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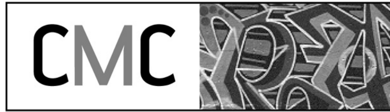

Paedophiles in the community: Inter-agency conflict, news leaks and the local press

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Abstract

This article explores the leaking of confidential information about secret Home Office plans to house convicted paedophiles within a local community (albeit inside a prison). It argues that a politics of paedophilia has emerged in which inter-agency consensus on the issue of 'what to do' with high-profile sex offenders has broken down. Accordingly, the article situates newspaper 'outing' of paedophiles in the community in relation to vigilante journalism and leaked information from official agencies. The article then presents research findings from a case study of news events set in train following a whistle-blowing reaction by Prison Officers' Association officials to Home Office plans. Drawing from a corpus of 10 interviews with journalists and key protagonists in the story, the article discusses both the dynamics of whistle blowing about paedophiles and also what happens after the whistle has blown.

Key words

inter-agency conflict; local press; news leaks; paedophiles in the community; vigilante journalism

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INTRODUCTION

In April 1998, towns and cities across southern England were the setting for a modern-day vigilante hunt. A posse of journalists was seeking a 68-year-old man recently thought to have moved to the region. Details of the hunt were widely reported but their quarry, Robert Oliver, was reluctant to make his whereabouts known. He had good reason to fear being identified, however. Oliver had just been declared Britain's most predatory paedophile and child killer. Having served 11 years for the rape and murder of a 14-year-old boy, his crime ensured that that he would receive little public sympathy. Indeed, so reviled was Oliver that rumours of his presence in a community were enough to bring angry crowds onto the streets demanding his removal. A number of protestors carried

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nooses as a stark reminder that Oliver's presence in their community would never be tolerated.

Britain's then Home Secretary, Jack Straw, mindful of police disquiet about mounting anti-paedophile protests, entered the debate on the hunt for Oliver by confirming that anyone attacking sexual offenders including suspected paedophiles would face prosecution. But he went further and condemned vigilantism as proof that public 'outing' of sex offenders was irresponsible and led to public disorder. It is ironic then that the catalyst for media vigilantism in this instance was police officers themselves. Senior officers in a number of regions, worried that Oliver might settle in their area, had leaked details of his whereabouts to the media in a bid to get him removed.

It worked. Although legally a free man, Oliver now resides in purpose-built accommodation inside the grounds of Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Nottingham. This is not the end of the story, however. The route that led to Oliver to agree voluntary incarceration also forms the subject matter for another public paedophile drama, this time involving leaks of information by the Prison Officers' Association (POA) to the local press. In the case study described later, the events that unfolded shed light on the dynamics of whistle blowing in the context of contested policy about 'what to do with' paedophiles post-sentence, but also on how reported leaking of information to the media helps frame the meaning of 'paedophiles in the community'.

The leaking of information to the media is a valuable newsworthy commodity because it allows news media to report what is news before it happens, but also to produce speculative discourses as to the meaning of the event yet to happen (Jaworski et al., 2004). In the case of news leaks about paedophiles in the community, leaks have extended their range of functions, from reporting scandals and policy manoeuvrings, to become a weapon in the political armoury of organizations against one another. At the same time, however, it is by no means certain that communities are rendered more secure by the actions of those involved in leaking confidential information.

To explore what happens after confidential information is leaked to news media, this article draws on findings from a case study of a local news event triggered by a POA news leak about Home Office plans to house high-profile paedophiles including Robert Oliver inside the grounds of HMP Nottingham. The article then goes on to discuss what happens after the whistle has blown. While whistle blowing may give rise to some short-term symbolic benefits to organizations affected by policy manoeuvrings set in train by the mediated politics of paedophilia (Critcher, 2002a), the longer-term impact is likely to be a continued narrowing of the media frame through which the public makes sense of the 'paedophile-in-the-community' issue.

