actual news and information sources; and protagonists' own interactions and relations with local journalists.

By drawing on these interviews in the remainder of the article, we go beyond the news texts to explore interactions between journalists and national and local protagonists to make sense of the predictable and unpredictable factors that shaped direction of the paper's news frames. The influence of local partisanship on the framing of local news agendas, the dynamics of which have been signally ignored in the existing research up to this point, forms the context for our case study of the local paper's construction of sources on Home Office plans to house high profile paedophiles inside the grounds of HMP Nottingham.

Absence of a tailored communication strategy

Paedophiles and other sexual offenders must live somewhere, and the majority are free to live in the community (Wing 1998). However, the media's moral encoding of

the allocation of risks surrounding the release of sex offenders from prison has engendered a charged situation in which certain high profile sex offenders are simply not allowed to establish normal domestic living arrangements. Addressing the media's role in usurping this basic human right, the Head of Communications for the National Probation Service described the impact of media "outings" on the management of sex offenders released into the community post-sentence:

> Where sex offenders were being identified in local communities, local newspaper editors were taking an editorial decision to expel these people from their areas. The media, and it's the local media doing this, were getting into a real hunt mentality. The problems we had in housing sex offenders in the community was all local media driven. (Head of Communications, National Probation Service).

This helps to make sense of the Home Office decision to develop Crown property sites to house paedophiles thought to be at especial risk from vigilantism. However, because the majority of the British press are united in seeing the concerns of anti-paedophile groups as (generally) legitimate, a tight Home Office cabal maintained secrecy over plans to house paedophiles inside HMP Nottingham.

> There is now a sort of neurosis within the Home Office that if we let outside agencies know about our plans, then they're going to leak it to the press. You know there are very real temptations out there, both for money but also to get it out of their patch. If you look at a lot of news coverage about where these

> leaks [about paedophiles] come from, you can detect they come from official sources. (Chief Probation Officer, Home Office)

As implementation of the Home Office plan proceeded, and as more agencies were included in local planning, policy disputes could not be maintained within the parameters of Home Office secrecy. Indeed, the Home Office are the most heavily leaked against of all Government departments, and reflects the degree to which it must engage with "permeable external bodies", such as the prison service (Walker 2000). Accordingly, there was no attempt to consider a communication strategy and press offices, nationally and locally, had no knowledge of what was being planned:

> That is one of the reasons why the Nottingham prison, police and probation services were kept in the dark and under-informed by the Home Office. They were only brought into the loop at the last minute. This explains why information was not widely shared around the Home Office, and it certainly wasn't something that we on the press desk were aware of until information came out from a leak inside the prison. That all happened without our involvement. If we'd known about the [paedophile] unit, we would have advised strategies for putting information into the public domain. (Senior press officer, Home Office criminal justice press desk)

The press officer's point is a useful reminder that even the most powerful of state institutions are never insulated from the need for effective strategic action (Schlesinger 1990). Indeed, in the case of the Home Office, once the POA had leaked information to the press (thus rendering the Home Office Press Office under pressure

to release specific details about the plan), their effectiveness as an information source was limited. Moreover, the press office were hindered in the immediate post-leak period by their own lack of information about what was being planned and why:

> Straight away you're thinking "how can we bring this back into some sort of control". The information has leaked out. It's out of our control completely. We've got no stake in it. We're immediately on the back foot because we've been doing something covertly and secretively. The problem we had is that we are trying to work away behind the scenes as an authoritative source, and then coming at you is the local paper saying "But don't you know there's a school nearby"? The problem was that the paper's editor saw it that information had leaked out and it was supposed to be secret. We were always going [to be] on the wrong foot from then on. (Home Office press officer)

There is, then, a reactive quality to the Home Office's subsequent enterprise of dealing with the local newspaper's partisan concern about a plan to house paedophiles near a local school (albeit within a secure prison environment). This rendered Home Office communication professionals unable to redefine the interpretative dimensions of the paedophile housing debate – i.e. that it might provide an innovative solution for making communities safe. Nevertheless, it may also be the case that the Home Office cabal that made the decision to house paedophiles in Nottingham were simply prepared to adopt a crude "sit tight" strategy given the inevitable public hostility that would follow any decision to house paedophiles in communities. Certainly the local journalist who reported the story in the *Evening Post* cites both blame and pragmatism toward the Home Office for the paper's initial framing of the story:

