Title of thesis:

Anatomy of an endemic juvenile panic: an investigation into the influence of British newspaper narratives on contemporary discourse around children.

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Declaration

I confirm that this thesis and the research it contains is my work alone, and that all secondary material (where used) has been fully referenced.

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Abstract

Children occupy an ever-more prominent position in public discourse in late-modern Britain, with politicians, news media and other key definers consistently depicting childhood as inherently problematic. Popular portrayals of juveniles tend to conceive of them as being subject to multifarious 'risks', with younger children, in particular, considered vulnerable to all manner of threats – from illnesses and medical emergencies to technological perils to the predations of deviant elements in society. When not threatened themselves, moreover, they are frequently depicted as presenting a menace to *others*, in a manner redolent of earlier moral panics about subversive youth sub-cultures. Drawing on a rich literature of research into news-making, textual framing and media reception, this thesis uses a triangulated methodology to explore the interplay between contemporary newspaper journalists, their sources of news, the narratives they weave, and (actual or potential) members of their audiences. It argues that the dominant, at times paradoxical, positioning of children – by press and public alike – as either or both of victims and threats amounts to an endemic 'juvenile panic', which is rooted in a continuum of ambivalences about minors that can be traced through history. This simmering state of panic boils over whenever it finds purchase in singular dramatic events – fuelled by the demands of a commercially driven media; journalists' pragmatic reliance on official sources with fear-promoting agendas; and the public's appetite for a good horror story. It is further argued that a particular focus on the dangers posed by 'familiar strangers' (adult or juvenile) acts as a displacement for deep-seated concerns stemming from recent changes in Britain's society and economy - notably growing personal insecurity and the slow decline of social trust.

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Chapter 1 – Literature review

Moral panics and media research: the story so far

'Moral panics' have become an enduring subject of scholarly debate in the social sciences and humanities. Though widely accepted definitions of what constitutes a panic were only crystallised relatively recently (McLuhan, 1964; Cohen, 1972), there is nothing new about the phenomenon itself. Today it is defined as a scare "about a threat or supposed threat from deviants or 'folk-devils'" (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009, p.2). Even when vindicated by some measure of 'fact', the fears underpinning moral panics are exaggerated – and reactions from policy-makers, authorities, media and/or public disproportionate. From Medieval witch trials (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009) to modern-day witch-hunts against predatory paedophiles (Critcher, 2003; Meyer, 2007) and benefit cheats (Golding & Middleton, 1982), societal elites, their agents and/or community leaders – Becker's "moral entrepreneurs" (1963, p.147) – are forever identifying convenient folk-devils to scapegoat for society's ills.

Given the ever-increasing ubiquity of news media, its role in fomenting moral panics has become a focus of sociologists, criminologists and communications researchers. In the 40 years since Young and Cohen published their seminal ethnographic accounts of the lifestyles of bohemian marijuana-smokers in Notting Hill (Young, 1971) and seaside skirmishes between Mods and Rockers (Cohen, 1972), a succession of studies have singled it out as the main conduit for promoting panics. For Hall et al (1978, pp.29-30) it was responsible for "relaying the dominant image of mugging to the public at large" during a largely spurious, elite-engineered early 1970s panic about black "muggers". A near-contemporaneous study of another media-stoked "crime-wave", in New York, demonstrated how an opportunistic police force and sales-chasing press contrived to 'invent' a whole new category of offence, "crimes against the elderly" – at a time when official figures showed rates of such incidents were either falling or comparable to those affecting younger age-groups (Fishman, 1978).

There continues to be lively debate, however, about the extent to which the media *originates* panics – rather than *reflecting* ones stemming from "grassroots" concerns (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994), politically expedient scaremongering by elite "primary definers" (Hall et al, 1978) or a combination of both. However, it is consistently argued that (whatever their factual basis) news portrayals of moral panics typically betray an "ideological" bias: reflecting, and buttressing, the interests of power elites (Hall et al, 1978). To take one example, Blumler and Ewbank (1970), Morley (1976), Hartmann (1975 and 1979) and Philo (1993) have all examined portrayals of striking workers in 1970s and 1980s Britain – with Morley deconstructing value-laden language used in television reports to distinguish between the "dedication" of some workers (1976, p.253) and the "irresponsible action" (Ibid) of strikers, and the others finding evidence from audience research to demonstrate the anti-union, pro-elite framing effect such one-sided coverage had on public perceptions.

This view of a homogenous, ideologically submissive news culture has not gone unchallenged, however. Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1987) and Eldridge (1999) have both used ethnographic observation of journalists at work to demonstrate that newsrooms can be hotbeds of disagreement about the best stories to pursue and angles to take – particularly between specialist reporters who know their beats and generalist news editors who, it is argued, harbour misconceived ideas based on crude institutionalised judgments about newsworthiness. Schlesinger and Tumber (1994, p.259) have cited stories "dealing with scandals inside the state apparatus or in the world of big business" as examples of news overtly challenging elite interests, while Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009, p.90) say the same of "grassroots panics" – those, fuelled by rumour, that are disseminated as much by "word of mouth emanating from the street" as the media. Meanwhile, several studies of recent panics, particularly ones associated with concerns about aspects of public health policy (Reilly, 1999; Boyce, 2007), have demonstrated that news organisations are not averse to taking oppositional standpoints to the official "party line" (Critcher, 2006a, p.14) when there's a good story to be had. This has repeatedly occurred in panics over medical risks – which can see doctors, scientists and other 'experts' supplanting 'official' sources like the government and police as primary definers. As Critcher has demonstrated (2006b, p.67-8), referring to Weeks's

(1989) analysis of the rise and fall of the mid-Eighties panic over AIDS, the "gay plague" narrative originally aired in news coverage was ultimately rejected by politicians and public alike because "a sometimes uneasy alliance" of medical organisations and articulate, well-funded campaigners persuaded journalists to accept *their* expertise over that of others.

Nonetheless, it is frequently contended that, in relation to classic 'moral' panics (those revolving around deviancy), correlations between the ideological interests of the powers-that-be and media proprietors tends to bias news outlets towards favouring elite sources (Fishman, 1980; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1989; McManus, 1994). Moreover, studies focusing on day-to-day *organisational* pressures faced by print, television, radio and online news media – notably the need to generate content, meet deadlines and sell advertising for profit - have emphasised journalists' *pragmatic* reliance on (readily accessible) official information channels that are bureaucratically geared towards supplying them with steady flows of 'oven-ready' material (Tuchman, 1972; Chibnall, 1975 and 1977; Gans, 1979; Fishman, 1980; Bantz, 1985; Schlesinger, 1989).

Earlier 'gatekeeper' studies (e.g. Manning White, 1950; Carter, 1958; Gieber, 1964) emphasised the *selectivity* governing how editors chose which news events to cover and reporters decided how to write stories, while others focused on the disjunction between the journalistic ideal of objectivity and institutional pressures (including ideological ones emanating from their employers) that led news-makers to omit inconvenient information from their copy and inject it with partiality (e.g. Breed, 1955; Sigelman, 1973). Later, Tuchman and Fishman challenged the notion that news *selection* is the problem – arguing journalists do not so much choose from pools of "facts and events which exist out there independently" (Fishman, 1980, p.13) as "create" news through the processes by which they define "facticity" and transform reality into stories (Ibid). This facticity is, more often than not, produced by (well-informed and well-funded) bureaucratic agencies including the police, courts and other law enforcement bodies – each eager to boost its own profile and agenda (Chibnall, 1977; Fishman, 1978). The *quid pro quo* for news outlets will be streams of stories displaying the requisite qualities – "negativity", "unambiguity", "personalisation" and "meaningfulness" (Galtung & Ruge, 1965;

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Harcup & O'Neill, 2001) – to satisfy widely accepted taxonomies of newsworthiness. A scare about, say, mugging is also likely to adhere to more specific news values ascribed to crime stories, or what Hall et al (1978, p.288) define as "'law-and-order' panic" - being "visible" and "graphic", and emphasising "individual pathology" (Chibnall, 1977, p.77).

In addition to numerous studies of media-fuelled moral panics, a number have examined the role news plays in crystallising other forms of societal neuroses - principally those associated with perceptions of "risk" (Giddens, 1990, 1991; Beck, 1992 [1986]). Beck has posited that late modernity has witnessed a transition from a form of industrialism associated with delivering "goods" to a post-industrial age which increasingly bequeaths "bads". The resulting "risk anxiety" (Scott, Jackson & Backett-Milburn, 1998, p.689) revolve less around recognisable sub-human folk-devils than wider environmental and/or technological insecurities, ranging from global warming to rail crashes and nuclear accidents. Then there is the array of hazards classified by some as "moral regulation" issues (Hier, 2008; Critcher, 2009). These encompass successive public health scares over AIDS (Rocherone & Linne, 1989; Kitzinger, 1993), BSE (Reilly, 1999), foot-and-mouth disease (Critcher, 2008) and swine flu (Gilman, 2010), and perceived risks associated with Britain's measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) jab (Mason & Donnelly, 2000; Evans et al, 2001; Ramsay et al, 2002; Boyce, 2007).

In wrestling with this set of conflicting and overlapping definitions, this thesis aims to be more ambitious than many that have preceded it, by focusing on what might be described as a *double-sided* panic relating to the problematisation of children: namely the dual positioning of juveniles in late-modern Britain as both prey and predator - or (in the wider context of risk) 'victims' and 'threats'.

Causes and consequences of panics: change in thinking and current debates

Research into panics can be traced through a succession of phases. These reflect not only the changing times in which studies have been carried out, but changing conceptualisations of the *nature* of panics wrought by the shifting sands of society, economy and culture. While early

monographs on panics tended to conceive of them as discrete "periods" occurring "every now and then" (Cohen, 1972, p.9), in the 40 years since Stanley Cohen popularised the term "*moral panic*" to describe a disproportionately alarmist societal response to an 'outbreak' of deviant behaviour by a sub-group of society identified as a threat to its "values and interests" (Ibid), it has become increasingly fashionable for sociologists and communications researchers alike to speak of more ongoing, if not *continuous*, forms of panic – and ones relating as much to fears about vague, inanimate, often unspecified environmental, technological and public health risks as the more classically 'personified' menaces of old. Occupying the most significant intermediate position in this evolution of thinking about panics, meanwhile, was a succession of influential studies published from the late 1970s onwards that saw moral panics as increasingly *serial* (rather than *periodic*) phenomena: bursts of popular outrage the elite "control-culture" Cohen identified would repeatedly orchestrate to mobilise public opinion in favour of punitive law-and-order measures and, ultimately, the establishment and consolidation of an underlying neoliberal hegemony (Hall et al, 1978). A key challenge this thesis faces is the need to 'locate' the juvenile panic on which it centres in the context of these shifting currents of thinking about the causes, nature and consequences of panics.

'Periodic' panics

At the time Cohen wrote his seminal study of the 1960s furore surrounding Mods and Rockers, the concept of moral panics was a novel one. Identifying the *existence* of such panics, and labelling them as such, was ground-breaking enough, but suggesting the iconic folk-devils of his age represented merely the latest in a succession of rebellious youth sub-cultures – and that their forebears had *also* sparked bouts of panic – was more significant (1972, p.9). Yet, while Cohen clearly recognised Mods and Rockers as the *latest manifestation* of a periodic panic about hooliganism, he was focusing on the hysterical reaction to a wave of youth disorder that took place at a time when the post-war liberal consensus was still (albeit tenuously) in place. To this extent, the explosions of media and political opprobrium that characterised 'his' panic arguably represented a form of *fin de siècle* expression of reassertions of 'decent' dominant societal values that had sporadically occurred in response to

discrete 'outbreaks' of youth deviancy since Elizabethan times (Pearson, 1983) – rather than a new phenomenon signalling the final breakdown of post-Victorian 'civilisation'. It would have been a step beyond this to paint alarmist headlines in Brighton's *Evening Argus* or the *Daily Telegraph*, or the accompanying fierce condemnations by judges, politicians and "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker, 1963, p.147), as evidence, at this stage, of a more *conspiratorial* hegemonic project to manage Britain's "capitalist crisis" (Hall et al, 1978, p.282) and, ultimately, decisively recalibrate its society and economy in a neoliberal mould.

What Cohen's work and other early 1970s studies of (perceived) deviant strains – from Young's "drug-takers" (1971) to criminals in general (Cohen & Young, 1973) – share *in common* with the vision of overarching hegemonic panic(s) conjured up by later writers, however, is their recognition that, for any putative panic to 'succeed', it must seize the imagination of "the majority in any given society" by appealing to their notions (however unconsciously held) of a shared "consensus about reality" (Cohen & Young, 1973, p.431). Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) have developed this idea to emphasise the significance of the *point in time* when a particular panic arises - arguing the reason one 'problem issue/group' is targeted over another is because it presents a salient scapegoat onto which wider lay concerns (and/or political frames) of the moment can be displaced. Both views concur that a *successful* panic must pit society's respectable, law-abiding majority against a disrespectful, lawless other – namely "those who are abnormal, who deviate or who present problems to the dominant value system" (Cohen & Young, 1973, p.431). Should it be necessary for the "mass media" and/or control-culture to "manufacture" this 'other' – as Cohen and Young implied in the title of their influential 1973 collection about media-amplified panics – so be it, but if the images it popularises chime with audience-members' *own* experiences/pre-existing prejudices, then the panic itself (and the consensus it mobilises around the need to bring 'deviants' to heel) will prove more enduring. It was precisely such an "awakening" of (dormant) "lay public attitudes" that, for Hall et al (1978, p.137), enabled elite forces and their media accomplices to manipulate a succession of then recent panics about disparate forms of social deviancy to collectively symbolise a cancerous "crisis" of values and identity in early 1970s Britain – with

long-lasting consequences that would see society coalesce around a *redefined* (more socially *illiberal*) consensus.

From periodic to serial panics: the rise of the "law-and-order" society

By the time Gerbner et al, Fishman and Hall et al were drafting their seminal late 1970s studies of media-stoked moral panics about youth crime, in America and Britain respectively, it had become fashionable to reconceive panics of the early Seventies (and, to a point, late 1960s) through the prism of an increasingly assertive 'new order' that today would be termed neoliberalism. The emerging consensus was that panics were now *primarily* the 'constructs' of elite forces determined to embed and preserve their "hegemony" (Gramsci, 1971), as opposed to explosions of popular alarm about authentic social concerns opportunistically 'hijacked' by those same elites. To Hall et al (1978, p.29), this tactic of systematic "ideological displacement" reached an early apotheosis in the guise of the (largely bogus) panic about 'mugging' by black youths they outlined in *Policing the Crisis*. They traced the roots of this supposed epidemic to sensationalist tabloid reports *anticipating* the arrival of the phenomenon from the United States – reports eagerly exploited by politicians and police to stoke public fears in order to justify an authoritarian law-and-order crackdown. The cynically manipulated mugging scare was, they argued, an object lesson in how elites presiding over inherently unequal social conditions purposely emphasise "the wrong things" (Hall et al 1978, p.vii). Using their levers of power and the media, they distract their public with a "sensational focus", thereby "hiding and mystifying the deeper causes" of society's problems (Ibid). And the mugging panic, the book argued, was not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it crystallised a growing sense among certain (socially conservative, if economically liberal) sections of society "that the 'British way of life'" was "coming apart at the seams" (Hall et al 1978, p.viii): that, in the words of a more recent political catchphrase, it was "broken" (Thorp & Kennedy, 2010). Moreover, if 'mugging' was symptomatic of creeping moral decline, so, too, was this sickness signified by deviant behaviours identified in a succession of other, then recent, panics "about the 'steadily rising rate of violent crime'" (Hall et al 1978, p.vii), *including* those around Mods and Rockers (Cohen,1972) and student protests (Hall, 1980) – not to mention various menaces still

persisting at the point Hall et al were writing, notably "unofficial" industrial action (Hall et al, 1978, p.274).

Meanwhile, in a series of influential 'Cultivation Theory' studies, Gerbner et al (1979 and 1980) argued audiences were sensitised to the possibility of falling victim to street crime by "heavy exposure" to television crime drama and/or sensational news bulletins – suggesting such media was effectively instilling dominant ideological norms among the US populace. Though this reading of their focus-group data was swiftly contested by Hirsch - who found patterns indicating that the high levels of sensitisation Gerbner et al identified might just as easily be put down to the fact that their subjects lived in ghettoised, high-crime areas where the prospect of assault (or worse) presented a plausible danger (Hirsch, 1980 and 1981) – the position the original researchers took only added to an increasingly influential current of academic opinion that panics were being mobilised for hegemonic ends. Moreover, at the same time as Gerbner et al were concentrating on interpreting *audience* responses to narratives about street violence, Fishman was observing the *genesis* of sensational crime narratives from 'the inside', by working as a reporter on a New York-based newspaper involved in concocting a bogus "crime-wave" in complicity with local law enforcement agencies and self-promoting city-hall politicians. After a supposed spate of attacks on older people had bedded into the media narrative, polling organisation Harris obligingly added a new category to its periodic crime surveys – "crimes against the elderly" – and found fear of such incidents had seeped into public consciousness. Six out of ten respondents surveyed in 1977 said they believed assaults on pensioners had increased and half of over 50-year-olds felt "more uneasy on the streets" than a year previously (Fishman, 1978, p.532). As at the height of Britain's mugging scare, these fears defied reality: despite stoking the panic by including more examples of such crimes on newswires it 'fed' to journalists, the New York Police Department's own data showed there had been a 19 per cent *drop* on the previous year's murder rate among elderly people (Ibid). While levels of other crimes against the elderly, including robbery and grand larceny, had risen, so had those for younger age groups – often to a much greater degree (Ibid, pp.532-3).

Where Fishman's analysis differed from those of Hall, Gerbner and others, however, was in the level of *intent* he ascribed to the media as an 'accomplice' to efforts by the broader establishment to cement its hegemony. While Hall et al explicitly labelled newspapers "secondary definers", with police, politicians and "the state" cast as "primary" actors, for Fishman any elite "ideology" propagated by the US media in spreading the myth of a street crime epidemic was more an inadvertent side-effect of commercially driven news organisations' (pragmatic) over-reliance on official sources equipped to deliver steady flows of pre-packaged raw material they relied on to fill their papers/bulletins than any expression of a deliberate 'desire' to promote the political status quo. Fishman argued cosy arrangements between journalists and official sources *did* institutionalise dominant ideologies in media organisations – but only because the nature of routinised material used in reports was *itself* ideological, having been generated by elite agencies with vested interests in "disseminating bureaucratic idealisations of the world" (Fishman, 1980, p.154). Whatever the media's 'intent', however, the overwhelming consensus to emerge from many late 1970s studies was that one *effect* of its institutionalised working relationships with 'the authorities' was to reinforce ideologically normative representations of society that served the interests of (incumbent or aspiring) elites.

From 'sick' society to "risk society": the rise of impersonal panics

If the overwhelming academic tendency of the late 1970s was to view contemporaneous panics as instruments of top-down elite oppression/propaganda – tools for maintaining power by pitting society's 'law-abiding' majority against any number of straw-man 'enemies within' – panics of the 1980s and 1990s have generally been characterised as more *bottom-up*. And, whereas conventional 'moral' panics were characterised by their demonisation of identifiable folk-devils judged to present threats to civil society, many (grassroots) panics that erupted in the last decade(s) of the Cold War focused on generalised, often nebulous, concerns relating to forces more powerful than individual governments, multinational companies or even political systems – ranging from public health worries about new drug treatments or medical conditions to the prospect of technological, environmental or nuclear catastrophe.

The dominant intellectual idea to emerge from this reconceptualization of panics was that of 'risk' (Giddens, 1990, 1991) and the "risk society" (Beck, 1992 [1986]), which posited that, in the late-modern, post-industrial age, 'hidden', often inanimate, threats unleashed by the process of modernity itself were supplanting fears related to visible, personifiable folk-devils whose principal threat to the established order was deviation from society's moral norms. Some years later, Bauman (2000) would build on these ideas in suggesting late-modern western societies had entered an era of "liquid modernity" – a post-globalisation epoch in which traditional social systems/community structures were destined to seem increasingly distant, if not absent, and day-to-day interactions between national and global citizens more fluid and unstructured. In this atomised world, devoid of peer-group, hierarchical or, ultimately, moral certainties of the past, individuals might (notionally) be more liberated, self-reliant and self-determining than before – but the (enforced) independence 'granted to' (and *expected of*) them would inevitably leave them feeling increasingly isolated and vulnerable.

The 'individualisation' of society envisaged by this strain of academic thinking was accompanied by a suggestion that (perceived) risk – and, more importantly, *management* of risk – was also being individualised, rather than subject to the community-wide 'barricade-building' emblematic of moral panics. Reflecting this paradigm, there has been a tendency for many *specific* panics manifested since the 1980s to be bracketed as concerns about medical issues and threats to individuals' physical and mental wellbeing deriving from technology, the environment and Man's interference with (and misuse of) both. These latter-day flaps – variously described as "risk anxieties" (Ungar, 2001) or "moral regulation" issues (Hunt, 1999; Moore & Valverde, 2000), rather than moral *panics* – embrace everything from the initial mid-1980s hysteria over the spread of AIDS (Rocheron & Linne, 1989; Weeks, 1989; Kitzinger, 1993; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995; Miller et al 1998; Eldridge, 1999; Critcher 2006b) to those over the human form of 'Mad Cow Disease', CJD (Reilly, 1999), hormone replacement therapy (Judelson, 2005) and the MMR vaccine (Mason & Donnelly, 2000; Evans et al, 2001; Ramsay et al, 2002; Boyce, 2007). If there are problematic *behaviours* associated with any or all such anxieties they are, primarily, individuals' disinclination (or refusal) to 'look after themselves' (and/or others with whom they closely associate) – rather than *other people's* readiness to do

them harm. The human agency involved in these moral 'regulation' situations, then, has nothing to do with the problem behaviours of deviant sub-groups/sub-cultures – errant elements whose conduct must be 'regulated' by society as a whole - but with behaviours that (mostly) pose little risk to anyone but those indulging in them. To Critcher, these are matters for "eternal self-vigilance" (2009, p.30) – with "issues in the health category", including decisions about whether to accept public health advice by adjusting lifestyle patterns, as those "furthest from moral panic but highest on self-regulation" (Ibid).

Power to the people: challenging elite narratives and exposing dissent within it

While the prevalence and persistence of such risk anxieties/moral regulation issues may in one sense point towards the emergence of a jittery, irrational view of the world, one 'positive' to have emerged from it is a more assertive role for citizens themselves (individually and collectively) as 'definers' of panic discourse. Moreover, at least some of this discourse is arguably more *legitimate* than conventional moral panics perpetrated by the 'powers-that-be' and their media mouthpieces. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009, p.133) have emphasised the importance of peer-to-peer "rumour" in spreading (even originating) some panics, while others have identified instances of 'panicky' conduct by citizens defying the 'official line' – often with some foundation. Indeed, beyond the confines of the strict 'moral' panics paradigm, recent history is littered with risk anxieties ultimately vindicated by the facts. These include several that contravened the rule-of-thumb that panics reflect/reinforce the interests of ruling elites - by wrong-footing, embarrassing and, in some cases, damaging politically those very forces. In Britain, newspapers reporting on the salmonella 'epidemic' (Reilly, 1999), BSE crisis (Ibid), 'Gulf War syndrome' (Showalter, 1997), foot-and-mouth disease (Bickerstaff & Simmons, 2009) and the HRT (Judelson, 2005) and MMR (Boyce, 2007) scares in the 1980s and 1990s campaigned *against* official lines – fostering doubts about the efficacy of politicians' pronouncements which, in all but the last two cases, proved justified. In these and other instances, the media's overriding adherence to 'instinctive' news values – buffeted by interventions by 'experts' better equipped to assume the mantle of primary definers than conventional 'official sources' - trumped any deference to politicians or police in determining

the (enlightened) angles they pursued. The fact that qualified experts often publicly dispute politicians' preferred narratives creates space for a wider range of claims-makers to air their views in the media. Significantly, this "broader range of voices" brings with it a positive knock-on effect for today's folk-devils, who can increasingly "contest the setting of moral boundaries" (Ungar, 2001, p.277). In describing the *process* by which campaigners asserted themselves as primary definers in relation to the AIDS debate, by "working with the media and providing highly professional 'sound-bites' more or less on cue", McRobbie and Thornton (1995, p.270) implicitly likened the gay lobby's strategy to the manner in which elite bureaucracies routinely shape the media's agenda by spoon-feeding it (ideologically loaded) information (Fishman, 1978 and 1980; Sumpter, 2000). Gay campaigners demonstrated, they argued, how "'folk-devils' can 'fight back'" (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995, p.270) – an argument they (1995) and de Young (1998) also used to explain the *collapse* of panics directly relevant to this thesis, including the demonization of, respectively, British single mothers and "Satanic day-care" providers in the US.

What studies of risk-based 'panics' exposed, then, in many cases, was not only the inadequacy of official narratives (and counter-narratives) as a means of 'opening up' or 'closing down' panic discourse but, more significantly, the fact that – contrary to Hall et al's vision of a monolithic elite control-culture – at times elites are *split*. One reason a popular panic might sprout and 'succeed' *in defiance of* official denials – or grassroots resistance might *thwart* 'elite-engineered' panics - is because different 'branches' of the elite disagree with one another. And this had never happened as often as in this increasingly insecure age, in which the pace of technological and environmental change was proving all-but impossible for anyone to predict, let alone control. During the debates about genetically modified (GM) foods (Eldridge, 1999) and BSE (Reilly, 1999; Evans et al, 2001), for instance, there were clear disparities between advice offered by different teams of scientists and lobbying interests in the first case and the UK government and European Union in the second. In other words, in assessing the safety of GM products and British beef, 'the elite' was *divided*. Similarly, while in relation to MMR a consensus quickly emerged between political and medical establishments that the three-in-one vaccine was safe, the controversy was able to last for almost a decade

because of mixed messages from general practitioners – consistently identified as our most trusted professionals, and much more so than either politicians or journalists (Smith, 2009). Though claims the jab might be linked to juvenile autism and/or bowel disorders were associated with surgeon Andrew Wakefield, he co-authored his (since discredited) *Lancet* paper with 12 other doctors (Wakefield et al, 1998). In this case too, then, the establishment was briefly divided – with a handful of credible claims-makers spearheading a growing chorus of public distrust with potentially serious consequences for the herd immunity of millions of children. Evidence from focus-group interviews suggests the fact take-up of the MMR continued falling beyond the period when Wakefield's colleagues publicly distanced themselves from the *Lancet* article owed as much to some GPs' ongoing reluctance to proactively promote the jab to worried parents as continuing media coverage of the anti-MMR campaign (Boyce, 2007, p.160).

Reflecting on such 'bottom-up' concerns from a global perspective, Habermas argued in *Between Facts and Norms* (1996, p.381) that the proximity of the "civil-social periphery" to laypeople gave it the "advantage of greater sensitivity in detecting and identifying new problem situations" than "the political centre". It was, he argued, *grassroots* pressure – not top-down governmental action - which saw "great issues" like those over gender inequality, climate change and global economic injustice "force their way into newspapers and interested associations, clubs, professional organisations, academies, and universities" (Ibid). Moreover, many "great issues of the last decades" had entered the "public sphere" through discourse initiated by wider "civil society", rather than politicians or media – including the nuclear arms-race, atomic energy, genetic engineering and Third World poverty (Ibid, pp.381-2). In other words, bottom-up agenda-setting by pressure groups, academics and the wider public had repeatedly evoked a legitimate "crisis consciousness" (Ibid) about issues in open opposition to established orthodoxies. Cohen, the most famous proponent of moral panic 'theory', recently took up a similar position – arguing those who glibly treated the term he popularised as shorthand for mass hysteria were as guilty of simplistic reductionism as any reactionary moral campaigner. In his 2010 paper to Brunel University's Moral Panics in the Contemporary World conference, he posited how it might be possible to identify – or "construct" – panics that those

critical of the "hidden and not-so-hidden political agendas that lie behind the strategies and rhetoric" of traditional ones would view as "good, positive or approved" (Cohen, 2010, p.1). Certain latter-day 'panics', he suggested, might best "be understood as 'anti-denial' movements" akin to the "consciousness-raising" campaigns of the 1960s (Ibid): ways of *counteracting* precisely those dominant political agendas that framed numerous earlier panics.

'Successful' panics of recent times, then, have not always been 'elite-engineered'. Rather, notions that the dominant consensus is threatened may stem as often from challenges to the moral order perceived by citizens at grassroots level as scares emanating from the rhetoric of politicians, law enforcement agencies or media (Walker, Kershaw, and Nicholas, 2006). Moreover, proliferation of new communication technologies has made it easier for ordinary citizens to 'spread the word' about perceived menaces and mobilise against them. An alliance, then, between lay heuristics and the 'digital rumour-mill' has made possible new forms of moral entrepreneurship – and, with them, new manifestations of bottom-up panic. But 'panic' – defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "a sudden uncontrollable fear or alarm"– should still be viewed with caution. However democratic (and open to counter-hegemonic views) the energetic new virtual environment may be, it remains a potentially febrile one, and therefore susceptible to the worst excesses of panicky discourse/behaviour. By way of illustration, in the two years to May 2010, Exeter resident Chris Wittwer recruited 18,000 people to 44 Facebook groups where he had posted the names and photographs of 6,000 convicted sex offenders (*Daily Mail*, 2010). And the potential remains for entirely new forms of folk-devil (or imaginative variations on old ones) to be conjured up online, as the emergence during the Noughties of the pejorative term 'chav' – fuelled by websites like ChavScum and ChavTown (Jones, 2011; Le Grand, 2013) - demonstrates in relation to the demonization of supposedly 'deviant' elements of the working-class. It is in relation to this anarchic new strain of 'panic-building' – conflating disparate risks and folk-devils and disseminating fear virally online through gossip, rumour, speculation and innuendo – that a new, more toxic and pervasive, strain of panic has arguably now emerged.

From moral to amoral panic: the new era of "permanent" panicking

While the "risk society" (Beck, 1986) and "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000) concepts offer obvious explanatory frameworks for the melange of panics and 'anti-denial movements' about technological, environmental and public health issues during the late 1980s and 1990s, they also have much to contribute to the debate about the (once more) evolving nature of panics in the 2000s. As the following sections demonstrate, the past decade or more has seen the re-emergence of all manner of more *conventional* moral panic narratives – not least those revolving around perceived threats posed to and, in some cases, *by* children. So how do we account for this resurgence of interest in deviancy, and how might it be related to the wider discourse about social atomisation and risk?

As a starting-point, there is much to be said for Hier's argument – conceived in a 2003 paper, and developed since (2008, 2010) – that, far from only having something to say about technological and environmental perils, the risk society concept in fact *lends* itself to the generation of conventional *moral* panics. Taking as his locus the potent concept of the 'stranger' as an outsider figure signifying fear and foreboding, Hier argues that Beck's era of "reflexive modernisation" (1992 [1986]) is one in which traditional moral certainties break down, to be replaced by situations in which *everyone* (not just the excluded "other") *becomes* a "stranger" to everyone else. Under these circumstances it is increasingly necessary, in interests of social cohesion, for societal/community leaders to distinguish between "everyday stereotypes of the stranger on the one hand and the enemy on the other" (Hier, 2003, p.18) – in so doing, promoting social concerns focusing on, for example, unruly teenagers or predatory paedophiles, with all the appearance of traditional moral panics. Likewise, in the age of "light modernity" and "software capitalism" Bauman (2000, p.116) sees as having supplanted the "heavy modernity" (Ibid, p.114) of the preceding "hardware era" (p.113), today's 'community-less' individuals are liable to come into (physical or virtual) contact with any number of "strangers" (pp.94-109) in their day-to-day interactions. It can hardly be a coincidence that, as Chapter 4 details, numerous recent studies have identified a problem of declining interpersonal trust, bound up with rising economic insecurity, in Britain since the late 1970s/early 1980s

(Hall, 1999; OECD, 2001; Harper, 2001; Pickles & Savage, 2005; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005; European Values Study Group and World Values Survey Association, 2006; Llakes, 2011). Viewed in tandem with Beck, Hier and Bauman's thinking, such insecurities seem to feed directly into the concept of unknowable (*un-trustable*) 'strangers in our midst' - a potent and enduring locus for panic projections related to the multifarious anxieties central to this thesis, ranging from child abuse/abduction to shady, hooded 'antisocial' youths.

But, as well as reviving and reinventing the figure of the sinister stranger – often in the guise, as we shall see, of a 'half-known' entity loosely familiar to us from the peripheries of our own social circles – the risk-infused panic narratives of post-millennial Britain arguably go beyond the microcosm, by continuing to embrace more 'distantly menacing', *macro-level* concerns identified by Beck (1992 [1986]). And it is this *montage* of disparate, overlapping and (above all else) *ongoing* fears – some personified, others not – that emerges from much recent thinking on panics. For Waiton (2008), the first discrete, then serial, 'moral' panics of the past have been usurped by an era of "amoral" panics, encompassing everything from classic 'morality-related' issues to a continual whirlwind of risk-based concerns, including BSE, superbugs and binge-drinking. Hier (2003 and 2008) has been similarly inclusive, identifying in his 2008 paper (p.186) a bewildering menu of "concerns pertaining to public surveillance, crime and disorder, child allergies, bullying, teen violence amongst females, 'hockey parents' and myriad health concerns" – all fears relating to questions of how families, law enforcement agencies, courts, politicians and/or individuals themselves "regulate" both public and private behaviour to minimise risk to others. What these views have in common is an underlying sense that 'panics' in the *plural* have somehow been replaced by a generalised, overwhelming and ongoing atmosphere of 'panic' in the *singular*. As Waiton puts it specifically in relation to fears about youth antisocial behaviour - a public concern central to this thesis – early 21st century society does not so much "face the occasional moral panic" as embody a collective mind-set locked into "a permanent state of panic" (Waiton, 2008, p.10). It is this notion of 'permanent panic' – of a self-perpetuating societal neurosis about the omnipresence of risks and threats, both animate and inanimate - that provides the immediate arena of academic debate into which this thesis enters.

Panics and media research: the case for 'joining the dots'

While there has been no shortage of creditable studies focusing on individual panics - and the media's complicity in fuelling them – only a handful, to date, have empirically examined the flow of ideas between elites, sources, news organisations/journalists and audience-members *in the round*. Most projects (for all their merits) have dwelt on one or two 'levels' of the process of ideational exchange which creates and sustains panics. Studies like those by Morley (1976) and Edwards (1979) of the media's treatment of striking workers; Hall et al (1978) of mugging; Chiricos, Eschholz, and Gertz (1997) of street violence and drug crime; Fritz and Altheide (1987) and Best (1990) of missing children; and Ost (2002) of internet child pornography all rely heavily on using textual analysis of news output to *infer* its agenda/bias - and any impact it might have on audiences. The nearest any come to 'proving' relationships they identify between elite/conservative/neoliberal discourse and news content on the one hand, or media messages and audience reception on the other, is Edwards' citing of government statistics relating to the actual incidence of industrial action (lower than media reports suggested); Chiricos et al's use of official figures confirming Americans' fear of violent crime was out of proportion with its true scale; and Best's use of opinion-poll data to demonstrate an apparent media effect on public perceptions of child vulnerability. In addition to the disputed data-set focusing on the effects of "heavy exposure" to violent TV crime programmes identified by Gerbner et al (1979; Hirsch, 1980 and 1981), a separate study by Dowler (2003) found an apparent correlation between fear of crime and exposure to violent dramas, but little evidence such anxieties were heightened by consumption of crime *news*. Whichever interpretation is correct, most of these studies approached panics from an 'outside-in' perspective – *inferring* intentionality behind media texts and/or effects from content.

Others have adopted an 'inside-out' approach to examining panic-generation, by conducting newsroom ethnographies and/or interviewing journalists. The best of these (Fishman, 1978; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987) illuminate the organisational practices of reporters, editors and publishers - with some incorporating textual analysis alongside participant-observation. But few examine the tripartite equation of news sourcing/creation and "encoding" of ideology in

content (Hall, 1980); "decoding"/interpretation; and any *effects* the media has on audience-members' attitudes/actions. To this extent, both the textual analysis and ethnographic/interview approach to studying the media's role in panics can also be described as 'top-down': neither can satisfactorily evaluate the presence/extent of any *effects* content so encoded might have on audience-members. Conversely, many noteworthy effects studies focusing on media-relayed demonisation stories – for example Hartmann and Husband on immigrants (1971) and Meyer on paedophiles (2007) – greatly illuminate the *reception* end of the media food-chain, but exclude the processes by which those stories are constructed/encoded by practitioners. Again, any steps they take to elucidate the *intention* behind media messages are generally inferred from textual analysis.

The problems of adopting too 'outside-in' *or* 'inside-out' a methodology while researching panics can be demonstrated by a closer critique of two key texts considered here. Even if one accepts Hall et al's contention that most moral panics (in their era at least) are/were elite-engineered, they relied entirely on *inferring* the media's intentions, after the event, through textual analysis of newspaper headlines, editorials, stories and features. They also adopted a highly selective structuralist approach - cherry-picking articles focusing on 'mugging', rather than systematically categorising *all* press items focusing on youth, including those with different emphases. In so doing, they laid themselves open to accusations of selectivity – a charge previously levelled at Hall over his (1973) analysis of coverage of the 1967-9 student protests (Curran, 1976). On its own, textual analysis is also problematic as a means of gauging the extent to which media output affects (let alone *effects*) the spread of panics, by influencing audience perceptions/reawakening latent prejudices. Hall et al extended the scope of texts they analysed to include a selection of letters sent by readers to local and national newspapers during the mugging panic and to parents of convicted offenders in the infamous Handsworth case. But, beyond this, they obtained no first-hand evidence of audience *responses* to stories they examined, either from interviews or independent surveys. This conspicuous omission prevented them from fully anatomising their chosen panic – in so doing, justifying their contention that it was elite-engineered. Moreover, as Hall himself has argued (1980), the fact a message is "encoded" in a particular way does not guarantee this is how it will be "decoded" by

those for whom it is intended - let alone that audience-members will uncritically accept the worldview it presents. In relation to fear of crime – a subject of direct relevance to his 1978 study – a more holistic mix of content analysis, official statistics and audience questionnaires led Roshier to conclude that, while the press did, indeed, portray "a consistently biased impression of crime and criminals", there was "little evidence" to suggest this was "very influential" on public opinion (1973, p.51). As others have rightly concluded:

"The analysis of press coverage is not a sufficient basis from which to extrapolate the decisions of the 'control-culture', public belief, or decision-making." (Miller & Philo, 1999, p.29)

Conversely, Fishman experienced the construction of a panic contemporaneously, at first hand - interviewing journalists and observing them as they sourced their information and wrote it up while working as a reporter alongside them. However, convincing though his thesis might be that it is journalists' *working practices* – and the nature of sources they depend on – that determine "news ideology" (1980, p.18), he is as guilty as Hall et al of omitting to empirically test the impact of their narratives on audiences. Given the absence of any textual analysis to speak of in his 1978 study – barring a fleeting tot-up of the number of crime-related stories published during his research period – he failed to demonstrate that what *resulted* from the news-creation process he observed was content that (manifestly or latently) *embodied* this ideology. The absence of substantive textual analysis, coupled with Fishman's self-proclaimed disinterest (p.531) in interviewing audiences, lays him as open to accusations of failing to test the *effects* of a (in his case, *commercially* driven) media-stoked panic as Hall et al. For these reasons, Fishman's work falls short of the multi-level approach required to 'anatomise' a panic.

And just as few researchers have produced empirical studies which 'join the dots' between elites, news sources, media and audiences, fewer still have conducted *contemporaneous* research into the societal forces responsible for generating, promoting and escalating unfolding panics. The handful of studies that examine the emergence and proliferation of 'live' panics tend to focus on one or two levels of the 'panic process' – with Young (1971) and Cohen (1972) concentrating on their impact on the public and folk-devils themselves, and Fishman

(1978) and Machin (1996) investigating the news "manufacturing" end of the equation. Few studies have 'anatomised' panics by investigating all of the following: the means by which panics first come about; how/by whom they are spread, amplified and/or transformed; and the extent to which, at least in the short-term, they can be said to affect the attitudes/behaviours of social actors. In their seminal ethnographies, Cohen and Young went some way towards squaring this circle, but they did so more than four decades ago – in a profoundly different media environment. To illustrate, the Brighton *Evening Argus* newspaper Cohen (selectively) content-analysed is today merely the *Argus*: nominally still a 'paper', but one placing as much emphasis on its online operation, and inviting its 'audience' to both comment on and contribute to its output, as its (increasingly infrequent) print editions. Back in 1972, few could have anticipated the complex dynamics of today's audience-directed multimedia news environment - one in which content can be uploaded to news sites by audience-members themselves live from the scene of a story, and readers engage in 'conversations', both between themselves (on discussion-threads) and with journalists (for example, via Twitter). This thesis argues that only a multi-level methodology – combining interviews with news-makers and consideration of their sources at one end, audience research at the other, and scrutiny of news output through textual analysis 'in between' – can illuminate the multi-layered interplay of ideas and information on which the persistence of panics depends in the digital age, let alone clarify the dynamics enabling one panic to endure while another "passes over and is forgotten" (Cohen, 1972, p.1). Furthermore, in an era when 'consumers' increasingly 'interact' with the news – and, in some cases, generate it themselves - researchers are blessed with a priceless new opportunity to analyse how more engaged audience-members react to stories *as they read them*, by examining the traces they leave online.

By analysing the interplay between *all* 'key players' involved in mobilising concerns about children in contemporary Britain, the thesis aims to go some way towards explaining the myriad dynamics at work in sustaining what has become an endemic juvenile panic – and, especially, the role newspapers play in this process. Long ago, while collaborating on their classic collection *The Manufacture of News* (1973), Cohen and Young contemplated producing a bogus press release warning of a putative new form of deviancy, in an experimental attempt

to locate Britain's "moral panic button" (Young, 2010). The spark that ignites (or reignites) a 'successful' panic in the public sphere may be as elusive as ever, but this thesis aims to help clarify the balance of influences elites, news sources, journalists, and audiences play in fanning the flames.