PAEDOPHILES IN THE COMMUNITY: MORAL POPULISM AND MORAL PANICS

The iconic status of paedophiles like Robert Oliver has come to symbolize the ultimate 'neighbour from hell' (Kitzinger, 1999). It assumes a particular representation of menace,

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however, as part of popular knowledge that there is 'obvious' risk to the community by releasing known paedophiles from prison into the community (Collier, 2001). While popular knowledge jars with the relatively low re-offending rates of child sexual offenders (Soothill et al., 1998; Silverman and Wilson, 2002), public concerns about paedophiles have become absorbed within a rhetoric of contemporary punitive populism reinforced by the popular press and other agencies (Evans, 2003).

Thus, even normally liberal newspapers have reinforced the figure of 'the paedophile' as dangerous. An editorial from *The Independent* newspaper, arising from released 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' (27 April 1998: 8). The conundrum this creates is neatly summed up 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' (Marr, 1998: 23).

The practice of releasing paedophiles from prison underpins public perception that they receive 'soft' punishment (Silverman and Wilson, 2002). A common assumption is that those involved in management of paedophiles are easily deceived and unable to effectively supervise their charges (see Franklin and Parton's (1991) account of news reporting of 'easily duped' social workers, whose inability to supervise wayward children renders them more rather than less at risk) and therefore the only appropriate penal response is to jail them without possibility of release. The notion that paedophiles are inherently recidivist is also used to make the case that they are beyond capacity for rehabilitation, which is also interpreted as a lenient penal response (Howitt, 1995).

However, as a number of commentators have argued (Jenkins, 1993; 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. Certainly, as Critcher (2000) points out, 'the paedophile' perhaps more than any other demonized group meets all the classic criteria of a moral panic:

> *It takes a real but marginal threat, magnifies it into a folk devil and proceeds to advocate policy measures with an unshakeable belief in the need to exorcise the demon it has conjured up. Like most moral panics, it distorts the hidden problem in favour of an observable enemy. (p. 12)*

The notion of the paedophile as 'an observable enemy' can be seen in newspaper reports of the Oliver case described earlier. Shortly after Oliver's release from prison a *Guardian* newspaper headline declared: 'Police Warn of Threat to Young Males: Town on Paedophile Alert' (15 October 1997: 2). Alongside a photograph of a semi-naked Oliver with bared teeth, the report noted how 'Schools and youth clubs in Brighton were yesterday put on high alert after it was revealed that the convicted paedophile killer Robert Oliver is staying in town'. The *Daily Mail* (15 October 1997: 3) also reported on Oliver's arrival in Brighton and included details of his homosexual relationship with fellow paedophile Sydney Cook. It asked: 'Could these evil men be living next door to you?' – providing photographs and last known whereabouts.

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Brighton's local newspaper, the *Evening Argus*, also ran a front-page story identifying Oliver (using the same photograph) with the headline: 'Beware This Evil Pervert'. The paper described hysteria in the town following reports that Oliver was spotted in a number of local parks 'eyeing up the children' (14 October 1997: 1). Readers were asked to 'be vigilante but not vigilantes' in letting the newspaper know if Oliver was seen in the city. Commenting on the relationship between moral populism and moral panics (though not in these terms), Andrew Marr (1998) has explained how paedophile hysteria is 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' (p. 23).

The media discourse of children at risk from 'the monster among us' is compelling and often difficult to refute (though journalists like Marr have tried to do so). According to Kelly (1996), confused application of the word 'paedophile' is to blame because it distorts differences of meaning surrounding child exploitation – a problem that results in male sexual power remaining hidden in favour of more easily identifiable threats (e.g. the paedophile as 'sick individual'). Kitzinger (2004) has added her weight to this argument by introducing the concept of 'media templates' that collapse definitional complexities in favour of shorthand terminology that journalists and the public use to make sense of particular issues. The notion of 'the paedophile' as a predatory prowler on our streets is one such template.

In this context of discursive closure surrounding child sexual abuse, moving beyond the moral panic thesis id advocated in order to make it clear that media fascination with 'the paedophile' obscures the more complex reality that child sexual abuse constitutes a wide range of offences currently bracketed as 'paedophilia'. The same point has been forcibly made by Parris (1998): 'What is the act of paedophilia? The word describes an immense variety of possible acts, ranging from the most heinous to the venial . . . To describe all these as "paedophilia" lends the patina of science to a category so wide as to be meaningless' (p. 2).