> The way the story developed was the fault of the Home Office and their disastrous handling of the story. The lack of information, the fact that they weren't willing to speak, allowed the fear that these people would be free to come and go, that paedophiles would be walking the streets of Nottingham, free to do what they choose. We wanted to put these points to the Home Office but they didn't have any answers. They certainly weren't saying that they didn't have any answers. They just weren't giving them. We just printed what we knew which was that some of the worst paedophiles in the country were coming to Nottingham. (Journalist, *Evening Post*)

Hostility toward official sources

The notion that the Home Office practised a crude "sit tight" strategy also makes sense in relation to the disputes then spilling out into the public arena about how to manage paedophiles in the community. Here we acknowledge Schlesinger's (1989) useful point that when authoritative sources are in disagreement (or, as in this case, are *perceived* to be in manifest disagreement with public opinion) this offers news media room to manoeuvre, interpretatively and evaluatively (cf. Reilly and Kitzinger 1997). This is especially the case in the context of intense public antipathy toward paedophiles. But it is also apparent in relation to growing antipathy toward those deemed responsible for releasing paedophiles from prison. Indeed, the notion that the Home Office was strategically ignoring local concerns underpinned the Deputy Editor's suggestion that his paper acted as a voice of/for the local community:

> From the local point of view we saw this metropolitan arrogance about why do we [i.e. the Home Office] need to persuade you, the local population. Why do we even need to debate it with you? What's the point of argument when you're having it? There didn't seem to be any need to discuss it. But we understood the needs of our constituency and we knew there was no support for [housing] paedophiles here. We decided to voice that opposition or we would fail to serve our readers. (Deputy Editor, *Evening Post*)

Indeed, the *Evening Post's* opposition toward the Home Office gave the paper ammunition for "politicking" with the Government department deemed directly responsible for releasing convicted paedophiles into the community. The Deputy Editor went on to explain how, in the context of concern about the location of the unit in Nottingham, the paper acted to voice specific grievances within the community:

> The job of local papers is to know when to say [that] things are right or wrong for the community. It's not always easy. But when it comes to paedophiles its much easier. The Home Office chose a location, which is in spitting distance to a local school, in the middle of a residential area. It's so obviously wrong and [we] were clear it was not safe. They [the Home Office] may have had a sound argument for [building] such a unit, but we had concerns about whether Nottingham was the best place to put it. We wanted to put those [concerns] to the Home Office. (Deputy Editor, *Evening Post*)

This comment could be interpreted as a straightforward "nimby" (i.e. "not in my back yard") response from the Deputy Editor. In other words, he appears to be advocating

that Nottingham's imminent "paedophile problem" be removed to another locale. But interpreting this comment solely in terms of "nimbyism" (in the sense that the term is often used pejoratively to signal a "small-minded" parochial attitude) obfuscates the political role of the local paper in voicing grievances on behalf of the community. Indeed, as our earlier description of *Evening Post* news frames makes clear, local grievances were constructed as *legitimate*, and because they also fitted with an established hostile anti-paedophile media frame, this helped place the paper at the centre of mediation between the Home Office and the local community.

Nevertheless, the problem remains that "nimbyism" (if this is what it is) appears indifferent to any attempt to resolve the national (indeed international) problem of where paedophiles should be housed post-sentence. But this is not necessarily the concern of local newspapers whose primary interest is to manifest *a priori* allegiance to their community regardless of other concerns (in this case, if not housed in Nottingham then where should paedophiles be housed?). This is evident in the Deputy Editor's comments on Home Office attempts to set up the paedophile unit without local consultation:

> Although we all try to be very grown up about it, it would be ridiculous to suggest that our attitude to the Home Office wasn't affected by them trying to get the unit developed on the quiet. They had taken a conscious decision to hide this from us, and once you do that you can't expect the media to deal with you in the normal way. We are the local paper, so we're obviously on the side of local people. (Deputy Editor, *Evening Post*)

The Deputy Editor's comment, "We are the local paper, so we're obviously on the side of local people", reflects the symbolic importance of placing the paper at the centre of an active defence of community interests. In the context of the paedophile unit, local partisanship is understandable in relation to apparent divisions between public and professional opinion on the issue of "what to do with" paedophiles. His view that the Home Office plan was "developed on the quiet" also helps makes sense of the paper's hostility toward Home Office officials over their lack of consultation with people living in the vicinity of the planned unit. The journalist who produced much of the copy during this period explained the evaluative scope this offered:

> We should not get away from the fact that there was absolutely no local consultation, which was the real local story for me. It would still have been a big local newspaper story, given the nature of the guys who were moving in, but I don't think the story wouldn't have been given the legs it had. I tried to get as much information from the Home Office as I could but didn't get much. It was frustrating but we were also able to develop the story locally in terms of community reaction [to the unit]. (Journalist, *Evening Post*)