Lessons from the literature

In endeavouring to anatomise a complex contemporary panic, this thesis has drawn particular inspiration from a handful of ground-breaking studies into the process of transactional communication and meaning-making in the construction of panicky public discourses. Pre-eminent among these is Golding and Middleton's masterful *Images of Welfare* (1982), which went further than any study before it (and most since) towards illuminating the collision of forces at all 'levels' of the communication "circuit" (Miller et al, 1998) instrumental in the generation and reproduction of a panic: in its case, the demonization of benefit "scroungers". The book successfully combined analysis of news texts (both broadcast and print) with an empirical survey of 'audience' opinion, qualitative interviews with relevant journalists (and sources) and examination of official social security data. More importantly, though, it represented a major breakthrough in attempts to situate a (near) contemporaneous panic in a longitudinal cultural context, by introducing the revelatory dimension of historical deposits tracing the framing of poverty as deviance down the centuries. While *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al, 1978, p.3) included an early section illustrating how 'outbreaks' of the "frightening new strain of crime" on which it focused (mugging) repeatedly occurred in the 1800s, it did so over a single page - and took its survey of portrayals of the prevalence of street violence down the ages back only to the rein of Queen Victoria. Equally, *Hooligan* – Pearson's (1983) canter through periodic panics about delinquency stretching back to Elizabethan times – made no attempt to examine the mediation of these ideas empirically beyond selective textual analysis.

Moreover, even great achievements have their limitations, and for Golding and Middleton this was the absence of a more direct empirical study of the *dynamics* of news reception – particularly the role of social mediation in the process of meaning-making. Where they used a

largely quantitative survey (with some qualitative aspects) to elucidate public attitudes towards welfare, in its efforts to *replicate* meaning-making interactions, empirically and in 'real time' – and investigate the extent/limitations of any media effects on audience perceptions - this thesis is most heavily indebted to the prolific output of the Glasgow University Media Group. Of all its various breakthroughs, one stands out as key inspiration: the use of focus-groups by Kitzinger, Philo, Reilly and others to explore the interplay between individuals' *mediated* experience of social phenomena via the news and their *social* experience in the 'real world'. These studies have broken new ground in helping us understand the 'balance' of influence on public perceptions between news media, personal (and vicarious) experience and other factors, by combining qualitative group interviews designed to gauge people's *views* on a subject with script-writing "news-game" exercises (Kitzinger 1993 and 2004; Philo, 1993) testing their *recall* of media framing devices and background biographical information that illuminates the individual "schema" (Graber, 1984) they bring to *interpreting* mediated narratives (and accepting/rejecting how they are presented). Through her focus-group work on public perceptions of everything from perceived 'links' between homosexuality and paedophilia (Kitzinger, 1996) to the dynamics of the AIDS panic (Miller et al, 1998) – a collaborative Glasgow project that remains one of very few to incorporate qualitative interviews with journalists, sources *and* audience-members – Kitzinger successfully recreated the natural, informal qualities of water-cooler/playground conversations. In so doing, she imbued her findings with an ethnographic dimension missing from either individual interviews or traditional surveys. By using subtle cues to steer side-tracking interviewees back to the point, and supplementary questions couched in everyday language to encourage those inclined to speak briefly or imprecisely to elaborate, she also demonstrated how people can be persuaded to vocalise – and *explain* - the thinking behind their immediate responses.

News media and panics about the childhood 'crisis' and youth disorder

Many influential moral panic studies have been preoccupied with children and/or teenagers. Long before Young, Cohen and Hall et al published their trio of books exploring youth panics of the 1970s, Britain had witnessed cyclical furores about delinquency. In truth, these dated to

earlier than the fabled post-war 'invention' of teenagers: just as Mods and Rockers gave way to punks, skinheads and, more recently, "mal-rats" (Valentine, 1996a), "chavs" (Jones, 2011; Le Grand, 2010) and "hoodies" (Lett, 2010), the 17th and 18th centuries bequeathed various prototype "hooligans" (Pearson, 1983). The supposedly untainted Victorian era - cast by dewy eyed crusaders as the golden age of morality - spawned the 1862 "garrotting panic" (Davis, 1980). And, during the course of the 20th century, penny dreadful comics, sexually explicit TV shows, "horror comics", slasher movies, violent video games and heavy metal lyrics were all successively blamed for triggering periodic explosions of juvenile indiscipline. As Pearson and others note, the establishment has a myopic tendency to greet any new variant of age-old forms of juvenile rebellion as a dangerous new phenomenon – an alien threat to previously unchallenged moral certainties that have long been the bedrock of British society.

Britain's most recent "crisis of childhood" (Coppock, 1997; Davis & Bourhill, 1997; Goldson, 1997; Scraton, 1997; Squires & Stephen, 2005; Kehily, 2010) began in the early 1990s, since when there have been several pinch-points. These include the panic precipitated by the brutal 1993 murder of two-year-old James Bulger (Valentine, 1996a; Scraton, 1997; Furedi, 2001; Kehily, 2010) – itself erroneously linked to the influence of horror film *Child's Play 3* (Newson, 1994) - and a recent parallel in the 2009 torture case involving the "devil boys" of Edlington, Doncaster (*Doncaster Free Press*, 2010). Though these particular panics all focused on the capacity for sadism of children (two 10-year-olds in the first case and a 10 and 11-year-old in the second), they each represented latter-day manifestations of a deep-rooted, generations-old continuum of panics about delinquency – conduct recast by recent governments as "antisocial behaviour" (Farrington, 2003; Squires & Stephen, 2005; Solanki et al, 2006; Rodger, 2008; Squires, 2008; Waiton, 2008).

And, more or less paralleling the current panic about *dangerous* juveniles, there has emerged a simmering, sustained – on the face of it, contradictory – panic about child *vulnerability*. This, too, has become a subject of intense research interest, spawning literature focusing on everything from America's "Satanic day-care panic" (de Young, 1998) to fears about "missing children" (Best, 1990), the dangers of abuse within the home (Krugman, 1995) and, especially,

the perceived threat from predatory paedophiles (McNeish & Roberts, 1995; McDevitt, 1995; Kitzinger & Skidmore, 1995; Valentine, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b; Gentry, 1998; Jackson & Backett-Milburn, 1998; Gallagher et al, 2002; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Meyer, 2007) and motor vehicles (Hillman, Adams, & Whitelegg,1990; McNeish & Roberts, 1995; Jackson & Backett-Milburn, 1998; Shaw et al, 2013).

The paradoxical nature of contemporary discourse on juveniles - positioning them as both potential victims and aggressors - has led several academics to interpret the underlying motives behind it as ideological. Like historical portrayals of Mods versus Rockers and black muggers, the conflicted images of childhood consistently conjured up by Britain's elite(s), according to Goldson (1997, p.5), reflect "the emergence and consolidation of moral anxieties and reactionary political concerns", while Scraton (1997, p.x) sees them as providing "popular legitimation for authoritarian interventions". For Scott, Jackson and Backett-Milburn (1998, p.1), such "contradictions" represent a tension between "two conceptualisations of children": as both "active, knowing, autonomous individuals" and "passive, innocent dependants". Yet, beyond identifying this contradiction, and speculating about reactionary motives behind it – largely by cross-referencing key events, like the Bulger murder, to subsequent draconian policies/legal judgments – few have offered satisfactory explanations as to how and why such a 'sea-change' in conceptualising childhood occurred when it did. Too little emphasis has been placed on the media's role in helping construct and reinforce this discourse; its reasons for doing so (whether primarily ideological or commercial); and the extent to which news discourse influences the reactions of politicians, control agencies, public and juveniles themselves.

One side of the coin: child safety and the great 'parental panic'

Recent studies have identified evidence of significant increases in parental protectiveness towards children. An influential Policy Studies Institute monograph found the "home habitat" of the average British eight-year-old – the area within which they are allowed to wander and play at leisure - shrank to one-ninth of its former size between 1971 and 1990 (Hillman, Adams, & Whitelegg,1990), with the number of children walking to school alone at this age plummeting

from 80 to nine per cent. Revisiting this study two decades later, the PSI found children's independence had diminished still further – with the overall proportion of primary-aged pupils walking *home* from school unaccompanied plummeting from 86 to 35 per cent between 1971 and 1990, before dropping to just one in four by 2010 (Shaw et al, 2013). Separate studies for the Children's Play Council (2006 and 2008), Children's Society (2007) and National Trust (National Trust, 2008, and Moss, 2012) paint similar pictures. Meanwhile, a 1995 Barnado's survey found that seven out of 10 parents felt their neighbourhoods were unsafe, with half saying they would never let their children play outside unsupervised (McNeish & Roberts, 1995). Ninety-five per cent of parents interviewed for another study admitted restricting their children's play because of safety fears (Valentine, 1996b).

Causes of parental concern - and some pointers to media effects

Approaching their subject from a socio-geographical perspective, Hillman, Adams, and Whitelegg (1990) and Shaw et al (2013) combined comparative longitudinal surveys of official data on "children's independent mobility" in England and Germany with focus-group interviews in both countries designed to identify why parents were restricting their children's outdoor activities. Both concluded the extent of parental protectiveness was significantly greater in England than Germany, and parents' primary concern was about their children being run over. The former cited road safety figures demonstrating that, while in 1971 three-quarters of junior schoolchildren were allowed to cross roads unaccompanied, this number had halved by 1990. Perhaps largely as a result, the number of children killed on roads dropped by a similar percentage in that period, but the volume of traffic doubled (posing a greater risk, ironically, to those still allowed out unaccompanied). Similar road safety fears have since been highlighted by Lansdown (1994), Valentine (1996a and 2004), Grayling et al (2002), and Jago et al (2009). That traffic fears, though hardly unfounded, can be somewhat disproportionate to *actual* levels of risk, therefore broadly qualifying as a panic (if not a 'moral' one) is arguably borne out by government statistics showing that between 1977 and 1987 child death rates on Britain's roads dropped from six to fewer than four per 100,000 (Hillman, Adams, & Whitelegg, 1990). In 1998, BBC news programme *Frontline Scotland* identified a similar picture north of the border,

reporting a survey in which eight out of ten respondents said they believed the frequency of accidents involving children had increased in the previous 20 years. In truth, the number run over in that period had fallen by 60 per cent (as cited in Furedi, 2001).

Significantly, some of Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg's interviewees also mentioned "fear of molestation" as a reason for their protectiveness (Hillman, Adams, & Whitelegg, 1990, p.24) - with concerns about girls being attacked particularly marked (Ibid, p.32) and parents of older children more worried about 'stranger-danger' than traffic (Ibid, p.30). The authors' identification of this as a growing concern from the 1970s onwards chimes with a historical overview by Meyer locating the point at which the media "discovered" paedophilia in the growing "problematisation of child pornography and homosexuality" during that decade (Meyer, 2007, p.9). Research has also identified a fear of "bullies" and older children (Valentine, 1996a; Jago et al, 2009), pointing to a partial 'overlap' with the flipside of the parental panic: the ASB furore. This conjunction is alluded to by Squires and Stephen (2005, p.9), in contrasting the image of residential roads alive with the "normal, pro-social, healthy activity" of "street football" in Spencer's 1950 paper *The Unclubbable Adolescent* with today's "on-street car parks where a stray shot might result in some expensive damage".

Worries about extra-familial sexual threats to children have repeatedly emerged from empirical research since the 1990s – a point at which Meyer sees the discourse on paedophilia undergoing a "conceptual shift...away from child sexual abuse as a problem *of* the family" (as epitomised by the 1980s scare about an alleged Cleveland child sex ring) to "a problem *outside* the family" (Meyer, 2007, p.9). "Strangers" emerged as the chief fear of 95 per cent of a 1,000-strong sample of parents surveyed in 1993 by children's charity Kidscape, while the same concern came out top in the Barnado's study (McNeish & Roberts, 1995) and Valentine's questionnaire of 400 parents with primary-aged children (Valentine, 1996a). The word "paedophile" – and images of "people getting" children - arose unprompted from qualitative interviews with 24 Bristol parents by Jago et al (2009, p.474). Meyer lists similar findings from successive MORI polls, principally surveys conducted at pinch-points after the high-profile murders of eight-year-old Sarah Payne and ten-year-olds Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman.

In a poll published shortly after the former's murder 78 per cent of parents said they believed contemporary society was more dangerous for children than in the past (MORI, 23 July 2000), while seven out of ten expressed similar sentiments following Wells and Chapman's deaths (MORI, 19 September 2002).

But alarm about 'stranger-danger' contrasts starkly with the actual scale of this problem: studies by La Fontaine (1990), Kitzinger and Skidmore (1995) Grubin (1998), Corby (2000) and Pritchard and Bagley (2001) all cite data confirming most paedophilia occurs within families – with strangers responsible for as few as one in five cases of child sexual abuse (Grubin, 1998). Similarly misinformed have been the widespread media-stoked fears about child murder in Britain post-Bulger: this rolling panic coincided with a *fall* in the number of murders of under 16-year-olds from four to three per million between 1988 and 1999 and a commensurate drop in the number of stranger killings from 26 to eight per million (Furedi, 2001). *Frontline Scotland* similarly found relationship disjunction between the extent of fears about child murder and the reality of the situation there: three-quarters of respondents believed stranger-danger killings had risen, but there had been no discernible statistical change either way in 20 years (Ibid).

Pinpointing the 'origins' of the parental panic

It seems beyond dispute, then, that the *causes* of parental anxieties about allowing children freedom of movement boil down to fears about 'stranger-danger', traffic accidents and, to a lesser extent, victimisation by older juveniles. So, too, is the fact that the first two concerns amount to panics. What is less clear from any existing study, however, is what the *source(s)* are of this panic: in short, from where do fears *derive*? In fairness, those who have done most to illuminate the sites of social anxiety over Britain's ongoing parental panic hail neither from sociological nor communications backgrounds. Hillman, Adams, and Whitelegg (1990), Shaw (2013) and colleagues approached their celebrated studies from an environmental/planning/quality-of-life perspective, while Valentine's prolific output reflects her background as a geographer. It was not within the ambit of their research to anatomise the

panic around child safety – let alone analyse how parental perceptions and behaviours have been influenced by particular forces like the media. Nonetheless, the fact remains that little attention has been paid in empirical enquiry into the reasons for changing parental behaviour patterns to analysing both the *outcomes* of parenting practices (reduced child freedom) and the *inputs* prompting them.

Several previous studies have sought to demystify particular parental panics by locating them in time – providing contextual explanations of the social circumstances in which they arose. De Young (1998) identified the stimulus for America's early Eighties "Satanic day-care" panic as the insecurities felt by then growing numbers of mothers entrusting their maternal roles to childcare providers so they could enter employment, while Ost (1990) cited economic insecurity as a key factor contributing to the salience of the country's early 1980s flap about missing children. But few studies have substantively attempted to trace any 'causal' relationship between perceptions of child risk and news messages (or, indeed, other information channels). McDevitt published an exhaustive longitudinal survey analysing an apparent correlation between stories about child abuse and neglect published in American metropolitan daily newspapers over a 25-year period and subsequent reporting of such crimes to statutory agencies. She found that, while complaints increased over time, they did so *concurrently* – casting doubt over the hypothesis that heightened media coverage *prompted* people to report offences. The upward trend in abuse allegations, she concluded, might have been due to "economic downturns and other widespread societal changes rather than media attention", while initial rises in news coverage and offence reporting may have been sparked by government initiatives (McDevitt,1996, p.261).

Yet McDevitt's research did not *disprove* a media effects hypothesis: while news coverage and filing of abuse claims appeared to have gone hand in hand, the latter had not come first. More importantly, in identifying national policy changes as likely 'causes' of these two trends, McDevitt failed to enquire why such changes had occurred, and to what extent they might themselves have been prompted by media pressure. As Cohen (1972), Hall et al (1978) and Fishman (1980), among others, have observed, crime crackdowns repeatedly flow from

intense media focus on an issue. By concentrating on the formal reporting of alleged abuse to the authorities, to the exclusion of any other behavioural effects of news coverage, McDevitt also left open the question of whether the combination of policy changes, heightened media interest and increased complaints about maltreatment she identified might have impacted on family rituals - something impossible to ascertain through content analysis. Circumstantial evidence for media effects drawn from interviews conducted by Boyce (2007), Reilly (1999) and others in relation to more "amoral" panics (Waiton, 2008) suggest qualitative approaches to investigating the causes (and consequences) of abuse anxieties may be more fruitful.

Of those who have narrowed their research to focus on stranger-danger – rather than wider definitions of child abuse, including incest – only Meyer (2007) has come close to anatomising this panic, by considering its historical roots and looking at both news representations of paedophilia and public responses to it. Laudable though her study is, however, it has limitations – notably the absence of interviews with journalists or newsroom-based research to bolster her case for distorted coverage based on scattered comments from focus-groups and newspaper content analysis. In addition, Meyer's scrutiny of media texts confines itself to two (polar-opposite) national papers: *The News of the World* and *The Guardian*. And while she rightly sees in focus-groups a device for elucidating "the reasons behind concern" about paedophiles "and its 'contradictions'" in ways questionnaires cannot (p.13), her groups almost entirely comprised middle-class and aspirational "upper working-class" participants. Moreover, she concerned herself primarily with the problematisation of *paedophilia*, rather than *childhood*. And while she made passing reference to the double-edged nature of the juvenile panic – the tendency to perceive children as both victims and threats – she focused solely on exploring the former. In addition, in cross-referencing her focus-group findings with her textual analysis she concluded the news media had "a power to incite fears, in some people, and shape practices as well as opinions" (p.29). Yet, if she did elicit anecdotal evidence of such effects from interviews, this is not displayed explicitly in quotations included in her book.

Impact of the parental panic on wider societal attitudes

In addition to identifying the societal influences affecting *parental* attitudes/behaviour, this thesis also aims to anatomise how elite(s), newspapers and other forces shape wider public perceptions of children. For example, on several recent occasions in Britain, America and elsewhere, media condemnation of perpetrators of exceptional crimes against children has been followed by public protest, demands for legislative crackdowns and/or vigilante action. The 2000 murder of Sarah Payne prompted a *News of the World* campaign calling for the introduction of 'Sarah's Law' - a public register of the known localities of convicted sex offenders living at large in Britain, based on America's 'Megan's Law' (Blacker & Griffin, 2010). One long-term outcome was a 'media effect' on the powers-that-be: a registration system, introduced in four pilot areas in September 2008 and rolled out across England and Wales in 2011. However, the most visible (apparent) short-term effects of this coverage were outbreaks of vigilante violence provoked by the paper's 'naming and shaming' of convicted paedophiles living in the community. In July 2000, 49-year-old Iain Armstrong was wrongly identified by neighbours as one of several offenders whose photographs had appeared on the paper's front page. A brick was thrown through a window of his ex-wife's house in Greater Manchester, and he was taunted with cries of "paedophile". Assistant Chief Constable Alan Green, of Greater Manchester Police, condemned the incident as an "irresponsible reaction of emotive stories in a national newspaper" (*www.bbc.co.uk*, 2000a). That August, the abbreviation "paedo" was sprayed on the door of a consultant paediatrician's home by a teenager who had confused her job title with the word paedophile (*www.bbc.co.uk*, 2000b). As Meyer emphasises (2007, p.7), public protests and direct action also occurred in Portsmouth in 2000 and Cambridge two years later, while several suspected paedophiles were killed by vigilantes, including Barry Sewell (Clixby, 2005), Arnold Hartley (Carter, 2003), and Paul Cooper (Herbert, 2005).

More subtly, Valentine's interviews suggest the stranger-danger panic might be affecting parents' behaviour (in a 'hands-off' way) towards *other people's* children. One mother confessed to being reluctant to console a lost child at a shopping mall because she feared

passers-by might think she was trying to abduct him (Valentine, 1996b). Yet, as Valentine herself concedes:

"...there has yet to be a proper 'historical' study conducted to ascertain how and why parental anxieties have increased over recent generations." (Valentine & McKendrick, 2004, p.232) Through its focus-groups and discussion-thread analysis, this thesis aims to shed some light on the impact of newspaper narratives about children on wider social attitudes.

The other side of the coin: the youth antisocial behaviour (ASB) panic

Just as recurring child safety fears have generated considerable academic literature since the early 1980s, concerns over childhood delinquency have also seen periodic spikes in scholarly interest. The resurgence of studies focusing on youth justice and (mis)behaviour coincided with a period of renewed political focus on these issues. The Major and Blair governments' embrace of hazily defined concepts of 'antisocial behaviour' led to various 'zero-tolerance' policies in the 1990s and Noughties, and extensive news coverage. The ASB concept was crystallised by New Labour's Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which introduced antisocial behaviour orders (ASBOs): civil penalties imposing conditions on the movements of anyone judged by police/local authorities to have behaved "in a manner that caused or was likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more persons not of the same household" (Great Britain. *Crime and Disorder Act 1998*). While more than half of ASBO recipients have since been adults, 41 per cent of those receiving them between 1999 and 2007 were 10 to 17-year-olds (Berman, 2009). And various spin-off measures have specifically targeted children and teenagers – ranging from curfews and parenting orders to dispersal zones and alcohol disorder zones. Mr Blair also formalised 'bottom-up' initiatives already used by some communities to self-police by introducing new state-sponsored agents at grassroots level, including police community support officers (PCSOs) and neighbourhood wardens.

The hyperactive political reaction to ASB – at a time of widespread (media-endorsed) consensus about the need to tackle violent criminals – followed years of supposedly sustained

youth disorder. The early 1980s and 1990s recessions had witnessed civil unrest in inner-city areas, notably Brixton and Toxteth, with unemployed youths engaged in running battles with police. Following periodic outbreaks of football violence during the 1980s, by the 1990s "joy-riders" had become the media's favourite youth folk-devils (Groombridge, 1998). Viewed against the background of haunting CCTV images of 10–year-old Robert Thompson and Jon Venables luring toddler James Bulger to his death on a Merseyside railway track, their antics were depicted less as exuberant (if lawless) expressions of rebellion articulated in previous generations by Mods or punks than alarming symbols of a cancerous moral decay among juveniles - and, by implication, their parents (Scraton, 1997; Squires & Stephen, 2005; Waiton, 2008; Millie, 2008; Rodger, 2008; Burney, 2009) - echoing the 1970s "'law-and-order' panic" (Hall et al, 1978, p.288).

Responding to (and fuelling) these portrayals, youth justice policy took lessons directly from the *Policing the Crisis* 'rulebook' by abandoning the liberal, rehabilitative approach adopted previously – with Mr Blair blaming "permissive" social attitudes of the 1960s and Seventies for fostering indiscipline (Blair, 2002). But the true scale of antisocial activity bore little relation to claims made by screaming headlines. A 2004 analysis of British Crime Survey data by Tonry found actual incidence of the "problematic behaviours" targeted by Home Secretaries Michael Howard and Jack Straw was "flat or falling" until 1998 – the year ASBOs were introduced (Tonry, 2004, p.19). As for one commonly cited 'antisocial' offence, vandalism, incidents fell by 19 per cent between 1995 and 2005-6, despite its remaining a consistent topic of news discourse (Walker, Kershaw, and Nicholas, 2006). Longitudinal content analysis of newspapers stretching back 20 years from the mid-2000s (Waiton, 2006) found that, while the term "antisocial behaviour" appeared in only "a couple of articles a year" during the 1980s, in January 2004 alone it was mentioned more than 1,000 times. This reflects New Labour's emphasis on ASB policy: the number of ASBOs issued rose from 322 in the first two years to peak at 13 times that number (4,122) in 2005. This growing preoccupation of politicians and media with ASB therefore displayed all the disproportion of conventional moral panics.

Although the coalition government scrapped ASBOs, it devised various new penalties, including criminal behaviour orders (CBOs) restricting the movements of individuals convicted of ASB-related offences and more than one variety of summary penalty resembling ASBOs – among them highly contentious 'injunctions to prevent nuisance and annoyance' (IPNAs) (Great Britain. *Antisocial Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill 2013*). There also continue to be localised efforts to accord ASB high priority and coordinate responses of police, councils, housing providers and other agencies. In January 2011 the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) launched a new partnership between eight police forces seeking to improve response-times to complaints about ASB (Edens, interviewed on *Today*, 2011). The move had been precipitated, in part, by national media coverage of the suicide of Fiona Pilkington, a single mother from Barwell, Leicestershire, who killed herself and her 18-year-old disabled daughter in October 2007 after suffering years "under siege" from "gangs of teenagers and children" (Sturcke, 2010). The coalition also introduced a website, Police.uk, giving the public free instant access to details of every crime and ASB incident reported in specific postcode locations each year.

Towards anatomising the 'ASB panic'

Where panics begin and end remains a matter of debate. Of particular dispute are those, like the endlessly resurfacing furores over delinquency, that originate in widely held perceptions of societal problems observable to many in everyday life. Just as, in periods of economic decline, elites recycle images of the feckless poor as "scroungers" (Golding & Middleton, 1982) – arguably to distract attention from deeper causes of society's problems - so too do they scapegoat rootless youth for deep-seated structural issues successive administrations have failed to address. As with scroungers, the durability of the teenage yob or hooligan archetype rests on its recognisability: in particular, to low-paid workers and other (deserving) poor who encounter them in ways they do not more 'socially distant' cases like freeloading yuppies or the tax-evading rich.

While any anatomy of contemporary manifestations of the rolling youth disorder panic should acknowledge the increasing preoccupation with the moral degeneracy of Britain's urban poor under Mr Major (Waiton, 2008), the 'ASB panic' arguably crystallised with Mr Blair's election in May 1997. His and the preceding government's "invention" (Millie, 2009, p.3) of ASB rested on a definition embracing a "wide spectrum" of behaviours, ranging from "serious criminal violence and persistent ongoing intimidation" to "minor" infringements like dropping litter (Mackenzie et al, 2010, p.i). Although it took politicians to articulate the simmering, occasionally explosive, dysfunctions of (largely socially excluded) youngsters as threats from an antisocial "other" (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), the appealing nature of New Labour's policies was testament to an already widespread belief that this problem existed. A 2010 Home Office-commissioned review of all post-1995 English-language research into public perceptions of ASB found considerable evidence identifying younger people, women and "those with prior victimisation experiences (both real and vicarious)" as groups likely to have "high perceptions of ASB" (Mackenzie et al, 2010, p.iii). To the extent there was already a sentiment among ordinary citizens (particularly residents of deprived areas) that youth misbehaviour was worsening, the 'ASB panic' therefore strongly resembles other 'bottom-up' panics cynically exploited by politicians, including elite-sponsored discourse about "scroungers" (Golding & Middleton, 1982).

Indeed, some evidence suggests that, long before governments turned the spotlight (back) onto ASB, people were already adjusting their routines to minimise the risk of encountering such behaviour – whether by changing routes to work or sidestepping clusters of youths on street corners (Mackenzie et al, 2010). But what effect has the successive ASB policies introduced since the 1990s, and news coverage flowing from/encouraging them, had on wider social attitudes? Evidence to suggest its heightened media and policy visibility has reinforced public perceptions of youth disorder is largely circumstantial. Several studies have implicated TV-watching in fostering impressions that violent juvenile crime is rising when it is not, with news programmes singled out repeatedly for blame (O'Connell, 1999; Goidel, Freeman, & Procopio, 2006; Dixon, 2008). However, as stated earlier, research focusing on the media's role in stoking fear of violent crime have mostly adopted a 'top-down' perspective – concentrating on news *construction* to the exclusion of audience *reception* (Fishman, 1978;

Hall et al, 1978). Excepting Cohen (1972) on Mods versus Rockers, much of the work done to elucidate the media's influence on popular perceptions of what might be termed youth ASB has largely been drawn from general literature on fear of violent crime/disorder. And 'patterns' emerging from this have been wildly contradictory – with, variously, TV blamed over newspapers for cultivating fears of personal risk among viewers, particularly residents of high-crime neighbourhoods (Doob & MacDonald, 1979; Gerbner et al, 1979; Dowler et al, 2003); newspapers alternately 'credited' and 'blamed' over TV for having the strongest agenda-setting effect on crime perceptions (Sheley & Ashkins, 1981; Heath & Gilbert, 1996); and women, white people and/or pensioners identified as groups most susceptible to panicking about crime, despite being those least likely to be victimised (Liska & Baccaglini, 1990; Chiricos et al, 1997).

Moreover, as the Home Office review emphasises, no study has yet been conducted to measure media effects on perceptions of ASB *per se* (Mackenzie et al, 2010) – a gap this thesis aims to help rectify. Might not the variable "interpretations" (Ibid, p.i) different individuals put on the sight of youth gatherings – and the "lay heuristics" (Ibid, p.8) on which others base their disproportionate fears about risks of victimisation - be partly shaped by media-constructed images? Moreover, few studies have explicitly addressed the ASB 'panic' at all, and none has adequately 'anatomised' it – by synthesising empirical research into its construction, transmission and reception. Scraton (1997) published a collection of papers on the subject, explicitly relating it to earlier panics about youth disorder. Most of these, however, merely synthesised arguments drawn from secondary literature. In a later collection, Squires (2008) updated the discourse by casting the spotlight on New Labour's initiatives – but this book, too, contained scant primary research and little emphasis on the media's role in framing the panic. Of the two other key studies – Squires and Stephen's *Rougher Justice: Antisocial Behaviour and Young People* (2005) and Waiton's *The Politics of Antisocial Behaviour: Amoral Panics* (2008) – only the former contains any empirical research to speak of. Although it provides a useful 'insiders' view' of youth responses to the ASB agenda - and a shrewd examination of deviancy amplification - given the authors' status as criminologists its primary focus is on public policy, rather than media influence.

This thesis argues only a multi-level research design combining textual analysis and interviews with both news-makers and audience-members can fully illuminate the dynamics of how images of 'antisocial' juveniles are constructed, reproduced and responded to. In exploring the interplay between elite(s), news sources, media and audiences, it aims to elucidate the relative balance of influence between top-down and bottom-up societal forces in prolonging this panic.

From attitude to actions: 'antisocial' versus 'pro-social' behaviour

In the absence of any thoroughgoing anatomy of the ASB panic, what we have so far is a patchwork picture of how they arise – and any behavioural responses they engender in others. We know of several instances from news reports of bottom-up 'panicking' about ASB: in 2005, Kent's Bluewater Shopping-Centre captured national headlines by becoming the first major retail outlet to ban anyone wearing hooded tops ('hoodies') and baseball caps obscuring their faces (*www.bbc.co.uk*, 2005). Although ASB was already high on the Blair government's 'Respect' agenda by the time this community-level initiative took place, others – including various bylaws introduced by local authorities to curb under-age drinking and other nuisances during the early 1990s (*Local Government Chronicle*, 1996) - occurred at times when it was a moot point as to who was driving the ASB crackdown: the Major government, councillors or grassroots moral entrepreneurs.

As for the question of how individual citizens adapt their routines to avoid *falling victim* to ASB, empirical evidence for wide-scale behavioural responses to the perceived threat remains minimal and is largely inferred from third parties. Teenagers interviewed for a British Youth Council/Youth Net report into young people's attitudes towards the ASB debate repeatedly alluded to feeling discriminated against. Likening the media's perpetuation of antisocial stereotypes to a reverse "ageism", they accused journalists of encouraging their elders to eschew them (Wisniewska et al, 2006, p.20). Intriguingly, of the fragmentary anecdotal evidence for 'pro-social' actors adjusting their habits in response to concerns about 'antisocial' ones, much involves parental protectiveness. As well as recording focus-group concerns about stranger-danger, Jago et al (2009, p.5) elicited comments about fears of "older children". In an holistic study embracing "semi-structured" interviews with parents of eight to 11-year-olds in

northern England, questionnaires of 400 parents, ethnographic work with PCSOs and group interviews with teenagers – though omitting media analysis - Valentine (1996a, pp. 590-1) cited parental concerns about "other, violent, children" as a key driver for restrictions imposed on children. Relating this to then ongoing public discourse about the Bulger case, she elided:

"...I argue that contemporary parents perceive their own children to be innocent and vulnerable (angels) whilst simultaneously representing other people's children as out of control in public space and a threat to the moral order of society (devils)." (Valentine 1996a, pp.581-2)

As always, *explosive* societal reactions are more visible than day-to-day ones, though – and perpetrators of youth disorder have often been subject to what might be termed 'vigilante' responses. Perhaps most famously, the trial of Venables and Thompson witnessed aggressive protests from vengeful locals, and such was the ferocity of death threats they received before and after conviction that their identities (and those of their parents) were changed on their release from prison to prevent them being hunted down. Indeed, as Hall et al showed in *Policing the Crisis* (1978), hate-mail has long been a commonplace behavioural manifestation of public revulsion towards violent crime.

Questions of consensus: is there more than one 'elite' position on juveniles?

One of the wider academic debates mentioned earlier that is pertinent to this thesis is the question of how far the juvenile panic can be described as a construct of society's elite(s), rather than the product of (authentic) grassroots concerns and/or their *exploitation* by a commercially motivated news media. Beyond this, there is also the question of whether there *exists* a single 'elite consensus' about such social realities at all – and, if there is, to what extent it is shared by news-makers. To take youth ASB, evidence suggests the dominant establishment consensus since the early 1990s has favoured a 'zero-tolerance' approach to culprits driven by a retributive law-and-order (rather than rehabilitative social welfare) agenda (Davis & Bourhill, 1997; Coppock, 1997a and 1997b; Goldson, 1997; Squires & Stephen, 2005; Waiton, 2008). Conservative Home Secretary Michael Howard's infamous statement that "prison works" (Nicholls & Katz, 2004) marked, for many, a decisive shift away from the liberal,

reformist approach to youth justice which defined the post-Sixties consensus (barring the wobbles of the 1970s – Hall et al, 1978) towards punitive policies which later became the stock-in-trade of his New Labour successors. With Tories, tabloids, most other news media and (according to numerous polls) public broadly supportive, the only vocal opposition to this "criminalisation of welfare" (Squires & Stephen, 2005, p.16) came from civil liberties campaigners like Liberty, a few maverick voices on the government backbenches and, intermittently, Britain's third party, the Liberal Democrats. Yet, despite the fact most surveys suggest this strategy remains popular (Smith, 2009), under Mr Howard's erstwhile Oxford contemporary, Kenneth Clarke, at the Ministry of Justice the succeeding Conservative-Lib Dem government initially began liberalising the country's approach towards youth offending (Great Britain. Ministry of Justice, 2010). Though his successor, Chris Grayling, all-but abandoned this approach (Great Britain. *Criminal Justice and Courts Bill 2013*), the fact it was ever on the agenda demonstrated an attempted break with the (Tory-initiated law-and-order consensus of the preceding 20 years and, by implication, clear dissent in elite circles. Importantly, open disagreement between civil libertarians and socially conservative defenders of New Labour's record (*The Daily Politics*, 2010; Wilson & France, 2010) provided further evidence of a split among Britain's supposedly homogenous political classes. Similar indications of rival/conflicting elite narratives were identified in earlier studies of criminal discourse in the media (Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994).

A related question arising from existing literature is why some panics 'succeed' – seizing the public imagination and rumbling on or recurring – while others fail to take off or peter out. This question is central to this thesis, given its focus on twin panics which have repeatedly resurfaced over generations. It is widely recognised that panics generally gain momentum when there is a 'meeting of minds' between elites, law enforcement agencies, media, moral entrepreneurs and public - and that, where links in this chain are 'broken', attempts to galvanise people against a common threat are liable to 'fail' (Cohen, 1972; Critcher, 2006b; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). It is a task of this thesis to explore the extent to which the enduring nature of this dual juvenile panic can be attributed to 'ideological' complicity between media, establishment and public – as opposed to a collision of distinct but mutually supportive

agendas, ranging from vote-chasing by politicians and attention-grabbing by police/courts to the media's pursuit of audiences and advertisers for profit.

Investigating news influence on the juvenile panic discourse: lessons from the wider literature on media effects and audience reception

Any investigation into the dynamics which conspire to spark, shape and sustain a panic must be informed by a (necessarily selective) review of the vast corpus of literature on media effects. In particular, this thesis follows a tradition established by many previous studies focusing on the role media plays in distorting public perceptions of crime, personal risk and other social concerns (for example, Gerbner et al, 1979; Hirsch, 1980 and 1981; Kitzinger, 1993; Philo, 1993; Dowler, 2003). Likewise, it draws heavily on the ever-growing body of research into *panics themselves* - including those that ascribe a significant role in the sensitisation process to the media (e.g. Young, 1971; Cohen, 1972; Fishman, 1978; Hall et al, 1978; Golding & Middleton, 1982; Boyce, 2007; Meyer, 2007).

One concern of this thesis is a preoccupation with the question of *how* influential British newspapers are – compared to other societal forces – in promoting and channelling public concerns about children. With this in mind, it is worth noting that there has been a recent shift away from the previously widespread view that the effects of the media are limited or "minimal" (Klapper, 1960) towards a qualified but significant emphasis on its power to prime/influence public perceptions and, potentially, actions (e.g. Zaller, 1996; Miller & Philo, 1999). The key qualification is that, where news narratives are 'effective', this tends to be because the process of *social* mediation has given them added resonance – with citizens relating them to their own "schema" (Graber, 1984) and/or being influenced by (well-informed/persuasive) "opinion leaders" (Roper, Katz, & Lazarsfeld, 1955) in their friendship circles. The resurgence in support for a strong (or *stronger*) effects model has been usefully reviewed, notably in the context of political communication, by Hillygus and Jackman (2003), Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein (2004), Hillygus (2005) and others. By subjecting today's problematisation of juveniles to the acid-test of qualitative audience research, this thesis aims to disentangle the effects of direct

news exposure from those of other, potentially more crucial, influences, such as direct (or vicarious) experience and discussion/debate on online social media. In so doing, it also wrestles with the question of how individuals' schemas (and those of their associates) are formed. Indeed, the notion that the mental maps we use to process news may themselves be shaped not only by our personal and professional lives/backgrounds but by media frames has been tacitly acknowledged by Graber herself, in mentioning a research subject who "developed a schema about nursing homes on the basis of a media story about a disastrous nursing home fire" (1984, p.147). Similarly, Philo has illustrated how no amount of personal experience can prevent some individuals *subordinating* their own (directly acquired) knowledge to persistent media (mis)representations. In his ground-breaking effects study of media impact on perceptions of mental illness, he relayed how one interviewee, a volunteer at a secure hospital, became wary of its inmates after a succession of media scare-stories about dangerous patients (Philo, 1999). To what extent might (mis)representations of stranger-danger and juvenile indiscipline, then, *also* be responsible for (re)fashioning audiences' worldviews – and their underlying schemas?

Online mediation of juvenile panic narratives: how 'active' are audiences today?

Though the seminal Glasgow focus-group studies published since the 1990s have much to tell us about the role social mediation plays in individual and collective processing of 'panic' narratives – while also making a persuasive case for the presence of media effects – those of most relevance here appeared before the arrival of a significant new site for the negotiation of meaning about social reality: online forums. The advent of digital social media, however, has sparked renewed interest in studying audience 'reception', and there is now a growing body of empirical research into the ways individuals use web forums, including newspapers' own discussion-threads, to both process and respond to news narratives - by *interacting* with them, each other and news-makers themselves.

An early 'tradition' of this (still emerging) literature was to see such forums as sources of audience empowerment. Democratisation of the spaces in which online news content was

published would, it was argued, enable citizens themselves - rather than small numbers of *professional* news-makers with privileged access to information and the means of news production – to not only react to (and, potentially, contest) news frames but 'bring to the table' their own knowledge and experiences of issues/stories about which journalists reported, thereby contributing directly to those narratives themselves (Pavlik, 2000; McCoy, 2001; Deuze, 2003; Boczkowski, 2004; Bentley et al, 2007; Tremayne, 2007; Bird, 2009; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009; Muthukumaraswamy, 2010; Lewis, 2012). Even at the point at which 'news' first entered the public arena, traditional journalists would be reduced from all-seeing arbiters of its newsworthiness to "referees" (Kovach, 2005), "librarians" (Bruns, 2005) or "gate-watchers" (Ibid). Impotent to stop citizens *accessing* the relentless tide of unfiltered information available online, they would instead have to make do with *directing* them to what they considered the most 'credible' (or, indeed, ideologically favourable) sources.

However, persuasive evidence for the balance of power between 'news-makers' and 'audiences' becoming as "reciprocal" as this (Domingo et al, 2008, p.326) – let alone shifting from one to the other - has so far been limited, as Witschge (2013) and others have shown. By contrast, recent studies have demonstrated that regular participation in debates on web forums tends to be the preserve of relatively small (potentially unrepresentative) gatherings of serial contributors (Wellman et al, 2001; Albrecht, 2006) and/or conformist voices that act as mere "echo-chambers" for the dominant discourse on which they are commenting (Treviranus & Hockema, 2009; Edwards, 2013). Moreover, the involvement of web moderators tasked with policing discussion-threads on many sites, and with powers to "censor" (Janssen & Kies, 2005, p.321) or remove legally contentious comments or those construed as 'trolling' (Hurrell, 2006; Binns, 2012), has arguably further strengthened the hand of the self-selecting, "self-reinforcing" (Barabasi, 2002, p.170) minority of repeat posters whose largely homologous viewpoints represent little more than a "positive feedback loop" (Bimber, 2012, p.118) for the media outlets concerned. As a result, early optimism that online forums would transform the relative positions of 'newsmaker' and 'audience' – let alone enable citizens to wrest *control* of news discourse from professionals – has increasingly been challenged. A further task of this thesis, then, is to

examine what evidence there is for meaningful exchanges (and *differences*) of views in the negotiation of meaning about juvenile panic narratives on newspaper discussion-threads.

Towards anatomising today's juvenile panic: where this research fits in

As we have seen, the literature review throws up a succession of different conceptualisations of panics that reflect not only perceived changes in the *nature* of panics over time, but also the ebb and flow of currents of academic thinking about them. By investigating the causes and consequences of one of the most potent panics of our time – the dual positioning of children as victims and threats in contemporary Britain – and doing so using a more comprehensive methodology than previous studies have managed, this thesis aims to offer a clearer understanding of the nature and characteristics of panics at the start of the second decade of the 21st century.

Chapter 2 – Research methodology

Any empirical study aiming to illuminate the relationship between news narratives, the sources that inform them, the journalists who produce them and the audiences that consume – and, increasingly, 'interact with' - them must necessarily adopt a multi-level research design, in order to examine each tier in this communication process and their points of intersection. In the digital age, the old top-down flow of news characteristic of the mass media era has been superseded by an increasingly reciprocal exchange of newsworthy information between journalists; conventional "primary definers" (Hall et al, 1978), like politicians and the police; expert (and, increasingly, amateur) claims-makers; and the wider public. By definition, in seeking to anatomise the process by which panics come about, are articulated and contested, and evolve over time in today's fluid public sphere, researchers must engage with all three levels of this communication "circuit" (Miller et al, 1998): news media, sources and audiences.