The concept 'paedophilia' only makes sense in relation to the construction of the paedophile discourse in the national public arena. It is in this mediated environment, where there is a blending of media and public agendas, that the paedophile discourse has its most powerful political effect: 'At times of perceived crisis "popular knowledge", voiced on the one hand by the press and on the other by community activism, becomes the more significant political force. Unlike most panics, paedophilia touched the everyday anxieties of parents. The discourse was grounded' (p. 115).

Such 'grounded' concern about soft punishment for paedophiles has led newspapers to become their own primary definers on this issue. For example, some have taken the perceived threat that paedophiles pose to communities into their own hands because they perceive public protection agencies as ineffective and unable to fulfil their statutory responsibilities (Cowburn and Dominelli, 2001). The rape and 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 (Rainer et al., 2003). In Britain, media interest in paedophiles released from prison and allowed to live anonymously in

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the community was crystallized by the abduction and murder, in 2000, of seven-year-old Sarah Payne by a paedophile, Roy Whiting.

NEWS MEDIA AND INTER-AGENCY CONFLICT

Following Whiting's conviction, press reports focused on the consensus view that Whiting, despite being a dangerous predator, had been allowed to roam freely and kill Sarah Payne. Whiting's conviction therefore gave British newspapers and 'pro-child' pressure groups including the NSPCC, an opening to argue that there existed a public policy vacuum in which the authorities appeared uncertain – indeed incompetent – about how to deal with risks posed by paedophiles released from prison into the community. However, the press's role in mediating between policy and public agendas is by no means relevant only to the issue of paedophiles in the community.

For example, Schlesinger et al. (1991) have noted how crime and criminal justice fields intersect with conflicts between agencies, which spill over into the public arena. They point out that the policy community use news media to address each other and suggest this 'raises questions about a conception of 'primary definition' that tends to assume a closed circle of definers' (p. 404). In the context of public concern about risks posed by paedophiles, the 'circle of definers' temporarily extended to include sections of the news media that had sought to redefine risks to communities both from paedophiles but also those penal professionals failing to protect communities from harm.

In the case of Roy Whiting, for example, press reports criticized probation officials for failing to prevent Sarah Payne's murder. This helped set in train processes that led policy makers and professionals to lose control of the paedophile agenda (Kitzinger, 1999). Moreover, the policy community faced a powerful press agenda in which popular knowledge about 'obvious risks' posed by paedophiles impacted on public communication about management of these risks. This extension to the circuit of policy communication (Miller et al., 1998; Eldridge, 1999) concerning management of paedophiles post-sentence resulted in the press agenda on paedophiles becoming pivotal. As Critcher (2002a) puts it: 'It mediates between policy and public agendas, constructs the public agenda and seeks to influence policy agendas' (p. 530).

The mass circulation British Sunday tabloid newspaper, the *News of the World*, exemplifies this mediator role. The paper's editor, Rebekah Wade, gained prominence following Whiting's conviction by pursuing a 'name and shame' campaign (Critcher, 2002b; Bell, 2002; Lawler, 2002) that promised to reveal the identity of every known child sex offender. The paper's announcement of its 'For Sarah' campaign put it thus:

> *There are 110,000 child sex offenders in Britain*[1] *. . . one for every square mile. The murder of Sarah Payne has proved police monitoring of these perverts is not enough. So we are revealing WHO they are and WHERE they are . . . starting today.*

The paper also demanded 'real' life sentences and new legislation it referred to as 'Sarah's law' (after the Sarah Payne case) giving communities the right to know if paedophiles live in their area (Cowburn and Dominelli, 2001).

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Opposition to the *News of the World*'s name-and-shame campaign came from critics both internal and external to the world of journalism. For example, one former tabloid editor criticized the paper's actions as a populist publicity stunt designed to increase falling sales (Greenslade, 2000). External criticism came from the Association of Chief Officers of Probation, whose complaint to the Press Complaints Commission pointed out that many of those identified were likely to have had information about them leaked from official documents and confidential case files (Collier, 2001). These criticisms did not deter Wade from insisting that the paper would continue to publish photographs and whereabouts of the 110,000 sex offenders.