Constructing local sources

The Home Office press office became very quickly aware of their limited potential for re-establishing some degree of anchorage over the fluid local meaning now attached to the prison unit issue. Consequently, they decided that Nottingham was the most appropriate geographical and political terrain on which ongoing media interest in the paedophile unit should be handled. Responsibility for future media relations was therefore given to a locally based Assistant Chief Constable and a senior Assistant

Chief of Probation. The absence of prior media relations between the Home Office and Nottingham-based media organisations also contributed to this decision:

> The problem for us is we don't have regular contact with local media, so we start from limited local knowledge on what the media environment is, or what local reactions were likely to be. It was a frantic game of catch-up. We needed to make a difference in the reporting by building a relationship with media at the local level. It was clear that we needed to make some kind of difference with the *Evening Post*. They had latched on to this as some kind of campaigning issue. (Press Officer, Home Office)

Notwithstanding the press officer's apparently decisive comment about "building a relationship with media at the local level", media relations in Nottingham actually took second place to a more direct communications strategy with concerned local individuals (e.g. elected politicians) and groups (residents groups, anti-paedophile groups). In other words, the professionals charged with managing the paedophiles to be housed in HMP Nottingham prioritised responding to the concerns of local people while simply fielding questions from the national and local media:

> We actually decided to ignore the media [agenda] and just respond to whatever they asked as honestly as we could. We made a firm decision to say that they would be a risk and that our job would be to minimise it. The second key message was: "And we don't have a choice in this. This is going to happen". (Senior Assistant Chief of Probation)

The local journalist responsible for much of the *Evening Post* coverage described how the initial framing of the prison story was now able to shift in response to the locally inflected insights of those charged with responding to media interest in the unit:

> The Home Office handed over the problem to these two local guys. It was clever really because they were more accessible, more informed, and above all had a local take [i.e. understanding] on the risks involved. They probably didn't want these paedophiles around any more than we did. They had to live with the problem like the rest of us. (Journalist, *Evening Post*)

The journalist singled out the probation professional for especial praise for his local news management skills ("probably the finest piece of local news management you could find") because it was he that provided the dynamic for shifting the paper's news frame away from hostility to the prison plan toward a more inclusive campaign against child sexual abuse per se. Identifying the "Real Demons" story as the turning point in the *Post's* coverage of the prison housing issue, the journalist explained how he was deliberately offered an alternative story concerning the extent of sexual danger to children from within the local Nottingham community:

> The protest stories died down after [named penal professional] fed me the line that the real [child sexual abuse] danger in Nottingham was not from Smith and Oliver [paedophiles now housed in the prison], but from members of your own family. When he gave me the line that there are people in Nottingham who are of equal danger to Smith and Oliver my eyes lit up. I thought: "front page story, no question at all". For us, it was a priceless warning to every local

> parent. It was together let's look for signs of child abuse. It was obviously a way of moving the story from the prison. (Journalist, *Evening Post*)

Indeed, shortly after publication of the "Real Demons" story the *Evening Post* initiated a child protection campaign (not specifically anchored in the locality) entitled: "Protecting Our Children" (2000-2002). The campaign demanded use of mental health laws to detain paedophiles. Under the headline, "Living with an evil in our midst", the paper noted that "despite the controversy that continues to surround the [Nottingham paedophile] unit and the people who live there, those with responsibility for running the scheme believe it HAS been a success" (4 February 2002: 6 original emphasis). Asked to reflect on the development of this campaign in the context of the paedophile unit accepting its first residents, the Deputy Editor noted the influence of local professionals in manoeuvring the paper's anti-paedophile agenda:

> It was important to move this story on. Every story has its natural news cycle. The local's put [up]on by the Home Office saw [this] and that helped. You've got to balance the responsibility the paper has to make a difference locally with keeping people informed and interested enough in issues to buy the paper. Remember a local newspaper's reputation has to be the ability to change things and we couldn't offer a credible alternative [to where the paedophiles should be housed]. (Deputy Editor, *Evening Post*).

The candid nature of the Deputy Editor's comments ("a local newspaper's reputation has to be the ability to change things and we couldn't offer a credible alternative … ")

reveals a useful point about local as distinct from national news values. It is that the local press' (in)ability to "change things" in the community can and does influence what local journalists judge to be newsworthy. That the *Evening Post* could not offer a "credible alternative" to where paedophiles should be housed confirmed their need to "move this story on". In short, while the movement of paedophiles into HMP Nottingham has a high local news value, the paper's need to appear to be able to "make a difference locally" is a much more dominant news value.