Relating research questions to research design

The research design for this thesis stemmed from a detailed consideration of the principal question underpinning it: namely, to what extent Britain is in the grip of a recurring, or ongoing, panic revolving around the problematisation of children, and which primary dynamics are responsible for generating/shaping and reproducing this. More specifically, it is concerned with establishing how instrumental the news media is in this process, compared with other societal forces, including power elite(s), "opinion-leaders" (Roper, Katz, & Lazarsfeld, 1955), "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker, 1963), or the direct/vicarious experiences of individual citizens. To use a biological analogy, how are 'new' panics generated and 'old' ones revived? In which direction(s) does the 'energy' which sustains and reproduces these panics typically flow and how is its circulation affected by new societal forces like digital communications technology, social media and citizen journalism? How often do panic narratives articulated through the news media stem from individual citizens' experiences/perceptions or eye-catching initiatives of outspoken opinion-leaders and claims-makers pursuing their own agendas or electoral advantage - as opposed to authentic 'events' or social phenomena beyond the direct control of

any of these parties? In his 2002 introduction to the third edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen distinguished between "*noisy* constructions", in which explosions of public opprobrium and panicky behaviour stem from "a single sensational case", and "*quiet* constructions", when social problems are 'identified' by professionals, experts or bureaucrats "with no public or mass media exposure" (Cohen, 2002, p.xxiii). We can all think of cases that fit into the former category – for example, the James Bulger murder or Madeleine McCann's disappearance – not least because of the blizzards of media coverage they provoked. Quiet constructions, though, are more difficult to trace by analysing media production or output, let alone interviewing practitioners or audience-members. And this is before we consider a 'third' category to which Cohen alluded in his original text (1972, p.1): periodic, or rolling, panics that resurface repeatedly, as ever-more socially embedded narratives about particular risks and/or forms of deviancy. It is this kind of simmering panic, bubbling back to the boil at moments of singular drama, which forms the locus for this thesis – concerned as it is with the dual narrative juxtaposing what might be described as 'deserving' with 'undeserving' children ('victims' and 'threats'). For this reason, a three-dimensional methodology was required, to analyse how these narratives are (re)constructed, received and contested in the digital age.

The researcher began by breaking down his central thesis question into three sub-questions:

(a) How are dramatic juvenile-related narratives, and their underlying discourse(s), constructed/reproduced in an era in which convenient distinctions of the past between journalists, sources and audiences are progressively breaking down?

(b) How does the wider public respond to/derive meaning from these narratives, immediately and in the weeks and months after they emerge - and what implications do these responses have for the 'media effects' debate?

(c) How do the crystallising moments in the 'life' of the 'juvenile panic' discourse – pinch-points at which it resurfaces in the public sphere – arise; why do some stories generate stronger media/public reactions than others; and who are today's key definers?

(a) News selection/construction in the digital age: newsgathering, framing and the new sphere of mediation between journalists, 'sources' and 'audiences'

To draw meaningful conclusions about the way news narratives around juveniles are shaped and sustained in contemporary Britain it was necessary to, first, conduct a textual analysis of the stories themselves, before going beyond this – to access key players in the *process* by which they are selected and framed/constructed. A primary methodological challenge facing this research, then, was the need to 'interrogate' (directly or indirectly) those involved in the two principal aspects of news-creation: the sources that provide the raw material for news and the journalists/editors who gather, sift, interpret, articulate and disseminate it. However, the advent of new levels of interaction between news 'makers' and 'consumers' – on online newspaper forums, via Twitter and elsewhere in the "blogosphere" (Castells, 2008) – makes understanding today's news-creation process a complex task. As a result, it was also necessary to analyse how 'participating' audience-members respond to 'official' news discourses and/or challenge them with their own *interpretations* of 'stories', 'events' and 'issues' at/immediately after the point of publication. It was insufficient, therefore, simply to interview journalists about their professional news-gathering/reporting practices. Rather, investigation of the news-making process also had to encompass the 'interface' between journalists/news texts and audiences – which the researcher chose to do by analysing the discussion-threads run beneath online versions of the sampled articles.

Nonetheless, while today's multimedia audiences may be *more* 'active' than those of 20 (or 10) years ago, the degree of direct involvement they have in moulding and/or contesting news agendas can be overstated. Previous studies have demonstrated that participation by audience-members in online dialogue around stories - let alone the creation of other forms of user-generated content - remains far from a 'mass' phenomenon, with most discussion forums dominated by a small minority of 'usual suspects' (Wellman et al, 2001; Albrecht, 2006). Moreover, while the majority of newspaper websites invite users to blog, tweet, post comments and submit stories, eyewitness accounts, photographs and even video footage, such

contributions do not appear 'automatically', let alone unedited. Far from operating free-for-all editorial policies, today's digital news organisations employ dedicated web moderators tasked with filtering out content judged legally, factually or editorially contentious (Janssen & Kies, 2005; Hurrell, 2006; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Binns, 2012). In investigating the ways in which today's audiences participate towards the construction of news narratives, then, it was also necessary to acknowledge the role of these influential mediators.

Due to the complexity of studying the news-making process in this multimedia, multi-mediated age, a triangulated research design was required to address the first sub-question alone:

(i)   Interviews with journalists from a range of national and local newspapers – to illuminate the routines and dynamics that determine the selection and construction of stories involving children by the British press in print and online

(ii)   Textual analysis of newspaper articles focusing on children – to examine how these narratives are framed/constructed 'on the page' and what this tells us about the dominant representation(s) of juveniles in popular discourse

(iii)   Analysis of reader discussion-threads beneath the online versions of the sampled articles   to evaluate the nature of immediate audience responses/contributions to these narratives and the degree to which the news texts and posts can be said to reflect an elite/hegemonic positioning of juveniles

(i) Choosing interviewees – and negotiating access

As the authors of one of the most influential studies of media portrayals of deviancy have argued (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987), any serious attempt to illuminate the construction of moral panic narratives relies on close examination of the news-making process. One way to achieve this is to examine it "from the inside out" (Ibid, p.77), by studying one or more news organisations ethnographically. An alternative method is to carry out in-depth qualitative interviews with a range of journalists whose body of experience, taken together, is representative of the normative and commercial day-to-day practices of the newspaper industry in general. Given that a primary concern of this study was to investigate the routines used by the British press *as a whole* to select/construct narratives about children - and evaluate the relative newsworthiness and commercial appeal of one over another - the 'broader brush' approach offered by a number of detailed one-to-one interviews was felt to be more suitable than participant-observation, as a decision to focus exclusively on one or two organisations risked producing results that were limited in scope and/or atypical. A principal reason for interviewing journalists was to examine their use of sources – and, in particular, why they favoured certain claim-makers over others, with the resultant impact these choices had on news narratives. By interviewing practitioners working on a variety of national and local papers, and with a range of different newsroom roles, the researcher gained a clearer understanding of the reasons why newspapers *in the round* accorded greater value/priority to some sources than others, and the techniques they used in the field to access these "knowers" (Fishman, 1980). Sadly, limitations of time and money prevented sources being interviewed directly.

As a central aim of the research was to investigate whether the posited panic discourse around children is widespread and pervasive – rather than, for example, being confined to certain sections of society/the press - the 30 journalists interviewed represented a spread of publications, from local weeklies based in provincial market towns to national broadsheets. Though the weight of evidence suggests it is tabloids that most 'enthusiastically' peddle the panic line (Cohen, 1972; Thompson, 1998; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009), previous studies have demonstrated that news narratives associating children with vulnerability on the one hand

(Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999; Meyer, 2007) and troublemaking on the other (Hall et al, 1978; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995) are far from confined to 'downmarket' papers. An advantage this researcher had when organising interviews was that, as a former national newspaper journalist and, latterly, senior lecturer in journalism at Kingston University, he had several prior industry contacts who were willing to speak to him. To achieve a broad enough reach, and sufficient numbers, however, it was necessary to approach many practitioners with whom he had had no previous dealings – whether using personal contacts as intermediaries or published by-lines as starting-points from which to 'track them down' by phone or email. The need to cast the net wider than his own (limited) pool of ex-colleagues meant that, in conducting interviews, the researcher still came up against many of the obstacles academics generally encounter in the course of persuading practitioners in a different field to speak freely about their profession.

Talking *to* journalists instead of *about* them: the pursuit of self-reflection in practitioners

The main obstacles encountered in interviewing journalists fell into three broad categories: evasion/elusiveness, defensiveness and apparent lack of self-awareness. Much has been written in previous studies (particularly those involving ethnography) about the often frenzied operational conditions under which newspaper journalists work (Tuchman, 1972; Chibnall, 1975 and 1977; Gans, 1979; Schlesinger, 1978; Fishman, 1980; Bantz, 1985). In an age when reporters are wrestling not only with the need to get their next print editions 'off-stone' but also rolling 24-hour pressure to post stories online, and tweet about them, this deadline-driven straitjacket is more intense now than ever (Dibean & Garrison, 2001). The frenetic nature of this 24/7 news routine presented the researcher with numerous hurdles, in terms of accessing his interview subjects. Some journalists were understandably keen to 'escape' the subject of work at the end of a long day - meaning they were reluctant to spend time discussing it as soon as immediate deadline pressures had abated. Given that journalists work notoriously long hours, this presented a stumbling-block, as it meant certain interviewees could not easily be pinned down for face-to-face meetings at times when the researcher (a full-time lecturer with a four-hour daily commute to and from work) was available. A more typical pattern was for an interview to be repeatedly postponed, or rearranged, because the unpredictable nature of

news-reporting meant journalists could never be certain, in advance, whether they would be free to meet up at specific times. In light of the long hours they worked, this was sometimes understandable: like the researcher, many had family commitments, putting their limited 'leisure-time' at a premium. Likewise, some also lived a distance from their workplace, so were reluctant to prolong their journeys home any later than necessary. As a result, when they did agree to speak to the researcher outside 'office hours', they could often do so only briefly and/or over the telephone. This limited the degree of detail the researcher could go into, and his ability to come back with supplementary questions when he felt an answer required clarification. Using the phone in interview-based academic research is notoriously problematic for other reasons, too - not least the barrier it creates between interviewer and interviewee by removing eye-contact and interviewers' ability to observe (and interpret) interviewees' facial expressions/movements (Goldie & Pritchard, 1981). Still more problematic were the instances when interviewees insisted on having questions emailed to them, ostensibly because it would be easier for them to find time to reply if they could access them on their personal computers as and when time allowed. Again, much has been written about the difficulties presented by email as an interview tool – not least the ability it gives interviewees to delay replying, 'script' answers and avoid supplementary questioning; the problem of establishing respondents' authenticity; and the lack of resemblance typed responses bear to human speech, due to the artificiality of the medium (Hine, 2000; Kivits, 2005).

On occasions when journalists agreed to meet the researcher to discuss their work their evasion sometimes took other forms. For example, one reason for trying to meet interviewees in person had been to 'confront' reporters with their published articles and/or ask them about their news judgment, why they/their papers pursued particular angles, and which sources they generally selected to inform their writing (and why). At times, reporters were reluctant to divulge much about their contacts - particularly when these included individuals they tended to quote anonymously in order to 'protect' them. On other occasions, interviewees seemed to be holding back information. There were also times when journalists simply refused to answer questions, without giving clear reasons.

Fortunately, the researcher's personal experience of having worked as a national news reporter gave him some insight into what the motivations of his interviewees might be on such occasions. As previous studies have noted, journalists can be proprietorial about their personal contacts, even when quizzed by colleagues (or bosses) on the same paper, for no other reason than a wish to preserve their 'exclusive' access to them and/or ensure they will continue supplying them with stories in future (Tuchman, 1978; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1989). British print journalists also have a professional duty of care, enshrined in the Press Complaints Commission's Editors' Code of Practice (Press Complaints Commission, 2014), to preserve the confidentiality of contacts in possession of sensitive information or in positions which might become vulnerable if their identities are disclosed (Wheeler, 2005; Banks & Hanna, 2009). On several occasions, this knowledge proved helpful, as the researcher raised this suggestion with interviewees, in so doing encouraging them to open up more by alluding to his own experience of handling contacts as a reporter and reassuring them he had no intention of divulging details in his thesis. On others, his admission that he was once a journalist himself seemed to *deter* interviewees from cooperating, as they appeared to perceive him as still being one – and, therefore, inclined to want to publish the information. One national tabloid reporter sought a written assurance that his words would not be published anywhere other than in this thesis/associated academic papers or books before agreeing to answer questions. Another, from *The Sun*, explicitly said he was happy to be quoted, as long as his words did not end up appearing in *The Guardian* – the paper responsible for investigating allegations about phone-hacking and other dubious journalistic practices at his sister paper, the now-defunct *News of the World*, which led to the Leveson Inquiry into Press Standards (The Leveson Inquiry, 2014). When the researcher couched his enquiries about sources in general terms, responses proved more fruitful. Asked which 'kinds' of source they found most reliable, in terms of ease of access/the quality of their knowledge, reporters' remarks frequently proved illuminating. For instance, crime correspondents tended to state their most valued contacts were senior police officers and lawyers – figures whose prominence in their articles (often to the exclusion of counter-claims-makers) reflected earlier research showing that establishment sources are invariably relied on more, and accorded greater validity, than dissenting voices (Chibnall, 1975 and 1977; Fishman, 1978 and 1980; Hansen et al, 1998).

Evasion and elusiveness may have presented the biggest obstacle to the researcher's access to knowledge about the reporting practices of his interviewees, but there were also problems with other 'blocks' to disclosing their rationales, motivations and values – in particular, defensiveness and lack of self-awareness. For example, when asked why they had taken the approaches they had to covering stories about stranger-danger and youth 'antisocial behaviour' they often reacted with incomprehension that their (generally punitive) stance on both issues should be questioned - at times appearing agitated that forms of deviancy they felt strongly about personally were being downplayed or 'defended'. Equally, questions designed to tease out indications of their own moral (or political) standpoints were generally met by stonewalling, blank looks and/or comments to the effect that they either did not have a personal view or had not considered it. Alternatively, they would fall back on defensive justifications based on platitudinous observations about 'how ordinary people feel' or their own experiences as parents/'law-abiding' citizens. Some answers indicated a lack of self-awareness – in particular, about the ideological or value-laden connotations of the angles or wording they used to frame articles, let alone whether those subtexts suggested anything significant about their own (consciously or unconsciously held) beliefs. A common observation was that angles taken by particular papers were a question of 'horses for courses', and would depend on institutional political biases, or target audiences, of individual publications they were powerless to contest. These reflected similarly shoulder-shrugging responses to interviews with journalists in earlier studies – for example, the health editor who told Boyce alarmist articles she penned about the MMR scare were written in a way designed to appeal to "your mom or your sister" and that most readers "want their own opinions confirmed" (2007, p.168).

In all these situations, the researcher tried to tease out informative responses, falling back on interview techniques he had used as a journalist, including open questions, supplementaries, and attempts to reword enquiries that initially met with inconclusive answers in imaginative ways to encourage interviewees to be more explanatory and reflective (Dohrenwend, 1965; Gillham, 2000). One tactic was borrowed from Hollway and Jefferson's *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* (2000, p.35), in which the authors demonstrate how to prompt interviewees to offer revealing insights into their thoughts and motivations by asking them to

"narrativise" their responses and allude to personal experiences. The researcher also drew inspiration from Geertz's writings on "thick description" – in particular, his contention that "winks and twitches", and what is *not* explicitly said (or done) in a given social situation, are often as significant as what *is* (Geertz, 1973).

Other problems with interviews – and how to overcome them

Persuading reporters to open up about their working practices, and the attitudes/norms underpinning them, was not the only difficulty encountered during interviews. In their seminal newsroom-based study, Ericson, Baranek, & Chan experienced what it must be like for journalists to be quizzed by academics about confidential sources and sensitive research – when at least one reporter they observed asked to read their field notes (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987, p.88). This happened to this researcher more than once. As an ex-reporter himself, he had the advantage of being able to take shorthand notes – allowing him to jot down observations/quotes quickly and discretely. While this generally seemed to put his subjects at ease and encourage them to act naturalistically – reducing the risk of an "observer effect" (Barth, 1975, p.225) – at times they became more inquisitive, peering at his notes while he wrote. This practice could be off-putting, particularly as the ability of most interviewees to use shorthand themselves prevented the researcher 'disguising' the meaning of his scribbles.

A different issue arose from the nature of the environments in which interviews were generally conducted. Given the need to meet journalists at times/locations convenient to them (and remove them from their workplace to encourage them to speak candidly), interviewing often took place in nearby pubs and cafes. In this respect, the researcher's ability to use shorthand proved invaluable, as the audio recordings he made were often muffled by background noise. Shorthand also proved useful as a 'back-up' to the computer-based program, Audacity, used to record journalists' words in other respects. Mindful of the dangers of "ventriloquising" the words of field subjects, and the need to preserve "autobiographical voice" (Shostak, 1981), noted in anthropological literature, the researcher aimed to take down interviewees' quotes verbatim, rather than paraphrasing them - replete with pregnant pauses, tautologies, expletives,

parentheses and other verbal ticks. Short of videoing each interviews, it would have been impossible to record such details electronically. For this reason, the researcher not only jotted down key quotes by hand, but also used shorthand to record other aspects of interviews, including speakers' mannerisms and affectations.

Of course no recording strategy, however full-proof, could compensate for the researcher's inability to access the newsrooms in which his various interviewees worked first hand – and in relying exclusively on interviews, rather than ethnography, he was dependent on their (subjective and incomplete) *recollections* of, and *reflections* on, their news-making practices, rather than being able to observe these directly. Particularly frustrating was his inability to attend editorial news conferences, let alone meetings between executives of different departments (for example, news and advertising), which would have provided an invaluable insight into the cultures and activities of other "bureaus" (Tuchman, 1978) or "microcultures" (Goodenough, 1978) within the overall newspaper organisations – and the impact these forces had on the 'internal' negotiation of news narratives. This problem, noted by Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1987, p.88), proved particularly limiting for this researcher, given that his prior career as a journalist had been confined to 'foot-soldier' roles (as a general reporter then specialist correspondent respectively). While he had been heavily involved in daily newsroom routines in six different news organisations, he had little direct experience of managing other staff or attending conferences, let alone the more overtly commercial side of news operations. To gain insights into the decision-making processes of editors, news editors and other executives, then, he had to rely solely on both their powers of recall and the honesty of their testimony. This situation was potentially problematic, because in several cases interviewees occupied senior positions in organisations for which he had himself worked previously - in a hierarchically inferior capacity, which excluded him from activities and decisions about which he was now asking them.

One singular *advantage* of carrying out interviews, rather than ethnography, was that this obviated the need for the researcher to wrestle with how deeply to immerse himself anthropologically: whether to opt for full-blown absorption into the (alien) culture, perhaps

without declaring one's true identity or purpose (David-Neel, 1971); adopt an intermediate participant-observer position (Hansen et al, 1998); or style himself as a dispassionate outsider (Malinowski, 1922; Agee & Evans, 1940). By positioning himself as an academic researcher his interviewees encountered in 'neutral' spaces outside their working environments, he sought to establish and maintain a professional distance from them – and, by extension, his own prior background as a reporter. He was especially mindful of the potential risk of "going native" (Walsh, 2006, p.230), by allowing himself to be (re)absorbed into the day-to-day practices of newsgathering/writing stories – particularly as several journalists he interviewed were former colleagues, and one (a mid-market tabloid weekend news editor) remained so in the *present*, in his capacity as a fellow lecturer at Kingston. He was also concerned to avoid making 'assumptions' about how the relations of production were operating, and news agendas formed, based on his pre-existing knowledge of other newspapers: in other words, he sought to make the people he was observing "anthropologically strange", despite the fact that much of what they were describing seemed familiar to him (Schutz, 1944; Walsh, 2006, p.227).

More pragmatically, any deeper absorption into the newsroom environment would have brought prohibitive logistical difficulties. Had the researcher decided to work for an organisation, he would have had to do so for several weeks or months to make the experience meaningful, as demonstrated by Fishman (1978 and 1980). As a full-time university lecturer, he did not have the flexibility to do this because of other work commitments. Conversely, his experience of having worked for some years as a reporter gave him the advantage of a prior understanding of the jargon and culture of news-making, while minimising the risk of imposing an elevated, "Orientalist" perspective on his subjects (Said, 1978; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Ang, 1991). Interviews also have the virtue that, despite not allowing for the close observation of newsroom practices obtainable through ethnography, they can still help counter what Hansen et al describe as "the problem of inference" (Ibid, p.45) – a charge often levelled at the use of 'outside-in' textual analysis to draw conclusions about underlying rituals and ideologies – while offering researchers some hope of qualifying or correcting "speculative theoretical claims" (for example, the assumption that journalists on a given publication share values that can be inferred from its content). Again, while earlier studies - including many relying on textual

analysis to infer journalistic 'intent' - portrayed news organisations as purveyors of dominant societal value-systems (Hall et al, 1978) and/or inflexible bureaucracies that left limited room for individual autonomy (Golding, 1981; Ettema et al, 1997), research based on ethnography and/or qualitative interviews has demonstrated that in a single newsroom there can be as many divergent perspectives as journalists (Fishman, 1980; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987).

(ii) Textual analysis as a tool to examine narrative constructions

While in-depth interviews can illuminate the processes by which news is *constructed* in a professional journalistic operation, they do not in themselves establish how the resulting narratives will appear publicly: in other words, whether a news organisation's *output* does, in the end, project a version of reality laced with routinised news values and/or elite (or any other) ideology. In the context of this study, it was hypothesised that the prevailing narrative about children in contemporary Britain problematises them as, at once, potential victims and threats, with younger juveniles particularly seen as vulnerable to abuse/neglect by deviant adults and (certain) older ones prone to deviance themselves. It was further posited that this discourse reflects a more widespread popular consensus, promoted by politicians and their agents, distinguishing between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' children/parents and favouring punitive measures for dealing with both those who harm children and juveniles who harm others.

To investigate whether this narrative exists, the researcher determined to carry out a contemporaneous textual analysis of news articles about children. In doing so, he sought to identify any (value-laden) headlines, language, images, captions and/or page positioning used to project such a discursive frame. Analysing articles was also vital from another perspective: whatever the *intentions* behind messages contained in news content, it is still published texts that (for most audience-members) constitute the sum of their direct exposure to 'the news'. Therefore, to be able to identify any potential 'effects' news stories have on those who encounter them - or to say anything more about why some narratives appear to tap into (and inflame) public anxieties more than others - as a starting-point it was vital to clarify what those narratives *were*. Moreover, in an age when *some* 'audience-members' are actively involved in

constructing news narratives themselves through user-generated content, published news 'texts' – and the trails of 'responses' they generate on online discussion-threads - have much to tell us about how citizen journalism is incorporated into the (previously closed) process of professional news production (Thurman, 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008).

Before contemplating what kind of textual analysis to undertake, the researcher had to determine one further matter: *which* media to analyse? The multiplicity of forms/platforms through which news is presented and consumed today meant it was always beyond this study's scope to offer a comprehensive analysis of news output. In the end, the researcher opted to focus on newspapers - in both their print and online guises. Aside from the practical limitations precluding an all-embracing approach, the decision was taken to study papers in recognition of the growing body of research evidence suggesting that, while television and radio can exert significant short-term effects on their audiences, the agenda-setting influence of newspapers can be more long-lasting, particularly in relation to fear of crime (Sheley & Ashkins, 1981; Heath & Gilbert, 1996).

Before embarking on his textual analysis, the researcher first had to resolve whether to use a predominantly quantitative or qualitative approach - and the related issue of whether to analyse newspapers in print form (a potentially onerous task), rather than purely electronically, using a labour-saving tool like LexisNexis. Given the strong emphasis of this research on investigating the framing of newspaper content, it was felt a hybrid form of textual analysis was most appropriate: one that was 'quantitative' in the sense that it involved counting the number of articles that could be argued to position children in a particular way, but 'qualitative' in that it allowed scope for making inferences about the *underlying intentions/agendas* of individual pieces, based on close interpretation of the language, images and other framing devices used to convey them. The researcher drew on the approaches used by, among others, Einsiedel (1992), as cited in Hansen et al (1998, p.114), who asked her coders to "indicate 'the overall impression' they got from" stories about science and technology in the Canadian press. In adopting his hybrid analytical model, the researcher was mindful of the need to avoid the "academic apartheid" (Curran, 1976, p.12) characteristic of studies which have sought to apply

doctrinaire distinctions between quantitative and qualitative methods that might be more constructively applied in combination. In the end, his favoured method for analysing the wording and projection of individual articles drew heavily on the practice of frame analysis and, in particular, Gitlin's (1980, p.6) focus on discerning the "principles of selection, emphasis and presentation" underpinning the construction of texts and Entman's (1993, p.53) conceptualisation of the verb 'frame' as the tendency to "select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to *promote* a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment for the item described". It could be argued this latter definition is especially relevant to the business of drawing out meaning from news articles concerned with juvenile problematisation – the issue at the heart of this thesis.

Defining categories

The researcher's primary task, in turning to textual analysis, was to test his hypothesis that contemporary newspaper discourse about children is dominated by narratives positioning them as either or both of victims and threats. To achieve this end, he began by isolating every article in his overall sample of newspaper content relating explicitly to children – which he chose to equate with the strict British legal definition of people under the age of 18 (and *not* including, for example, individuals referred to as 'youths' or 'teenagers' who turned out to be 18 or over). In this way, he drew on the good practice of others who have determined "which units" of their sample meet the "qualifying criteria" for inclusion in their textual analysis as much by identifying those that do *not* as those that do (Deacon et al, 2007, p.125).

Having defined the parameters of what constituted a juvenile-related article, the next task was to decide how big a sample to analyse and how to code it. To elicit as objective an impression as possible of how children are portrayed in British newspapers, the researcher decided to analyse not only coverage which slotted under the twin headings of 'child victim' and 'child threat' but *all* articles about juveniles, irrespective of their angles/focus. Moreover, to categorise these articles in a way that reflected the actual range of frames used to portray

children – as opposed to forcing his sample to fit entirely "predetermined categories" (Beardsworth, 1980, p.375) – he opted for a "data-driven" approach (Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2009, p.8) requiring him to first immerse himself in the texts to develop the most suitable category headings. Having begun with this method of "inductive category development" (Mayring, 2000, p.3), he went on to use "deductive category application" (Ibid, p.4) to allocate each article to one of six categories: 'child victim', 'child threat', 'child survivor', 'celebrity children', 'child hero/achiever' and 'other articles about children'. The 'child hero/achiever' category was chosen to reflect various articles encountered about, for example, children winning prizes and passing exams, while pieces about overcoming illness or injury and other forms of bravery were bracketed under 'child survivor'. A more diverse (though less numerous) collection of pieces about everything from cute babies to breakthroughs in paediatric medical care was analysed under the 'other' heading.

Although the divisions between these categories may seem self-evident, allotting articles to them sometimes proved problematic. For example, a story about children being physically assaulted by older juveniles arguably slots into two categories - 'child victim' and 'child threat' - and the not infrequent occurrence of such pieces forced the researcher to avoid double-counting by introducing a seventh category: 'hybrid'. Had he opted instead to decide between one or other of the 'victim' and 'threat' headings in each case, this would have proved highly subjective (and, therefore, contentious). For instance, a story about a baby being beaten up by a teenager might be placed in the 'child victim' category on the basis of the relative ages of the two juveniles, but if its narrative thrust focused squarely on the violent track-record of the perpetrator then the 'child threat' theme could be argued to 'trump' any emphasis on the victim's infancy. Introducing a hybrid category, however, did not stop some content being stubbornly hard to pigeonhole: should a story about new medical research into cot-death prevention be listed as an 'other article involving children' or one that problematises (early) childhood as a vulnerable state, and therefore falls under the 'child victim' heading? The researcher addressed issues like this on a case-by-case basis, weighing up the balance of emphasis in the articles concerned before categorising them, and deciding whether to list them under one heading or another. In doing so, he recognised the imperfection of this approach

and the (unavoidable) subjectivity of his judgments (Krippendorff, 1980 and 2006; Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2006). The final line-up of categories, then, and the precise wording of titles applied to each one, could only be refined once the researcher had spent an initial period "immersing" himself in his sample material, to "get a general 'feel' for its content and structure" (Hansen et al, 1998, p.107). Even then, it was necessary to carry out a limited recoding exercise to be certain the initial coding had been correct. Just over 10 per cent of the original sample was reanalysed for this purpose – producing a match of nearly 94 per cent. Significantly, in most categories the match was 100 per cent: the only reason for the slight disparity in coding the second time round was that a small handful of pieces (three out of 47) were placed under the 'child victim' heading, rather than 'child survivor', as they had been previously. As Chapter 5 explains, the distinction between some stories categorised under these two headings is somewhat moot, given that, by their nature, 'survivor' stories tend to position juveniles as having either *survived* 'victimhood' or narrowly *escaped* it. This was the case for these three particular articles – all focusing on the tale of a girl coming to terms with her father's death in Iraq.

From quantitative to qualitative analysis: identifying and interpreting frames

Having settled on a method of identifying which articles to include (and exclude) in his sample, and a set of categories in which to place them, the researcher next had to decide on the most suitable process for coding each piece - and how far to go in attempting to infer its 'meaning'/narrative 'intention'. Deciding how to distinguish between different categories, then, was just the beginning of the coding process. Having devised his categories, he needed to determine which *elements* of each article to analyse – and whether to do so in print, electronically or both. To begin with the latter point, as Deacon recently argued (2007, p.10), relying exclusively on LexisNexis or an alternative electronic database would have forced him to focus solely on the "linguistic" framing and content of articles, to the exclusion of the "visual dimension of news". While aspects of newspaper framing like the presence and nature of accompanying photographs, the relative size of articles and their positioning on the printed page are difficult to quantify scientifically (Bell & Garrett, 1998), it is the researcher's belief that

they are "key mechanisms by which news-makers dramatize reports, assist readers' comprehension, corroborate the 'truth' of a reported event and, sometimes, qualify, or even subvert, the linguistic substance of a related news item" (Deacon, 2007, p.10). Indeed, the ability of pictures to consolidate agendas reflected in the texts they accompany has been well demonstrated in the field – not least by Kitzinger, who was told by focus-group participants that an image she showed them of an anonymous crowd symbolising the 'invisibility' of AIDS-carriers to help them write their own reports about this subject was "*determining* the script" (Kitzinger, 1993, p.281). Unlike, say, the subscription-based Guardian and Observer Digital Archive, LexisNexis also offers no way of reading entire editions of a newspaper from 'cover to cover' – making it difficult for researchers to gain a tangible sense of how children may have been represented *in the round* in a single paper on a given date. For these reasons, the researcher opted to analyse physical newspapers – if only to help him make *impressionistic* observations about the ways in which, beyond the wording of 'body text', such elements as "headlines, story structures" and "graphical arrangements" (van Dijk, 1998, p.31) had been mobilised to frame articles. In deciding against using LexisNexis, he was also mindful of the fact such programs can only ever be as accurate as the search terms entered into them: as Soothill and Grover (1997) have observed, keywords can be blunt instruments, throwing up "false positives" (for example, confusing the act of rape with the plant of the same name) and "false negatives", where over-specific terms ('rape', but not 'sex attack') misleadingly exclude relevant articles.

As for the textual elements analysed, after initially experimenting with up to ten categories (including word-count and presence/nature of accompanying pictures), he refined this to a simpler breakdown. The core aspects analysed were: type of article/section of paper; page number (and whether an article appeared on a 'facing' or 'non-facing' page); headline wording; opening sentence/paragraph (intro) wording; use of subjective language in an article as a whole; and choice of sources. In compiling spread-sheets of data, the easiest columns to fill were those concerning type of article (news story, feature, opinion piece etc) and page number. Others proved more difficult. Perhaps the hardest to evaluate through textual analysis alone was journalists' use of sources. The importance of analysing the role claims-makers

(particularly elite sources) play in framing/constructing news narratives is well documented (Tuchman, 1972; Chibnall, 1975 and 1977; Gans, 1979; Schlesinger, 1978; Fishman, 1980; Bantz, 1985), but to make judgments about such matters the researcher first had to wrestle with the difficulty of identifying which sources had been used and which left out. It was easy enough to note the occurrence of quotes explicitly attributed to named individuals or organisations - the local authority announcing a crackdown on antisocial behaviour or the judge condemning a 'sex pest' as he sent him to prison - and the relative prominence of one claims-maker's view over another's. But the frequent occurrence of anonymous comments which could easily have emanated from any number of sources muddied the waters. Then there was the question of whether material presented as 'factual' had originated from a source, though none was credited in print. While the researcher was able to ask reporters he interviewed where they had obtained information included in particular articles, and how they generally sourced their material, the practical impossibility of asking the same of every journalist whose writing was analysed meant his assessment of this aspect of news content remained necessarily impressionistic.

The decision to place a heavy emphasis on intro wording was based on two factors: the importance attached to this narrative element by journalists and journalistic trainers as a device to "draw the reader into" an article (Keeble, 2006, p.111), communicate its overall news-line (frame), and outline its 'who, what, where, when, why, how' elements. Headlines, meanwhile, were analysed because of abundant research evidence indicating that they can be highly influential in shaping audiences' responses to news discourse (Philo, 1996; McCombs, 2004). But, while it was relatively easy to quantify lexical components of headlines and intros, given their comparative brevity, doing so for entire articles was more problematic. For this reason, the researcher confined himself to focusing on particular terminology and turns of phrase indicative of attempts to frame them in emotive or otherwise subjective ways (Bednerak, 2006; Richardson, 2008), as well as any other obvious "semantic relations" or "collocations, assumptions" and "grammatical features" (Fairclough, 2003, p.133) apparently used to promote a particular "vision" of the world (Ibid, p.130). In doing so, he sought to draw on the good practice of moral panic researchers like Cohen (1972), Hall et al (1978) and Golding and

Middleton (1982), by adopting what van Dijk describes as a "discourse analytical approach to content analysis" (2000, p.14) to infer latent as well as manifest textual meanings. However, this study's approach to analysing news articles is most heavily indebted to the multi-dimensional mode of textual analysis advocated by Philo, in arguing for "a method which analyses processes of production, content, reception and circulation of social meaning simultaneously" (2007, p.175). His powerful critique of the limitations the more exclusively "text-based" methods of van Dijk, Fairclough and others (Ibid, p.191) have as tools for explaining the "origins of competing discourses", the impact on published articles "of external factors such as professional media practice", let alone "what the text actually means to different parts of the audience" (Ibid, p.175), are concerns central to the purposely triangulated methodology adopted here.

Choosing the pool from which to sample

In endeavouring to establish if panic narratives constitute the dominant representations of children in the British press *as a whole*, it was not sufficient to sample just one 'section' of it - for example, tabloids. The sample had to be representative of the industry's *overall* output (Deacon et al, 2007, p.120), meaning that, at the very least, it would be necessary to investigate the extent to which newspaper titles from 'top to bottom' – from broadsheets to red-tops - infused their coverage of juvenile-related stories with a panic-fuelled discourse. To guard against the risk of choosing papers arbitrarily, or with some form of (unintentional) in-built bias (for instance, 'left-wing' or 'right-wing'), the researcher decided to sample every national title on the chosen dates, with four exceptions: *The Financial Times*, *i*, *Metro* and *Morning Star*. The *FT* was excluded on the basis that it is a more specialist title whose primary focus is economic news, meaning its breadth of coverage of other issues, including ones concerning children, was likely to be unrepresentative of general mainstream news discourse. The *i* was omitted because it is a simplified version of the *Independent* and most of its content appears simultaneously in that title. The *Metro* and *Morning Star* were both left out principally on grounds of their limited geographical distribution – the first because it can only be accessed in/around metropolitan centres; the second because it is only sold in a limited number of retail

outlets, predominantly in urban centres, added to which, through its close links with the Communist Party of Britain, it is an overtly partisan paper in a way even the most brazenly 'conservative' or 'liberal' nationals are not. One other title that can lay some claim to national status, on the basis of its widely recognised agenda-setting influence, was also excluded. This was London's *Evening Standard* – which, however influential, is only distributed in/around the capital. In the end, the list of national dailies selected for analysis was as follows: the *Guardian, Independent, Daily Telegraph, Times, Daily Mail, Daily Express, Sun, Daily Mirror* and *Daily Star.* In addition, to go some small way towards testing the idea that the posited discourse around children was not confined solely to *national* papers, the decision was taken to include a single local title in the sample: the Brighton *Argus.* An evening paper with a print circulation hovering around the 19,000 mark (Ponsford, 2013), this was chosen partly for pragmatic reasons (the researcher lived locally), but also because it was owned by Britain's biggest local newspaper group, Newsquest – and, for this reason, could lay claim to being as 'typical' a provincial paper as any other. There was also an additional consideration: given the nature of the news narratives being examined, it was felt that selecting this paper might offer the possibility of an illuminating comparison with its earlier incarnation as a 'paper of record' during the clashes between Mods and Rockers that provided raw material for Cohen's seminal study of youth folk-devils (1972). On the single Sunday when newspapers were sampled (31 July), all nine national titles then published were read: *The Observer, The Independent on Sunday, The Sunday Telegraph, The Sunday Times, The Mail on Sunday, The Sunday Express, The Sunday Mirror, The Daily Star Sunday* and *The People.*

Having determined one aspect of the overall sample – the publications to be examined – the next dilemma was how to settle on a system for the "sampling of dates" (Hansen et al, 1998, p.104). As the researcher's aim was to investigate whether panicky narratives dominated *consistently*, rather than being subject to fluctuations depending on, say, which day of the week/time in the month a paper was published, the decision was taken to sample issues every fifth day throughout July 2011, beginning on the first. In following this tried-and-tested approach (Troyna, 1982), the researcher settled on five-day intervals, as this was felt to provide a substantial quantity of data without becoming overwhelming, as it might have been

had he sampled daily or every other day. The length of the month chosen (31 days) meant this approach had the added virtue of enabling him to sample issues published on each day of the week, including a Sunday, while avoiding the pitfalls of, say, an 'every seventh day' method, which would have left him with only four editions of each paper, all from the same day of the week – presenting an intrinsically distorted picture (Hansen et al, 1998, p.104).

In opting to conduct his analysis during July, the researcher was conscious that he could be accused of choosing an unrepresentative period – the summer months conventionally labelled the "silly season" (Hansen et al, 1998, p.103), due to the absence of parliamentary proceedings/major political events and the customary, disproportionate, press focus on 'lighter' topics like the weather. However, July was felt to be a suitable month for several reasons. Firstly, the object of the analysis was not to investigate whether panicky narratives about children – or, indeed, narratives about children *in general* – outnumbered those about any other particular subject (or subjects), but rather whether, out of all editorial relating to juveniles, articles positioning them as either or both of 'victims' or 'threats' predominated. In this respect, *any* month would arguably have produced an appropriate pool from which to sample articles, as it was the comparative emphases of one juvenile-related story versus another – as opposed to the balance of stories about children and those about everything else – that were of primary interest to the thesis. In the event, July 2011 turned out to be far from a typical 'silly season' month anyway, with several major national and international stories competing to provide a more-than-usually dramatic backdrop to the overall summer news agenda. These included the rapidly escalating (legal, political and commercial) fallout from allegations of phone-hacking at the *News of the World* newspaper; the mass shooting of a number of innocent Norwegian Labour Party supporters (including children) by right-wing extremist Anders Breivik; and an unfolding famine in Somalia. If panicky narratives focusing on juveniles managed to gain a prominent day-to-day airing against such an atypically eventful summer news backdrop, this would arguably further underscore the sense that they assert a disproportionate hold on UK press discourse.

(iii) Monitoring the dynamics of news construction in the digital age: the case for analysing discussion-threads

Any empirical study of the construction and reception of contemporary news narratives must take into account the increasingly symbiotic nature of media-audience relations in the digital age – and the "dynamic links and interdependencies among artefacts, practices and social arrangements" the "infrastructure" of "new media" has introduced to supplant old notions of a more "linear relationship among production, text, and audience" (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006, p.3). As McRobbie and Thornton prophetically observed back in 1995 (p.274) – when the Internet was in its infancy and blogging a scarcely imaginable prospect - "the hard and fast divide between media professionals and media 'punters' seems to have broken down". Today every professional newspaper worth its name has a website – and one whose scope goes well beyond acting as a shop window for its print 'flagship'. Newspaper websites are now dynamic, continually updated, highly interactive brand extensions which, in many cases, reach wider audiences than their print versions and require similar levels of manpower/investment to maintain. Not only do they regularly attract greater *quantities* of 'readers' than their sister publications – buoyed by the fact they can be accessed anywhere and free of charge (in most cases) - but they strive to develop more *qualitative* relationships with audiences. The 'readerships' of today comprise many technologically savvy individuals equipped with the tools and knowhow needed not merely to voice opinions, but contribute to framing news discourse itself. By posting comments, anecdotes and observations; offering personal testimonies, reactions and eyewitness accounts; and uploading photographs, video footage and audio clips; these hyperactive audience-members are straddling the ever more porous divide between 'reader', 'journalist' and 'source' (Gordon, 2007).

In light of this transformation in the ecology of news production, it was necessary to analyse not only the 'professionally' written news texts but also the immediate audience 'responses' they provoked when reproduced online. Mindful that the public visibility of discussion-threads generated beneath articles on which they were 'commenting' effectively made them extensions of the published texts, in analysing them the researcher decided to use an adapted version of

the interpretive approach he had taken to his qualitative analysis of print newspaper content. Just as he had categorised the frames used to project the original articles by judging the "value-dimensions or stance" implicit in their use of language and images (Hansen et al, 1998, p.114), he sought to distinguish between posts that might be classified as 'affirming' the dominant narrative contained in an article and those adopting a position that was either 'negotiated' (accepting some aspects of a story's thrust, but not all) or 'oppositional' (disputing its agenda entirely). In dividing responses into these three broad categories, he consciously drew on the seminal work of Hall (1980) and others on 'active' audiences, while applying similar categories to those used in numerous studies of news content - for example, Semetko's (1989) distinction between "reinforcing", "deflating", "straight" and "mixed" British TV coverage of the 1983 general election campaign. Moreover, in recognition of the *increasingly* (inter)active nature of audience reception/meaning-making in the online sphere – with 'readers' entering into what amounts to open dialogue about stories not only with each other but also the journalists who write them – the researcher also distinguished between two key *levels* of user response: straightforward 'reactive opinions' and a minority of higher-order comments that were 'evidence-based'. These were those that endorsed or contested values projected by articles by explicitly drawing on *personal knowledge/experience* to justify their views.