In practice, however, the *News of the World* published 79 photographs of sex offenders. Announcing their decision to halt further publication of photographs, the paper declared success in its 'For Sarah' campaign by announcing it joined a Government committee to draw up paedophile risk assessment procedures. The paper argued that this was the result of it being in tune with the public mood. It also made a clear distinction between the paper's vigilance on this issue and regrettable public acts of vigilantism (Bell, 2002). However, the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders countered that *unmanaged publicity* – leaked information – was now a cause for concern for agencies working in penal policy.

This was illustrated in 2000 by events on the Paulsgrove estate in Portsmouth, on Britain's south coast. Community grievances sparked by the *News of the World*'s naming of a paedophile living on the estate, led to street protests involving the estate's women and children (Bell, 2002). Condemned by the broadsheet press for being 'irrational' and the 'wrong kind of mothers' (Lawler, 2002: 108), protestors were represented as a working-class lynch mob fuelled by vigilantism. Moreover, according to the Association of Chief Officers of Probation, naming and shaming child sexual offenders not only stokes unwarranted fears about the extent of the 'paedophile threat', but directly undermines the work of agencies and organizations involved in community supervision of paedophiles (Byrne, 2003).

Consequently, the *News of the World*'s claim that 'community notification' protects the community from paedophiles is a moot point (Presser and Gunnison, 1999; Silverman and Wilson, 2002). What is certain is that under the workings of the Sex Offenders Act 1997, sex offenders released from prison have the right to local authority housing but only a few probation professionals have the right to know where they live. As Critcher (2002a) points out: 'Local newspapers gave voice to these grievances and sought to defend their communities' (p. 525). Indeed, it is salient to point out that the *News of the World* borrowed the idea of naming and shaming from local press campaigns aimed at protecting communities from paedophiles in their area.

VIGILANTE JOURNALISM AND COMMUNITIES AT RISK

In their special role as symbolic representatives of community (Aldridge, 2003) local newspapers address concerns and sensitivities of the community in which they circulate. Surprisingly, though, scholarly myopia has obscured the particular 'concerns and

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sensitivities' of local and regional newspapers; as if news agendas formed outside of the metropolis add little understanding as to how 'popular knowledge' is formed. As Cottle (1993) puts it in the context of his production study of regional TV news in Britain: 'On grounds of audience size alone . . . this form of news cannot be considered marginal to students of the news media' (p. 37). Indeed, the study of local news media can also tell us much about the way in which popular forms of news journalism mediate issues of public concern. This view is apparent in relation to anti-paedophile stories, many of which are rooted in Britain's local communities.

Since the 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).

In this context, local journalists covering the release of paedophiles from prison into their particular locale must navigate popular knowledge about the nature and extent of risks involved while constructing a factual, comprehensive, style of reportage that includes interpretation and opinion relevant to their local readership. Langer's (1998) examination of TV news stories on 'communities at risk' makes the point that such stories are routinely organized around the narrative form of news texts as much as institutionally sanctioned context. The significance of the point here is that a key element in the basic form of local news coverage about paedophiles in the community concern the disruption that such an event causes the local community, and how that disruption can be minimized through a variety of cultural codings such that a symbolic return to harmony and equilibrium is achieved within affected communities.

In the case of paedophiles living incognito in the community, this has led to some newspapers mobilizing a 'rogue's gallery' (Bell, 2002) of identifiably 'risky characters' whose cultural coding as 'dangerous paedophiles' goes some way towards overcoming the disruption that they cause communities following their identification as dangerous/threatening. Once identified as such, the task of bringing the community together to eradicate the perceived threat can then begin. The sense of the organic nature of the 'assumed community' that is at work here may not all that precise, but the point is that community at risk stories give local news media opportunities to present themselves as key players in protecting the community from harm attributed to dangerous forces normally external to the community.