Conclusion

The normally hidden partisan dynamics revealed in this particular British case study highlight how familiar processes of framing, agenda setting and journalist-source relationships (see McQuail 2005) are inflected by the nature of local news production; i.e. local news frames and agendas are constructed with the relationship between the local paper and local publics firmly in mind. For this reason journalist-source relations in the local and regional news production environment do not take quite the same form as they do in the national news production context (Ericson et al. 1989).

With this in mind, we have sought to understand the dynamics surrounding the construction of local news frames on a localised anti-paedophile housing issue. The case study presented here, of shifting hostility/preference toward distant/local sources of information about the management of paedophiles in one Midlands community, offers an unusually detailed account, from journalists and key protagonists, of the dynamics of local partisanship at the height of intense anti-paedophile sentiment in Great Britain in the late 1990s.

Whilst the research we present is clearly a parochial inflection on a national issue, it is nevertheless the case that local newspapers remain an important agenda setter, and that this has been largely overlooked in existing agenda setting research. The role of local journalists is also crucial in framing the parameters of local media debate. In the controversy concerning paedophiles released into the community, local media is the principal terrain on which current disenchantment with policies about "what to do with" paedophiles is played out. It is therefore crucial that we better understand the partisan context within which journalists frame the terms of that debate.

In trying to tease out aspects of the "local dynamic" that underpins the shifting local news frame in our case study, we are mindful that anti-paedophile sentiment in the country is a salient factor in the *Evening Post's* hostility toward the Home Office. The key point here is that the terms of local (as well as national and international) debate on paedophiles appears circumscribed by a paucity of *mature* public debate about "what to do with" paedophiles. This goes some way toward understanding why the Home Office did not consult locally about housing paedophiles in Nottingham and was unwilling to use local news media to debate the issue of where and how paedophiles should be housed.

Nevertheless, for all the discomfiture that POA whistle blowing presumably caused the Home Office, the plan to house paedophiles inside HMP Nottingham *was* enacted and the paedophile unit received its first residents within two months of the POA leak. It remains in situ inside the jail. Perhaps then the Home Office cabal that set the plan in motion was *correct* in its decision to not enter into an already vexed public debate

about housing paedophiles in Nottingham (and elsewhere). Certainly, there can be little doubt that the *Evening Post's* hostility toward the Home Office was more or less inevitable given that anti-paedophile sentiment includes antagonism toward those officials perceived as releasing paedophiles to strike at will within communities.

In this context the partisan dynamic that shaped the later interaction between the local journalist/deputy editor and their local news sources was dependent on a real and/or imagined notion that no-one in the community actually wanted the paedophiles to be housed in Nottingham but that the community was going to have to make the best of it since no alternative could be found to where the paedophiles should be housed. In terms of the journalist-source relationship a clash between local journalists and local penal professionals was the last thing the local paper needed as it sought to establish terrain on which it could maintain its position as a key player in the local community.

Notes

[i] The authors gratefully acknowledge the advice of David Deacon on earlier drafts of this paper. Thanks also to Bob Franklin and the helpful comments of anonymous reviewers.

[ii] Jewkes (2004) notes, for example, that that the Home Office has used the iconic image of the predatory paedophile "hanging around" on street corners to illustrate the paedophile issue for its own promotional purposes.

[iii] Responding to community grievances, the Government introduced a Criminal Justice and Court Services Act (2001), with a statutory requirement for criminal justice agencies to consider community responses and concerns when making their decisions regarding management of sex offenders. Further, in December 2001, Home Secretary, David Blunkett highlighted a commitment to local community involvement in Multi-Agency Public Protection Panels (MAPPS) where the police, probation and social services share information about high-risk offenders living in the local area to manage the risk from released sex-offenders (Silverman and Wilson 2002).

[iv] Since 1997, persons convicted of a sexual offence in England and Wales are legally required to sign the Sex Offenders Registers (Scotland and Northern Ireland have similar requirements). It gives police, probation and other relevant statutory agencies details of names and addresses and other personal information to help track the identities and whereabouts of released sex offenders.

[v] Similarly, in December 2000, a local housing officer in South London leaked information to the local newspaper, the *Wandsworth Guardian*, that the Home Office was planning to re-open a hostel to house high profile paedophiles. The plan was

formulated without consultation with the local community and led to a successful campaign to overturn the decision (for details see Silverman and Wilson 2002).

[vi] The paedophiles that opted to live in this unit were subject to a tenancy agreement, which included giving prison authorities twenty-four hour notice of intention to leave the unit, and those who did so agreed to be accompanied by uniformed police officers. The tenancy agreement also contained very strict criteria on the age, identity and criminal background of visitors.

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