In addition to applying methods based on textual analysis, in evaluating discussion-threads the researcher also drew on aspects of the "virtual ethnography" approach advanced by Hine (2000). Through close reading of the (unfolding) discourse, particularly that contributed by individuals who used 'evidence' to support their observations, he was able to build up a tentative impression of the heuristic, socioeconomic, ideological and other influences shaping some responses. However, as the primary aim of the analysis of discussion-threads was to illuminate the *degree* to which popular news representations of children could be said to reflect a wider, hegemonic, conceptualisation of the young (and the dangers they both face and pose) – rather than explain *why* individual audience-members might share this perspective - he did not feel it necessary to either participate in discussions himself or contact individual posters directly. Mindful of the risk of acting as a "lurker" (Ibid, p.48), though, he paid due regard to the ethical issues surrounding his observation of online discussions requiring username/password

access. Fortunately the websites visited, unlike Facebook and other membership-based social networking sites, displayed reader comments in threads that were publicly visible, and therefore in the public domain to the same extent as the professional articles to which they pertained. This avoided having to seek prior permission from the publications' owners before embarking on his analysis/publishing his findings.

Given the often exponential explosions of reader comments and testimonies generated in response to particular stories, the researcher purposely confined himself to observing those appearing on newspapers' own websites – rather than extending his research to encompass the outpourings of Twitter, Facebook or blogs. In restricting his analysis to user-generated content carried by newspaper sites, however, it was necessary to address a layer of complexity largely missing from the creation and dissemination of 'independent' citizen journalism. Examining the *processes* by which user-generated content is 'put out there' by newspapers required him to engage with the ways reader contributions are "moderated" by those organisations (Edwards, 2002; Hermida & Thurman, 2008): in other words, how they are filtered/edited/censored and, occasionally, vetoed. While it was informative to observe the moderation process from 'outside in' – as a 'reader' waiting for other readers' content to appear online, and by referring to the papers' freely available contributors' terms and conditions – it was equally crucial to find out how it operated from 'inside out'. To this end, interviews were conducted with two web editors responsible for overseeing moderation of discussion-threads at their papers: one based on a local evening title, the other a national broadsheet.

(b) Mapping short-term and longer-term attitudinal and behavioural responses to child-centred news narratives: how parents, grandparents and children themselves 'react' to the moral panic discourse

A central concern of this thesis is to determine the extent to which the press is instrumental in shaping and reinforcing panicky discourse around children in late-modern Britain – as opposed to merely 'reflecting' (pre-existing) public attitudes/behaviours. In examining this question empirically, the researcher employed a mix of 'live' research methods, to illuminate how these

narratives are processed by parents, children and other 'audience-members' both immediately after a story is published and in the medium-term. However, in doing so, care was taken to avoid adopting tactics conducive to positioning the media as a one-way street in which news generated by journalists is passively absorbed by consumers. As numerous reception studies have demonstrated, audience-members were actively engaging with news output – filtering, negotiating and decoding meaning, and deciding whether to accept or reject its underlying narratives - long before the advent of social media and user-generated content revolutionised how news discourse was constructed and made meaningful (Klapper, 1960; Hall, 1980; Graber, 1984). And, as illustrated by Morley's 'at-home' study of viewers of BBC1 current affairs programme *Nationwide*, the extent of individual audience-members' engagement with news – how they process information both during and after 'receiving' it – depends on various factors, including what else they are doing at the time and how often they are distracted (Morley, 1980; Levy & Windahl, 1984).

Two principal qualitative research methods were employed to illuminate how late-modern audiences process the news, and accept/reject/respond to its "dominant" messages (Hall, 1980). To explore how narratives about children 'affect' adults/their families in day-to-day life, and wider questions about audience reception, the researcher convened a series of focus-groups. Individual audience-members with especially strong or detailed opinions on particular issues, and quieter members who contributed least to group discussions, would then be approached for follow-up one-to-one interviews. To shed light on the 'instantaneous' reactions of audience-members to contemporaneous stories, the researcher supplemented his focus-groups with findings drawn from the analysis of online discussion-threads he was conducting in his parallel investigation into the negotiated construction of news narratives.

To ensure the focus-group research produced a representative sample of views and opinions, the Department of Communities and Local Government's English Indices of Deprivation 2010 was used to identify postcode areas with high proportions of ABC (skilled professional) and DE (unskilled, manual and unemployed) residents respectively. In addition, an important element of this research was its attempt to situate the framing of popular narratives about children in

the *present* within the context of discourses stretching back generations. Mindful of this, the researcher convened not one but three focus-groups in each postcode area, divided by generational status: the first comprising parents, the second grandparents, and the third children themselves. The 'working-class' focus-groups were primarily recruited through Whitehawk Primary School in Brighton, a school based in one of the five per cent most deprived wards in England and then recently placed into special measures by the Department for Education because of its relatively poor levels of academic attainment. The 'middle-class' groups were arranged through St Luke's Primary School, a school rated 'outstanding' by the independent inspectorate Ofsted and located in a leafy middle-class ward a mile or so west of Whitehawk. Efforts were also made to achieve as representative a gender split and ethnic cross-section as possible, again through the way the groups were advertised – though, in practice, the adult focus-groups ended up entirely comprised of women, and the participants in all six groups were overwhelmingly white British. Despite the gender and ethnic bias, the richness of dialogue generated enabled the researcher to draw tentative conclusions about the ways in which the media interacts with a multitude of other stimuli to help shape, reinforce and, occasionally, challenge 'audience' perspectives – and, conversely, how adults' and children's own experiences influenced the extent to which they accepted or contested news narratives.

Focus-groups interviews – and how to conduct them

The decision to use focus-groups as the primary tool for audience research was based on lessons drawn from earlier communication studies and wider methodological overviews suggesting that social mediation between peers – conversation between workmates, family members and friends – represents the most influential stage in the process by which media messages are decoded by audience-members (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980; Kitzinger, 1993 and 1999b; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Boyce, 2007; Meyer, 2007). Therefore, using surveys/questionnaires was not an option. As for the notion of interviewing all participants individually, aside from the impracticalities of doing so on grounds of cost and time, the researcher felt focus-groups were more suitable because of the opportunity they offered to observe individuals negotiating their responses to news narratives in social situations. As

Hansen et al (1998, p.258) observe, focus-groups enable researchers to "observe how audiences make sense of media *through conversation and interaction*". The researcher also noted what Kitzinger (2004, p.174) describes as the tendency of groups to promote "diverse types of talk - jokes, gossip, songs, anecdotes - all important forms of communication that help illuminate how media messages are received, resisted, transmogrified, and incorporated into everyday exchanges".

Before plunging into discussions about the news media's output, the researcher used initial sessions with parents to enquire about their family routines and activities - especially the degrees of freedom they allowed their children and their reasons for imposing restrictions where they did so. When issues like stranger-danger and traffic risk were cited (as they frequently were) he used supplementary questions to ask why/*from where* parents had formed the impression that these were threats. He also asked about their perceptions of older children (particularly those other than their own). With some parents, there was little need to press in this area, as they had already volunteered concerns about youth antisocial behaviour as a reason for, say, limiting their younger children's independence. Grandparents were asked the same questions, but with emphasis on their memories of freedoms they had allowed their own children, and their perceptions of how things had changed in intervening years. The researcher asked participants in all focus-groups to "narrativise" their views, by drawing on personal/vicarious experiences (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). His use of supplementary questions was inspired by the findings of previous reception studies (e.g. Reilly, 1999; Boyce, 2007) in which questions along the lines of "can you tell me where you got that idea from?" (Hartmann, 1979) had teased out the sources of people's fears about BSE and the MMR vaccine and prejudices about striking industrial workers respectively. Another technique was the use of projected questions such as, 'what do you think other people feel about...?' rather than 'what do *you* think about...?' Here the researcher drew on earlier studies demonstrating that indirect techniques can elicit contributions that may tell us much about respondents' perspectives - even if, through embarrassment or shyness, they attribute them to others (Fisher, 1993; Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007).

The sensitivity of certain discussion topics – such as paedophilia or youth ASB - saw some participants reticent about speaking openly about their feelings/experiences, while others became more vocal and dominant. Under these circumstances, brief follow-up interviews were used to tease out views from 'shyer' individuals and press those who had expressed strong opinions on why they held them in a context free from the peer pressure of group meetings. These interviews also helped put "defended subjects" at their ease, eliciting more from those who appeared to want to "disguise the meaning of at least some of their feelings and actions" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p.26).

Importantly, where participants cited "the media" or "newspapers" as sources of their perceptions of child vulnerability and/or youth misbehaviour the researcher pressed them for specific examples of stories/outlets that had influenced them. In doing so, he was mindful of Hartmann's observation that people "may mention the media simply because this is a plausible answer" – just as they might default to asserting something as their own views even though these were ultimately shaped by the media, discussions with associates or both (1979, p.475)

Using focus-groups to recreate everyday social discourse about news

To emulate the 'real-life' water-cooler (or social media) situations in which people discuss (and process) what they/others have read/seen/heard in the news, the researcher used selected articles involving children drawn from the same day's newspapers as prompts. As most focus-group members had not previously encountered these, he was able to directly observe their *initial* responses to/discussions about them and the underlying narratives they embodied. In addition to circulating these *immediate* examples of articles about juveniles, exercises based on the "news-game" approach devised by the Glasgow University Media Group were used to prompt participants to recall narratives they had previously encountered in the media (Kitzinger, 1993; Philo, 1990). They were shown samples of imagery drawn from reports problematising children and asked to write captions in the style of national papers based on their recollections of these/similar stories. In addition, each participant was presented with a series of statements about two high-profile events (the abduction of Madeleine McCann and

August 2011 urban riots respectively) – some true, others based on inaccurate media reports – and asked if they believed them to be true or false.

To render the data gathered from focus-groups as meaningful as possible, the researcher drew on Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) "psychosocial" approach to making sense of respondents' narratives. This entailed asking adult participants a series of basic biographical questions to build up a rudimentary picture of their familial, socioeconomic and cultural/ethnic backgrounds (and their typical patterns of media consumption), thereby contextualising their responses in light of their individual "schema" (Graber, 1984). To avoid anyone feeling pressurised to relay these details 'publicly', he handed each participant a simple form asking their age, occupation, marital status and number/ages/genders of children (and, where appropriate, grandchildren). In the event, finding out more sensitive information proved surprisingly unproblematic overall, with most participants opening up during group sessions about everything from family bereavements to their experiences of crime and (in the case of the working-class mothers) time they had spent living on benefits.

Talking *to* as well as *about* children: the need for child focus-groups

The discussion so far has focused on how to elicit from adults their views about children and the way these concepts are framed in media/popular discourse. However, it seemed only right to also ask children themselves for their views. The researcher therefore recruited two further focus-groups: comprising older children (aged eight and over) from the same neighbourhoods as the adults. The aim was to build on the useful work done previously by Wiesnewska and others on ASB (Wiesnewska et al, 2006; Wayne et al, 2010) to solicit children's views on both the levels of freedom they are allowed by their parents and their feelings about *other* (principally older) juveniles, as well as adults' attitudes towards them. Again, the researcher began these meetings (a single session with each child cohort) by teasing out participants' personal experiences of childhood boundaries and freedoms, before gently pressing them for their opinions on both the reasons their parents imposed rules they did and how they felt about them. Because of the sensitivities associated with interviewing children, the researcher first

obtained written permission from their parents, and an adult (usually a teacher) was generally present in the room during these sessions.

Juvenile focus-groups presented difficulties distinct from those encountered when interviewing adults. For instance, some participants, notably younger ones, appeared shy and self-conscious about speaking up or struggled to articulate their ideas - particularly if there were older/more vocal children present. In the working-class group, one especially dominant boy grew restless after answering the early questions, to the point that he would interrupt other contributors before they could finish their sentences and side-track the discussion from important themes in order to speak about something he found more interesting. For instance, he and other participants repeatedly tried to steer a discussion about parental rules governing walking to school onto preferred subjects (computer games and horror movies). Indeed, as the children already knew each other – most being in the same year, if not class - there was a sense that the dynamics of their pre-existing relationships were intimidating some and encouraging others to dominate. Occasionally a child would become defensive or dismissive when pressed on a point: for example, several working-class boys ridiculed the suggestion their parents imposed any boundaries in relation to how late they were allowed to play outdoors unsupervised, provoking apparent 'copycat' responses from other participants keen to match their bravado. On such occasions, the researcher often struggled to find alternative ways to word his questions to counter this group dynamic and coax out more 'honest' individual answers.

Illuminating immediate audience reception: the value of analysing discussion-threads

The advantages of analysing online discussion-threads to investigate how audience-members participate in the construction/negotiation of news narratives were rehearsed earlier. But why use this method to inform research into news *reception*? As with the arguments in favour of focus-groups, the rationale is both theoretical and practical. Practically speaking, it is more 'affordable' – in terms of both time and money – to observe audience-members reacting/contributing to news discourse through the prism of online forums than to gain access

to their homes, in the manner laboriously achieved by Morley (1980) and others in their ground-breaking studies. Today communications researchers can eavesdrop on people contributing/responding to news narratives in 'real time', simply by logging into their PCs. Moreover, while the nature of Morley's study *necessitated* his presence in the same room as audience-members he was studying, this was not the case for the present research. Morley sought to illuminate *how audiences consumed* (TV) news – for instance, the extent to which they ritualised the act of watching it and/or multitasked while doing so – but this researcher's focus was more on what audiences who took the trouble to post comments *had to say* immediately after reading news narratives (as well as any informed opinion or expertise they 'brought to the table' themselves in accessing it). In any case, as others have observed (Mackay, 2005), reading newspapers (whether in print or online) is a relatively solitary pursuit, compared to TV-viewing (at least in the pre-multichannel era when Morley conducted his fieldwork), and this makes it inherently more problematic to study 'anthropologically'. A further methodological argument in favour of studying discussion-threads is that it potentially offers a more 'truthful' window into the ways audience-members behave around news than conventional ethnographic methods. As other researchers have observed, people may act and react in more candid ways when operating under the cloak of online identities (Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Clapper, 1998; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Spears & Lea, 1994), through usernames, aliases and "visual anonymity" (Reid & Reid, 2005, p.132). Moreover, whatever the limitations of discussion-thread analysis – or, indeed, focus-groups – as means of identifying media 'effects', they at least offer a way of illuminating how people negotiate and construct meaning around published texts and, in so doing, some indication of how they are immediately *affected* by them (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Millwood Hargrave & Livingstone, 2006).

(c) Towards anatomising Britain's juvenile panic: the value of 'case studies' to pinpoint crystallising moments that revive panic discourse

The researcher faced one obvious question in attempting to identify crystallising moments in the 'life-cycle' of the juvenile panic discourse: what do such pinch-points 'look' like? One clue may be found in Cohen's (1972) concept of "sensitisation", defined as the point at which a

panic enters the wider public sphere as societal awareness of a perceived problem issue is heightened by exaggerated news coverage. With this in mind, the decision was taken to follow the initial, 'broad-brush', empirical research into the construction and reception of news narratives around children with a more focused one, bringing together all four principal strands of the methodology to converge on a single explosive story that 'broke' at some point during the study period. The aim was to carry out a 'live' (or *almost* live) investigation into the way this story was reported and received/responded to – by analysing contemporaneous coverage in all the previously sampled papers; interviewing a selection of journalists responsible for producing it; and evaluating the immediate and more considered responses this discourse provoked from discussion-thread contributors and focus-groups. In so doing, the researcher was ever-mindful of the arguments put forward by Philo in his critique of the limitations of "'text only' analyses" of news discourse (Philo, 2007, p.184).

In the event, the researcher did not have long to wait before 'finding' his crystallising moment: on a drizzly autumn evening in October 2012, a mammoth police manhunt was launched in and around the sleepy Welsh town of Machynlleth after five-year-old April Jones was abducted by a man in a mystery car while playing out, unsupervised, with friends. However, identifying the *occurrence* of such a moment was only part of the researcher's problem. That a simmering social concern (in this case, the pervasive fear of 'stranger-danger') had suddenly bloomed into a moral panic was easy enough to establish by applying widely agreed definitions of that term (Cohen, 1972; Critcher, 2003; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009), but how should he go about disentangling the factors instrumental in this happening to ascertain which was/were preeminent? It became his task to distinguish which (if any) of the following stimuli were most decisive in transforming the reporting and reception of this undeniably newsworthy incident into full-blown panic discourse: the objective event of April's sudden and mysterious disappearance; the reopening of a popular narrative about stranger-danger and lurking threats in familiar settings; the use of social media, notably Twitter, by investigating officers and April's own family to spread word of her disappearance virally; pre-existing public sensitisation to this issue because of grassroots perceptions that it was genuinely a (growing or immutable) social problem; the story's framing by the police, local (and national) politicians, and other primary

definers; a surge of interest from the news media sparked as much by its own commercial concerns (pressure to sell papers and advertising) as the story's coincidence of timing with a major paedophilia scandal (revelations about serial child abuse by the late Jimmy Savile); or its own *intrinsic* newsworthiness? In endeavouring to anatomise how these and other factors played out in the construction and mediation of the 'April panic', the researcher hopes to have illuminated the common dynamics and patterns underpinning such crystallising moments.

Towards a theory of narrative construction: lessons from social constructivism

Underpinning this thesis is a key conceptual paradigm: the theory of social constructionism/constructivism. Throughout the first two chapters there has been an emphasis on exploring how news narratives – and public discourse generally – are 'constructed'. The same concern preoccupied many seminal studies that inspired this thesis. Fishman (1978 and 1980) wrote of observing journalists "manufacturing" the news and Altheide (1974) of their "creating reality", while Tuchman referred to reporters "making" news by drawing on a "web of facticity" they and their sources had spun between them (1978). Hall et al repeatedly referred to the "construction" – by elites, law enforcement agencies and media - of a bogus mugging epidemic in *Policing the Crisis* (1978). And, in their wider overview of the issues surrounding panics, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) spoke of the "social construction of deviance". Perhaps the most nuanced application of this paradigm, though, was offered by Cohen, whose original 1972 study – subtitled "The Creation of the Mods and Rockers" - crystallised ideas like disproportionality and deviancy amplification in relation to how news reports about social problems were instrumental in fostering panics. Though he later distanced himself from the "'strict'" constructionist view which holds that "there are constructs and nothing but constructs", he subsequently argued in favour of a "'weak' or 'contextual'" form of constructionism which, while accepting social realities *do* exist independent of news discourse, acknowledges they are often reported in exaggerated (or 'constructed') ways (Cohen, 2002, p.xxiii).

As Chapter 1 noted, academics have not always viewed newsgathering – or, indeed, news 'making' – as a process of reality *construction*. Early "gatekeeper" studies (Carter, 1958;

Gieber, 1964; Warner, 1970) conceived of news as an independent (if not fixed) set of real-world happenings from which editors *selected* what they considered worthy of coverage. These choices were based on factors ranging from normalised professional judgments about newsworthiness to commercial pressures (print deadlines, lobbying by advertisers and owner interests). Others focused on how – once initial selections had been made - reporters chose to write up their stories, or introduce further levels of selectivity, by including some details and omitting others (Stark, 1962; Sigelman, 1973). Others still focused on the "social control" (Breed, 1955) exercised by senior staff-members in editing articles, choosing how to present them, and acculturating newcomers to the ways of the newsroom.

Yet, even if we accept this 'selectivity' paradigm – that there *are* such things as objectively real news events and phenomena, and that journalists/news organisations are more concerned with 'choosing' than 'creating' stories – it remains the case that, in making selections, they weave patchwork quilts that might easily have turned out differently. In doing so, they cumulatively construct their own pictures of reality. Newspapers, websites, magazines, TV and radio bulletins: all, in the end, are subjective constructs comprising collections of particular stories deemed worth reporting in particular ways, for particular reasons, at particular times. More importantly, the *tone* and *structure* of reports – the language journalists use to convey them, the headlines introducing them and any images accompanying them – collectively project *angles* designed to steer audiences towards particular readings. These angles – or "frames" - are as much a part of the 'construction' of news as the combinations of stories reported. It is the use of framing, above all else, which justifies epithets like 'manufacture', 'create' and 'construct' in relation to successive panics (Hall et al, 1978; Golding & Middleton, 1982; Kitzinger, 1993; Philo, 1993 and 1999; Boyce, 2007).

Far from being exclusively applied to news *production*, this broad "social constructionist" approach – which posits that reality is (re)constructed through the social practices of members of a given society/community (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) - has also persistently been alluded to in reception studies. From Hall's 'encoding-decoding' paper, which first popularised the idea of "active audiences" (Hall, 1980), to recent writings focusing on the negotiation of news

narratives between professional and citizen journalists (Tilley & Cokley, 2008), the notion that we are all involved, continually, in defining and redefining the news agenda, and any discourse(s) it enshrines, offers an ever more apposite model of the communication process.

Moreover, as discussed elsewhere in this chapter, the new sites of meaning-making in the digital age – principally the Internet/social media – are more than mere channels through which narratives are relayed and received, or even forums in which their underlying messages can be contested. They are also "cultures", within which journalists, audience-members and sources can move and interact freely - socialising and experiencing (albeit 'virtually') much as they do in real life (Hine, 2000). What Tuchman describes as the "meaningful nature of social life" (2002, p.81) has been transferred to the digital realm – and with it the ability of social actors to (cooperatively or through dispute) construct/reconstruct social reality through their online behaviour. In this sense, the practice of analysing discussion-threads is informed by other theories related to constructionism and its more psychologically oriented bedfellow, constructivism - including symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), phenomenology (Schutz, 1967), performativity (Austin, 1962) and structuration (Giddens, 1990).

Hegemony, consensus - and new sites of meaning-making and contest in the digital age

Traditional models of public/news discourse construction have emphasised the pre-eminence of elite "primary definers" - governments, law enforcement agencies and powerful business interests - in shaping and influencing mainstream media agendas (Cohen, 1972; Hall et al, 1978; McManus, 1994). Hall et al took this thesis to its logical conclusion, by conceiving of the emergence of a dominant "control-culture" in 1970s Britain, which they saw as conspiratorially projecting a normative neoliberal version of social reality. In its efforts to achieve "hegemony" (Gramsci, 1971), this control-culture sought to conscript every influential group in society – from police to local residents' associations – into a manufactured consensus.

Yet, even in this evocation of a proto-dictatorship of ideas, there remained some room for hegemonic narratives to be questioned, or challenged outright, by other claims-makers. Back

then, it invariably fell to trades unions - themselves frequently pilloried by politicians and press for deviant conduct antithetical to the new order (Blumler & Ewbank, 1970; Morley, 1976; Hartmann, 1975 and 1979; Philo, 1993) - to do the counter-claims-making. But today, after four decades in which neoliberal values have become progressively more entrenched, 'outsider' claims-makers, including unions, are enjoying an increasingly vocal resurgence. And nowhere is the ever-widening degree of democratic participation in the construction of social reality – and the news narratives that help shape it - more visible than in the digital public sphere. As Habermas (1996) has argued, *progressive* (not conservative) claims-makers have been responsible for, to take one example, the slow normalisation of environmental and humanitarian concerns since the 1970s - in *defiance* of elite narratives.

For the purpose of this thesis, online empirical research was confined to examining how competing views are articulated (and moderated) on newspaper websites, and inferences that can be drawn about individuals' *responses* to their narratives from comments audience-members post there. A wider survey might analyse the input of myriad other claims-makers who, with varying success, are endeavouring to influence public discourse in relation to Britain's rolling juvenile panic(s). These range from Facebook groups set up to name and shame sex offenders living in the community (*Daily Mail*, 2010) to civil liberties groups like ASBOwatch (an offshoot of Statewatch), which highlights concerns about ASB policy, particularly overly punitive ASBO use towards children (*Statewatch*, 2014). For now, though, a detailed analysis of their contributions to public debate, and the extent to which they are successfully challenging (or reproducing) longstanding narratives about juveniles, remains a matter for further research.

Chapter 3 - Images of children: perceptions and portrayals down the ages

If anything can be said for certain about the images of children that emerge from history it is that, contrary to the conclusions of earlier theses (Aries, 1962), there is no linear narrative charting the evolution of ideas about them – and no clear transition from an age when a conception of childhood does not exist to one in which it does. Childhood was not "invented" (Cunningham, 2006) or "discovered" (Aries, 1962; Sommerville, 1990) at some imagined point between the early Middle Ages and Enlightenment. Sources ranging from an early Mesopotamian tablet lamenting that "children no longer obey their parents" (Ibid, p.15) to Anglo-Saxon king Aethelstan's ordinance exempting thieves aged 15 and younger from harsh punishments meted out to their elders (Heywood, 2001, p.14) show that juveniles have been distinguished from adults for millennia.

This is not to say conceptions of childhood have always been consistent. Although clear similarities can be discerned between the ways wildly disparate societies reared, taught and disciplined children – and portrayed them in culture and the arts – levels of regard and respect paid to juveniles have fluctuated repeatedly. The writings of Locke represented a 'revival' of those of Erasmus precisely because in the 150 years separating their major treatises on education there were prolonged periods when the latter's progressive ideas were out of fashion. And, however far back we detect a "sentimentalising" of childhood – for example, in Christian documents as early as St Jerome's letters on girls' education of AD400 (Cunningham, 2005, p.59) - only in the cosseting of the Victorian era did this affection bloom into full-fledged "ideology" (Ibid, p.41). As Heywood (2001, p.30) observes:

"The cultural history of childhood has its turning points, but it also meanders over the centuries: a child might be thought of as depraved in the early 20th century as well as the Middle Ages."

But while precise conceptions of childhood (and where it starts and ends) may have varied from one civilisation, and epoch, to another, one aspect of how children are perceived and depicted has remained remarkably constant: ambivalence. From theological and pedagogic

arguments about the value or futility of teaching children right from wrong (let alone anything more) that vexed moralists and thinkers throughout the Medieval period to implicit distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' juveniles lacing 18th and 19th century discourse juxtaposing "sacralised" innocents (Zelizer, 1985, pp.184-5) with "delinquent" urchins (King, 1998), visions of childhood have been repeatedly polarised by one and the same society, to the extent that, in Heywood's words (2001, p.32), the "contradictory nature of ideas and emotions" about it can be seen "running like a red thread through the historical literature".

This thesis argues that 21st century Britons remain as torn as our ancestors were between a conception of childhood which leads us to idealise and "smother" (Zelizer, 1985) children (particularly younger ones and/or our own) and a wariness of their wilder traits (or, rather, those of older kids/other people's). Just as the fragmentary cultural deposits bequeathed us by earlier societies testify to an enduring human legacy of divided emotions towards the young, this paradoxical positioning of children as both "angels and devils" (Valentine, 1996a) still plays out in popular narratives of today – fuelled by 'double-sided' representations consistently found in the news media.

The ambiguous child

Contradictory portrayals of children characteristic of public and media discourse in late-modern Britain, then, have deep historical roots (Hendrick, 1997). This chapter will now proceed to define the interrelated dimensions of the ambivalence towards children which emerges from history. It will begin by analysing the overarching, centuries-long discourse about what might be termed the *condition* of childhood – the 'nature-nurture' debate – before addressing a succession of related polarities that have emerged from societies' efforts to distinguish between different *states* of childhood or *types* of children. By examining various binary oppositions that surface in narratives about children across time, it aims to clarify how juveniles came to be conceptualised as they are today.

Nature versus nurture

One of the few near-constants of the story of childhood down the ages is the disjunction between conceptions of it as a symbol of purity on the one hand and sinfulness on the other. Evidence of conflicting ideas about whether children enter the world in a state of innate innocence or evil stretches back to antiquity (Sommerville, 1990), but the debate was arguably crystallised with the emergence of the Medieval concept of "original sin" (Cunningham, 2005, p.29) and a wider discourse about 'nature' versus 'nurture'. While rationalists argued juveniles could be improved through sound parenting and schooling (nurture), Christian purists maintained their underlying nature(s) meant they were destined to remain indelibly stained until adulthood (Sommerville, 1990). But within the second camp there were further shades of opinion – with some arguing the rite of baptism could cleanse the young of "infant depravity" (Shahar, 1990, p.55) and set them on the path to redemption.

Insights into the evolution of the nature-nurture debate can be gleaned from two principal bodies of evidence: published pronouncements of philosophers, moralists and politicians, and documented behaviour towards children of individuals, families and authorities. Early theologians like St Augustine are credited with first articulating the original sin concept – an enduring idea that would beget a long line of adherents, from Roman Catholics through Calvinists and Puritans to John Wesley, who implored parents to "break the will" of their offspring (Sommerville, 1990, p.145). But the secular concept it opposed – that of young children as empty vessels that could be tipped either way by their upbringing and life experiences – had its origins in much earlier writings. When John Locke likened the minds of the very young to "soft wax" which should be moulded into shape to rear model citizens, he invoked a metaphor all-but identical to that used by Erasmus and, 500 years earlier, the enlightened Christian philosopher Anselm of Canterbury – who had argued that, although mothers fulfilled a primary role in socialising their children and giving them their "world-picture", infants were as yet *too* soft and wax-like to be moulded at all (Shahar, 1990, p.115). Similarly, Locke's use of the term "tabula rasa" (Cunningham, 2005, p.73) also drew on ideas that can be

traced back to the ancient Greeks, notably Pelagius's "clean slate" (Ibid, p.29) and Aristotle's "blank tablet" (Sommerville, 1990, p.142).

The nature-nurture debate underscored discussion about whether children should be (formally or informally) educated - and, if so, in what, by whom, and how. Although there is evidence that future leaders were tutored in philosophy and science in antiquity, and there was some debate about the value of teaching children as early as the 12th and 13th centuries (Berkvam, 1983), the little we know about this suggests moralists were still so hung up on the question of children's innate potential (or otherwise) that they only judged it worth teaching those whose 'natures' were *conducive* to their learning (Ibid). Clearly it would be a big step from such discussions to a point where most, or all, children were considered *capable* of being taught – let alone 'deserving' of tuition.

Ozment (1983, p.177) interprets the moralising of the 1500s as evidence that education, in tandem with parental discipline, was seen as a way of grooming children to become "social beings" and put aside childish things: primarily "selfish, antisocial behaviour". This was an implicit positioning of the young as both unformed and prone to (innate) deviancy, yet pliant enough to be moulded into shape. As several historians note in relation to later centuries, "schooling" children smacked of "standardisation" (Sommerville, 1990, p.245) and reproduction of dominant social and moral norms, and was a world away from acknowledging they had minds of their own – let alone 'rights' to the brain-food best suited to liberating their individuality. Such a utilitarian philosophy can arguably be glimpsed in the watering-down of early adaptations of 'classic' literature for children – Thomas and Harriet Bowdler's 1807 *The Family Shakespeare* removed "everything that can raise a blush on the cheek of modesty" (Ibid, p.169) – and the use of conventional morality (fairy)tales like those of the Brothers Grimm to indoctrinate them with contemporary moral codes. Again, children were being positioned as future ambassadors, and motors, for the existing national (and, by extension, world) order(s).

There was, of course, much to come from education that would not only benefit children, but engage them in ways that finally began to harness their individual inclinations and abilities.

Britain's post-war settlement, which introduced comprehensive secondary education, may have in one sense continued the trend towards "standardisation" (Sommerville, 1990, p.245) through its social construction of children as "pupils" rather than individual boys and girls (Hendrick, 1997, p.47). But with the emergence of more humanistic teaching methods, under the influence of social reformers and educationalists like Kate Wiggin, Rudolf Steiner and Abraham Maslow, recent decades have seen an elevation of the concept of children's 'rights' – and implicit recognition that not all boys and girls are the same, and childhood has a 'purpose' other than to serve the interests of adulthood.

Similar conceptions of children as potential model citizens (if schooled correctly) can be found as early as Plato's disapproving fourth century BC critique of Sparta's obsession with breeding only soldiers and heroes (Sommerville, 1990, p.29) and as late as Locke's influential *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, published in 1693 and quickly translated into five other languages as a mark of its saliency and influence (Cunningham, 2005, p.73). On the former point, one quirk of the way the nature-nurture debate – and wider questions about children's 'value' – played out in certain civilisations was the unequal treatment meted out to girls and boys. The Spartans lionised 'the idea' of boys – despite systematically brutalising them through "dazing and ridicule" to instil "unquestioning loyalty and physical and mental stamina" (Sommerville, 1990, p.21) – while exposing many of their infant daughters, rather than investing time and effort in rearing them (Ibid). Likewise, callous attitudes towards girls - as well as children otherwise 'disabled', and unfit for fighting - were exhibited by the Hellenistic Greeks (Sommerville, 1990, p.52) and various Germanic tribes (Heywood, 2001, p.74). In later centuries, gender divisions were to surface in other child-rearing practices, not least stark differences in the subjects girls and boys were taught at school – history, maths and outdoor pursuits versus literature and homemaking skills – with, once more, the differential 'natures' of the sexes determining the *manner and substance* of the nurturing bestowed on them.

Intriguingly, though, as we have already seen in the literature review and will be demonstrated again in later chapters, gender divisions in the conception of children's natures have not always favoured boys: while there is little evidence for a bias towards either sex in today's

media coverage of children as 'victims', a stark emphasis on the actions of male miscreants – and society's attitudes towards them - appears in the discourse on child/youth 'threats' (Valentine, 1996a and 1996b).

What little we know about past parenting practices from documentary and archaeological sources also tells us something about how children were conceptualised by society – and how the nature-nurture debate played out within families. Though we can only go so far in interpreting artistic and literary sources as evidence for parents' *actual* behaviour towards children – and, even if we do accept representations at face value, it is a further step to infer from them anything profound about how people *thought and felt* about their offspring - one myth we can safely debunk is Aries' insistence that there is little evidence of parental affection before the later Middle Ages. If this were true, how should we read Philip of Novare's 13th century description of children as "a source of joy" their parents "would not exchange for all the treasures of the world" or 14th century diarist Giovanni Morelli's claim to have "preserved the date, place and way" his son was conceived – and "the joy he experienced in touching his wife's belly and feeling the movements of the foetus" (Shahar, 1990, p.33)?

Other Medieval sources allude to mundane but tender aspects of child-rearing like bathing, dressing and changing children - invariably described as "especially beautiful" and with "clear, white skin, pink cheeks like the rose or the lily" (Ibid, p.95). There are also scattered descriptions of parents at leisure that sound distinctly modern - including an entry in the biography of the 12th century French abbot Bernard of Clairvaux describing how peasant women attended fairs and festivals carrying their babies in neck-bands or rucksacks (Ibid, pp.96-7). Similarly, Aries' claim that children are either absent from – or depicted as 'miniature adults' in – early Medieval art is dispelled by numerous "poignant" portrayals in 12th century works (Forsyth, 1976) and subsequent Gothic, Carolingian, Ottonian and Romanesque illuminations, paintings and sculptures (Shahar, 1990). As to the mini-adult claim, while some early images of the infant Christ portray him as outsized and/or with grown-up facial features, Aries' reading of the 'reasons' for this is too literal and "present-centred" (Heywood, 2001, p.13). In the early wooden sculpture *Virgin and the Child in Majesty*, Heywood argues

persuasively that the artist's decision to give Jesus a "mature" expression was meant to signify his "divine wisdom" – at a time when adults, too, were typically depicted as symbols of their rank, social status and inner qualities, rather than with any attempt to capture their actual physical characteristics (Heywood, 2001, p.13). Moreover, while Martindale (1994, p.197) rightly identifies the "more lively, more human, and more probable" turn paintings of children took around 1300, the naturalism of these images arguably owes more to the rediscovery of classical painting techniques and conventions than any sudden awakening among adults to the charms of the young (Sommerville, 1990).

That said, in later eras a more sentimentalised "myth of child goodness" (Ibid, p.204) would undoubtedly emerge – visible in everything from 17th century Dutch paintings depicting "tender scenes" of fathers playing with and singing to their children (Heywood, 2001, p.87) to Joshua Reynolds' portrait of an angelic girl in the *Age of Innocence* (1788) and Mendelssohn's "six children's pieces", *Kinderstucke* (as cited in Sommerville, 1990, p.209). That children were increasingly seen as *worthy* of close parental attention – and, by extension, of inherent *value* – seems beyond dispute then. But what consensus existed, if any, about the right 'balance' between affection and discipline, and what does historical 'parenting literature' tell us about other aspects of how societies conceptualised children?

A semi-constant feature of child-rearing advice from both Church and lay authors is their emphasis on the importance of instilling obedience and decorum. The implication is that, left unchecked, children revert to their innate savagery (Heywood, 2001, p.92). So, while a clear recognition emerged in early advisory texts that children had the *potential* to be groomed into worthy heirs or gentlefolk – and/or economically useful contributors – a firm hand was judged necessary to ensure they did. As with many aspects of the changing conception of children, it is impossible to chart a linear continuum in attitudes towards 'nurturing' throughout history. Shahar (1990, p.2) emphasises that, though the "dominant view of Medieval authors" was that under seven-year-olds should be "treated with tenderness and not burdened with excessive demands for discipline and self-restraint", many 18th century authors "advocated rigid discipline from the very earliest age and relentless battle even against infants to force them to obey

parental commands". Significantly, "switches" (bundles of twigs used as makeshift canes) were all-but ubiquitous in Renaissance pictures of children in school (Ibid, p.94) while the fledgling *British Medical Journal*'s exhortation to mothers to "promote the future of the race" by forcing their children to respect "the gospel of hygiene" (Cunningham, 2005, p.151) typified the newly medicalised advice literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Recent history presents us with a more explicitly 'child-centred' view of the way early-years rearing should be conducted. Reviving (and greatly expanding on) the late Medieval emphasis on the importance of nurturing and comforting younger children, the early pronouncements of the 'baby industry' fell back on a view that children's needs (if not 'wants') were paramount – with renewed emphasis on the importance of breast-feeding and, perhaps, a newer one on that of toilet and sleep-training. While trends have oscillated since the early 20th century between the behaviourist approach to setting strict feeding and sleeping timetables favoured by F Truby King's Babycraft movement and latter-day 'authorities' like Gina Ford and the *laissez-faire* humanism of Dr Benjamin Spock, these divergent approaches share a fervent belief that decisions should be taken in the child's best interests – and in accordance with his/her (declared or undeclared) 'needs' and 'wishes'. As corporal punishment has moved, in all-but a handful of western societies, from being a centuries-old fact of life to socially unacceptable (even illegal), so, too, have calls for a return to a (romantic) recognition of the 'rights' of the child to *be* a child and to *enjoy* childhood made by socially conscious 19th century campaigners like Kate Wiggin (Cunningham, 2005, p.160), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Ibid, p.144-5) and Conservative reformer Sir John Gorst (Hendrick, 1997, pp.74-5) been normalised. That these perspectives have become progressively more ingrained at the same time as children's independence has been eroded by increased parental protectiveness arising from (disproportionate) concern about risk is a central paradox around which this thesis pivots.

As earlier centuries wound on, and the idea that children could be nurtured to mature into fully formed social beings entered ascendancy, recognition also emerged that they had *intellectual* needs (and rights), not just spiritual ones. Through early stories aimed directly at children, like *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella* and other fairytales by 17th century writer Charles Perrault

(many featuring child heroes and, especially, heroines) and the revolutionary children's illustrated encyclopaedia *Orbis Pictus*, by Czech educator Commenius, we glimpse not only images of childhood innocence and vulnerability consistent with those drawn in earlier periods but also a new understanding of the power of children's imaginations – and their capacity to read, learn, question and think for themselves. This marked a significant departure from the times when folk stories, invariably conveyed orally, were used primarily to terrify children into obeying their elders - often by invoking antecedents of today's 'stranger-danger' concept, in the person of "wandering beggars who steal children, disable them, and send them to beg" or "the evil eye (*mal ochio*) of malicious old women" (Shahar, 1990, p.139). By contrast, the new children's literature aimed to both entertain and educate the young, and the recognition by publishers (and, increasingly, parents) that this was a worthwhile endeavour indicates a paradigm shift in the 'value' placed on children - and the triumph of the idea that they *could* be nurtured (whatever their inbuilt tendencies) over the narrow fatalism of original sin.

Nonetheless, through the later writings of Darwin and Freud, and the resurgent religious fundamentalism represented by, for example, 20th century Christian evangelical movements, the idea of children's innate primitivism would continually recur – just as it permeates media discourse to this day in response to the 'antisocial' actions of "feral youth" (Malthouse, 8 August 2011) and "devil boys" (*Doncaster Free Press,* 2010). In the starkest examples of such popular narratives, Darwin's vision of the immature child as a microcosm of early stages in human evolution, and Freud's of the inborn sexuality informing the physical and emotional development of the young (Sommerville, 1990, p.157), are perverted into images of native deviancy that no amount of attentive nurturing can overcome.

Younger versus older children

Flowing out of the 'nature-nurture' debate is a recurring narrative that seeks to distinguish between the virtues and vices of *younger* children (especially infants) and *older* ones (notably adolescents/teenagers). Given the preoccupation in nature-nurture discourse with the question of whether children are born with any innate qualities – and how or whether, if these traits

exist, they should be developed or eradicated – one might expect the 'young-old' debate to be founded on the premise that the former state is more problematic than the latter. But the narratives about younger and older children that emerge from historical sources are in themselves contradictory. Every image or document portraying young juveniles as a "drain" (Sommerville 1990, p.186), economic or otherwise, in contrast to their more self-reliant and/or productive elders, is matched by another favouring innocent, malleable infants or toddlers over wilful, corruptible (or corrupted) adolescents?

For any discussion about the view historical societies took of younger and older children to have merit, we first need to establish that they distinguished between these two 'groupings' at all – and, if so, how. Fortunately, there is considerable evidence to suggest distinct 'stages' of childhood have been recognised for centuries. As recent histories have demonstrated (Sommerville, 1990; Cunningham, 2005) terms denoting 'child' and 'children' can be located in manuscripts dating back to antiquity, with some societies - notably those of ancient Greece and Rome (Cunningham, 2005, p.2) - using several different terms to signify the concept (an indication, perhaps, that they were already alive to the existence of separate developmental phases). Evidence of what Aries (1973, p.6) termed the "first sentiment of childhood", "*mignotage*" (coddling), can also be glimpsed in material from ancient Rome (Neraudau, 1984; Dixon 1991). While very young children might be viewed as stained with original sin, it is in the (deviant) actions of errant older children, and the punitive reprisals for which they increasingly become liable as they age, that we glimpse a division between those too young to be held responsible for their actions and the morally 'culpable'. It is an analogous distinction between younger and older children today, of course, which underpins contemporary discourse about the age of "criminal responsibility" (Gillen, 2006; Gumham, 2006; Cipriani, 2009) – and the point, central to this thesis, at which juveniles cross the boundary between unwitting misbehaviour and nefarious intent.