Seeking to rid communities of these dangerous forces suggests why, as early as 1996, local newspapers in Britain made use of confidential police files – including some leaked by the Scout Association – to identify paedophiles living in their region (Travis and Ahmed, 1998). As Kitzinger (2004) puts it: 'many of the national stories about paedophiles began life on the front page of local papers and some neighbourhood protests were sparked by

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local press reports rather than vice versa' (p. 20). 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 a literal physical removal.

This point is illustrated by briefly returning to the case of Robert Oliver. Along with Sidney Cooke, he was convicted of child sexual offences prior to a 1997 Sex Offenders Act, which otherwise would have required their movements after release to be supervised. Both had received death threats while in prison and were in genuine fear for their lives. Efforts to house the men in probation hostels had resulted in over 40 public disorder incidents ostensibly caused by local newspaper demands that they be removed from their area. In one widely reported incident, a known associate of Oliver and Cooke (and who had recently been released from prison for child sexual abuse offences) was shot dead by assailants as he opened the door to his flat.

In seeking to make sense of such events it is important to recognize how popular notions of 'retribution' and 'just desserts' coalesce around the perception of statutory services as ineffective when it comes to protecting the public from paedophiles. Media intervention in managing the threat paedophiles pose to communities is a concern of agencies working with sex 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 neighbours.

But neither is this a straightforward 'not-in-my-back-yard' reaction towards 'outsiders' perceived as a threat to the moral and social order. In the local media environment, where journalists champion local grievances, the 'outing' of paedophiles constitutes 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. As Silverman and Wilson (2002) suggest, hostility to official agencies' practice of housing paedophiles in estates without local consultation is a consequence of community grievances about this practice residing on the margin of the agenda for police, probation services, councils and other agencies.[2]

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RESEARCH DESIGN AND CASE STUDY

At this juncture, attention now turns towards findings from a case study of one local news event set in motion by leaking of confidential information by an official agency (the Prison Officers' Association) to the Nottingham-based *Evening Post* newspaper. At the height of the anti-paedophile sentiment in 1999, the Home Office and its official representatives in the local environment became the focus of public anger over plans to house released paedophiles in Nottingham (albeit inside prison grounds). Some relevant details of the paper's published response to the news leak are included. However, the principal aim in this article is to explore the normally invisible dynamics surrounding the leaking of information to the local press. To do this, I draw from a corpus of 10 interviews with key sources and journalists, to try to get beyond the text to explore the complex political

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dynamics that framed the paper's initial and subsequent representation of the Home Office initiative. This primary research is used to highlight mixed fortunes associated with leaking of information.

HOUSING PROBLEMS AND A LOCAL SOLUTION

The discussion thus far has confirmed sensitivities surrounding the housing of paedophiles on their release from prison. However, paedophiles must live somewhere, and the majority remain free to live in the community (Wing, 1998). Addressing the media's role in usurping this basic right, the Head of Communications for the National Probation Service described the impact of media 'outings' on management of sex offenders post-sentence:

> *Where sex offenders were being publicly 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. (Interview, 24 January 2001)*

This comment helps to make sense of a decision, taken by the Home Office in 1999, to use Crown property to house paedophiles considered at risk from vigilantism. An immediate benefit is that stable accommodation can be provided without the need for a public consultation process – and concomitant dangers of public disorder. Among property identified as secure enough to house paedophiles was HMP Nottingham, in the East Midlands of England. The paedophiles that opted to live in the prison grounds were subject to a tenancy agreement, which included giving prison authorities 24-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 strict criteria on the age, identity and criminal background of visitors.

However, because the majority of the press are united in seeing the concerns of anti-paedophile groups as generally legitimate, a Home Office cabal maintained secrecy over plans to house paedophiles inside the prison. According to a Chief Probation Officer seconded to the Home Office:

> *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. (Interview, 12 February 2001)*

Certainly, it is the case that the Home Office are the most heavily leaked against Government department, which reflects the degree to which it must engage with 'permeable external bodies' (Walker, 2000). The result is that the Home Office does not always get its own way. For example, in December 2000, a local housing officer in South London leaked confidential information to the local newspaper, the *Wandsworth Guardian*, that

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the Home Office was secretly planning to reopen a hostel to house high-profile paedophiles and sex offenders. As with its HMP Nottingham plan, the Home Office appeared to have made its decision without local consultation. This caused outrage in the community and led to a successful campaign to overturn the decision (for details see Silverman and Wilson, 2002).