The Hippocratic tradition that juveniles progressed through a series of 'rites of passage' en route to maturity - and, in many societies, fuller personhood/citizenship – was widely embraced in the Middle Ages, where various Latin texts tell us that classical ideas were refashioned into

a perceived journey from *infantia* (birth to age seven) through *pueritia* (seven to 12 and 14 for girls and boys respectively) and *adolescentia* (12 or 14 to 21) (Heywood, 2001, p.14). Although there were some variations in perceptions of the number of childhood stages – with prolific Persian scholar Avicenna identifying five, leading up to the age of 30 (Ibid) – there emerged a widespread consensus that very young children were fundamentally different in nature/capabilities to those a few years older and, in turn, teenagers. Interestingly, there also appears to have been an early recognition among thinkers of the distinct period of adolescence – hundreds of years before the fabled 'invention' of that concept in the late 19th/early 20th centuries (Aries, 1962). In addition, the idea that 'childhood' – and, by implication, the potential delay in individuals' take-up of roles and duties associated with adulthood – might last until 21 (or even 30) raises the intriguing possibility that some early moralists/academics inclined towards a more gradual (even liberal) approach to ushering children into the grown-up world, with its attendant rights and responsibilities, than exists in late-modern Britain.

Several distinct 'debates' emerge from a study of the historical sources on conceptions of younger and older children. As the previous section noted, sharp disagreement existed for long periods over the innate qualities of children, particularly (new-born) babies. But alongside familiar sin-versus-innocence arguments, more nuanced and intriguing shades of opinion can be glimpsed. To the Cambridge Platonists, Rousseau and the Romantics, young children were gifted with innate spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities that risked being lost or drummed out of them by too rigid and rapid an induction into adulthood (Sommerville, 1990, pp.149-53). Conversely, while adopting a less 'one-size-fits-all' view of the nature of children than early Christian moralists, some thinkers saw children as little more than unexposed photographic negatives who, while in need of nurturing to fulfil their 'potential', could only ever be expected to do so within certain pre-determined parameters inscribed (genetically) at birth. Schultz's (1995) appraisal of Middle High German texts concludes adults in that society did not so much believe the way children were treated in childhood would *affect* how they turned out as grown-ups as that "the discerning eye could pick out from childish traits what the future adult would be like", regardless of how well or poorly they were raised (Cunningham, 1998, pp.1197-8).

The one area of agreement that does appear to have emerged from early on, though, was the *need* to address children's spiritual and (in the broadest sense) pedagogic development - whether one saw the primary role of parenting and education as stifling children's inborn *animal* tendencies or liberating their innate *human* potential. However, setting aside questions about the socioeconomic barriers preventing some children from accessing education, there was disagreement among 'privileged' classes about how early in life formal tuition should commence. By the 16th century, clear divisions were opening up between those who saw children aged seven and under as ripe for little more than petting and pampering and early educationalists, like Erasmus, who declared "the first years of life" of "utmost importance for the future life of the child" (Ibid). Debate raged for centuries across Europe about the capacity of young children to learn, and in the event it wasn't until 17th century Weimar that the first elementary schools emerged, with Britain waiting a further 200 years to offer even the most basic formal education to the children of its poor (Heywood, 2001, p.155).

Another debate that emerges from historical portrayals of/discussions about younger-versus-older children concerned the age it was acceptable for households (particularly poorer ones) to send their young out to work – and the related question of what implications economic usefulness had for the 'value' family (and wider society) placed on its offspring. To sickly, underpaid 18th century farmhands, any additional mouth to feed presented a severe burden to their already impoverished households – but should children survive to ages when it was socially acceptable to conscript them into the job market they might become an overnight "economic asset" (Cunningham, 2005, p.80). Yet, just as poorer households today struggle to fund their children's university education, in the face of dwindling state support and spiralling tuition fees, when elementary schooling first became compulsory, parents suddenly confronted the harsh truth that their sons and daughters – until recently working in mills or shinning up chimneys for a living – had reverted to being an "economic drain" (Sommerville, 1990, p.186). Each of these developments was a *reflection* of how perceptions of children had changed over time, as premature adulthood (born often of economic necessity) made way for a new emphasis on the "rights" of the young to enjoy both "natural" childhood freedoms (Cunningham, 2005, p.73) and improved prospects and status as "social beings" (Ozment,

1983, p.177) when they came of age. But, in transforming the ways industry and family worked, these changing practices would also *influence* how children were perceived in ensuing periods – as both present dependant and future keeper (Heywood, 2001, p.73) or "sacralised" innocent (Zelizer, 1985, pp.184-5) and unruly free spirit (Cunningham, 1991, p.145).

If infants – and, from the introduction of elementary education, those in the 'pueritia' phase – were judged *economically* burdensome, so too were they considered *spiritual* millstones. A thread running through this chapter is the preeminent role played by the Church and its emissaries in constructing ideas about childhood. Church writers were influential in (often contradictorily) framing children as innately sinful in infancy (Cunningham, 2005, p.29; Sommerville, 1990, p.55) yet prone to greater temptation (sin) from seven upwards (Shahar, 1990, p.16) – and liable to descend into "frivolous and arrogant" behaviour from 14 (Ibid). Medieval children were also portrayed as a "drain" on their parents' spiritual lives (Shahar, 1990, p.11). *The History of Kyng Bocchus and Sydracke*, published in 1530, lamented how Man had become obsessed with the love of his children – investing "all his energy and his money in their support and advancement", instead of devoting himself to "the salvation of his own soul" (as cited in Shahar, 1990, p.11). This theme was revisited by ecclesiastical writers in later centuries, with numerous of the 350 catechisms and 'question-and-answer' advice documents issued by Church authorities between 1549 and 1646 entreating fathers to discipline youngsters harshly because their "unstable and fanciful" mothers could not be trusted to (Cunningham, 2005, pp.49-50). A similar sentiment informed 19th century evangelist Hannah More's portrayal of young children as "sinful polluted creatures", even as she founded the Sunday School movement to 'save' them (Robertson, 1976, p.421).

Not that all evidence used to support the view that adults adopted an essentially callous, self-serving attitude towards younger children is entirely convincing. Several authors have drawn attention to the prevalence at various times of 'wet-nursing' or 'out-nursing' - the practice, even among wealthier families, of mothers avoiding breast-feeding by handing their babies to hired nurses – as support for Aries' view that infants and toddlers were deprived of affection in certain periods. Yet, while it may be harder to explain why more affluent households used wet-

nurses, this thesis favours more prosaic explanations than Aries' fanciful notion that affection was "discovered" at some indeterminate point in the later Middle Ages. As Hendrick (1997), Anderson (1980) and Pollock (1983) argue, widespread wet-nursing among the lower classes – and, indeed, the abandonment of many infants by poorer families – can best be understood as a reflection of harsh economic circumstances, with the former being a "product of family economic strategies that compelled mothers to be wage-earners in order to supplement the low wages of the male breadwinner" (Hendrick, 1997, p.17). In this respect, it represented an antecedent for the widespread practice of entrusting children to childcare providers today – an arrangement which, as we shall see in coming chapters, has fuelled latter-day maternal anxieties. For the better-off, wet-nursing may have been viewed as a healthier/safer substitute for breast-feeding than alternatives, such as using poorly disinfected bottles, when the child's natural mother was unable to breast-feed or social etiquette prohibited her from doing so (Ibid).

As for the periodic rises in abandonment and infanticide, it is argued that economic considerations (or, in the case of illegitimate children, social taboos) largely account for these, too. Cunningham (2005, p.93) notes "a close correlation" between the numbers of babies abandoned to foundling hospitals and years of "economic crisis" in 16th and 17th century northern Italy. A tripling of abandonment rates in Limoges, France, between the 1740s and 1780s, meanwhile, coincided with a sharp rise in the price of grain (Ibid). More revealingly, he cites ample documentary evidence to suggest disposing of even bastard infants was consistently regarded as unconscionable. In 16th century France, unmarried women who fell pregnant had to make declarations to magistrates vowing not to kill their offspring, and mothers of illegitimate children who died were presumed guilty of murder unless they could prove them stillborn under a law passed in 1532 by the Holy Roman Empire (Ibid, p.116). Whatever inequities such judgments might disguise about the relative social status of poorer-versus-richer (or legitimate-versus-illegitimate) children, they suggest that, by the late Medieval period, a value of sorts was being placed on even the youngest juveniles.

Moreover, while in one sense older children might have been 'favoured' over the young for their economic worth and (learned) social/emotional maturity, a parallel discourse has slowly

emerged in recent centuries to challenge the notion that older necessarily means wiser. According to Shahar's (1990, p.25) analysis of secular Medieval legislation, for girls and boys respectively the ages of 12 and 14 were those from which they were generally entitled to certain 'rights' (principally marriage) – and, conversely, judged capable of bearing "criminal responsibility". The Medieval era saw familiar modern arguments about criminal intent rehearsed in relation to young people, with 13th century English jurist Henry de Bracton arguing "lack of intention protects the child" (Ibid). Centuries later, documents relating to prosecutions of children for slander in colonial Massachusetts and Plymouth Colony suggest that, by the time pioneers were settling in North America, the perceived age of culpability for most crimes had risen to between 14 and 16 (Beales, 1975, p.384). By contrast, in England and Wales today – partly in response to successive moral panics about juvenile crime of the late 1980s and early 1990s – children are deemed criminally responsible from as young as 10. While several countries (including Scotland, Ireland, Canada, Israel and Japan) match the higher Medieval threshold of 12, and others (among them China, Germany, Austria and Italy) end the defence of infancy at 14, only a handful (Argentina, Brazil, Belgium, Columbia, Peru and the Democratic Republic of Congo) extend it to 18 – still widely seen as the age at which 'adulthood' commences.

This is not to deny that children's 'rights' have been progressively extended in other ways – with, in Britain, the Children Act 1908 ushering in a century of reform engendering a "more comprehensive and child-oriented legal system" and "more generous and liberal provisions for children in all walks of life" (Hendrick, 1997, p.49). Nonetheless, in important respects, our conceptions of children have become *less* tolerant – and more contradictory - over time. Child welfare legislation in Britain offers levels of protection and redress for abused and neglected children undreamt of in the 16th or 17th centuries and, by way of preserving their childhoods, it is no longer lawful for anyone under 16 to marry. The irony is that, in an age when the concept of childhood has never been more enshrined in law – and, with it, children's rights to *enjoy* that childhood, free from cruelty and exploitation – the opprobrium meted out to (older) juveniles who stray from the path of 'innocence' can be so severe (Squires & Stephen, 2005). The dark flipside of children's (and teenagers') natures is a theme that has repeatedly been addressed

in literature and the arts in recent decades – in stark contrast to the images of virtuous/victimised juveniles that prevailed in 19th century fiction (Sommerville, 1990, p.204). In novels such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1959) and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1963), concepts like original sin would be revisited in the context of post-war debates about civilisation versus barbarism and the medicalisation of deviancy respectively (Conrad & Schneider, 1992). Each title explores concerns played out (by liberals and conservatives alike) in latter-day moral panics about child delinquency and youth disorder – and, fittingly, each repeatedly resurfaces in public discourse as shorthand for extremes of both (Scraton, 1997).

The economic versus affective child

Debates about the economic usefulness or otherwise of younger versus older children open up deeper questions about whether parental (and societal) 'affection' towards juveniles was reserved for those seen as immediate or potential assets, rather than burdens – and, by extension, whether early demonstrations of emotional attachment should be viewed as genuine, let alone unconditional, rather than intrinsically self-interested. The overwhelming documentary evidence relating to the economic position of children, from at least the Renaissance, points towards seven or 12 being ages from which it was deemed socially acceptable (if not usual) for lower orders to send their children out to work and the middle classes into apprenticeships (Shahar, 1990; Heywood, 2001). Is it not possible then, as some have argued (Thompson, 1977; Hendrick, 1997), that perceived economic usefulness was a *precondition* for many children of being 'loved' – or, to put it differently, that affection shown to younger juveniles stemmed from their value to their families as future breadwinners and/or "status symbols" (Cunningham, 2005, p.72)?

The extent to which children were seen as fulfilling a primarily economic role in the shadow of the Industrial Revolution can be inferred from the way British imperialists fretted about the need to use a combination of school and "mothercraft" to ensure the strength of future armies (Hendrick, 1997, p.42) and German medical expert Arthur Schlossmann unashamedly preached to Rhineland notables that unacceptably high rates of infant mortality must be

reduced not out of compassion for the poor but because "the unrelenting [industrial and military] drive of our times demands a resistant, healthy population" (Heywood, 2005, p.154). Even as they gradually gained more 'rights' – and recognition that they were sentient beings entitled to realise their individual potentials – as late as the early 20th century, then, the overriding establishment view of children was as economic units whose primary purpose was to help strengthen the prevailing social order (Gaskins et al, 1992). And, as the 1900s wound on, begetting two world wars, this imperative became, for industrial, military and governmental elites, ever more urgent (Heywood, 2005, p.154).

In 21st century Britain, economic factors arguably continue to influence the level of social value ascribed to (particular) children. As illustrated by the panic discourse(s) reflected in the author's textual analysis, virtual ethnography and focus-group interviews, a key subtext to the narrative of children as 'prey' versus children as 'predator' is the underlying distinction repeatedly made by politicians, news media and individual members of the public between the types of households with which 'good' and 'bad' children respectively are associated. This thesis argues that pitting the parents of respectable, well-behaved children against those of truants, vandals and "feral youth" (Malthouse, 2011) acts as a proxy for broader, more divisive, narratives used by politicians and press alike to discriminate between the economically useful and economically burdensome (*www.bbc.co.uk*, 2010a; Porter, 2011). In dividing parents into these twin camps, civil society implicitly distinguishes between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' adults *and* children – a key opposition to which this chapter returns in its final section.

Though it is important to recognise the economic (as opposed to emotional) value placed on children in history, it would be unjust to dismiss motives for parental affection as wholly selfish. Documentary and material evidence for the culture (or cultures) of lived childhood, though scant, demonstrate the existence of toys such as marbles, spinning-tops, dolls and rattles – and, through them, a recognition of children's 'rights' to play and amusement – dating back to antiquity. Stick and wheeled toy horses have been recovered from ancient Persian archaeological sites, while pictures of dog-carts and hoops emerge from excavations of ancient Greek settlements (Ibid). But perhaps the most compelling evidence to support the argument

that children's 'rights' to childhood freedoms was recognised in earlier societies comes from Gordon's (1991, p.148) analysis of records of miracles performed to heal injured juveniles by six English saints and martyrs between 1170 and 1500. Of the 358 miraculous recoveries recorded during this period, 135 related to accidental injuries suffered by children (predominantly boys) while playing at home, on roads, and in streams, ponds and pastures. Equally illuminating are the recorded devotions made by the children's parents, which demonstrate that, far from being heedless of the dangers to which they exposed their offspring, they were distraught at the thought of losing them.

What emerges from this, arguably, is a conception of childhood more rational and mature than that prevailing in Britain today: one recognising that it is in children's 'natures' to want to enjoy outdoor freedoms, free from constant parental monitoring, while also regarding the young with a sense of responsibility and affection. This is an impression compounded by a handful of documentary nuggets which call into question Aries' contention that in Medieval Europe it took until seven for children to be recognised as human beings – and that even then this only occurred because they were deemed old enough to work. Heywood (2001, p.116) cites a 1422 census from Reims which shows that, far from routinely moving into domestic servitude aged seven, girls did so generally between the ages of 12 and 22, while boys continued in this field from 12 to 30. Similarly, Kussmaul's (1981, p.70) study of servants in early modern England quotes several mid-19th century documents, including worker registration schemes, confirming that the "ordinary age of entry" was 13 or 14.

Richer versus poorer (civilised versus feral) children

Any discussion of the economic value placed on children inevitably leads to consideration of the relative status of those from poorer and richer backgrounds. History tells us that, while normative perceptions of childhood prevailed across given societies during particular historical periods, they were not always respected by - or seen as applicable to – all *sections* of those societies. Class and other socioeconomic barriers often fostered contradictory attitudes towards, and treatment of, children even at times when there was widespread agreement

about their position in relation to adults. Even as Victorian social reformers and educationalists were pushing for the introduction of universal schooling and others were promoting an idealised view of children celebrating their beauty and innocence, the governing classes were turning blind eyes to the betrayal of these high-minded ideals in the interests of continued industrial expansion. As Sommerville notes:

"One of the puzzles of our history is the fact that the greatest exploitation of children coincided with the greatest glorification of childhood." (Sommerville, 1990, p.188)

This thesis argues that these inherent contradictions in the conceptualisation of children and childhood – encompassing conflicting ideas about everything from their innate qualities to their immediate and longer-term socioeconomic worth – have clear parallels in the way(s) we perceive and portray juveniles today. The suggestion that class and economic inequality alone foster different perceptions of the role/position of children in disparate parts of the same societies can be glimpsed in everything from alarmist 19th century newspaper reports about London's "wild and incorrigible" street children and "dangerous classes in Paris" (Cunningham, 1991, p.105) to the "jarring" fact that, in the same era, children of the poor were routinely hired to hand-tint engravings in books aimed at privileged offspring of the better-off (Sommerville, 1990, p.161). These patterns recur time and again through history – with clear modern-day parallels, arguably, in the dual positioning of threatened/civilised (usually middle-class) and threatening/feral (working-class/underclass) children in public discourse in Britain today (Valentine, 1996a), not to mention the use of developing world child labour to manufacture clothes and toys for the young of the affluent West.

The clearest evidence for disparities in the treatment (and conception) of poorer versus richer children is to be found in distinctions made from early history between those 'destined' for great things – even fame and fortune – and those doomed to lives of drudgery and/or servitude. Shorn of patronage from Church, charity or philanthropist, children of the poor were left devoid of education and/or training - and powerless to improve their lot, in the face of deeply socially embedded concepts of class and inherited wealth. As stated earlier, it took until

the mid-19th century for compulsory elementary education to be introduced across Europe, with Britain among the last countries to embrace it. Rudolph (1994) and Cunningham (1998) have emphasised clear class distinctions between the treatment of children by Medieval and later European peasant families (and those who exploited them) and the middle and upper-classes of their day. The former were forced to view their sons and daughters as economic resources to increase their meagre household incomes, while scattered documentary evidence from the latter suggests they were already using education to groom gentlemen heirs/virtuous future brides and homemakers, whose marriage might be used to buy them into yet higher status and influence. The poor languished firmly outside this closed circle.

Class-related conceptions of the young can also be glimpsed in the arts – perhaps most poignantly, from the early 19th century onwards, through the emergence of dedicated children's literature. Early children's stories reflect significant societal continuities through time that take the shine off more progressive changes in attitude forged during the post-Enlightenment period. Through tales as diverse as Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Match Girl* (1845), Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863), Prosper Merimee's (1845) *Carmen* (and the Bizet opera adapted from it) and even Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1881-2), we glimpse the gruelling labour regimes still endured by impoverished children and the tragedies to which these could lead. The irony was that at the same time as children of the emerging 'educated classes' were gaining their own literature, reflecting their newly recognised status as social beings, the juvenile protagonists of those stories often hailed from a parallel (uneducated) world of factories, mills, shipyards and streets stalls. However, this did at least offer wealthier children a window into how 'the other half' lived. Though guilty of sentimentalising poor children through *A Christmas Carol's* Tiny Tim and *The Old Curiosity Shop's* Little Nell (Sommerville, 1990, p.204), in *Oliver Twist* (1838) Dickens managed to humanise street urchins and delinquents – primary folk-devils of his day (May, 1973; Pearson, 1983; King, 1998) – not to mention abused children, orphans and the abandoned.

Through their portrayals of impoverished children, and those who used and abused them, these stories tell us (and told others at the time) much about how poor children were both

treated and, by extension, *conceptualised*. This raises the possibility that the early to mid-19th century saw the emergence, or consolidation, of an underlying class-related societal narrative of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' children, and that juveniles from lower orders were still widely viewed (perhaps even by their own families) as being of a different, lowlier breed to their wealthier 'peers'. We glimpse this frame in the dramatic device at the heart of Captain Marryat's Civil War adventure yarn *The Children of the New Forest* (1847), in which four orphaned children from a landed Royalist family disguise themselves as the (by implication, antithetical) grandchildren of a poor forester. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries the arts appear to be telling us (often disapprovingly) that a dual conception of children prevailed: one that idealised *childhood* as a hallowed state, while distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' (for which read, usually, 'rich' and 'poor') children, and reserving most of its idolatry for the former. This thesis argues that the dual construction of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' children – by society at large, rather than writers and reformers who challenged it – offered a foretaste of the contradictory latter-day positioning of juveniles as "angels and devils" (Valentine, 1996a).

Deserving versus undeserving children: positioning the young today

What all of these conflicts amount to can ultimately be boiled down to one central underpinning idea: that conceptions of children and childhood have for many centuries been characterised by a deep-rooted, and multifaceted, ambivalence. Contrary to earlier theories (Aries 1962), the *existence* of childhood and the distinction between children and adults has long been recognised. Insofar as there was ever any transformation in how the 'nature' of juveniles was conceived, this occurred during the 17th and 18th centuries, when awareness of their spiritual and intellectual needs appears to have sharpened - but beyond this the concept of childhood was neither invented nor discovered at any particular point in history. Instead, what *has* happened is that the status and position of children has been successively socially (re)constructed in different contexts to reflect (and buffer) dominant socioeconomic, political and cultural norms of the day. If any consistent pattern emerges from these constructions, it is one of ongoing ambivalence towards the universal *condition* of childhood – in other words, whether children's characteristics are inscribed at birth or can be crafted in later life – and

repeated discrimination between the value of particular *types* of children (younger or older, economically useful or burdensome, richer or poorer).

This thesis argues that these discourses implicitly enshrine deeper, more invidious, forms of ambivalence: ones that attempt to legitimately distinguish between responsible and irresponsible, disciplined and unruly, civilised and feral - or 'deserving' and 'undeserving' – children (and parents). These ambivalences towards children continue to this day, as will be demonstrated in the empirical research that follows.

Chapter 4 – Focus-group findings

A unifying theme to emerge from all the focus-group discussions involving mothers and grandmothers was that Britain has become a scarier, more intimidating place than it once was. The consensus among both pairs of groups – the first drawn from Whitehawk, a working-class suburb of Brighton in one of the five per cent most deprived wards in England; the second from Hanover and Queen's Park, a middle-class neighbourhood a mile to its west (Great Britain. Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012) – was that today's children are being reared in a tenser, more anxiety-inducing environment than previous generations. Adults' contrasting memories of their own childhoods - and grandparents' of the environment in which they brought up *their* children - testified to a sense that social, economic, technological and cultural pressures had intensified over time. A shared perception also emerged that childhood itself had become more pressurised, and children subject to a wider range of 'risks' and 'threats' than ever – making parenting a more unsettling and conflicted experience.

The heightened anxiety detectable in the parents' comments reflected the simmering moral panic discourse underpinning earlier studies by Hillman, Adams, and Whitelegg (1992), Valentine (1996a and b), Meyer (2007) and others - all of which identified widespread fears about children falling prey to extra-familial dangers if allowed too much freedom by their parents. No sooner were they asked about the levels of independence they habitually allowed their children than working-class participants began alluding to sweeping, unspecified fears about "the risks out there" and "what could happen in life". And even the more *laissez-faire* members of both groups – those professing to be relaxed about letting their children walk to school, play outside or run errands unsupervised – demonstrated acute awareness of the potential risks they were taking by granting such liberties. As encapsulated by a 42-year-old middle-class nurse, who recalled casually allowing her four children to walk to the corner-shop from a young age, "anxiety is such a big thing - it really influences our behaviour". The *extent* of this sensitisation to perceived dangers, moreover, was reflected in discussions held with two groups of nine and 10-year-old children, from the same areas, who testified to both the nature of their parents' fears and the constraints placed on their freedoms as a consequence.

When pressed, contributors identified a montage of perceived threats – ranging from age-old anxieties about prowling bogeymen, busy roads and "the dark" to newer menaces like cyber-bullying, rampant consumerism and intrusive electronic gadgets. The main aspects of the 'scarier world' paradigm to emerge from discussions can be categorised as follows:

- Abduction/molestation/grooming/murder by strangers
- Abuse/murder by adults known to the child – including family, friends, trusted professionals in positions of *loco parentis*, or 'familiar strangers' like neighbours
- Traffic accidents caused by dangerous drivers/careless children
- Violent assault or bullying by older children/teenagers
- Over-exposure to 'adult' film and TV content, video games and electronic gadgets
- Corrupting effects of rampant consumerism and advertising

Abduction/molestation/grooming/murder by strangers

The first person to allude to 'stranger-danger' was a 39-year-old working-class single mother-of-two, who described how neither of her daughters dared venture alone to the local park because she had "drummed it into them" about "the people". Asked for clarification, this part-time volunteer in a community cafe nodded gravely as a married mother-of-four training as a teaching assistant mentioned "paedos and stuff like that". This, in turn, prompted a busy 25-year-old juggling single parenthood with a course in nursery-nursing to interject that her son (aged six) was forbidden from straying beyond a patch of grass, sandwiched between two roads, immediately outside her ground-floor flat, because "it's so close either way and someone can grab 'em so easily in a car".

These fears about unsupervised outdoor play were echoed by a second single mother (aged 32) with three primary schoolchildren, who fretted that if she "saw something about to happen" to her seven-year-old daughter she would be unable to reach her in time because two flights of stairs separated her second-floor flat from the pavement below. And similar concerns were raised by another tower-block tenant, living with a partner and two children (four and six), who

had barred her eldest from playing alone in her close for fear of "the alleys". She once "went to pieces" after finding her six-year-old son missing from the backseat of her car minutes after leaving him to drop her daughter off at nursery. As she reflected, "all he had done was followed me in, but the first thing that come into my head was, 'what if someone has opened that car and got him?'"

These mothers' rationales for imposing such restrictions bore striking similarities to the accounts given by both sets of children. The middle-class nurse's nine-year-old daughter described being allowed to play in her front garden, so long as she kept the gate closed - adding that she would not be allowed to walk her dog to nearby Queen's Park until she was 10, because her mother worried about "the park, the actual park". When she was asked to expand on this point, a friend interrupted with the words "those people, those strangers there". Similarly, a nine-year-old working-class boy said the reason he was only allowed to play out until early evening was "in case people try to take you". For some, the reasons their parents gave for restricting their movements were based on particular sensitivities: one working-class girl, who had moved in with her separated father after being withdrawn from the care of an abusive mother, said her dad considered most things "dangerous", and would only allow her to walk alone to school because she did not need to cross roads to get there. When pressed, she said the threats he most feared were that she might "get hurt" - either "by a car" or "a burglar".

A common thread of the working-class mothers' remarks about restrictions they imposed on their children's independence was an emphasis on using mobile phones and 'ring-rounds' to other parents to keep tabs on their movements. Even when older children were allowed a degree of 'unsupervised' outdoor activity, arms-length supervision was still being used to ensure they did not stray far – with youngsters ordered to take their phones everywhere, and vigilant neighbours exchanging text messages if they spied each other's kids where they were not meant to be. Evidence of this rudimentary 'tagging' system also emerged from both sets of children, with all but one in the working-class cohort confirming that a condition of being permitted to play out was that they took mobile phones with them so they could call their parents if need be. The nurse's daughter, meanwhile, remarked that she would be "allowed to

go to town on my own" only "when I get a phone" in "year six" (aged 11). Typical justification for this approach came from the married working-class mother-of-four, who, despite allowing her children to walk to and from school alone from seven, confessed to phoning friends if her 11-year-old daughter was late home, as she liked "to know where they are and who they're with". "If the other child has got home and she hasn't, then what's happened from their house to mine?" she added.

Concerns about abduction, abuse and/or murder by strangers also surfaced early in middle-class discussions. For these mothers, the concept of child-snatching arose in the context of a generalised exchange about fears of "the dark". Responding to a remark from the a nurse that she let her children walk to the local swimming pool from the age of eight, a 46-year-old writer framed her concerns using a mix of vicarious experience and literary allusion:

"It's just the dark. I don't know what I think is going to happen in the dark that wouldn't happen in the day...And even now with my youngest, 10, I'll go, 'yeah, can you send him home now cos...it's on the brink of dusk, you know, before it gets dark'. It's like this mythical...*cut-off.*"

Her remark prompted a 51-year-old worker in a homelessness hostel, who confessed the nature of her job made her view the world as "slightly more dangerous" than "other people would think", to mention the news. The single parent of two sons (nine and 13) commented, "more...stories that you read in the newspaper of people being abducted in alleyways...do happen in the dark".

Extensive discussion about "the dark" by these middle-class mothers was reflected in a shorter debate among the working-class mums about the wisdom of letting children play outside on winter evenings, because of fears about 'losing sight' of them. A shy 22-year-old mother-of-four became animated on this subject, recalling tussles with her 12-year-old son over her edict that "he will not disappear from the street when it gets dark" if he wanted to avoid being "grounded".

Interestingly, while middle-class mothers were generally more self-critical than those in the working-class group about the 'irrationality' underpinning their association of darkness with stranger-danger, at times their discussion became contradictory – and reasoning they used to *question* the true scale of this threat was 'replayed' as *justification* for their concerns. A point repeatedly made was that there were almost certainly no more paedophiles at large than in the past – and it was *awareness* of risk, rather than risk itself, that had increased over time, with the advent of public information campaigns, Criminal Records Bureau checks for adults working with children, and registration of child sex offenders under "Sarah's Law" (Griffin, 2010). Yet heightened awareness was itself conceived as a cause for potential worry. One mum, a married 46-year-old who works with parents of children with special educational needs, raised concern that closer monitoring of paedophiles might send them "underground" - making them even *more* threatening. And the hostel-worker mused that, though abductions had occurred just as often when she was a child (even if they were not so well publicised), parents today were cursed with *knowing* "loads of children go missing".

The suggestion British society was becoming over-sensitised to risks that had always existed but were less widely recognised previously was borne out by both sets of grandmothers – most of whom recalled having far greater freedom as juveniles than their own grandchildren enjoyed today. A 55-year-old working-class teaching assistant, originally from Glasgow, was one of several who walked to school alone by the age of seven, and could not remember "*any* limitations" to the independence she was allowed. But, while she vividly described the 45-minute walk that took her "down past a canal" to her secondary school, she confessed to having been stricter on her own children and, in due course, grandchildren – largely due to the heightened public profile of child abuse and abduction. Though she conceded society had become "more aware" of "paedophilia", rather than the problem itself being any more pervasive, she said that (unlike her own parents) she would always walk her children to school, while she habitually followed her granddaughter down to the nearby park to keep an eye on her, because "at the back of my mind I'm thinking, 'oh please God, don't let anything happen before I get there'".

Others remembered enjoying even greater childhood freedoms. Another working-class grandmother, who had lived in Whitehawk her whole life, recalled making "camps in the bushes", going "over the [rubbish] tip" and beneath a coastal "under-cliff, where the water used to come up", leaving her and her friends "absolutely drenched". Yet, despite having tried to adopt a similarly relaxed attitude towards her own children's outdoor activities, she conceded she was "just so worried for the kids these days" because "you hear more about paedophiles".

Middle-class grandmothers appeared to have experienced even freer childhoods, reflecting the comparatively low-crime areas in which most recalled growing up. A 65-year-old retired teacher remembered being allowed to travel to France alone aged 13 – an experience which informed similar levels of freedom she allowed her own children, whom she permitted to go to London by train on their own to visit their father from as young as eight. And, while there was a general consensus that it was acceptable for children in the 1970s and Eighties to play out alone and walk themselves to school by the time they reached seven or eight, one retired women's refuge worker said she had let hers walk to the local shop unsupervised from as young as three. Asked why they felt today's parents had become so much more protective, a widowed former health visitor earned nods of agreement when she recounted how, despite the fact it "had been going on for ages", around "30 years ago" the media had "all of a sudden" been flooded with allegations of child "sexual abuse". An 82-year-old divorcee concurred that "being worried about children being abducted" did not "enter into it" when she was bringing up her daughter (the middle-class nurse).

A specific missing child case raised, unprompted, by both sets of mothers was that of Madeleine McCann: the three–year-old British girl who vanished from the Portuguese holiday apartment where she had been left sleeping beside her siblings while her parents dined at a nearby restaurant in May 2007. Despite the fact this incident happened on foreign soil, all the women identified with the scenario – an indicator, perhaps, that the notion of children being snatched while asleep in a supposedly safe location (whether at home or overseas) makes this as yet 'unsolved' media *cause-celebre* a singular embodiment of the disquieting idea of 'threatening familiarity'. This theme cropped up repeatedly, and was best crystallised by the

writer, who proactively raised another news story as a spectre of the dangers that might lurk even in the most innocuous-seeming locales: the notorious 1996 slaying of mother and daughter Lin and Megan Russell in a quiet country lane in Kent:

"...if I'm feeling anxious...I always think of that woman...the Michael Stone case, in broad daylight in a beautiful village that they'd moved to because it was so idyllic and safe..."

Similarly, one working-class mother translated a newspaper story about two (then recent) murders of people in their own homes – drawn from her local paper, *The Argus* – into a source of worry about dangers that could potentially befall her children *outside* the home:

"If they're going to come into your house and do it, what're they going to do if children are *out*?"

Another intriguing extension of paedophile fears was the working-class mums' concern that, unlike in days gone by, children could no longer be wholly insulated from 'stranger-danger' even at home. The trainee nursery-nurse feared personal images and details innocently posted on social networking websites like Facebook could act as magnets for online stalkers, as "all they need" is for "someone" to "put a picture up of the kids playing outside your house and it's got the street name". Despite professing a laid-back attitude towards her children's independence, the teaching assistant admitted being so worried her younger daughter could be groomed by paedophiles posing as children on Facebook that she had censored the child's online profile to avoid "some man" exploiting it by thinking, "hang on, I've got a vulnerable little girl who...likes this, that and the other - I know what she loves". This story prompted the high rise-dwelling single mother-of-three to recall intercepting a message to her seven-year-old daughter from someone she had "added...on Facebook" who "she...thought was [singer] Peter Andre" and was suggesting "come and meet me".

Abuse/murder by adults known to the child - or 'familiar strangers'

At least as prevalent as fears about predatory strangers were repeated declarations of concern about children being abused/killed by adults known to them. This fear – an expression of the recurring 'threatening familiarity' theme – surfaced powerfully in the working-class cohort when, during a highly self-reflexive discussion about the distrust with which they sometimes (unjustifiably) regarded men they met in parks and playgrounds, the single mother-of-three recalled a high-profile media story that had disturbed her precisely because it confounded conventional stereotypes about child-abusers. "That woman...she was...abusing the children", she said, referring to Plymouth nursery-nurse Vanessa George - convicted of molesting pre-school children in December 2009. The case had "horrified" her because "as a mother...you would think it was a natural thing that women wouldn't". In similarly alarmed tones, she raised the more immediate case of schoolteacher Nigel Leat, from Weston-super-Mare, who had been jailed for serial sex offences in the same week her focus-group first met. "I would have thought you could trust teachers", she said, returning to the issue of misplaced confidence – and adding this case was even more alarming because Leat had gone undetected (and unpunished) for so long, with 30 people complaining over 15 years but "only 11 were taken any...further".

A high-profile story illustrating the 'threatening familiarity' paradigm raised by the middle-class mothers was the Soham killings: the abduction and murder of 10-year-old Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman by Ian Huntley, partner of their teaching assistant, Maxine Carr, in August 2002. In an apparent admission of a form of (limited) media effect on her behaviour, the special needs worker, who had three children, aged eight, 11 and 12, relayed – to a chorus of "mms" – how such stories left her suspicious about men she and her children encountered locally:

"I kind of get anxious, you know, when you hear about...the Soham murders. For a period...I remember...even looking suspiciously at...men, odd-looking men."

A common thread of such exchanges - as with others prompted by recollections of infamous media stories - was for parents to 'project them' onto themselves and their communities. For example, the nursery-nurse recalled her loss of innocence some years earlier, when her former German teacher had been convicted for storing child pornography on his computer. She remembered him as "a fantastic teacher" her mother had "trusted...100 per cent". Perhaps unsurprisingly, the term "trust" recurred time and again in these discussions - in relation to horror stories about everyone from predatory professionals to sadistic friends and family members. Both sets of mothers raised the haunting prospect of parents/carers sexually and physically abusing their children in private while presenting doting public facades. Prompted by another parent's recollection of the case of eight-year-old Victoria Climbie - who died after two years of torture and neglect by her great aunt and uncle in their London bed-sit in 2000 - the teaching assistant raised the spectre of abusive parents who presented "the happiest-go-lucky" facades while subjecting their children to "absolute hell" when "behind closed doors". In the middle-class group, similar concerns about the ability of "plausible" adults to deceive were repeatedly raised by the hostel-worker.

As with the broader notion of 'threatening familiarity', such underlying worries about the possibility of trusted individuals betraying that trust recurred consistently, not only in parents' discussions but children's - with a middle-class boy sparking a lengthy exchange about the possible duplicity of benign-seeming adults by cautioning that "sometimes they're [strangers] vaguely friends of your grown-ups". He also raised the subject of "what happened in Wales" (a reference to the abduction and murder of five-year-old April Jones, explored in Chapter 7) - prompting the nurse's daughter to comment that she had been "surprised" by this story "because it was just a friend's dad and apparently they were really nice before". Explicitly projecting this concept onto her own life, she added she would normally "trust" the dad of the girl sitting beside her "to drive me home". The question of whether such heightened sensitisation to the prospect of deception reflects a more fundamental 'crisis' in interpersonal trust is deliberated in detail later.

Dangerous drivers and careless road safety

Fears about speeding cars and children's own heedlessness in crossing busy roads were marked in both parent groups – with many mothers mentioning personal anecdotes or official data to illustrate the rational, evidence-based, nature of these concerns. The special needs worker was more worried about traffic than other threats because "statistically" it "supersedes all that". Asked outright what their main concern was when they weighed up whether to allow their children out independently, the middle-class mothers replied in unison: "the roads". Mothers in both groups mentioned fatal accidents involving children that had sharpened their anxieties about road safety. The teaching assistant recalled having to explain to her young children that a friend's son had died after being "hit by a car". And a 36-year-old single middle-class mother-of-three criticised drivers who "flash" their headlights to indicate it is safe for children to cross – a practice she blamed for the death of a child at her son's secondary school, who started crossing after being flashed by one car, only to be run over by another.

For the working-class mothers, 'dangerous driving' tended to be couched as a form of deviancy: with the focus on (young) joy-riders, rather than motorists generally. Their concern about 'antisocial' drivers – a corollary of broader worries about thuggish youths detailed in the following section – arguably reflected the relatively 'high-crime' neighbourhood in which they lived. It was best expressed by the timid 22-year-old mother-of-four, who spoke excitedly about motorbikes careering along alleyways and "up and down at God knows however long, up until 12, what, one o'clock, two o'clock in the morning". A related theme to persistently emerge from discussion about roads was the sense that accidents were often as much the fault of careless children as drivers: in other words, kids were sometimes a risk to *themselves*. In a similar vein, a tower-block dweller recalled the day her "little boy...legged it out of school" and "straight across the main road".

But, despite maintaining their concerns about traffic were well-founded, the middle-class mothers offered a highly self-reflexive insight into how their worries about road safety might nonetheless be overblown. Just as they had criticised society's (and, by extension, their own)

irrational fixation with stranger-danger, so, too, they observed that previous generations exhibited a healthier attitude towards traffic risks. The hostel-worker crystallised this point by asking herself aloud why her mother - despite being of "anxious" disposition - had permitted her to roam so much more freely outdoors than she would dream of letting her own children, even though roads near her childhood home were as busy then as today. "It *was* a busy road *then*, but we were allowed to go wherever really", she recalled, adding that, though her mother "always imagined dreadful things happening", she would "allow us to do all that". Directly posing the million-dollar question about rising parental insecurities, she asked: "So what's going on?"

Though there was widespread agreement among these mothers that their concerns had a rational basis (not least because of the surge in car ownership since their childhoods), they struggled to reconcile memories of being allowed significantly greater freedoms, including the ability to cross busy streets, with the tight rein they exercised over their own children's movements. Echoing the working-class group's earlier emphasis on using phones to keep track of their children, the writer reflected that her own parents "didn't need to know where we were, whereas now...they [children] have mobiles and we can contact them...and we need to know". Her concerns about over-controlling parents were echoed by the nurse's memory that "it never *occurred* to people then to hang on to children". At "six or seven", she and a friend had gone "to the countryside with her pony – just one pony and us – for *miles*". It was, though, the single mother (a midwife) who best summed up this group's collective frustration with its own state of anxiety, by focusing on "the mobile phone" as a *symbol* of parental neurosis:

"If you text somebody and you haven't heard within, like, five minutes, you start thinking to yourself, 'oh...I wonder what's going on there?'"

Worries about road safety were echoed by children, with the main freedoms they listed – such as being allowed to walk alone to a corner shop or school – frequently qualified as short trips they could make without crossing busy streets. A shy middle-class girl said the only journey she was allowed to make independently was to a local dance studio she could reach without

crossing a road, while a working-class boy who lived some distance from both his school and the nearest park complained of being deprived of liberties his peers enjoyed because of the number of roads he had to navigate to reach these locations. And, in an echo of the midwife's concern about drivers giving children mixed signals by flashing their headlights, one boy said his mother worried that "if they give me a signal to cross the road and I cross" they might still "squash" him. As we shall see, the self-questioning, often contradictory, discourse which ensued around road safety and stranger-danger (particularly among middle-class mothers) appears to relate to a broader crisis of confidence in parenting, and maternal self-identity, linked to wider changes in British gender roles.

As with their reflections on escalating sensitisation to child abuse, grandmothers offered a helpful historical perspective on the changing nature of road traffic risks. While several criticised what they saw as irrational and panicky public perceptions (and media portrayals) of the prevalence of paedophilia, they agreed that, by contrast, soaring levels of car ownership had introduced a *genuine* menace where none had previously existed. A 71-year-old middle-class grandmother recalled the lively "street life" she experienced in the 1970s – a time when cars were far less widespread and it was safer for children to play outside as a result. Similarly, the retired women's refuge worker recalled that, when she grew up in Norwich, traffic was so minimal that "playing out was something everyone did". As a result, it was "very rare to be totally on your own" – a fact she saw as reducing the likelihood of children coming to other kinds of harm. In the working-class group, the 62-year-old wife of an ex-police officer reflected that, when she was young, only one household had a car on her Brighton estate - allowing her and friends to roam freely along the middle of their road. But quieter, less busy, streets were only part of the picture: equally important was the "genuine community spirit" she remembered from her youth, as characterised by memories of her "neighbours" looking out for one another and her knowing the woman next door as "Auntie Grace, not Mrs Watkins". An office worker (56) recalled enjoying similar freedoms, first in south London, then Saltdean (a coastal suburb of Brighton), where she would walk unaccompanied to her local lido and use a doll's pushchair as a makeshift go-kart.

Violent assault or bullying by older children/teenagers

A fourth 'category' of threat mentioned frequently in discussions was that posed by other (predominantly older) children/teenagers. However, here there emerged significant differences between the two sets of parent, with working-class mothers relaying personal anecdotes based on their own (direct or vicarious) experiences, while middle-class parents largely relied on third-hand (media) accounts or sporadic incidents they had witnessed involving individuals unknown to them personally. Moreover, there was a marked divergence of opinion about where the 'blame' lay for aggressive juvenile behaviour – with working-class mothers inclined to criticise miscreants themselves (or their parents), while middle-class mums generally adopted a 'liberal' viewpoint by blaming problems in society.

The working-class consensus was neatly encapsulated by a vivid recollection by the teaching assistant of a bullying incident involving her son – an assault similar to one he himself referred to in his own focus-group, involving "five year sevens". "My little boy last year got beaten up by a 14-year-old person, and he come home covered in blood", she recalled, adding, "there are so many parents out there that don't put rules and boundaries in place and let their kids do what they want". Other working-class mums made similar observations. The shy contributor said her son was afraid to visit the park alone "because he's been bullied down there", while the nursery-nurse alluded to the "gang mentality with the older ones" who "group together and...think they rule the roost". She recalled an occasion when her 30-year-old brother had brought her son home 10 minutes after taking him to the swings, complaining about "big kids...swearing, shouting" and "drinking alcohol".

A further aspect of parents' concerns about 'bullying' was the potential for modern technologies to be used as 'weapons'. The nursery-nurse explicitly referred to the 'scarier world' paradigm by drawing a distinction between today's "gangs" and "the olden days", when "if you had an argument with someone you'd have a little fight, and that was it". "My friend's daughter wouldn't go to school because they'd come to the school and...beat her up and videoed it", she recalled, adding that footage was put "on the Internet" and "their friends got it...texted to their

phones". As with her comments about online grooming, it was this mother who crystallised anxieties about children's access to new gadgets – stressing the sense that social media was breaking down, or making porous, once solid dividing-lines between public and private spaces. "That's the problem with the Internet now - they can be bullied...sitting in your house", she said, adding "you *think* they're safe" but "you can't even trust" that they are.

An undercurrent to the 'problem-parent' discourse was the disapproval some working-class participants expressed towards those they judged feckless. When the subject of youth indiscipline recurred in the context of a news-game exercise in which mums were asked to recount "facts" they could remember about the August 2011 riots, both the nursery-nurse and another single mother aired vocal opinions about other local parents they regarded as irresponsible and workshy. That both were themselves receiving state benefits lent their comments clear echoes of the heterogeneous views voiced by both low-paid 'blue-collar' workers and even other *unemployed* people towards jobless "scroungers" in earlier studies (Golding & Middleton, 1982). Moreover, their remarks supported this researcher's hypothesis that discourse about 'good' and 'bad' children often acts as a proxy for broader societal distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' families/parents. The strongest criticism of 'undeserving' families came from more aspirational mothers – the teaching assistant, married to a taxi-driver, and soon-to-be qualified nursery-nurse, who explicitly referred to her studies as a way of lifting herself off benefits. Her most outspoken comments were prompted by a cutting from *The Sun* she was shown during an exercise designed to stimulate discussion about negative parental stereotypes. Responding to the headline 'No dole if you let kids bunk school: PM vows blitz on feckless families', she pointedly distinguished between herself as a "single parent on benefits" and others who "have children, get the money, and let the children do whatever they want". When another mentioned a local family in which there were nine children but no working adult, she added, "if you've got that many children and you cannot work to afford them...it's not right".

Similarly disapproving attitudes towards 'undeserving' families were arguably visible in the working-class mothers' responses to another of the news-game exercises: one requiring them

to write their own newspaper-style captions to accompany two black-and-white photographs of children and teenagers looting shops during the August 2011 English riots. Responding to one such image, depicting a group of hooded, masked youths clambering through the front of a smashed shop window and removing items of clothing, the nursery-nurse wrote:

"Free loading teenagers getting something for nothing."

In her second caption, accompanying a photo of a group of masked and hooded boys, one of whom appears about to hurl a makeshift flamethrower, she put:

"Youth of today! Our countrys[1] future."

Meanwhile, the married mother-of-four, who had earlier criticised the lack of "rules and boundaries" set by other parents, was one of several to insinuate nefarious motives for the looting youngsters, beyond a desire to get "something for nothing", with the following caption:

"Joining in stealing to make money in taking cloths to pay for habits."

Though the parents had been asked to pen captions 'in the style' of a newspaper, rather than ones necessarily reflecting their own standpoints, in several cases (including those quoted above) there were clear correlations visible between the written word and opinions the same mothers expressed in discussions.

Despite the widespread agreement among the working-class mothers that parents should only have as many children as they could afford, not all agreed with clear-cut 'deserving/undeserving' distinctions. The separated mother-of-three, who had previously held down a job at a local superstore, mentioned the "poverty-trap" – arguing that there was little incentive to take up a low-waged post when, by doing so, you could lose benefits and end up worse off. And even the most critical mothers interspersed their invective about irresponsible

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[1]NB extracts have been quoted with spelling and punctuation errors intact, to authentically reflect how they were worded by focus-group members

parents with complaints about the "stigma" attached to their own reliance on social security and popular myths about single parents. One summed this up by invoking this stereotype: "single mum, got kids, out of control". Just as middle-class mothers sometimes offered contradictory readings of the extent of real danger presented by predatory paedophiles and traffic, then, working-class mums were similarly conflicted about the true scale of juvenile disorder and 'problem-parenting'. More marked than this ambivalence about the news narratives with which they were presented, though, was a firm conviction that – whatever 'society' might think to the contrary – sweeping caricatures did not apply to *them*. In other words, it was *other people's* children (and *other* parents) who were guilty: further evidence of a 'them and us' 'deserving/undeserving' fault-line.

Unsurprisingly, given that they lived in a relatively 'low-crime' area, the middle-class parents seemed less concerned about threats from other children - with only one or two able to recall any instances of bullying or 'antisocial behaviour' of the kind described by working-class mothers. Nonetheless, there was wide agreement even in this group that unruliness among (older) children in some neighbourhoods *did* exist, and presented a genuine menace to residents of those areas. One significant difference between the views expressed by this group and the other, however, was the former's dismissal of simplistic narratives about individual culpability and repeated reference to the complex causal factors it held responsible for outbreaks of juvenile indiscipline – chiefly poverty, broken families and domestic abuse.

The contrast between these liberal attitudes and more socially conservative ones expressed by the working-class mothers also emerged through news-games. The hostel-worker chuckled at use of the word "feckless" in the "no dole" article, while the writer lampooned its wording in a faux-hysterical voice, mocking phrases like "*Shameless*-style families" (a reference to a Channel 4 comedy-drama about a comically dysfunctional family blighted by intergenerational unemployment) and "mums and dads must make sure their kids obey the rules". A 50-year-old single mother and ex-schoolteacher went further, criticising this story's underpinning 'anti-scrounger' narrative and suggesting the Government should "give them [families on benefits] *more* money so they've got some room to breathe and look after their kids!"

Before writing captions to accompany the riot pictures, the middle-class mothers repeatedly asked the researcher to clarify the aim of the exercise. As a result, their contributions appeared more reflective of the kinds of framing device used by (tabloid) newspapers in such cases, rather than their own views on the subjects. A wide range of well-worn news clichés emerged in these captions, among them several pejorative labels for the UK as a whole, including "feral Britain", "Great Britain?" and "broken Britain" - a reference to a favourite term of then Conservative Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith (Thorp & Kennedy, 2010). Their preoccupation with mimicking familiar news-frames was reflected in a lengthy critique of the assumed 'intention' of the reporter and headline-writer responsible for a *Daily Star* article entitled 'Leave our kids alone: Cam's campaign on net porn' (Nicks, 2011) – focusing on a ministerial crackdown on everything from Internet pornography to billboards advertising lap-dancing clubs.

The skilled professional and public/voluntary-sector backgrounds of most of these mothers (all but one university-educated) was also reflected in a more general critique of media (and public) discourse around working-class families. Explicit reference was made to the then recent publication of the book *Chavs* (Jones, 2011) and the demonization of youth through terms like "hoodie" – suggesting considerable scepticism about the reliability and objectivity of news narratives and, by extension, a willingness to adopt negotiated or oppositional responses to media output. That the same narratives provoked more acceptant reactions from working-class mothers demonstrates that news can exercise a high degree of positive *reinforcement* of existing perspectives among those whose own experiences 'chime' with those they read or hear about in the media - a finding in keeping with previous studies of sensitisation to the threat of criminal activity among residents of high-crime neighbourhoods (Doob & Macdonald, 1979; Hirsch, 1980 and 1981; Liska & Baccaglini, 1991).

Exposure to 'adult' films and TV, video games and electronic gadgets

One category of threat identified by both sets of parents offered a late-modern twist on the decades-old fear about the potentially desensitising effects of adult imagery on impressionable juveniles: the ubiquity and 'addictive' qualities of electronic media. While the technology might be different, many initial concerns raised by working-class mothers, in particular, focused on unsuitable content their children stumbled across on mobile phones, the Internet and, especially, social media. A tower-block tenant recalled the time her four-year-old daughter had "screamed...'there's a man trying to kill me'" after unwittingly accessing a video of her favourite TV character, Hannah Montana, on YouTube that had been doctored to create the impression someone was "shooting" at her. Working-class mothers also expressed worries about their children's exposure to sexualised and violent content through traditional media forms – notably TV dramas, news bulletins aimed at adults, and "shooting games". Programmes ranging from *The Simpsons* to *EastEnders* were name-checked, with the nursery-nurse singling out an episode of the soap focusing on a cot-death which "really upset" her "friends' kids" because "they didn't realise it was not real".

At times, more candid mothers confessed to being directly responsible for their children's exposure to TV and film horror and violence. The teaching assistant, who had previously voiced a *laissez-faire* attitude towards her children's outdoor activities, confessed she and her husband both "love our horrors", adding, "*all* of my kids will watch them" – with the caveat that she first explains "they're all made up, it's not real blood, they're not real guns" and "it's *all* pretend". Nonetheless, her admission to exposing her children to fictional violence – confirmed by her nine-year-old son, who enthused about watching "18" films and playing adult-rated video games like *Call of Duty* – marked a significant point in the working-class mothers' discussion. By flaunting her "love" of "horrors" in the context of a strand of debate that had begun with another mother recalling the real-life Bulger murder, she was implicitly conflating the real and imaginary. A fellow mother made a point about the dangers of this confusion for children - arguing that "when you get stories on the news where it's very similar, a lot of them

then sit there and say, 'well mum, that happens...That's very similar to what happened in that film and you said was make-believe'".

More significantly, the 'horror-loving' mother was arguably demonstrating the same interest in *true* "horror" stories she had expressed in an earlier meeting, when recounting the compulsion she felt to read Kate McCann's diaries "because I've got kids and I thought to myself, 'I've got to read it'" and a recent decision to buy *The Sun* "for the pure fact that I saw on the front-page some kiddie had died". Such admissions add weight to the suggestion attempts by newspapers to whip up panics about child vulnerability for commercial gain are, in part, *responses* to a genuine public fascination with grim real-life dramas – an idea explored in Chapters 6 and 7.

An issue which drew more united condemnation from parents in both groups, however, was the ubiquity of sexually explicit imagery – even in programmes (and public locations) where children might see them. Responding to the *Star* story about the Government's proposed crackdown on Internet porn, the midwife criticised "things like Rianna on the *X-Factor* in a bikini dancing around at six o'clock at night" – arguing it had less "to do with 'special' websites" and more with "all of that [pop] culture". Her observation was echoed by the ex-teacher, who recounted how one of her eight-year-old son's friends had "showed him how they'd put in the word 'cock' – as in cockerel – to Google, and come up with some images...of penises pierced".

Concerns were also raised by the middle-class mothers about the portability of new technologies - and the difficulty of prising gadgets away from children. These frustrations tended to be linked to worries about children's physical (rather than mental) health – and a fear that, by spending too much time in front of screens, kids were missing out on valuable exercise. "I remember being at a farm and seeing a kid...on his game...I just thought that was...*wrong*", recalled the writer, while the hostel-worker revived the 'scarier world' paradigm by describing her mother as "judgmental" about the fact her grandchildren "play too much on the computer and...*don't* go out", despite recognising "that it's a different world" today. Most illuminating about this latter anecdote, however, was the intriguing disjunction it highlighted between certain manifestations of 'changing times' - including the notion that today's outdoors

represented "a different world" to that of her mother's day - and the hostel-worker's earlier critique of today's *disproportionate* fears about road safety. Similarly, she highlighted contradictions in her own parenting behaviours, by reflecting that while she generally followed the pattern of *increased* parental protectiveness she observed in peers, the one area in which her children were *less* controlled was in their use of technology. This sense of 'abdicated' parental authority (echoed by others) has a flipside - in the 'involuntary' loss of authority alluded to by the nursery-nurse when fretting about cyber-bullying and the ex-teacher's concern that "when my son goes to stay with the other...partner...I'm informed almost nothing about what goes on and...I *am* concerned that he would set up a Facebook page for my son".

Corrupting effects of rampant consumerism and advertising

Concern about the omnipresence of advertisements – and consumerist values they project – emerged from both groups, albeit in different guises. The special needs worker couched her distaste in 'scarier world' terms by describing "the whole consumerist culture" as a "threat" that was "pervasive and...degenerate". Nodding agreement, the midwife criticised her eldest son's "frivolous" spending habits, predicting that "he's going to turn 18, get a load of credit cards, max them all out and be in debt quite quickly". Whereas "in my day you made a packed lunch for yourself and *then* you went out", her son would say, "oh I'm going to get a Subway, I'm going to get a McDonald's" and spend "more money, more money all the time for such throwaway things".

The working-class mothers were equally critical of shallow consumerism – though it took the stimulus of being asked about the riots for them to vent their feelings. For these financially straitened parents – all but one of whom were either unwaged single mothers or living in households where neither partner worked – criticisms were often personalised and couched in terms of peer-pressure they and their children felt to buy unaffordable designer labels. Yet it took the only mother from a working household – the teaching assistant – to crystallise the consensus, by complaining, "if they [the Government] still drop our money and put things on

hold, how are we still going to afford...our kids", who "aren't disappearing when they reach eight" but "getting more expensive" and demanding "Adidas trainers, tracksuits".

There was strong agreement that these pressures had intensified over time, with the ex-shop-worker observing that, in the six years separating her arrival at secondary school from her younger brother's, a "strict school uniform" policy had been supplanted by a *laissez-faire* culture in which "you were allowed to wear your Adidas jacket or your Reebok coat and...Nike trainers". It was perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that acquisitive aspects of the 2011 rioting surfaced more visibly in captions written by these mothers than those from the middle-class group. In a lengthy description of the photo of looters plundering a clothing shop, the volunteer cafe-worker wrote:

"2 young kids under the age of 18 entering through a shop window to get their label items to either keep for themselves or to sale on to other people."

But the punchiest response came from the shy contributor, who explained her caption reflected the bullying her son endured for being unable to afford "one of those new tracky jackets":

"Labels cause chaos as theifs steal."

A further criticism of advertising was sparked by the caption-writing exercise focusing on the article about the initiative to protect juveniles from explicit images – which also referred to concerns around promotion of sexualised children's clothing. Harking back to both the discussion of adult media content and her own criticism of irresponsible parents, the teaching assistant complained of "porn everywhere...porn on buses", before returning to her familiar refrain that "a lot of it is down to parents" and arguing "you don't take your little girl shopping and go, 'you get what you want' - you *choose* what your daughter wears".

Working-class versus middle-class: differences of opinion

While there was overall agreement between working-class and middle-class groups about the nature of perceived threats to children and the potentially deleterious effects of certain changes in society (notably runaway consumerism and technological advances), certain concerns were peculiar to each cohort. Working-class participants' worries were generally more grounded in the hard reality of personal experience than those of the middle-class mothers and grandmothers – which might account for the differences of *emphasis* already highlighted, such as their greater concern about bullying and ASB. Another example was the stress placed by working-class parents on peer-pressure they/their children faced in relation to advertising. While middle-class mothers raised consumerism as a general issue – albeit a socially corrosive one – for working-class mums it was a source of day-to-day material anxieties. When one mentioned the fact school uniform offered a relief from her children's demands for designer labels, a lengthy discussion ensued about the punitive cost of blazers. The nearest middle-class mums got to replicating this point was a brief exchange about parents who insisted on "two holidays a year" (writer) or paying for independent schooling (special needs worker). As the latter put it, "there's pressure on parents to work even...if they don't need to - to consume", when they should be "spending time with the children". By contrast, working-class mothers projected consumerist pressures onto themselves (and their lean circumstances) – complaining about the difficulties of fending off requests for the latest MP3 player or mobile phone. "I think all kids have got a phone - all three of my older ones have got phones", reflected the teaching assistant, in a typical illustration of peer pressures their children faced.

While mobile phone ownership *per se* was viewed as a positive thing by these mums – principally for enabling them to keep tabs on their children - for middle-class parents it was a cause of stress. A particular concern raised by these mothers – all juggling parenting with demanding jobs – was what the nurse and special needs worker both described as the "incessant" barrage of text messages and emails, and the intrusive impact these had on family life. "*Why* are we more busy?" asked the latter rhetorically, musing, "I think it comes back to technology", as "in the past you would have spoken to your friend on the phone, cos that's all

there was, but now you send emails [and] get texts". The nurse expressed similar frustrations as a sense that there was always "something else to do" - prompting the writer to ridicule a fellow scribe who had installed a computer program which asked her each morning "how much freedom" she wanted to write unimpeded, before blocking incoming emails for the duration of her writing session. "It's so pathetic", she reflected, "the...*language*: 'I want four hours of freedom. Freedom from *myself*: freedom from my own desire to go and check my emails'". For these 'time-poor' mothers, then, interruptions from 'the outside world' during precious family (or 'me') time were a cause of irritation and stress – a clear contrast in perspective to that of more 'money-poor' working-class mums, who saw mobile phones and (as we shall see) social networking tools like Facebook as vital sources of *interaction* with that same outside world.

In terms of other perceived threats, a marked contrast between the two groups was the emphasis some working-class mothers placed on dangers inherent in mundane domestic objects. Again, given the relatively long hours spent by these (largely unemployed) mums at home, this is perhaps unsurprising. One lengthy exchange between the nursery-nurse and another parent was sparked by the former's recollection of a news story about a girl stabbing herself with a butter knife while making a sandwich. This anecdote was one of several which arguably pointed towards some level of media 'effect', as the former attributed the fact "my boy...knows he does not touch anything in that kitchen" to "this story in the paper" – adding she "would never have thought of a kid of that age trying to make himself a sandwich" otherwise.

The other mother recalled a report about a child getting trapped in some blinds, and admitted to reinstalling a baby-gate across the doorway to her kitchen – a room she referred to as "the dangerous area" - after finding her four-year-old daughter standing over her cooker with the gas switched on. Other parents expressed fears about hazards ranging from safety razors and toasters to cleaning fluids – the nursery-nurse recounting how her friend's son drank a cup of white spirit after his uncle handed it to him, mistaking it for milk.

These wildly varying concerns about household safety – significantly, all *inanimate* threats present *within*, rather than outside, the family home – are redolent of the "bads" identified by

Beck and others as increasing causes of late-modern risk anxieties or the (often humdrum) sites of parental policing grouped by Critcher (2003) and Hier (2008) under the heading "moral regulation" issues. Taken together, these concerns hinted at a generalised, ill-defined unease one might easily equate with the permanent latter-day ("amoral") panics envisaged by Waiton (2000) and the increasingly diffuse categories of danger highlighted in Beck's (1986) concept of the "risk society" and Bauman's (2000) of "liquid modernity" – all redolent of the prevailing 'scarier world' paradigm.

One other concern which arose specifically in middle-class discussions was the danger of children being introduced to (illegal) drugs and alcohol. As with the plentiful anecdotes from working-class mums about bullying and teenage violence, the source of this fear was personal experience – with the midwife fretting about the fact her son "dabbles in smoking pot and stuff with his friends and I'm sure that...plenty of them go further than that". Revealingly, mention of drugs sparked a lively discussion about the 'downside' of moves towards greater social "inclusivity" in state schools (something all participants agreed was a good thing), as it prompted the hostel-worker to suggest threats like "drugs, girls getting pregnant, violence, violence in the home" now felt "closer" to middle-class families than they would have done in previous generations – a further expression of the dominant 'scarier world' paradigm:

"Inclusivity...changes the way we view ourselves and...risk. In the past, I think, it was 'us and them'. 'Them' were the ones who...fucked up, basically. *We* were okay...I think if you were of a certain class you didn't worry as much because you thought that happens to 'them' – not me. Whereas now...we're all kind of in the same boat, so we're far more likely to...get exposed."

Experience, the media...and 'Chinese whispers'

As we have seen, in voicing their concerns about risk and threat both sets of mothers alluded to a melange of influences on their perceptions – from first-hand/vicarious experiences to news reports. When, early in their first meetings, they were explicitly asked where they felt their anxieties derived from (*besides* their own experiences), the working-class and middle-class

parents respectively gave the following one-word answers: "news" and "media". Each reply was greeted with murmurs of agreement and nodding heads from fellow participants – making it difficult to dismiss as a "default" response (Hartmann, 1979). Of all fears attributed (directly or indirectly) to the media, none was raised more frequently than child molestation/abduction. And the impromptu mentions of cases ranging from the Moors murders to the McCann disappearance testify to high sensitisation to stories *originating* in the news. Moreover, some mothers insisted particular reports had had a tangible effect on both their anxieties and parenting practices. Besides the scattered claims by working-class mums that stories had affected their domestic safety routines around bread knives and suchlike, some middle-class mothers said the McCann case had moved them to change their behaviour more profoundly. While working-class mums united in condemning Madeleine's parents for leaving their children alone in bed the night she vanished, middle-class parents had a more 'live-and-let-live' attitude – with the writer admitting that, prior to reading about this story, she and her partner also "used to leave our kids when they were sleeping...to go next door to a restaurant". Significantly, though, she claimed she "did notice my behaviour changing in direct relation to that story...I think our practice did change", though "probably only...for a certain amount of time". The ex-teacher felt her behaviour had been similarly influenced – albeit more by parenting literature than conventional media, to which she claimed to give herself "limited exposure".

Despite repeated references to the media, however, the most oft-cited influence on both groups of mothers was what might be described as rumour or (to quote the nursery-nurse) "Chinese whispers" - the main conduit being Facebook. Significantly, when parents were asked to complete questionnaires asking them about the media outlets they most frequently accessed, the social networking site was cited by several mothers, across both groups, as their main source of stories. While most said they received some news from television (primarily BBC1), and several that they/their partners regularly bought national newspapers (the *Sun* and *Daily Mirror* were mentioned most often by working-class mothers; the *Guardian* and *Observer* by middle-class mums), the most commonly cited outlets were the (free) online version of their local paper, the *Argus*, and Facebook. That the latter is not itself a news site – but a forum within which media reports are, at best, disseminated by sharing hyperlinks and clips and, at

worst, bowdlerised via the virtual rumour-mill - adds ballast to previous suggestions that many people are not so much *directly* influenced by news narratives as indirectly, via *other people's representations* (and interpretations) of those stories. A latter-day manifestation, perhaps, of the "two-step flow" of communication identified all those decades ago by Roper, Katz, and Lazarsfeld (1955).

What emerged consistently from both parent focus-groups' discussions of the ways in which news narratives about childhood threats come to scare/affect them was that, whether they first encounter a story in the media *themselves* or by picking it up *vicariously* through gossip, their 'consumption' of news is subject to an awful lot of processing. It is through this system of processing – mediated today as much by social networking sites like Facebook as the classic water-cooler (or playground) conversations of old – that parents arrive at their understandings of news narratives. If those narratives can be said to influence their attitudes towards parenthood, then, these 'effects' owe as much to the processing as the processed.

The most powerful demonstration of the influence of Chinese whispers related to a news story originating in the *Argus* – which provoked a lengthy, often critically reflective, discussion among working-class mothers about heightened concern they felt when 'stranger-danger' reports occurred in their area, compared to 'distant' ones like Praia da Luz (scene of Madeleine's disappearance). The first (indirect) reference to the *Argus* story arose when the parent who initially raised concerns about "the people" said she had seen a "black car" parked outside her home a few days earlier. Intriguingly, the previous summer had witnessed a flurry of local media publicity about sightings of a black car in the vicinity of schools across Sussex, including in Brighton and Hove, and head-teachers throughout the city had sent letters to parents alerting them, as well as verbally reminding their pupils about stranger-danger. *The Argus* had devoted several news items, at least one lengthy background feature and considerable space on its letters page and online discussion-threads to these sightings, and several instances in which children had purportedly been directly approached by a man driving a black car along their routes to school. These reports were also vividly recounted by middle-class children, with the nurse's daughter recounting this stark instruction from two years earlier:

"My mummy said, 'never get into a black car with a stranger'."

Yet, despite clearly being unnerved by these tales, both mothers and children demonstrated a keen sense of reflexivity about their tendency to be easily panicked by exaggerated peer-to-peer retellings of unproven 'incidents'. Significantly, though, working-class mothers tended to project blame for fostering panics onto *other* adults, in an echo of their recurring criticisms of more irresponsible parents. But, paradoxically, the infuriation they displayed towards other parents panicking was itself framed as a form of parental protectiveness about their children being unnecessarily frightened. A lengthy exchange between nursery-nurse and teaching assistant began with the former condemning "these parents" and their children for "proper mouthing off" about "this man...taking them" and the latter describing the viral nature of rumour in precisely those terms: "like a bug". The nursery-nurse recalled there being "about three different dads that drive black cars, and they'd come to pick up their kids at the school, and because it's a bloke pulling up in a black car" it was "all going round, 'oh, it's a black car, it's a black car, it's that car'...like Chinese whispers...Every time a black car parked outside the school, everyone panicked".

Indeed, the sense that children are often needlessly spooked by tales of prowling bogeymen was echoed by one of the-middle class schoolgirls. The eldest daughter of separated parents, she described how, two years earlier, she had been scared by classmates telling her "there's a kidnapper at Queen's Park" where "we all go down" to "have a play". Her fear about lurking menaces in familiar places was stoked, she said, by a mobile phone text message her mother received from the school warning parents to "please be aware we've had a notice about a guy in black hanging around the toilets". Tellingly, the nurse's daughter had separately mentioned "a kidnapper in black" at a previous point in the meeting. And what was the primary locus for such alarmist gossip-mongering besides playground and school-gates? When asked, the mothers once again united in singling out social media: specifically, Facebook.

The overriding impression to emerge from discussions about risk perceptions was that where individuals said they had been influenced by stories they heard – whether directly from news media or, more often, mediated by playground or Facebook gossip – the tales that most affected them were those chiming with their own experiences. Whether it was the writer speaking of her (temporary) change of habits in relation to leaving her children at home unsupervised following the McCann case or the lone parent bringing up three young children in a tower-block, who said news "frightens the life out of me" - singling out a local report about people being murdered in their beds and tales of predatory teachers and nursery-nurses – there was clear evidence of selective media engagement along the lines noted by Graber (1984) and others. That the dominant "schema" (Ibid) shaping these mothers' processing of stories about children was 'negative' – i.e. clouded by a 'scarier world' perspective – leads us to consider how and why such an ominous view of the world their children inhabit has arisen.

The roots of 'scarier world' thinking: some working hypotheses

As the above analysis demonstrates, issues raised during discussions were not only shaped by interpersonal processing, Chinese whispers and news discourse, but also individuals' wider socio-economic/cultural environment(s). More specifically, their responses demonstrated evidence of a decline in social trust and increasing pressures today's mothers, in particular, face to 'multitask' by juggling school-runs and mealtimes with working life – trends noted in several other academic and government studies. In so doing, they offered pointers as to why *certain* news stories/rumours sparked greater concern than others, by tapping into deep-seated anxieties related to the position of parents in late-modern Britain. Moreover, the suggestion that fears revolving around children (especially their vulnerability) provide a peculiarly salient locus for wider (parental) anxieties *at this time* reflects the findings of previous studies - notably Best's (1990) analysis of America's 1980s missing children panic, which he located against a backdrop of growing financial insecurity spawned by 1970seconomic instability and toughening welfare regimes.

Declining social trust

A recurring theme in both focus-groups was the sense that people who initially seem benign are not always as harmless as they appear. Concern about devious sexual perverts masquerading as conscientious schoolteachers or nursery-nurses or "plausible" (hostel-worker) and "manipulative" (nurse) acquaintances disguising ulterior motives to befriend children were voiced repeatedly by both sets of mothers. This sense of 'threatening familiarity' ran like a red thread through discussions, reappearing in the context of safe-seeming settings rendered suddenly menacing (the village where mother and daughter Lin and Megan were slain by a lurking psychopath; the holiday apartment from which Madeleine vanished) and in the middle-class mums' recognition of the fact stranger-danger is less commonplace in society than abuse by familiars. The ex-teacher personalised this edginess vividly, recalling her wariness of "the parent" she "hadn't met before" who "came up to me in the playground and said, 'oh, can my son come out for the day?'" "At the back of my mind", she admitted, "I'm thinking...'I know absolutely zero about this person'".

The sense of simmering suspicion/guardedness permeating many of the mothers' exchanges fits with Beck's (1986) paradigm of "reflexive modernisation", which conceives of late-modern societies as ones in which everyone is effectively a stranger to everyone else. It is also strongly consistent with evidence for a long-term decline in interpersonal trust documented in recent studies – several highlighting the social inequality and economic insecurity characteristic of liberal free-market societies like Britain as contributory factors (Hall, 1999; OECD, 2001; Harper, 2001; Li, Pickles, & Savage, 2005; *European Values Study Group and World Values Survey Association,* 2006; Llakes, 2011). According to a 2001 report by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, the proportion of UK residents professing to "generally trust others" plunged by half - from 60 to 31 per cent - between 1959 and 1995 (OECD, 2001, p.101). Levels of general trust towards "other people" had dropped a further percentage point by 2005, compared to the relative stability of "social market" countries like France and the Netherlands and in stark contrast to the dramatically more trusting Scandinavian "social democratic" societies (Llakes, 2011, p.3). These findings reflect longer-

term trends identified by, among others, Rothstein and Uslaner (2005, p.45), who have used statistical tests to demonstrate that "the causal direction" between socioeconomic inequality and declining social trust "starts with inequality".

While middle-class mothers countered some of their concerns about the trustworthiness of other adults with periodic declarations about feeling "safe" in their neighbourhood (nurse) and that "more people are nice than horrid" (writer), working-class mums often complained about intolerant neighbours and the general erosion of community ties over time – though, significantly, they acknowledged some people on their estate still "look out" for others. The groups were united, however, in expressing unease about what Putnam (2000, pp.136-7) has labelled "thin trust" – a willingness to give the "generalised other" outside one's immediate social circle (the man in the park or the parent of a child's friend) the benefit of the doubt. And, significantly, a common thread that bound both groups of mothers together was a sense that Britain had become a more aggressive place than in their own youth. As the special needs worker put it, "there's more *anger* around...I think it feels like an angrier world", while the working-class nursery-nurse generated murmurs of agreement when she contrasted her own mother's warning to her that "some people" are "bad, so don't talk to strangers" with her sense that today "it don't even have to be a stranger - it can be a kid that is in your class that...has brought a knife to school". Again, she related this observation directly to the media, remarking, "there's been in the news children stabbed...in class with scissors - anything that's lying around". Echoing the special needs worker more directly, she mused, "as a culture we've got more violent".

For middle-class parents, worries about interpersonal trust also seemed bound up with feelings – perhaps related to their status as working mothers – that late-modern living was more "frantic" (nurse) than when they were growing up. "Life is just more *hurried*", added the midwife, because "when I was younger...you would have been allowed to walk to school at age eight, because you would have been calling for a friend, and...your mum would have known their mum, whereas now everyone's just dashing round in cars going to work...so you don't know all the mums in the class".

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Personal guilt and economic insecurity

Concerns about pressure from parenting literature – and its conflicting advice - repeatedly surfaced in middle-class discussions, contributing to a sense that the hard-working parents felt constantly buffeted by entreaties to 'do the right thing' for their children as they struggled to attain a healthier work-life balance. Connotations of 'guilt' detectable in some comments arguably reflect underlying tensions in late-modern Britain between the need/desire for women to build careers while still juggling 'traditional' responsibilities associated with motherhood.

"Pressure to work" was mentioned more than once – with the special needs worker and writer both complaining about societal norms of 'keeping up with the Joneses'. Conflicting pressures these mums identified included the former's contention that "the way we are now with our children has completely changed", in that her parents "wouldn't have *dreamt* of playing with me, but nowadays mums feel they have to play with their kids, and entertain them". Similarly, the hostel-worker said she felt "totally at the mercy of what people think" about whether "your child's okay walking to school on their own", while the midwife criticised "the amount of books available - and websites", that led to parents constantly "analysing themselves".

Again, findings from external research offer useful context. According to a recent Social Issues Research Council study, the proportion of British mothers in employment rose from 43 to 68 per cent between 1973 and 2011. Qualitative interviews conducted for the same inquiry found the amount of time mothers spent away from their children – at work or indulging in "me time" – left them feeling "towards the extremely guilty end of the scale" (Social Issues Research Centre, 2011, p.15). Guilt was especially marked among mothers aged 30 to 44 – a range into which all but one middle-class mum fell (or had until recently). This emotion was associated with "going back to work", "spending so much time there" and daring to enjoy their jobs (Ibid).

Work pressures are also widely linked (among both men and women) to feelings of economic insecurity – another recent British trait, according to researchers. Since 2003, the annual British Social Attitudes survey has consistently found that more than twice as many UK adults

would rather continue working the same amount of time they currently do than lose a penny in wages by cutting their hours – with 64 per cent of respondents confirming this in 2010, against 28 per cent who said they would consider doing less (Butt et al, 2010). Set against other BSA findings, this appears to reflect a feeling of general employment insecurity consistent with the introduction of flexible labour markets and the recent prolonged British/global recession. Asked how easily they could find a similar or better job with another employer if they wanted to, more than half of adults questioned in 2010 replied that this would be "difficult" or "very difficult", with only 27 per cent saying it would be "easy" or "very easy" – compared to a 47-42 per cent split in 2005. Since 2008 (Butt et al, 2008), the survey has also identified growing pessimism among adults about their likely levels of financial comfort in retirement, with more than six out of 10 respondents admitting they "worry a lot" about their "standard of living" as pensioners, and only 15 to 18 per cent (2008 and 2010 respectively) claiming to be unconcerned.

Prima facie, economic insecurity was much higher among working-class mothers - all of whom relied, at least in part, on state benefits at a time when Britain's coalition government was cutting the welfare budget. However, while a running theme of their discussions was financial hardship, middle-class mums clearly experienced monetary pressures, too (albeit relatively), as their concerns about consumerist norms demonstrated. Moreover, the fact that all were working, and in responsible professional posts they had only reached after years of training, rendered the 'guilt factor' – to which they repeatedly alluded (if obliquely) – perhaps more acute for this group.

For all their distinguishing characteristics, one commonality shared by almost all mothers was some degree of reliance on extra-familial childcare. And, given the generalised undercurrents of social suspicion already identified, it is perhaps unsurprising specific attention should be drawn to worries about child abuse by individuals in positions of *loco parentis* – nursery-nurses, teachers or other children's parents. Such fears have a long genealogy, most notably in America's early 1980s "Satanic day-care panic" that de Young (1998) dismissed so convincingly as a fiction of Christian evangelicals, over-zealous social workers and, most significantly, a generation of stressed mothers acclimatising to working life for the first time.

The themes and concerns raised by focus-group participants – and the deeper social issues that underpin them - are reflected in the dominant narratives that emerge from the analysis of contemporaneous newspaper articles and online discussion-threads in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 – Textual analysis

The overwhelming impression to emerge from the majority of articles examined in the textual analysis is that today's children are beset by challenges and hazards at every turn – from conception to coming of age. From health stories warning about the dangers of this diet or that behaviour for pregnant women and their unborn babies to cautionary tales about suicides induced by exam stress, cyber-bullying and online 'grooming', the world juveniles inhabit is consistently portrayed as one of intense day-to-day pressure flecked with moments of darker foreboding. And, while it was once possible to argue that media narratives were primarily constructed by journalists and their sources, the analysis of online newspaper discussion-threads conducted alongside that of news texts themselves testifies to a growing degree of active complicity between 'news-makers' and 'readers' in affirming, if not creating, these menacing images of reality.

While articles positioning children as vulnerable to external threats proved the most prevalent category, the next most typical underlying narrative, predictably, was that conceiving of juveniles themselves (especially teenage boys) as threatening. Again, the discussion-threads that accompanied online newspaper reports of this kind were invariably littered with condemnatory comments from readers endorsing the world-views presented. As with the other category of article, however, the collusion between journalists and audience-members often went deeper than this – with contributors not only posting straightforward *reactive* responses to stories but also personal anecdotes and vicarious experiences supporting, if not strengthening, the newspapers' frames. One key trend to emerge, then, from this analysis of 'complete' online newspaper narratives – that is, the articles penned by journalists *taken together with* the discussion-threads flowing from them – was that of "active" audience-members (Hall, 1980) as citizen "claims-makers" (Cohen, 1972). Rather than simply 'receiving' and 'reacting to' news narratives constructed by 'in-the-know' professionals, more engaged readers were *contributing their own* information/evidence to those constructions. This collaborative form of 'news-making' arguably blurs the lines not only between 'reader and journalist' but also 'reader and source' – as audience-members offer direct and informed inputs to substantiate and/or build on those of

the primary claims-makers or "knowers" (officials, press officers, eyewitnesses, victims) (Fishman, 1980) and "secondary definers" (journalists) (Hall et al, 1978) on whose accounts articles tend to be based.

Not that agreement about the nature and emphasis of news narratives among those taking the time to post comments beneath them was universal: more intriguing than evidence-based responses *affirming* an article's "dominant" discourse (Hall, 1980) were the small but significant minority that *contested* the frames/angles journalists adopted. Some of these took the form of straightforward reactive opinions – expressions of views contrary to the perspectives implicit in an article – but more often individuals asserting these counter-narratives 'backed up' their remarks by alluding to direct/vicarious experiences/expertise enabling them to authoritatively reject the dominant discourse. While most evidence-based responses, then, *affirmed* the narratives on which they were commenting (or to which they were 'adding') a handful offered viewpoints that were at least "negotiated" (Hall, 1980) - if not downright "oppositional" (Ibid). Though few in number, these 'counter' claims-makers are important, in that - as with the occasional points of disagreement between fellow focus-group participants – they testify to the existence of a (perhaps growing) body of vocal citizens willing to contest otherwise largely dominant, even hegemonic, narratives (in this case, about the vulnerability and/or unruliness of today's children). This suggests newspaper discussion-threads – which one might have expected to be peopled overwhelmingly by individuals whose views chimed with those of the publications concerned (Iyengar & Kahn, 2009) - may have the *potential* to become sites of debate and contest comparable to those identified on social media outlets like Facebook (Doe & Lu, 2012), issue-specific forums (Witschge, 2005 and 2006) and the wider blogosphere (Macgilchrist, 2012) by others who have studied counter-hegemonic narratives.

How the articles broke down

As expected, the dominant underlying conceptualisation of children to emerge from the textual analysis was one positioning them as either or both of 'victim' and 'threat' - or, to quote Valentine (1996a), "angels and devils". A substantial majority of articles presented juveniles as

vulnerable to external dangers and, though significantly smaller, the next biggest category was that positioning them as dangerous in themselves. More intriguing, perhaps, was the handful of stories that straddled *both* these categories – focusing on one child's victimisation by another.

Altogether, 63 national newspaper editions and six issues of the Brighton *Argus* published during July 2011 were sampled – a copy of each title once every five days throughout the month[2]. All articles focusing on children (defined as under 18-year-olds) were isolated, before being divided into seven categories: 'child victims'; 'child threats'; 'hybrid' (victim and threat); 'child survivors'; 'child achievers/heroes'; 'celebrity children'; and 'other articles about children'. The analysis identified 462 relevant articles, of which 262 (nearly 57%) were classified in the 'child victim' category and a further 46 (one in ten) as 'child threats'. Interestingly, the next biggest group of articles were the 27 (around 6%) grouped under the 'child survivor' heading – of which several related to children narrowly escaping serious injury, illness or death due to everything from birth defects ('Jigsaw op saves lad', *The Sun*, 16 July; 'iPad baby is the apple of my eye: Tot born at 23 weeks home with mum', *Daily Mirror*, 26 July) to accidents ('Pilot saved our lives', *The Argus*, 1 July). Clearly, had these articles been included in the 'child victim' category then its dominance of the prevailing news discourse would have been even more pronounced. Indeed, the only disparity in the grouping of articles to emerge during recoding concerned these two categories: out of 47 pieces recoded (more than one in 10 of the overall sample), three that had initially been placed under the 'survivor' heading were re-categorised under 'victim'. All three pieces concerned the same story: that of a 10-year-old girl who had been granted leave to sue the Ministry of Defence over her father's death in Iraq. Though a 'victim', in that she was grieving over the loss of a parent, she was also a 'survivor' because, far from wallowing, she had resolved to take legal action over what she regarded as the unjustified nature of his death. In addition to this small number of debatable 'victim-versus-survivor' stories – which, in any case, all positioned their subjects as vulnerable - the 'hybrid' category focusing on victimisation of children by *other* juveniles accounted for 17 pieces (around 4% of the total). The overall breakdown of articles analysed on the seven dates is detailed in Appendix 1 and Figure 5.1 below:

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[2]NB Bibliographic references to newspaper articles analysed for Chapters 5 and 7 have been confined to those directly quoted or cited in the text.