Among elites, information leaks are a major weapon in the political armoury of organizations against one another, as well as a strategically important tool of infighting between elites with political and professional goals. As the Chief Probation Officer explained:

> *The Home Office has to manage not only external media [relations] but the agendas and expectations of agencies that come under its umbrella [operations]. It means you sometimes have to take difficult decisions about whether to promote a particular initiative or keep quiet about it so as to keep various parties from undermining each other. In the Nottingham case, the latter was probably the only practical strategy because if a leak occurs in advance by one source then at least you can always try to question its accuracy. (Interview, 12 February 2001)*

Accordingly, there was no attempt to consider a public communication strategy and press offices, nationally and locally, had no knowledge of what was being planned. A senior press officer on the Home Office criminal justice press desk put it thus:

> *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. It explains why information about the prison [housing plan] 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. (Interview, 12 February 2001)*

FRAMING THE WHISTLE BLOWERS' FEARS

As implementation of the Home Office plan proceeded, and as more agencies were included in its local planning, inter-agency policy disputes, scepticism and outright dissensus could not be maintained within the parameters of Home Office secrecy. Thus, in May 1999, Nottingham's *Evening Post* newspaper[3] received information from whistle blowers in the local POA branch that the Home Office were secretly building a paedophile unit inside the grounds of the local prison. It reported that: '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: 1). The report went on to outline the POA view that this was a 'scandal of the highest order'.

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Two days later, under the headline 'Fear in the Heart of a Community', the paper outlined the conflict between the POA and the Home Office:

> *Neil Mason, secretary of the Nottingham branch of the Prison Officers' Association, said: 'Why should a prison look after civilians who have served their sentence?' He criticised the move saying: 'How can we have open Government when there is no consultation on plans like these? No one in the community was told a thing. They tried to get as far down the road as they could before anyone found out' . . . Another warder, who asked not to be named said: 'We have been told this has to be up and running as soon as possible. Our concern is that Nottingham will become home to some of the worst paedophiles from around the country. We also don't know how much access some of the current prisoners who are on duties such as gardening will have access to them. It could present a lot of problems and we are far from happy about it'. (22 May 1999: 3)*

A third *Evening Post* feature entitled 'Staff's Fear on Paedophile Bid' (25 May 1999: 2), linked POA and local community concerns about their non-consultation in the Home Office plan. It quotes both national and local POA officials:

> *Yes, the paedophile problem must be dealt with. But to dump them together in the heart of a residential area must be counter-productive. Paedophiles feed off each other's sick fantasies . . . We support the community's right to be consulted on this radical and potentially dangerous proposal.*

Once again, the report highlighted the POA view that lack of public consultation was a political scandal. At this juncture however, the paper's interest in the POA dispute with the Home Office begins to be reframed within its partisan promotion of community grievances about the housing plan.

Thus, within days of disclosing information about Home Office building plans, the POA found itself located outside the *Evening Post*'s developing news frame. Building on what the paper termed 'secret Home Office plans' to house paedophiles 'only yards from a primary school' (22 May 1999: 1), the paper developed a new interpretative frame of reference concerning anger and hostility in the community over alleged Home Office 'secrecy' (the implication being that Home Office plans were deliberately secret because local people would oppose it). Indeed, the paper's attention was now directed toward challenging the Home Office over its non-consultation with the local community. In short, POA whistle blowers – the authors of the leak – no longer figured within the paper's 'local injustice' news frame.