Figure 5.1 Breakdown of articles about children for July 2011 (462)

- Child victim - 262 (56.7%)
- Child threat - 46 (10%)
- Child as survivor - 27 (5.8%)
- Celebrity children - 34 (7.4%)
- Child hero/achiever - 36 (7.8%)
- Hybrid - 17 (3.7%)
- Other articles about children - 40 (8.7%)
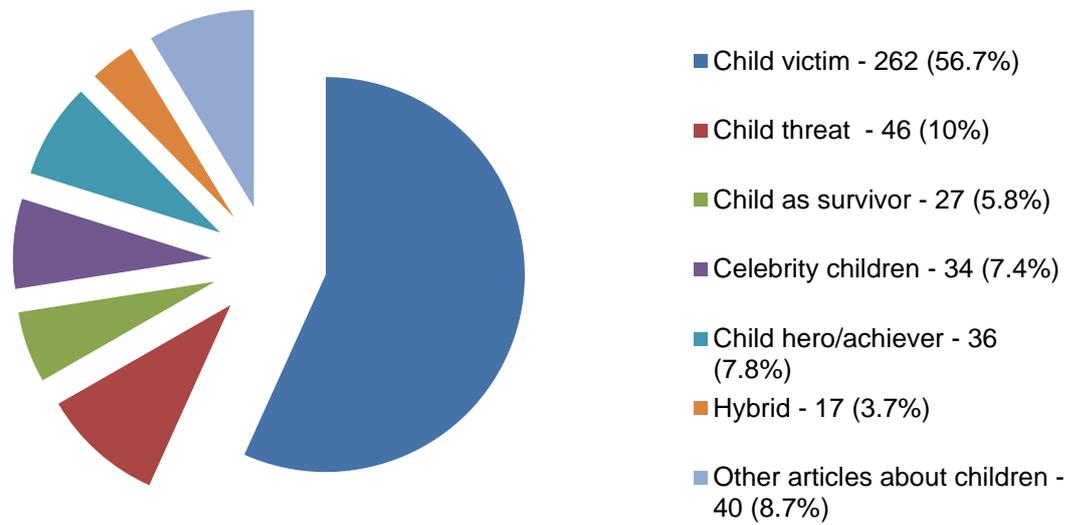
On the biggest 'news day' (6 July) 73 'victim' articles appeared (seven out of ten of the total) with eight (just under 8%) positioning children as threats (see Figure 5.2). Breakdowns of article type for the newspapers featuring the most and fewest stories about juveniles – *The Sun* and *The Guardian* respectively – and *The Argus* can be found in Figures 5.3 to 5.5.

Figure 5.2 Breakdown of articles for 6 July 2011 (104)

- Child victim - 73 (70.2%)
- Child threat - 8 (7.7%)
- Child survivor - 2 (1.9%)
- Celebrity children - 3 (2.9%)
- Child hero/achiever - 8 (7.7%)
- Hybrid - 3 (2.9%)
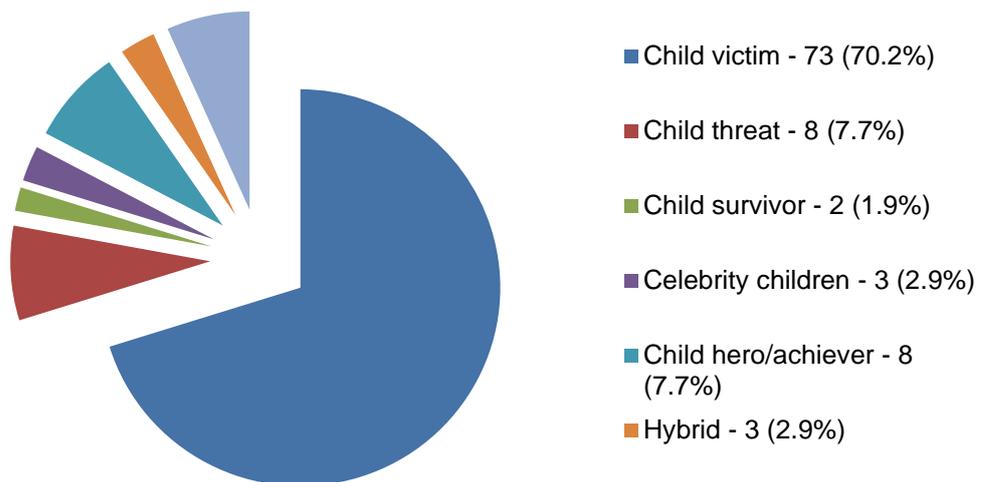
Figure 5.3 Breakdown of types of juvenile articles in Sun (72)

- Child as victim - 46 (63.9%)
- Child as threat - 6 (8.3%)
- Child as survivor - 5 (6.9%)
- Celebrity children - 5 (6.9%)
- Child achiever - 5 (6.9%)
- Hybrid - 3 (4.2%)
- Other stories about kids - 2 (2.8%)
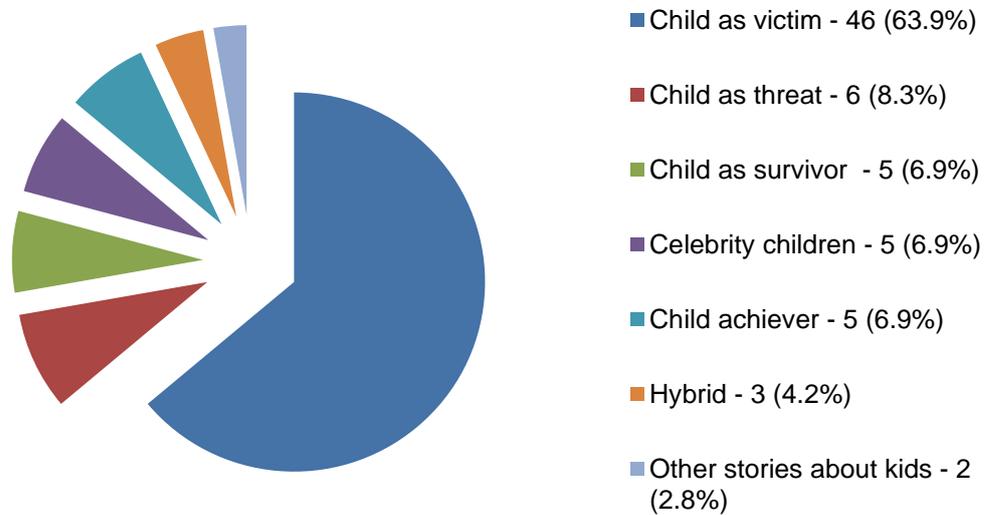
Figure 5.4 Breakdown of types of juvenile articles in Guardian (14)

- Child victim - 11 (78.6%)
- Child threat - 1 (7.1%)
- Child survivor - 0 (0%)
- Celebrity children - 0 (0%)
- Child achiever - 1 (7.1%)
- Hybrid - 0 (0%)

Figure 5.5 Breakdown of types of juvenile articles in Argus (60)

- Child as victim - 25 (41.7%)
- Child as threat - 5 (8.3%)
- Child as survivor - 3 (5%)
- Celebrity children - 1 (1.7%)
- Child achiever - 9 (15%)
- Hybrid - 1 (1.7%)
- Other stories about children - 16 (26.6%)
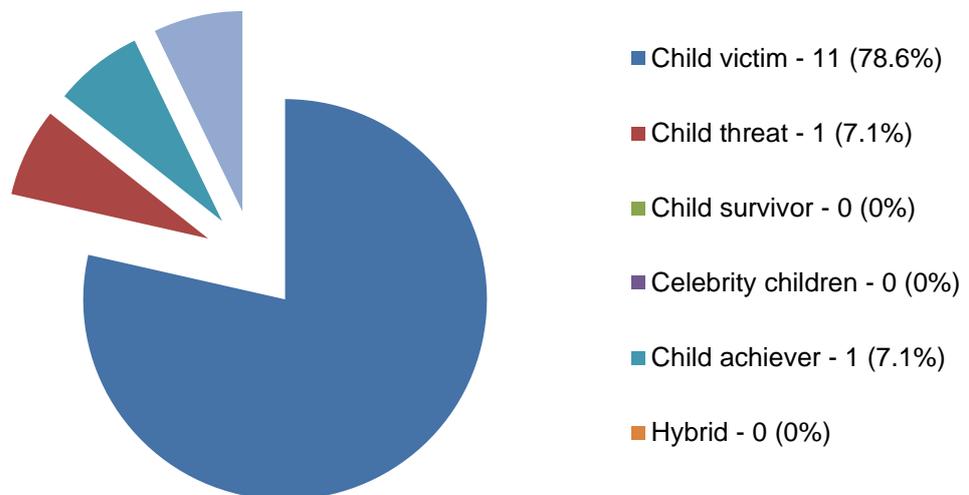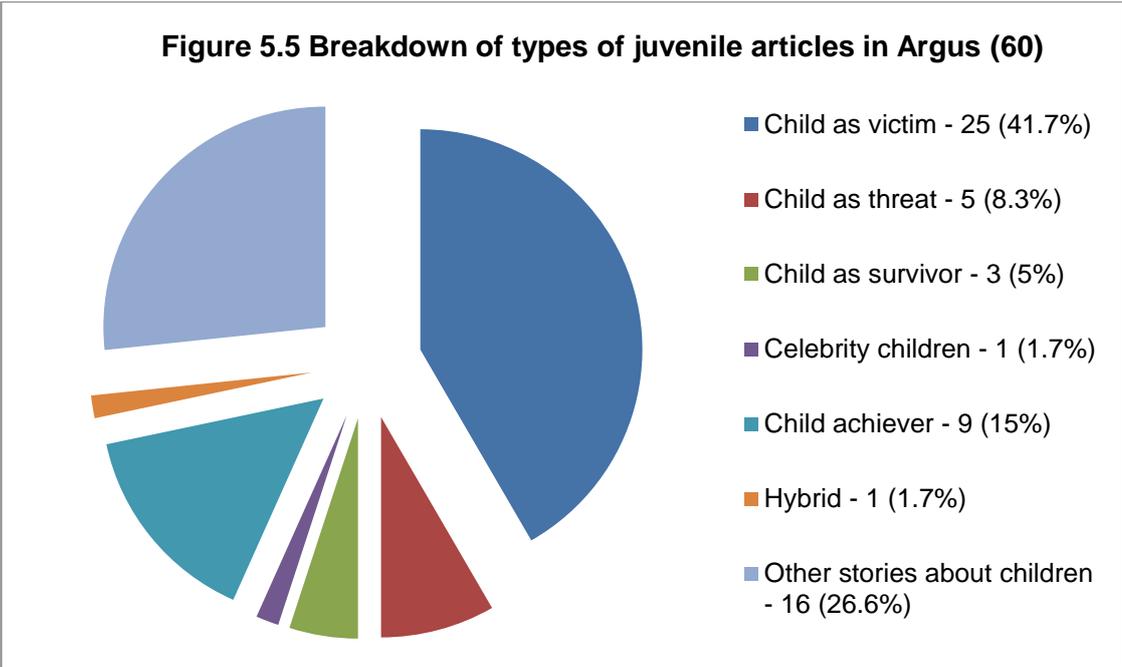
Victim and threat articles were divided into sub-categories, as seen in Figures 5.6 and 5.7

Figure 5.6 Breakdown of threats faced by children (279)

- Paedophile attack and/or murder - 86 (30.8%)
- Health/medical risks and accidents - 70 (25.1%)
- Other form of attack/murder/neglect - 22 (7.9%)
- School/social pressures - 40 (14.3%)
- Miscellaneous - 61 (21.9%)

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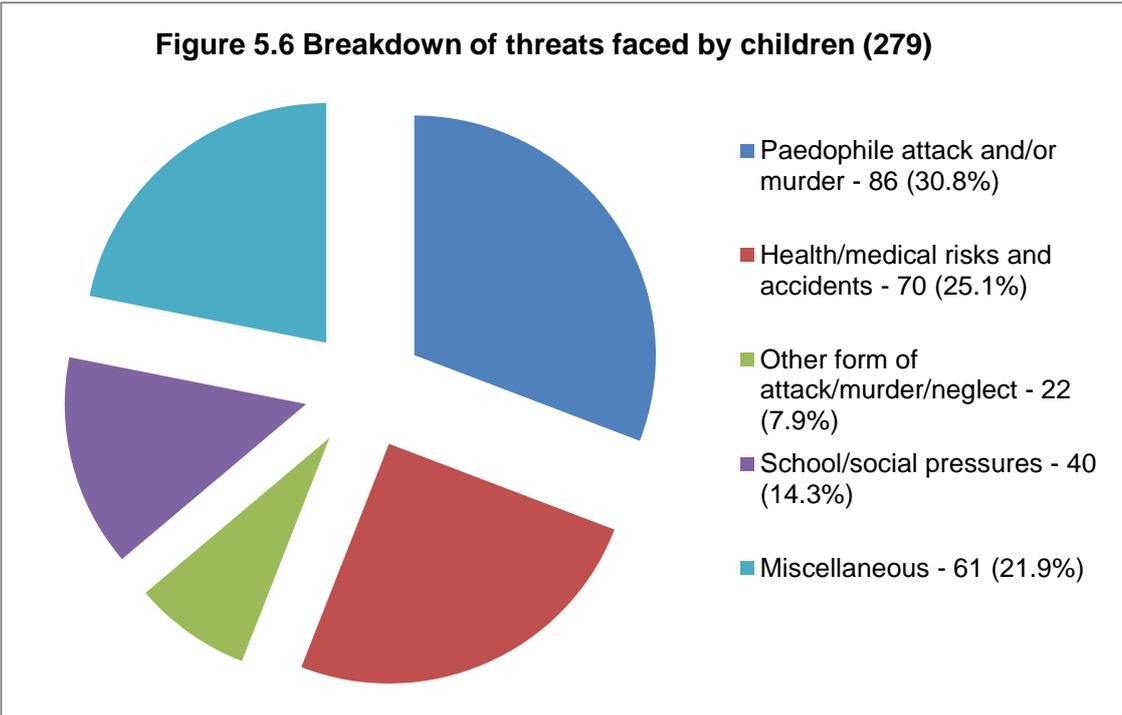
Figure 5.7 Breakdown of threats posed by children (63)

- ■ Killer or attacker - 27 (42.9%)
- ■ Other crime/antisocial behaviour - 20 (31.7%)
- ■ Disruptive at home and/or school - 9 (14.3%)
- ■ Other types of menace - 7 (11.1%)
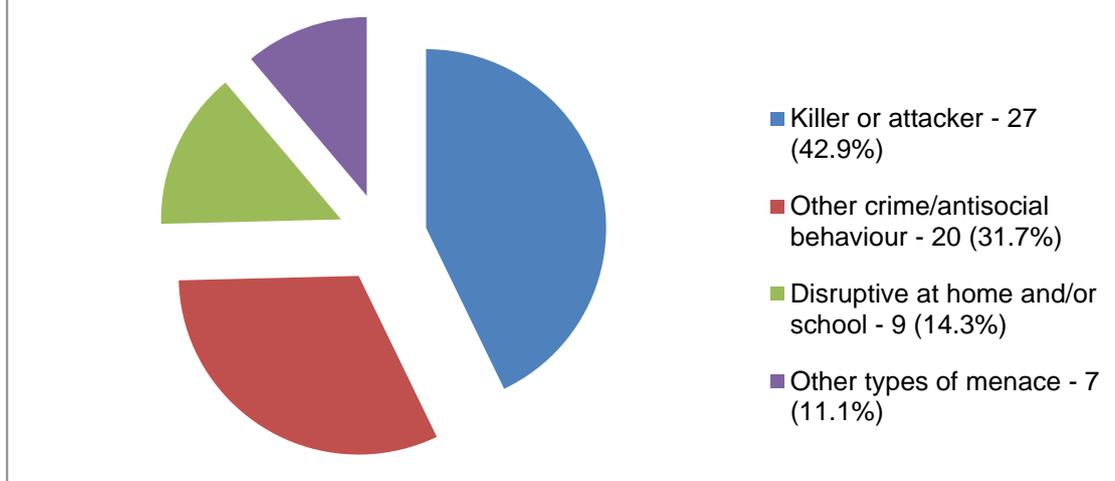
As illustrated in Figure 5.6, nearly a third of articles positioning children as victims (86 out of 279) focused on paedophile crimes, with a quarter (70) concerning serious/fatal emergencies and/or illnesses. Other forms of attack/abuse, besides those of a sexual nature, accounted for another eight per cent (22 articles). Of those positioning children as threats, the highest proportion (42.9%, or 27 out of 63) portrayed them as attackers or killers, with nearly one in three (20) focusing on more general issues relating to juvenile aggression or antisocial behaviour (see Figure 5.7). The inclusion of a hybrid category in the overall statistical breakdown of articles made it necessary to incorporate the small minority of pieces in which children were positioned as both victim and threat in both figures 5.6 and 5.7.

Framing 'juvenile panic' narratives: some examples

On the basis of a comprehensive sample of articles about juveniles in national newspapers during July 2011, there is therefore clear evidence to demonstrate the existence of a widespread consensus in the British press over the dual positioning of children/teenagers as, alternately, victims and threats.

Children as victims

Just as the adult focus-group participants identified a melange of disparate threats to the wellbeing of today's children, textual analysis also spotlighted a bewildering array of risks and dangers. Articles in the 'victim' category covered everything from familiar menaces like paedophiles and errant drivers to a multitude of other horrors spanning the spectrum from banal to bizarre. Over the course of the month readers learnt of attackers stabbing children to death ('Mum of stab lad begs: no revenge', *The Sun*, 11 July); hanging them ('Afghan insurgents hang boy, 8', *The Independent*, 26 July); clubbing them with gym equipment ('Dumbbell teacher ban', *Sunday Mirror*, 31 July); sawing the tops of their ears off ('Teen's ear hell', *The Sun*, 11 July); and, through saturation coverage of the actions of Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik, massacring them ('The victims' stories: young lives cut short by a merciless killer', *The Independent*, 26 July). Safety risks reported included various terrors rooted in nature – ranging from peanut allergies ('Allergic reaction', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 July) to falling branches ('Strike day girl killed by branch: Off school 13-yr-old hit in park', *Daily Mirror*, 1 July); wild animals ('Teenagers mauled in bear attack', *The Independent*, 26 July); and starvation ('First Africa famine in 27 years: Brits help dying kids...why can't rest of Europe do it too?', *The Sun*, 21 July). But these were as nothing to the multifarious manmade perils, which embraced computers ('Too much internet use 'can damage teenagers' brains'', *Daily Mail*, 16 July); goalposts ('Boy 'killed' by goalpost', *The People*, 31 July); "sugary food" ('Blast for toy ploy', *Daily Star*, 1 July); Chinese-style "floating fireworks" ('Warning over sky lantern craze as family flees roof fire', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 July); and a supposed new craze for "bling" babies' dummies encrusted with beads and precious stones ('Bling baby dummy risk', *Daily Mirror*, 11 July). On one day alone (6 July) a single paper (*The Sun*) regaled readers with tales of a nine-day-old infant who died of the common cold-sore virus ('Coldsore baby dies'); pupils left "terrified" after a "screaming illegal immigrant" "clung to the bottom of their school coach" ('Asylum shriekers'); a mother charged with neglect after allegedly leaving her children alone in a boiling hot vehicle ('Car kids' 104 degree F hell'); and a 16-year-old youth who died of electrocution – albeit while stealing copper from a disused power station ('Wire theft boy killed'). This is to say nothing of the three paedophile-related stories it reported the same day –

including the revelation that the great uncle of glamour model Katie Price had been unmasked as a convicted child abuser ('Jordan uncle is molester').

Of course, not all threats identified in these articles related directly to British children. Equally, it would be a push to suggest all (or most) stories were cases of journalists 'whipping up' hysteria over minor or non-existent risks, or disproportionately exaggerating the scale or horror of genuine crimes/terrors. This can hardly be said of the Breivik case or Somalian famine, for example. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the overwhelming emphasis of narratives about juveniles selected from the "news net" (Tuchman, 1978) by UK-based papers during July 2011 were ones positioning them in a 'victim role'. The sheer dominance of articles framed around fear and foreboding, rather than positive aspects of childhood, arguably testifies to the existence of a deep-seated popular conception of children in Britain as vulnerable, dependent and/or helpless - rather than capable, sensible and self-reliant.

Decline of social trust and 'threatening familiarity' in news discourse about children

One device the press consistently uses to dramatise its framing of children as susceptible to all-pervading dangers is the notion of 'the familiar' as a source of menace. The haunting idea that the avuncular façade of a family friend or neighbour might mask malign intentions repeatedly surfaced in the sampled newspapers – personifying the potent concept of 'threatening familiarity' which arose as a key concern of the focus-group parents. By way of illustration, a story widely reported in red-tops and broadsheets – intriguingly, the twin ends of the newspaper spectrum – on 1 July concerned the sentencing to life imprisonment the previous day of 39-year-old Italian citizen Danilo Restivo for bludgeoning a mother-of-two to death, placing clumps of hair in her hands, and leaving her mutilated body to be found by her teenaged son and daughter. In the tone and phrasing of their headlines and intros these reports gave a clear flavour of the baleful and vengeful wording they would adopt throughout. Under the screaming headline 'Teen's horror', the *Sun*'s intro focused on the claim that the murdered woman's daughter, now 19, remained "haunted" by the image of her mother's corpse. Restivo was described in the intro as a "hair fetish fiend" and similarly extreme

language was littered throughout the story. The murderer was not jailed but "caged", while the only source quoted besides the daughter (around whose court testimony it was based) was the judge who, in sentencing him, decried his "inhuman depravity".

Restivo's positioning as demonic and/or sub-human recurred in several reports - in common with many other articles focusing on violent/sexual crimes involving children (Meyer, 2007). Though the *Daily Mirror*'s version was more measured in tone, confining itself largely to describing the grisly details of his crimes, rather than inserting its own value-judgments, it used a similarly alarmist approach for the rhetorical headline 'Life for fetish psycho: why was hair fiend free to kill?' *The Times*, meanwhile, carried a lengthy quote from the judge, in which he condemned the "cold, depraved, calculated killer" for leaving the two children to find their mother "butchered on the bathroom floor", and dwelt on his "sadistic, sexual appetite" (de Bruxelles, 2011, p.21). Building on the portrayal of the murder as something devilish in nature, the *Guardian* – normally more measured in reporting such matters (Meyer, 2007) – incorporated the judge's "depraved" quote in its headline and the longer phrase "inhuman depravity" in an intro describing the deed as a "ritualistic killing" (Morris, 2011, p.9). A hamper (top-of-page) story on a prominent facing page (p.9) omitted little emotion from its coverage – using the words "fetish" and "mutilating" in the second paragraph, and telling readers in the fourth that some jury members "wept" on hearing the daughter's statement. Again, the phrases "sadistic, sexual appetite" and "cold, depraved, calculated killer" were included, as was a quote absent from other accounts, in which the judge emphasised the "callous and calculating" way Restivo had targeted the mother and the fact her children "knew him as a neighbour" – a trope recognisable from numerous high-profile stories positioning juveniles as victims of trusted extra-familial adults (for example, the Soham murders), as well as the concerns about 'threatening familiarity' aired by focus-group parents. Of the four papers carrying the story, the *Guardian* also stressed most heavily the heart-wrenching nature of the daughter's testimony – placing a long extract in a separate box, headlined 'Why my mother?', and beginning its quote with a sentence in which she described how she "felt as if my heart had been ripped out". Significantly, all four titles placed the story in highly visible positions on facing pages – used by editors to 'catch the eye' of readers for articles they expect to be of the widest interest. All but

the *Guardian* carried a police mug shot-style photo of Restivo, looking unshaven and wild-eyed behind his glasses, with both News International titles, *The Sun* and *Times*, juxtaposing this with photos of two of his victims: the traumatised teenage daughter and her murdered mother.

The other key element of othering underpinning Restivo's story besides his portrayal as a Satanic/freakish killer – his foreignness – was heavily prevalent in the equally widespread coverage of a nefarious predator on 6 July. The *Daily Star* (2011, p.21) set the tone for this tale, covered by every tabloid, of Iranian national Homayon Narouzzad, who had been jailed a day earlier for sexually abusing 18 under-aged girls. Describing him in its headline as a "foot fetish paedo", it told how the "Iranian-born asylum-seeker" with "a paedophile foot fetish" befriended and then "preyed on" girls aged 12 to 15 while working at a fast-food takeaway – yet another example of 'threatening familiarity', enhanced on this occasion by the revelation that his business went under the chilling name "Family Guy". In the course of a pithy seven-paragraph report, the reader learned that Narouzzad "persuaded" a 13-year-old girl to "pimp" her friends, whom he "bribed" with food, cigarettes and up to £50 a time to "touch and kiss their feet while he masturbated". As with Restivo, the perpetrator was pictured in a 'mug-shot', looking unshaven and impassive. The *Mirror*'s report was equally sensational - though far longer, running to a page-lead. Like other papers, alongside the head-shot familiar from the *Star* it also included a waist-length photo of Narouzzad posing bare-chested, with muscles flexed, tattooed torso and manic ear-to-ear grin. Beneath the headline 'Foot fetish abuser paid for perving: he's jailed for preying on youngsters' (White, 2011, p.22), it again led on the image of a "fast-food shop worker with a foot fetish" being jailed for having "sexually abused" girls. Once more, the adjective "Iranian" was prominent – arguably an irrelevant fact, inappropriately emphasised and breaching the Press Complaints Commission's code of practice (*Press Complaints Commission*, 2014) – as was his having exploited one girl to procure others. In common with tabloid reports of other sexual crimes, the paper tactfully avoided the word "masturbate" – referring instead to Narrouzad's "carrying out a sexual act". It went on to emphasise the damage done to his victims in the long run, stating the girls had been "left psychologically scarred by the abuse" and quoting two sources to emphasise this point: Detective Inspector Jane Little, who condemned the "abuse", and Judge Maureen Roddy, who

told him "the innocence of those victims was destroyed by your actions". While *The Sun*'s version was significantly shorter, it, too, carried the photo of Narouzzad posing (albeit truncated to his head and shoulders) – under the headline '4 yrs for 'asylum' sex fiend' (Moriarty, 2011, p.4) and an intro dubbing him "a perverted Iranian asylum-seeker". It went on to describe the girls he abused as "sex slaves". The article was peppered with value-laden verbs and adjectives, describing how he "lured" them to his "sordid lair" and persuaded them to perform "sex acts" and sate his "fetish for SOCKS"[3]. It also teased out another disturbing detail that enhanced the portrayal of Narouzzad as malign bogeyman masquerading as affable friend – the fact his victims had previously known him as "Smiley".

Both mid-market tabloids, the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*, gave the story page-lead treatment – reproducing the full-length shot of Narouzzad flexing his muscles. As in *The Sun*, these versions were liberally scattered with references to the twin aspects of his 'deviancy': his perverse sexual predilections and asylum-seeker status. The *Mail*'s story – headlined 'Foot fetishist who abused 18 girls in flat over takeaway' – emphasised the 'threatening familiarity' dimension, relating how "the tattooed body-builder was a popular figure in the area, known by the teenagers who flocked to the cafe as 'Smiley' for his happy demeanour". As in all other reports, mention was again made of his takeaway's name ("Family Guy"). But this story dwelt on the kinky nature of Narouzzad's sexual tastes and his victims' resulting loss of innocence, by relaying how many of the girls were "still dressed in their school uniforms" as he persuaded them to "let him kiss their feet or perform sex acts upon him". As well as drawing attention to Narouzzad's asylum-seeker status, the *Mail* went further than any other title in othering him on the basis of his foreignness - drawing an explicit parallel between his conduct and other then recent cases of predatory Asian men 'grooming' white schoolgirls. It cited statistics from a respected claims-maker – the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre – revealing that 28 per cent of the 2,379 offenders suspected of using drugs and alcohol to lure children over the previous three years had been Asian. Though this case was not mentioned by name, to many people reading the *Mail* article its repeated allusions to Asian pimps might have been taken as references to the high-profile near-contemporaneous prosecution of nine men of

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[3]NB headlines and extracts from articles have been reproduced here exactly as written, with capital letters (where used) intact, in order to reflect the emphases used by newspapers in print

Pakistani and Afghani origin for raping and sexually exploiting girls as young as 13 under the cover of two takeaways in Rochdale (Carter, 2011). Reflecting an apparent 'anti-immigration' agenda, the *Express* angled its account more directly on Narouzzad's asylum-seeker status – and, by implication, the fact he had abused not only under-aged girls but also the hospitality of his host country. Headlined 'Iranian paedophile is jailed, but WON'T be sent back home' (Riches, 2011, p.7), its report highlighted demands from "campaign groups" for him to be "kicked out of Britain when he has finished his sentence". As well as dwelling again on his "vile foot fetish" and repeating the detail that many of his victims wore school uniforms while being abused, it launched into condemnation of "European Human Rights legislation" for allegedly obstructing his deportation, citing an unnamed "legal expert" to support this view – despite assurances (also quoted) from the UK Border Agency that he would be sent home. Several other sources were quoted as supporting the paper's zero-tolerance line – including "locals" from Narouzzad's neighbourhood and right-wing pressure group MigrationWatch UK. The paper even ran a phone-in poll alongside the article – asking its readers the loaded question "should all foreign crooks be deported?" – and cross-referenced to an opinion piece on this subject on another page.

A further tale embodying the concerns about 'threatening familiarity' and 'declining social trust' raised repeatedly (albeit not in these terms) by focus-group participants was the rolling local newspaper story to which several working-class mothers had alluded, about a spate of sightings of a suspected child-snatcher driving an enigmatic black car. On 16 July the Brighton *Argus* ran a page-lead story entitled 'Man seen loitering near schools' (Loomes, 2011a, p.12), opening with the following sentence:

"POLICE are looking for a man seen hanging around schools in a black car after a ten-year-old was offered a lift by a stranger."

All three core elements of this recurring story were introduced here – the idea of a "stranger", the suggestion he had been "loitering", "hanging around" and/or offering children lifts to and from school, and the ominous "black car" motif. The use of the word "police" repeatedly in the

story's first three paragraphs arguably added legitimacy to the paper's assertion that these were authentic incidents. The intro was also noteworthy for its failure to specify the location where the stranger made his approach – vagueness likely to have fuelled unnecessary speculation among readers about whether the incident had happened in their neighbourhoods. In the first 'incident', they were told, a 10-year-old girl had reported "feeling" as if she was "being followed by a black Mini" before its "male driver" asked her if she wanted a lift. The second 'occurrence' revolved around the sighting of a man who "stared at two children" while driving past them as they walked to a different school. Interestingly, the clear inconsistency in the descriptions of the two vehicles (the first a "Mini", the second "a black saloon car") was glossed over without comment. Five days later, on a more prominent page (7, rather than 12) the headline of another lead story informed anxious parents of a "third child" (Loomes, 2011b, p.7) who had been "offered [a] lift by a stranger". Readers learnt that "the 11-year-old girl was walking by herself when a man in a black car" pulled over and offered her a lift. Though yet another type of vehicle was mentioned (this time a Ford), consistent with the 'threatening familiarity' paradigm (as in previous stories) was the 'ordinariness' of its description. Perhaps most notable, however – and for very different reasons – was a piece *The Argus* ran on 26 July. So firm a grip did the unfolding mystery apparently have by this point that the paper published a full-page background feature under the headline 'Right to be aware and to educate...' (Parsons, 2011, p.8). Unlike similar pieces, the paper appeared to be straining to promote calm - cautioning against overreaction by concerned citizens. While careful to avoid alienating anxious readers – it began with the truism "nothing is more important to a parent than the safety of their children", and reflected that it was "not surprising" reports of "strange men in black cars" caused alarm – it introduced the term "panic" in its second paragraph. By its fourth it had become more overtly questioning:

"Are we, therefore, surrounded by paedophiles? Are the streets of the county being stalked by predators, waiting to snatch a child the minutes its parents' backs are turned?"

In similarly balanced vein, the feature cautioned readers that, though "it is fair to say a tiny handful of people in society are practising predatory paedophiles", it was "of great concern"

that the degree of alarmism had reached the point "where drivers and dog-walkers are being confronted with baseless accusations". A further warning was implicit in the use of a large photograph above the headline depicting a banner reading "Get the paedophiles out", hanging from the balcony of a flat in Paulsgrove, Portsmouth, "where there were mob attacks after a newspaper campaign" – namely the *News of the World*'s pursuit of "Sarah's Law" (Bell, 2005). And, in a line that might have been written precisely to address the folly of panicking about issues of social trust, it added, "woe betide the man who goes to pick his child up in a black car" or dares to "say hello to one of his child's friends or offer them a lift". Even this, atypically questioning, article ended on a more predictable note, however – urging "everyone" to "be aware and report any suspicious behaviour to police" to prevent "tragedies such as that experienced by Sarah Payne's family from ever happening again".

Children as threats

As with the numerous articles focusing on children as victims, those positioning them as threats evoked all manner of scenarios to demonstrate the scale and variety of the menace posed by unrulier juveniles. Kids were portrayed as threatening other (younger) children ('Are our parks safe for children or are they a haven for drug dealers?' (*The Argus*, 21 July); parents ('Mum run down by daughter', *The Sun*, 21 July); cute animals ('Sick yob blows up possums', *The Sun*, 16 July); the mentally and/or physically disabled ('Why was Gemma abandoned to be murdered for fun by a gang of savages who she thought were her friends?' *Mail on Sunday*, 31 July); the elderly ('Shocked mugger routed by ex-bouncer granny, 63', *Daily Express*, 1 July); public safety ('12-year-old boy warned for hoax yacht emergency', *The Argus*, 6 July) – and even global security ('British boy of 16 held over CIA and PayPal hacking', *Daily Mail*, 21 July).

In some cases, children were depicted as dangers to themselves. On 6 July both *The Sun* and *Daily Mirror* ran short stories – under the respective headlines 'Lad thick as plank' (*The Sun*, 2011, p.14) and 'You utter plank: Boy, 14, risks life on rail line in web craze' (Thornton, 2011, p.31) - ridiculing a teenage boy for endangering not only himself but, potentially, many others by lying down on a railway track to have a photo taken for his Facebook page (a craze known

as "planking"). Even one of the most widely covered single stories under the 'survivor' heading essentially boiled down to a case of a (careless and unsupervised) child narrowly avoiding causing *himself* serious injury. This was the tale of 17-year-old Lewis Tavernier, who boasted to the tabloids how he "didn't feel a thing" when a bolt fired from his hunting crossbow lodged itself in his face (*The Sun*, 2011a, p.38).

The feral youth paradigm in newspaper discourse

Common tropes in the various stories focusing on children not as victims but victimisers were the pejorative framing of (invariably older) juveniles as "thugs" or "yobs" and descriptions of their unsavoury dress codes. The most frequently referred to items of clothing were "hoodies" (hooded tops) – which over the previous few years had been portrayed as a 'badge of dishonour' in UK political and media discourse and a shorthand term for aggressive youths themselves (Lett, 2010). A textbook example of this approach was to be found in a "good news" story (Ettema & Peer, 1996) about an ageing have-a-go heroine who tackled a teenage mugger, recounted in two newspapers (*Daily Mirror* and *Daily Express*) on 1 July. The *Mirror*'s account – headlined 'Hand to handbag combat: Liz gets better of mugger' (Armstrong, 2011, p.19) – began with the following intro:

"A TEENAGE thug who tried to nick a 63-year-old woman's handbag got more than he bargained for – his apparently vulnerable victim used to be a nightclub bouncer."

The story relayed how "plucky" Elizabeth Bonson chased the "yob", still clutching a handbag containing "cherished family photos" – despite having suffered a "bloody nose, cut chin and fat lip" when he "punched her twice in the face". Towards the end of the story, the only source referred to besides the victim herself (Cumbria Police) was indirectly quoted as disclosing that "the mugger, who wore an oversized grey hoodie, is believed to be a teenager". The *Express*'s account (topped by the headline 'Shocked mugger routed by ex-bouncer granny, 63') went in harder on this aspect, describing the assailant as a "teenage hoodie" in its second paragraph, before reverting to "yob". Its first sentence also played up the image of a heartless,

opportunistic attack on a vulnerable pensioner, describing her as "a lone, grey-haired grandmother" – despite the fact that, like the *Mirror's*, this story was accompanied by a large, posed head-and-shoulders portrait of Elizabeth looking tanned and youthful (if grave).

Another common story type portraying children as threats was that focusing on 'deviant' school pupils, and the impact of their actions on their classmates and teachers. A widely reported 26 July story concerned 45-year-old James Gallogly, who resigned as head-teacher of a Cheshire primary school after being suspended for pinning a boy against a wall. Each of the three tabloid accounts of his departure was angled around the fact he was so respected by parents that many had withdrawn their children from lessons in protest. The *Sun's* pithy three-paragraph account opened with an intro describing how parents "rushed to back" Gallogly after he quit over "being accused" of assaulting the "disruptive pupil" (*The Sun*, 2011i, p.30). The paper emphasised that, since the incident, the autistic child had been excluded for biting another teacher – a detail apparently calculated to persuade undecided readers the head's actions were justified – while a protesting parent was quoted as branding the teacher's dismissal "a disgrace". In a far lengthier story, the *Mail* adopted an even more heavy-handed approach to emphasising the injustice of Gallogly's reluctant resignation. Under the headline 'Parents' revolt as headmaster is forced out for pinning violent boy against wall' (Narain & Eccles, 2011, p.23), it told of a "dedicated head" who had been "forced to resign, despite a parents' protest and the staunch support of even the 'victim's' mother and father". Again the boy was described as "disruptive", but this time added ballast was given to the sense of unfairness by quotes attributed to Ryan Johns' own parents, who had reputedly condemned the school's governors for "carrying out a 'vindictive' witch-hunt against a well-respected head". Another parent condemned Gallogly's treatment as "diabolical", while choice biographical details were included to back up the report's assertions about his respectability. These included the fact he served on the finance board of the Diocese of Shrewsbury and one father's assertion that he spent "numerous extra hours" looking after socially deprived children and "always had time to speak to parents". Like the *Express*, the *Mail* framed its print coverage with portraits of a smiling, open-faced Gallogly on the one hand and a smirking, spiky-haired Ryan on the other. The latter's report was all-but identical in length, structure and emphasis to

the *Mail*'s – again stating in its headline that the head had been "forced out", and describing Ryan as "disruptive" and "unruly". The quotes branding Gallogly's treatment "a disgrace" and "appalling" were also reused. It is worth also noting that a small but noticeable number of articles focused on the bullying, harassment and/or killing of one child by an older juvenile/teenager. For instance, several tabloids reported on 21 July about a youth (variously described as a "thug" and a "yob") who drank the equivalent of 44 pints of cider before attacking a younger teenager (e.g. Perrie, 2011, p.31). As this particular "yob" was 19 years of age, it was possible to place this tale in the 'child victim' category. However, some stories were still more problematic.

'Hybrid' victim/threat stories – which way to categorise them?

The story that proved most difficult to categorise was one reported more than any other across newspaper titles during the month. This was a court case surrounding the macabre tale of a teenage boy who bashed his girlfriend to death with a rock for a bet. In the various reports about this unfolding story – most carried by papers from the *Mirror* stable, which followed its every twist and turn – no opportunity was lost to emphasise the severity of the crime and the psychotic-cum-demonic nature of its perpetrator. In the most extensive single article on the case - published by *The People* on 31 July, under the uncompromising headline 'Let him rot in hell: heartbroken family of murdered girl speak out on killer' (Jeffs, 2011, p.16-7) – readers were told that murderous Joshua Davies "had a fixation with horror films", "used the internet, texting and social network sites" to plot 15-year-old Rebecca Aylward's death, and, after leaving "her bloodied body face down" in woodland, "chilled out with friends" by "calmly" watching [BBC1 entertainment show] *Strictly Come Dancing*. Worst of all, he had been "smirking" as, days earlier, he was convicted.

But alongside the details portraying Davies as unhinged (we learnt he had been detained in "a secure unit" and "revelled in the nickname Psycho") there were numerous quotes from the victim's family alluding to the idea of malevolence hiding behind an innocent facade – a version of the 'threatening familiarity' paradigm. The murdered schoolgirl's uncle (described, in pointed

contrast to Davies, as "a carer") recalled her family's mistaken impression of him as "an ideal teenager" who would "help set up the dinner table, was polite and would do anything to help". Davies was "from a church-going family, academically gifted – everything you could want for your own daughter".

Until the point Davies was convicted, Rebecca had been the only protagonist whose name was used and/or image shown in an article. The 'tragedy' of her murder had been further emphasised by the repeated use of head-and-shoulders snapshots depicting the pretty 15-year-old smiling on a beach. The wording of headlines also reflected the bias towards focusing on Rebecca, rather than Davies: on 1 July, *The Sun* headed its story 'Pal: I saw girl victim' (*The Sun*, 2011b, p.41) and the same day's *Mirror* wrote "Killer mate showed me Becca body" (Smith, 2011a, p.24), while five days later the latter used the headline 'Becca ex in 'fake river rescue' plot' (Smith, 2011b, p.27). However, in an echo of the convictions of Jon Venables and Robert Thompson for the James Bulger murder two decades previously, on sentencing Davies the judge determined that the gravity of his crime was such that his anonymity should be removed – and from this point on the story's emphasis was as much on the *murderous* child as the murdered. In the end, to avoid distorting the overall total of articles by 'double-counting', the decision was taken to include it in a single category – and, as a result, classify it as a 'hybrid' article, alongside a handful of other (less widely reported) stories.

Power to the people – 'audience' comments, claims and counter-claims

Of the 298 articles falling under the 'victim', 'threat' or 'hybrid' headings considered for the analysis of discussion-threads, only 23 had posts accompanying their online versions. This represented just over 7% of the total number of pieces bracketed in these categories (325). The greater emphasis placed by certain papers on soliciting readers' views meant the sample contained an in-built bias towards broadsheet/quality titles (notably the *Daily Telegraph* and *Independent*) and one particular mid-market tabloid (the *Daily Mail*), with the *Sun* – responsible for the biggest single 'news day' analysed (6 July) – reserving invitations to readers to post online responses to a handful of longer stories. The only articles listed in the relevant

categories in the textual analysis of print articles but purposely *excluded* from that of discussion-threads were the 27 revolving around allegations that reporters at the (by now defunct) *News of the World* had hacked into the mobile phones of murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler and the parents of Sarah Payne, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman. Although these articles reused 'iconic' photographs of the girls, their main emphasis was on the 'victimisation' of vulnerable families by mercenary journalists rather than that of the children themselves by their killers. To have incorporated them in the analysis of online user responses to articles about children as victims/threats would therefore arguably have distorted the findings.

Despite representing only a minority of child-related articles published, between them the 23 separate pieces accompanied by reader-posts generated a rich body of material. A total of 2,809 responses were posted on their discussion-threads – and while the overwhelming majority (2,244, or eight out of ten) were straightforward *reactive opinions*, some 565 contained additional information and/or testimony which in some way 'added to' (or 'detracted from') the substance of an article. As anticipated, most of these 'evidence-based' responses (334 or 59%) amounted to *endorsements* of an article's underlying narrative: personal testimonies from audience-members who claimed their own experiences and/or background knowledge supported it. However, more than four in ten (231) were *rebuttals* to an article's narrative, based on information/expertise that *contradicted* the newspaper's portrayal. A breakdown of posts by type is given in Figure 5.8 and types of reactive opinion and evidence-based responses in Figures 5.9 and 5.10 respectively.