Explaining the move towards a local injustice news frame, the journalist responsible for the *Evening Post*'s copy during this period offered this interpretation of the POA leak:

> *The POA probably didn't think through how the local news angle would play. They wanted to continue to make political capital out of their disagreement with the Home Office. I got bits of information from them [the POA] for a while but the story moved [on]. Whatever leverage they got from leaking information, it was not useful in their dealings with us. We had seen [that] the story could only be developed in terms of*

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> *what this meant for local people, local concerns, that sort of thing. Their blowing the whistle on what was happening inside [the prison] was good for us because we got a good story that had legs. But it didn't helped their disagreement with the Home Office because the paedophiles moved in. (Interview, 25 January 2001)*

AFTER THE WHISTLE HAS BLOWN

Whistle blowing and leaking of confidential information in organizations is always a high-risk strategy. This is evident in organizations since it can and often does lead to discipline and sacking. Occasionally it can also lead to court cases. Such a situation arose in 2000 when two convicted sex offenders brought a case against North Wales police after being identified to a third party (a newspaper). The men's complaint against the police was upheld when the court clarified that the North Wales police had leaked confidential details of the men's whereabouts in order to move them out of the area. The trial judge, Lord Bingham ruled:

> *It is not only in the [offenders'] interests but also in the interests of society as a whole that they should be enabled, and if need be helped, to live normal, lawful lives. While the risk of repeat offending may in some circumstances justify a very limited measure of unofficial disclosure, a general policy of disclosure can never be justified. (Travis, 2000: 3)*

The judge's remarks that 'a general policy of disclosure can never be justified' can be seen as an attempt to inject official disquiet over the manner in which police and other agencies are routinely involved in leaking confidential information (in this case about paedophiles released into the community but also in relation to other confidential matters such as leaked draft rulings of judicial reviews). It was a view shared by then Home Secretary Jack Straw, who in commenting on the court case made clear his opposition to the leaking of official Home Office information:

> *It is vitally important that dangerous paedophiles should be supervised adequately and that the public should be protected from possible further offending by them. This is of course made far more difficult if the effect of further unofficial disclosures by some individuals to some sections of the media, is to drive them underground. (p. 3)*

Straw's comments criticizing unofficial disclosures were supported by the main public protection agencies including, ironically, the POA. In this context, the POA appeared part of a wider consensus on the damage that could be inflicted by mischievous use of confidential information. Indeed, whistle blowing has another less obvious side-effect caused by the reality that the very act of leaking information to the media is always *intended* to cause a degree of public 'mischief' (Jaworski et al., 2004). Thus, even if the quality of leaked information is good (not to say in the 'public interest') there is often no easy way for the recipient of information (usually journalists) to trust the whistle blower as a future source of credible information. Paradoxically, the act of whistle blowing can lead to the

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whistle blower's own exclusion from subsequent public debate that their whistle blowing actions have initiated.

The POA blew the whistle on Home Office plans in order to undermine its efforts to extend prison officers' responsibilities to include care of ex-prisoners. Faced with this prospect, the POA had few practical resources with which to resist beyond publicizing (and attempting to puncture) a secret Home Office policy. However, whistle blowing can offer a significant advantage: i.e., the achievement of *symbolic capital* such that it creates a preferred representation of reality (Jaworski et al., 2004). This is by no means an insignificant point. Powerful organizations like the Home Office ardently protect their internal activities from disclosure by constant policing against outside (especially journalists') intrusion. As Downing (1986) puts it: 'Secrecy is not used as an impermeable shield blotting out all communication, but as a device to allow the pinnacle of the power structure to communicate when and how it prefers' (p. 157).

However, the leaking of confidential information to the media has a high news value within news production (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994) and, by blowing the whistle to the press, POA officials intended to obstruct the Home Office 'power structure' in the hope that it would generate useful publicity for their opposition to block Government plans to extend their role. However, POA hopes quickly buffered up against the reality which underpins a local newspaper's role as an 'effective change agent' in the community (Aldridge, 2003). As the Deputy Editor of the *Evening Post* put it: 'We only run campaigns if we're confident we're going to win. We don't like to run campaigns that we're going to lose because it looks bad. 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' (Interview, 25 January 2001).

The POA decision to leak information about HMP Nottingham's paedophile unit was not authorized at the highest level of the organization. In fact, the decision to whistle blow was taken at local branch level, by officials representing prison officers concerned about the impact of such a unit on their established work practice. However, a planned second leak of details concerning extensions to the unit was given to the press via a formal news release issued from the national POA executive replete with ready-made quotations from senior and local POA officials. According to the *Evening Post* journalist who made particular use of this 'formal' news release: 'The national POA clearly had nothing to lose given that the Nottingham branch had already blown the whistle' (Interview, 25 January 2001).

The Home Office's strategy of secrecy was compromised through porosity and by conflict between official agencies. With hindsight, perhaps, it could not have worked without *all* local and national players involved maintaining a commitment to uphold confidentiality. The decision by the POA to overtly blow the whistle on Home Office plans thus reveals the complexity of 'elite dynamics', at least when it comes to the vexed and conflict-ridden issue of what to do with convicted paedophiles post-sentence. Nevertheless, for all the discomfiture that POA whistle blowing presumably caused the Home Office, the plan to house paedophiles inside the prison *was* enacted and the paedophile accommodation received the first of its four permanent residents within two months of the POA leak. It remains in situ inside the jail.

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CONCLUSION

This case study of inter-agency conflict surrounding the Home Office's attempt to secretly build paedophile housing inside the grounds of HMP Nottingham is more than just a parochial inflection on a national issue. It illustrates how the politics of paedophilia is rooted in a breakdown of professional consensus on how to deal effectively with paedophiles in the community. And at the centre of local interest in the whereabouts of paedophiles is the mundane reality that representatives of official agencies (such as the police and prison services) are involved in leaking information to local media for their own promotional interests. This insight into the pragmatics of whistle blowing is hardly new but it does underpin the point that anti-paedophile vigilantism could not occur without collusion between the press and official agencies.

However, such collusion reflects the strategic importance of information and news management in our mass-mediated society. Negrine (1995) suggests that information leaks say something about routinized journalistic activity, in particular journalists' dependency on sources; but they also reveal as much about political in-fighting between agencies who leak information as they do about journalism. This is because leaks sabotage normal patterns of information management since they subvert 'normal' practices of disclosure. But they also highlight the limitations of journalistic practices and, more critically, the paucity of information available within the public sphere. Indeed, in the context of this study, we suggest that it also reveals the paucity of *mature* public debate about 'what to do with' paedophiles in the community.

Herein lies the rub. In the context of the politics of paedophilia, where primary definers are in conflict on the issue of where to house paedophiles, information leaks reflect the degree of fragmentation on this issue in elite circles. In other words, leaks offer a prism through which can be seen the absence of elite consensus among members – in this case the prison service, police service, probation service, as well as the political class shaping post-sentence penal policy. Adapting Schlesinger's (1989) critique of the propaganda model of news production, because there is no single elite capable establishing a consensus on this issue among its members, but rather several competing factions and agencies without common terms of reference, the media provide a relatively open (and closed) system in which divisions among elites are played out and the role of the media becomes crucial as an agent of change.

Journalists may see their own use of leaks about the paedophiles in the community in much more pragmatic terms, however. An editorial in the *Hartlepool Mail* is probably illustrative of the response made by newspaper editors to accusations that they are exploiting a lack of consensus on 'what to do with' paedophiles in the community: 'We make no apologies for using confidential information to blow the whistle on a convicted paedophile. We would argue that it is grossly unfair to the people living in an area that someone like this should be placed among them in secret' (Travis and Ahmed, 1998). While this is a legitimate point of view, the absence of consensus on where paedophiles should be housed post-sentence means that news leaks and breaches of professional confidence are likely to continue. What is less certain is whether communities are safer as a result of whistle blowing journalism.

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Notes

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1 It should be noted that only about 50 of the 110,000 men are convicted sex offenders who fall into the category of predatory paedophiles.

2 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 (Kemshall and Maguire, 2003).

3 Nottingham's *Evening Post* is the city's only paid-for local paper and has monopoly position in a region of about 350,000 inhabitants. It is ranked 13th in The Newspaper Society's 2005 Top UK Regional Evenings Ranked by Circulation . See http://www.newspapersoc.org.uk/facts-figures/circulation/evecirc.html.

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