Figure 5.8 Breakdown of discussion-thread posts by type (2,809)

- Reactive opinion (2,244 - 79.9%)
- Evidence-based endorsement (334 - 11.9%)
- Evidence-based rebuttal (231 - 8.2%)
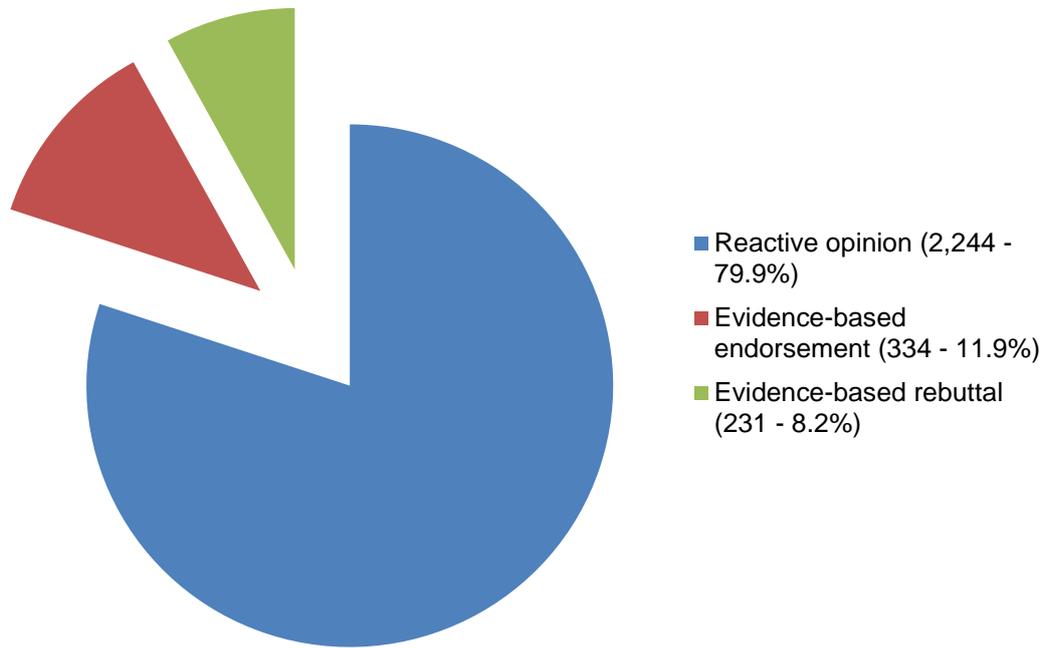
Figure 5.9 Breakdown of types of reactive opinion (2,244)

- Affirming - 2,038 (90.8%)
- Negotiated - 124 (5.5%)
- Oppositional - 82 (3.7%)
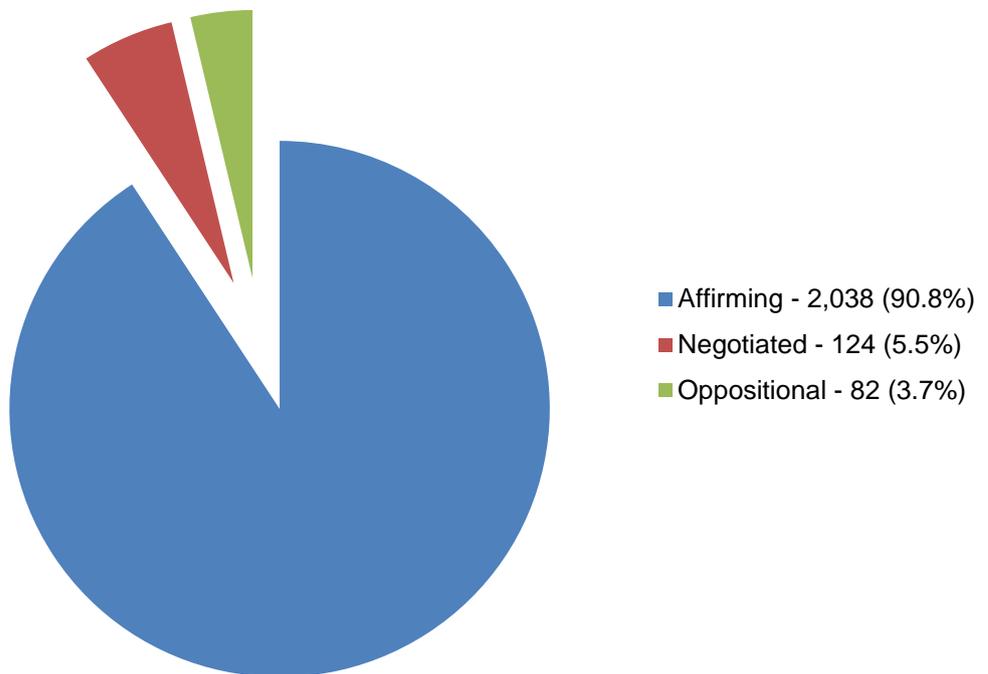
Figure 5.10 Breakdown of total evidence-based responses (565)

- Endorsement (334 - 59.1%)
- Oppositional/negotiated response (231 - 40.9%)
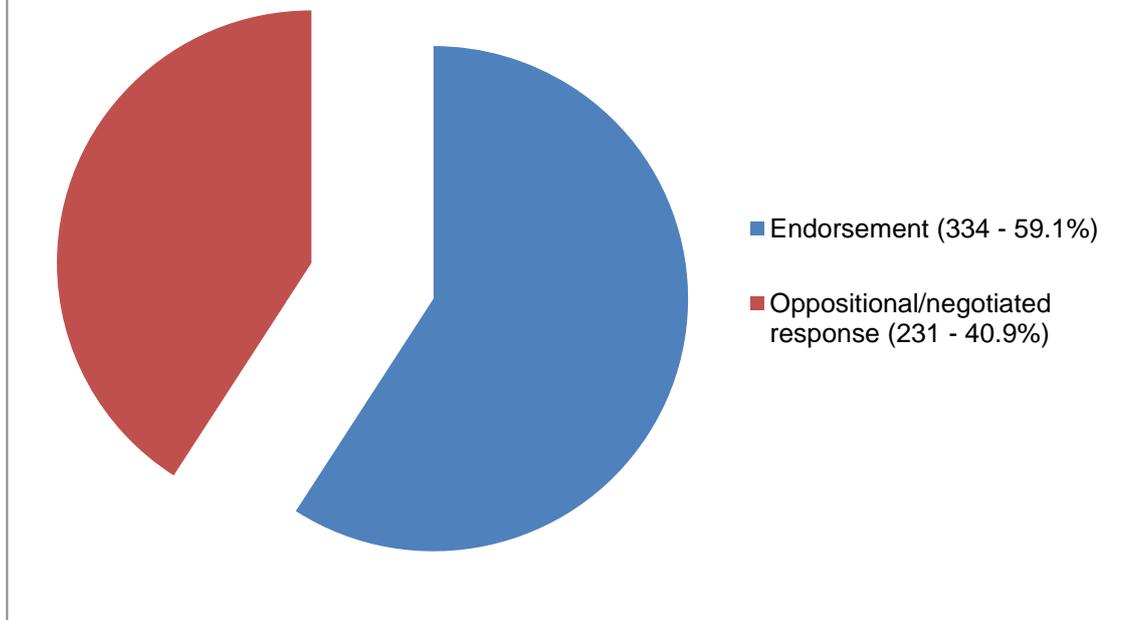
Getting it off your chest – from reactive comments to proactive claims

Discussion-thread posts ranged across a wide spectrum – from simple, unquestioning affirmations to sophisticated rebuttals of the narratives underpinning stories. But, while a small but significant minority of posts (437, or around 16% of the total) contested at least some aspects of the meanings of articles to which they responded, more than eight out of ten wholly endorsed their agendas. And since only a handful of articles (principally in the 'liberal' *Guardian* and *Independent*) challenged the binary 'good/bad child' positioning of juveniles underpinning most others – and these atypical 'readings' were themselves disputed by some readers commenting on them – an overwhelming consensus emerged in support of the normative 'victim' or 'threat' framing of children consistently identified through textual analysis.

We can be confident that this breakdown of published posts was representative of the views of all those minded to contribute to the discussion-threads, on the basis of interviews with journalists responsible for moderating forums on such sites. Contrary to concerns raised in

earlier studies about the danger of web moderators acting as "censors" of controversial views expressed in online forums (Noveck, 2004; Janssen & Kies, 2005), both the community manager for a national broadsheet and web editor of a local daily tabloid confirmed that the practical impossibility of individually filtering every post submitted before it appeared on their threads forced them to moderate in a largely "reactive" and/or *post facto* way. The local paper's default position was to publish *every* comment initially, however contentious – with disputed ones only removed if it received (and upheld) complaints from other readers. As the paper's web editor put it, "case law has created a situation where you either actively moderate or you reactively moderate", whereas "if you do *any* active moderation then you are deemed to be actively moderating, and you are therefore responsible for any content on the website". Conversely, "if you say, 'our comments are reactively moderated', then it means you can't do *any* active moderating" – a reason she gave for adopting a generally non-interventionist policy. Moreover, while there were a handful of exceptions to this 'rule' – tensions in the local community had, for example, encouraged her to avoid running discussion-threads beneath stories about New Age travellers – she had only ever "banned" around 20 individuals from contributing to discussions, and only then for severe "trolling" or remarks bordering on incitement. Significantly (given the subject of this thesis), the incident she recalled most vividly concerned a poster who taunted other readers by quoting "Chris Morris, particularly the paedophile stuff". This was a reference to a much-criticised 2001 episode of spoof television talk-show *Brass Eye* (Conlan, 2001), in which the comedian lampooned the moral panic arising from a succession of high-profile child murders, including those of Sarah Payne and the Soham girls, and a contemporaneous debate about Internet child pornography sparked by the then recent prosecution of rock star Gary Glitter.

Though the national paper's policy of "post-moderation" represented a slightly different approach – requiring web staff to systematically check threads for inflammatory comments after their initial appearance, rather than only doing so after receiving formal complaints – its community manager said that, in practice, limited time and resources meant it was necessary to use "a combination of post-moderation and reactive moderation". "If you pre-moderate you are effectively publishing [but] if you post-moderate you are *hosting*", she said, adding the

paper was legally "okay" provided troubling posts were removed "in a reasonable amount of time" after being spotted.

Of the numerous affirmative responses amounting to simple *reactive opinion* counted in this analysis (see Figure 5.9), a large number served as mere "echo-chambers" (Treviranus & Hockema, 2009; Edwards, 2013) for the sentiments of articles beneath which they were posted: straightforward, opinionated comments that gave explicit expression to meanings implicit in what journalists had written. However, other responses went further - extending the process of meaning-making in the reception of particular stories to vindicate wider (apparently pre-formed) worldviews. The most common response to articles about unruly children and, conversely, those who mistreated or abused the young was one of disgust/outrage. The single comment posted beneath a 6 July *Sun* story about a woman who learnt of the premature prison release of her abusive stepfather - headlined 'Shy weeps as paedo stepdad freed early: abuse campaigner's fury' (France, 2011, p.12) - was typical in tone and content of most reactions to paedophilia-related stories. An audience-member using the alias 'buffy71' wrote:

"This man should rot in jail, until the space reserved in Hell for him is ready for him to rot there, for what he did to Shy. The 'justice' system in the UK is far from its title."

Indeed, it was the recurring suggestion in stories about both predatory adults and feral children that 'the law' was 'on the side' of criminals (rather than victims) that provoked the fiercest, most persistent forms of gut reaction. "That about sums up the British legal system", moaned 'Rob, Links', responding to a *Mail* report about a father prosecuted for warning fellow parents his ex-wife's husband was a child abuser ('Father fined £1,000 and found guilty of harassment for warning families about a paedophile', 11 July) .

Several others, meanwhile, explicitly endorsed the father's actions, with 'Michele, France' and 'Karen, Stoke, England' both branding him a "hero"; 'skyguy, Wallasey, UK' describing himself as "speechless and beyond despair" at the injustice of his treatment; and 'Dave, Surrey' urging everyone to ignore the magistrates who punished him and "inform neighbours, friends and others with whom they have contact, to pass on information of any disgusting paedophile", in

the knowledge that "the courts won't. ENGLAND 2011". It fell, though, to 'Paula, working hard for a charity in Stoke on Trent' to sum up the consensus most pithily, remarking that such incidents could occur "only in england[4]".

Injustice was also a running theme of reactions to the aforementioned story about the "dedicated head" being forced out of his job for disciplining a "disruptive" autistic pupil. 'Maximus, Wakefield' spoke for the majority of contributors to the *Mail*'s thread by decrying the head-teacher's treatment by school governors as "shameful", while 'the History Man, France' lamented that "another talented teacher" had been "lost to the profession".

A *Mail* article that provoked a string of kneejerk reactions manifesting its latent 'feral youth' narrative was one focusing on allegations that a "gang" of travellers or Gypsies (specified as boys and men) had callously drowned a pony in a lake. The tabloid's lurid version of this widely reported tale of juvenile corruption and deviancy – headlined online 'Gang 'deliberately drowned' pony in lake in front of horrified families' – provoked much sentimentalising about "helpless" ('Shocked, London') and "defenseless" ('Emma, West Yorkshire') animals, juxtaposed with cries of "monsters" (Ibid), "scum" ('Chaz, Rainham, Essex') and "murderers" ('Furious and Frustrated, Richmond, Surrey'). But it was 'Ray, Leeds, UK' who best summed up the consensus, with the despairing enquiry:

"Why do we have so much trash living in this country?"

For all their colour and ferocity, the responses discussed above can essentially be classed as impulsive reactions that did little more than parrot received (or perceived) narratives. *Some* affirming opinions, however, might better be described as 'extensions' of the discourses to which they were responding – in that they appeared to read into them deeper levels of signification. The article that attracted the most comments of all was a 11 July double-page spread in the *Mail* about the pregnant teenage daughter of a welfare-dependent "mother-of-14" – hyperbolically headlined 'Pregnant at 15, daughter of Britain's most prolific single mother

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[4]NB discussion-threads have been quoted exactly as written, with all punctuation/spelling errors and capital letters intact, to preserve the authenticity of the original posts

(And, of course, she's on benefits - just like mum)' (Sears, 2011, p.11) - which generated 745 posts. While readers lined up to condemn the mother's "breeding" habits ('Charlotte, Cape Town'; 'J Thompson, Bangor'; 'Cathy, West Yorkshire'), others launched into wider diatribes about the "underclass" ('deji, London'), using lurid language like "vermin" (Ibid) and "scroungers" ('Jane von M, the Netherlands') to describe both the family itself and others like it. Among the starkest examples of an attempt to elide deeper meanings from the 'deserving/undeserving children' discourse underpinning this tale of feckless parenting was a lengthy rant from 'Steve, London', which read into it evidence of a deliberately engineered dependency culture related to "the goal of Labour and indeed Socialism" to "get as many people reliant on the government as possible to ensure a permanent grip on power".

Similarly extreme tirades against the supposedly corrosive effects of "liberal" thinking surfaced in responses to several stories focusing on juvenile indiscipline. A *Mail* story, posted online on 10 July under the headline 'Teachers will be allowed to use force on unruly pupils as ministers lift 'no touching' ban' (Loveys, 2011), prompted 'Rob, Lincs' to condemn "progressive enlightenment from the sixties" for undermining the "simple concept" of "herding" children "into a big building" and teaching them "stuff they need to know".

Another variant of the affirmative comment was that which disputed the *particulars* of a given article – and/or fellow posters' reactions to it - yet still endorsed its underlying discourse. For example, 'Sofia, Berlin, Germany', argued in response to the 11 July story about the single mother-of-14 that, while "not a supporter of people havind so many children and then receiving benefits", these particular offspring "look pretty happy, healthy and okay".

The 5.5% of reactive opinions that adopted a more *negotiated* stance (124 out of 2,244) tended to be lengthier, as their authors wrestled with ambivalent feelings about a narrative. Though implicitly at one with the hegemonic *Mail* 'deserving/undeserving' discourse around families, 'Shyamini, London, UK' took issue with its customary portrayal of the *scale* of this problem in society, in an extensive post responding to news of the pregnant daughter of

"Britain's most prolific single mother". She argued that "families like this are uncommon" but "are given maximum coverage in the DM".

As one might expect from audiences choosing to visit particular news outlets in preference to others (Iyengar & Kahn, 2009), overtly *oppositional* posts were rarer – accounting for fewer than 4% (or 82) of all reactive opinions. For this reason, though, they were more pronounced when they occurred. Among the boldest challenger to the extended collective character-assassination mounted against the single mother – and the anti-welfare discourse underpinning it – was 'Jessica, the beautiful south', who criticised her fellow readers' "nasty comments" and challenged them to admit if they were suggesting "this lady and her children" should "starve". "The benefits system was set up to help those who cannot help themselves, i.e. people just like her", she added. A similarly counter-hegemonic perspective adopted by 'luke, london' led to the following testy exchange with (one suspects) a more typical reader:

'Luke, London': "Can we stop attacking the poor please?"
'Fool on the Hill, Costa del East Anglia': "Can the poor stop having children they can't afford please."

Yet even oppositional readings of a narrative can come with a twist. While 'Brenda M, UK' contested the single mum-baiting aspects of other comments – pointing out that this mother was "married to their [the children's] father" until this "didnt work out" and "couldn't exactly go out and find a job with the children at home" – in other aspects of her 'defence' she adopted a tellingly doctrinaire *Mail* line. Picking out a theme running through several other oppositional comments – the idea that, as 'Richard, Bedford' put it, "lots of babies" were needed to "fund the pension and healthcare costs" of Britain's ageing population - she described the 14 children as "clean, well behaved" and "white" (qualities needed "in a country with a falling indigenous English birth rate").

More intriguing still were the minority of posts that might best be characterised as '*pro*-hegemonic' readings of the *details* of a story which were simultaneously oppositional in the

sense that they questioned how those details were *presented/interpreted* by reporters. For example, a Facebook-style "like" and "share" device informed readers browsing the thread beneath an 11 July *Independent* story about deprived children suffering from poor schooling and academic under-achievement (headed 'Three in five of the poorest 11-year-olds lack basic literacy') that "seven people like[d]" a post by 'Thrasos' that might have been more at home on the discussion-boards of less liberal papers. In it, he dismissed the article's "typical lefty logic" that "the problem is poverty itself"", arguing "the truth" was that "those with the least ability become the poorest" and "when they have children those children will inherit their genes".

Similar evidence of "trolling" (Binns, 2012) emerged through a hostile debate that opened up between repeated posters on a thread flowing from a story in the *Argus* about the mysterious "black car" that reportedly terrorised Sussex schoolchildren during the 2011 summer term – though, in this case, the 'antagonists' (unlike 'Thrasos') adopted a clear *counter*-hegemonic viewpoint. Responding to numerous comments by panicky parents fretting about the alleged incidents, a poster using the nom-de-plume 'Billy Bones' joked that "Strangers Sweeties Always taste better", while 'papa_melons' simply criticised concerns that were "completely blown out of proportion" whenever there was "the slightest hint" that "a kiddy snatcher" was "amongst us". Chapter 6 will return to this particular story in light of an *Argus* journalist's testimony that this scare was ultimately unfounded.

Audience members as 'claims-makers' – and 'counter' claims-makers

Given the preoccupation of this chapter with the *construction* – rather than mere affirmation or contestation - of news narratives, the responses of greatest interest were the one in five that moved beyond endorsing or criticising articles' editorial lines to present additional/alternative information (evidence) with a bearing on the 'facts' reported (and underlying 'realities' portrayed). A breakdown of these responses is presented in Figure 5.10. Of the *affirming* evidence-based responses, a large number consisted of posts endorsing the (implicitly) critical framing of articles – for example, value-laden language and strongly worded intros/headlines used in stories about menacing children or those who menace them – by explicit reference to

the posters' own experiences. 'Aussiemaverick' responded to a 26 July *Independent* story about the withdrawal of the Vatican's ambassador to Ireland following Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny's condemnation of its handling of a long-running controversy over paedophile priests (Day, 2011, p.22) with a comment drawing on the personal trauma of being "physically and psychologically" abused by nuns at a Melbourne school. In so doing, the poster not only endorsed the underpinning (hegemonic) panic narrative – which played on the 'threatening familiarity' and 'abuse of trust' paradigms raised in focus-group discussions – but *reinforced* it by supplying independent evidence of its legitimacy. Similarly, 'Ruth, Essex' posted on 10 July in support of the 'feral youth' narrative signified by the contributions of the principal claims-makers (the Department for Education and an outspoken former deputy head-teacher) to a *Mail* story about ministers' decision to lift a ban on "touching" disruptive schoolchildren – stating she had given up teaching after 34 years following a "breakdown" caused by parents' failure to discipline their deviant offspring.

By contrast, a common characteristic of oppositional/negotiated evidence-based responses was their presentation of additional and/or contradictory 'factual' information (e.g. data or other acquired knowledge) that cast *doubt* on the validity of a story's details and/or manifest/latent meaning, as framed by the journalist/publisher. Some posters attempted to undermine or debunk key aspects of certain articles. On 26 July, 'Christine, Newport' posted a comment on the *Mail* website countering a central claim of its story about the headmaster who had been "forced to resign" after being suspended for "manhandling" an autistic boy – namely that teachers were barred (by nonsensical laws) from using physical force to protect themselves or (deserving) children against (undeserving/feral) classmates – by drawing on her own background knowledge to cite rules permitting the use of "appropriate restraint methods".

Another common form of oppositional evidence-based response was the post which *re-*presented facts contained (but usually buried) in the original articles - *emphasising* those details over ones fore-grounded by the journalists to contest their overall framing of a story. 'Louise, Danby' drew fellow readers' attention to a significant detail buried near the bottom of the same story - pointing out the decision by the school's governors to investigate the teacher

might have been far from the unjustified "witch-hunt" it was painted in the article, as "Cheshire East Council said he had been suspended after 'other issues around his discipline methods'".

Perhaps the most persuasive oppositional posts, however, were the small but significant minority arising out of readers' own professed experiences/expertise. A 30 July *Telegraph* story reviving familiar concerns about the nefarious influence of magazine depictions of physical beauty on girls with eating disorders was countered by two posters who claimed to have had anorexia and were far from sympathetic towards fellow sufferers who blamed their conditions on media portrayals of idealised body-types – and, by inference, the 'victim' subtext underpinning the tale. A similarly jittery 21 July *Mail* story headlined 'Mothers using nicotine gum to avoid smoking in pregnancy 'put unborn babies at risk'' (Borland, 2011, p.13) provoked 'Elizabeth, Cardiff' to defend moderation over total abstinence by mocking those who preached a mantra of "don't drink, don't eat certain foods, don't smoke (but don't get stressed) or you'll KILL YOUR CHILD".

Of all oppositional evidence-based responses noted, though, the most powerful were those contradicting the *Mail's* version of the widely reported story alleging a "gang" of feral youths and men had callously drowned a pony in a lake. Stripping out the 204 (largely condemnatory) *comments* on the alleged crime – conveniently attributed to "Gypsies" - 12 posts contained claims by people purporting to hold informed views on the subject. Eight were oppositional – outnumbering those 'supporting' the details/framing of the *Mail* article two to one. Oppositional posters who drew on unspecified background knowledge about travellers/horses to bolster their criticisms of the *Mail's* line included 'Polly, Yorkshire', who disputed the likelihood of their abandoning the pony's trap and tackle (as the story stated), given the cost of this equipment, and 'horace4831, Gravesend, Kent', who contrasted the paper's account with the BBC's version of the same occurrence, which made "no mention of them [the culprits] being Gypsies". In a direct attack on the folk-devil positioning implicit in the story's headline, 'Ella, Newton Stewart, Scotland' breathlessly reminded other readers that "not all folk with horses and traps are gypsies" and to suggest as much was "a slanderous statement", tantamount to "assuming that all asians are fundamentalist muslims and might bomb us".

Most noteworthy of all, though, was a post by 'John, Reading', which mounted a wholesale contradiction of key claims in the report based on a first-hand eyewitness account omitted from the *Mail's* coverage. In an authoritative evidence-based post citing his "friend" as a *direct* protagonist in the events, he condemned the "awfully inaccurate and rather spiteful" report, "bordering on racism", adding that his "friend who works at the lake, teaching sailing" had told him that "the horses were taken into the water to cool off after a hot ride". "The member of public who went to hospital sustained his injuries from several kicks to the head from the HORSE he tried to rescue", he said - adding that his "friend jumped out of his boat and pulled him out of the water". Describing the incident as "a terrible accident, nothing sinister" and condemning the pony's owners as "guilty of stupidity" for "leaving the scene of an incident and not being compassionate" but "certainly not guilty of deliberately trying to drown their ponies", he advised doubters to "check this out" by calling "Hawley Lakes Sailing Club, who would confirm this story".

Though representing a tiny minority of informed oppositional voices, 'John, Reading' arguably went well beyond merely 'contesting' the framing (and implied meaning) of this story, to persuasively *contradict* it – to the extent that anyone bothering to read the discussion-thread with an open mind might have emerged with an entirely altered impression of both its detail and signification. In this sense, his post was less a *response* than a *counter-narrative*: an entirely contrary *version* of the story drawn from an alternative (arguably better informed) source/claims-maker to reject its feral youth agenda.

Journalism in the online era: the professional-participatory interface

Much has been written about the process of active "meaning-making" (Hall, 1980; Deacon et al, 1999) in which audience-members engage as they process news narratives both individually and collectively. In many respects, the patterns of meaning-making discernible in the online discussion-threads analysed here display similar characteristics to those observed in numerous pre-Internet (and pre-social media) reception studies relying on focus-groups (for example Kitzinger, 1993 and 1999b; Boyce, 2007) and/or ethnography (Morley, 1980). There is nothing new about the idea that it is the processing of journalistic texts by audience-members that leads to manifestation of the narratives latent in them – nor that, by actively engaging with news discourse, these 'recipients' are themselves helping to construct (or, at times, contest) hegemonic notions about social reality (Corner, 1983). What *is* new, though, about the ways in which meaning-making is negotiated in the virtual (rather than physical) world is that, unlike the water-cooler/dinner-queue/playground conversations of old, these new sites of news-processing are increasingly visible for everyone else to see – including those *not* contributing themselves. Beyond this, the ability of audiences to post responses to news narratives online does not necessarily add extra complexity to the process of meaning-making itself. However, in the sense that they are *writing down* their thoughts and observations, leaving a visible record of them for others to read, at the very least they are adding an extra layer of (reactive) material for other (more 'passive') readers to digest – and accept or reject.

Where discussion-posts become more noteworthy is on the occasions when they go beyond merely *responding* to professionally produced articles to provide additional/alternative *evidence* with a bearing on the 'facts' of the story as reported and/or their (implied) signification. In these rare instances, audience-members are not simply contributing to the construction of meaning in the traditional sense described in the literature, namely by actively negotiating interpretation with the text. Instead, they are *collaborating* with the journalist on the wording of the text itself – or, on some (even rarer) occasions, contesting, reshaping or *writing their own versions* of it.

The question of how (and why) news narratives about children come to be framed as they are by professionals in the first place, and the 'intention' behind those frames, is explored in more detail through the extracts from interviews with practising journalists presented in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6 – News-making

The dominance of panicky newspaper narratives about children Chapter 5 identified has not come about by accident. Commercial pressure on journalists to produce 'sellable' stories that persuade readers to buy their newspapers, visit their websites and, increasingly, engage in discussion (providing a fertile market for advertisers) is hard-wired into every aspect of today's news-making process. The imperatives of this unashamedly "market-driven journalism" (McManus, 1994) are crystallised in data circulated among news editors and reporters on a day-to-day basis - expressed as print sales graphs, online hit rates and complex analytics that break down the shifting demographics of their audiences. In this way, journalists whose remit was once (ostensibly) to apply normative professional judgments about newsworthiness when pursuing and writing up stories have been explicitly co-opted into the business of generating copy designed to maximise the readership and profitability of their publications – with incentives liberally deployed to ensure they comply with their employers' wishes. So it is that staff on a Somerset-based weekly paper are "incentivised with the promise of an iPad for the reporter with the most hits per quarter", according to one reporter, and named and famed (or, implicitly, shamed) at weekly "Fizzy Friday" de-briefs that involve "gathering around a blackboard" to compete for recognition over their "successes of the week". In addition, newspapers' embrace of digital, as well as print, publishing has further intensified pressure on reporters, as they are prevailed upon to file bespoke versions of their stories for each medium (at times simultaneously) and go beyond writing and researching articles to actively *promote* them - by tweeting their top lines and directly interacting with readers. Today's reporters, as a Devon-based crime specialist puts it, are "encouraged" to actively "'sell' our product - not just blithely write articles and bugger off home, not caring whether anyone reads it".

Commercially motivated decisions are as instrumental as 'objective' judgments about newsworthiness in almost everything today's journalists do, whether they be specialist broadsheet correspondents or trainee reporters on local free-sheets - from identifying events and issues likely to appeal to their target readership(s) through justifying the time needed to research them, particularly if this takes them out of the office. Choices of wording, headlines

and pictures used to frame articles 'on the page' (both in print and online) are also viewed as crucial to maximising papers' appeal to as wide, and varied, an audience as possible. And, against this intensely competitive backdrop, they have become more focused on telling stories that are highly charged and dramatic – including narratives playing on pervasive, deeply ingrained societal concerns about children identified in previous chapters. When asked about their news instincts, reporters and editors appear highly attuned to the resonance alarming and/or tragic stories involving juveniles will have for readers – and, though most deny they would ever proactively *search* for such narratives, almost all concede they instinctively recognise their commercial value whenever they 'find' them. It is an argument of this thesis that the disproportionate degree of newsworthiness attached in contemporary Britain to dramatic stories about children – especially those revolving around their abuse by malevolent adults or threats *deviant* juveniles pose to others – is related to the steady erosion, over time, of interpersonal trust (a trend itself linked to declining economic security and rising individualism in neoliberal societies – Hall, 1999; OECD, 2001; Harper, 2001; Pickles & Savage 2005; *European Values Study Group and World Values Survey Association,* 2006; Llakes, 2011). By focusing on the 'murder mystery' and/or 'horror movie' elements of such stories – unsupervised outdoor play, mysterious cars and the predatory behaviour of nefarious adults/youths – and *dramatising* them in narratives they construct online and in print, papers are actively tapping into, and *playing up*, this atmosphere of unease and suspicion for commercial gain.

Of the competitive forces at play in the context of journalists' day-to-day work for the British press, the following are those most conducive to the emergence of news values favouring dramatic narratives about children. The first three illuminate the editorial routines and institutionalised news values that lead to newspapers placing disproportionate emphasis on covering (and dramatising) such stories. The fourth offers an insight into how journalists 'rationalise' the compulsive appeal of these narratives, individually and collectively – and conceptualise the relationship between themselves and their audiences in the context of this febrile popular discourse:

- Increasing pressure on journalists' time, including newsroom economies and demands for both print and web copy - resulting in greater dependency on official/elite sources

- Pressure to *generate* more dramatic, entertaining and 'interactive' stories, based on quantifiable measures of interest in a subject – including reader feedback and participation, print sales and online hit-rates

- Explicit and implicit pressure to *present* stories in dramatic and entertaining ways - and 'market' articles direct to readers, as well as write them

- Journalists' rationales for the popular appeal of dramatic stories about children, their relative newsworthiness over other stories – and the reporter's role as storyteller

Increasing pressure on (fewer) journalists' time – and over-reliance on elite sources

The bewildering array of routine demands facing reporters since the introduction of digital publishing has coincided with a progressive depletion of resources, as rising print costs, increasing commercial competition and falling advertising revenues have led to staff and budget cutbacks (Sweney, 13 May 2009). As a result, today's newspaper journalists are under more pressure than ever to be constantly productive. "Time is money", explained one specialist on a mid-market Sunday tabloid, adding that it used to be "frowned upon to be in the office on a Tuesday" (the first day of his working week) but was now equally "frowned upon to be out of the office" – let alone "wasting" the afternoon on "a dead end". A common tool his paper's news-desk uses to keep tabs on reporters' whereabouts and productivity, according to a colleague, is to demand memos from them proving they are "actively engaged in something" and, the specialist added, already demonstrating "*massive* progress" by Tuesday afternoon.

Time pressures are felt even more intensely on newspapers with *daily* print runs, whose news-desks rely on a similarly obsessive "memo-driven culture" to monitor reporters' output. Even before leaving his house, one national broadsheet crime correspondent will "start my day" at 8am by sending "a note to the desk" with "a story or two", while a weekend news editor on a national mid-market tabloid expects all his reporters to file memos before the paper's morning

news conference to tell the desk "this is what's around in my patch". This ever-increasing pressure for journalists to both continually update their news-desks on work-in-progress and 'deliver the goods' with finished copy results in various kinds of treadmill: an experienced Sunday broadsheet specialist recalled her editors "always pushing for 'scoops'" for their one hit of the week, regardless of the financial and staffing "limits of their paper", and a tabloid competitor emphasised his editor's demand for "quality, not quantity". By contrast, local reporters stressed the onus placed on them to produce daily 'quotas' of articles, echoing the culture of "churnalism" identified by Davies (2007).

One *effect* of this "sausage factory" (Nesbitt-Larking, 2007, p.152) approach to news-making is to force journalists to rely more heavily on pools of predictable and 'reliable' contacts – in particular, elite/establishment sources equipped with the knowledge/communications infrastructure to provide continuous flows of 'oven-ready' material to fill infinite space (and meet perpetual deadlines) online with eye-catching, advertiser-friendly news 'content'. As others have observed (Tuchman, 1972; Schlesinger, 1978; Gans, 1979), journalists' dependency on sources considered authoritative and credible - whom they can speak to 'on the record' and contact easily from the desk-bound environments described here - contributes to a disproportionate reliance on officialdom. This leads, in turn, to an over-emphasis on reporting subjects that promote those contacts' own agendas. Given the exhaustive demands placed on their time, it is hardly surprising today's multitasking, multimedia journalists rely more than ever on the classic "primary definers" (Hall et al, 1978) or official "knowers" (Fishman, 1980) - police, courts, councils and government departments – that were so instrumental in framing media-stoked 'crime-waves' of past decades and, by extension, that (moral) panic narratives influence news agendas so heavily. That the "first job in the morning" for a recently retired crime reporter on a daily paper in southern England was to pursue the "kernel" of a story by calling the local "police press line" – a recorded tape handily updated overnight by duty inspectors and press officers with details of incidents they felt journalists might consider newsworthy – was significant, in that it biased the ideas he pitched to his editors towards narratives casting the police in a favourable light (successful arrests) and/or demonstrating the importance of their work (witness appeals). Though he would later visit "the nick" to meet

contacts directly in search of off-diary tip-offs, he remained reliant on what officers were – and were *not* - prepared to tell him, with the press tape representing an initial filter that acted as a back-stop for redacting information the force did not want publicised, and emphasising those it did. His memory of this routine was remarkably similar to the experiences of crime specialists working today. The Devon-based crime reporter listed "cops and punters [the public]" as his principal sources, with those officially 'in-the-know' coming out top, "because they rarely 'fold' [withdraw quotes] after they've told you something on the record" – a reference to 11th-hour retracted statements that infuriate reporters under pressure to 'stand up' stories and deliver them to schedule. Similarly, time constraints were acutely related to judgments the Somerset-based reporter made in habitually turning to official sources in the expectation they would yield readily usable stories, with the fire service and ambulance press officers favoured because they "put a lot of incidents on their website" and "give us log numbers we can then bring to the police" respectively. This routinisation of official information channels echoes numerous earlier studies, in which the prevalence of news focusing on (real or supposed) crime increases was directly related to over-reliance on police and other law enforcement agencies (Tuchman, 1972; Chibnall, 1975 and 1977; Hall et al, 1978; Schlesinger, 1978; Gans, 1979; Fishman, 1978 and 1980; Bantz, 1985; Lewis et al, 2008).

Ease of access and willingness to offer on-the-record quotes, no matter how humdrum, are just two of many reasons why official sources are often favoured over 'unofficial' ones. Police and other statutory agencies are also routinely approached to verify claims made by 'non-official' contacts, primarily for legal reasons (costly litigation being a risk scrupulously avoided in today's tightly budgeted newsrooms). The Somerset reporter would "always check everything out that comes from someone who calls us up", but "would feel pretty safe to" publish a police or council press release "as it is". Similarly, an assistant news editor on a national mid-market tabloid said his paper favoured official sources when searching for "something solid" - though it also liked to humanise stories to appeal to readers, by speaking directly to "those involved" or their "friends or family". But, while journalists' normative news instincts might favour heartfelt quotes from grieving relatives or dramatic claims by anonymous whistle-blowers to witness appeals couched in police jargon or bland official denials, these impulses are consistently

trumped by their (reluctant) acknowledgement that the latter sources are usually more 'reliable' – or less 'risky'. This combination of hard-nosed pragmatism and institutionalised "common-sense" guide the Devon-based crime reporter's personal rule-of-thumb that "two on-the-record official sources is ideal, and it'll beat one on-the-record, which will beat a known punter, which will beat an unofficial, unknown punter", while the Somerset journalist will "put out a few feelers first (i.e. a friendly word with the police)" to "gauge" if "someone [who] has approached us with something they want us to follow up" is "legit".

There is a fine line, though, between viewing official sources as more credible than untried, untested members of the public because of their access to privileged knowledge/willingness to speak openly and developing such a cosy reciprocal relationship with them that journalists become (however unwittingly) "handmaidens of the powerful" (Paletz & Entman, 1981). Some journalists face such intense hour-by-hour pressures – combined with lack of opportunity to leave the office in search of a wider range of stories/sources – that they become over-reliant on spoon-fed leads from well-placed elite contacts. The Sunday specialist who could not justify time outside the newsroom meeting sources unlikely to guarantee him stories confessed he had known experts he routinely consulted "for many years", making them "kind of mates". "Most of my work is on the phone, text messages", he said, defending this practice thus:

"Very rarely do government departments I deal with blatantly *lie*...A lot of your sources and freelancers go, 'oh, that government department – they never admit *anything*', but way more often than not it's the *source* that's actually wrong."

Notwithstanding such remarks, it would be over-generalising to infer that journalists' pragmatic day-to-day dependency on readily reachable official sources blinds them to the potential for such contacts to obfuscate or mislead. Directly contradicting the Sunday specialist, the weekend news editor observed that "government departments lie", while the editorial director of a family-owned newspaper group based in the south-east lamented one legacy of the Leveson Inquiry into Press Standards (The Leveson Inquiry, 2012) was "a real fear among police officers and other 'traditional' contacts of sharing information with journalists" – forcing

reporters to rely more on "tightly controlled" formal channels orchestrated by "media liaison teams". He was one of several interviewees to argue the speed and ease of using social media to "crowd-source" information and quotes from the public meant papers could increasingly *bypass* official channels, that would only mention "things they choose to highlight" if left to "proactively" provide "details of breaking news". The retired crime reporter, meanwhile, reflected on a wave of scandals involving police dishonesty - notably revelations about corrupt payments made to Scotland Yard officers by national reporters (O'Carroll, 2012) and the fabrication of events surrounding the deaths of 96 football fans at Hillsborough stadium in 1989 that fed into misguided press reports (McSmith, 2012). Though he maintained official sources generally lent stories "more weight" and "trust", he added a "codicil about Hillsborough" and the "appalling way" the *Sun* had been deceived by South Yorkshire Police.

Matching their healthy scepticism about the integrity of (some) official sources, journalists also retain an ingrained, normative aversion to the limited newsworthiness of stories based on official press statements. Though employed by a local weekly that requires strong working relations with the police to keep its website bubbling between print editions, a trainee reporter on a south-east London weekly free-sheet noted that, "while these are our most reliable sources" and ones it "always" used to "verify information", they would "never" produce "many really good stories". His contention that "the best stories always come from the general public" was echoed by the Sunday tabloid specialists, who, unlike their daily counterparts, faced constant pressure to produce exclusives. One dismissed any idea his stories would ever *originate* with "Whitehall, government", whose "only usefulness" was to provide a "response".

Nonetheless, many off-the-record sources such journalists rely on for quotes and un-attributable tip-offs are themselves key "knowers" (Fishman, 1980): as 'experts', they tend to be either funded, commissioned or otherwise related to the establishment or the *occupants of* official positions themselves (even if divulging opinions and information 'unofficially'). For example, both aforementioned specialists referred to using lawyers as unnamed sources for 'off-diary' stories. A broadsheet legal affairs correspondent said people he regarded as "unofficial" sources were usually those "practising the law", while the retired crime reporter

mentioned barristers, head-teachers and the NSPCC as key contacts besides police officers. Significantly, all these sources have vested interests in promoting issues related to law enforcement/child protection. The fact journalists routinely use such contacts as 'non-official' (*as well as* official) sources for stories/angles points towards a high degree of trust in both their personal integrity and access to authentic information.

Given such heavy reliance on elite/establishment contacts, it is unsurprising so much newspaper coverage is routinely devoted to stories revolving around more dramatic (therefore, normatively newsworthy) incidents to which journalists are directed by these sources, such as juvenile-related crime. A combination of pragmatism, force of habit and hard-nosed profit-seeking at the expense of investment in costly off-diary investigations also leads this increasingly commercially driven press to cut corners, churn out more pre-packaged, PR-generated "pseudo-events" (Boorstin, 1971), and become timid and risk-averse (especially legally). In so doing, whether by accident or design, papers are positioning themselves as prisms reflecting the "bureaucratic idealisations of the world" police, judges, fire-fighters, civil servants, politicians and (state-sponsored) 'experts' - from government advisors to university-based criminologists - have vested interests in "disseminating" (Fishman, 1980, p.154).

Commodification of news 'on the page'

One outcome of this, discernible in newsrooms on a day-to-day basis, is that news is increasingly treated as a mass-produced commercial commodity that must be sufficiently free-flowing and packageable to fill space (in print and online) to ever-tighter/more numerous deadlines – themselves the products of a relentless drive to hit newsstands and update websites ahead of competitors in an unremitting pursuit of more (and more engaged) readers. And with most papers now employing "*way* fewer reporters" than previously and replacing seasoned hands with trainees, as one national Sunday specialist complained, those who remain feel "more pressure" than ever to deliver the goods. Hence demands placed on the Somerset reporter to write 10 stories daily, of which "at least one" must be uploaded online, along with "any breaking news that filters in off the police/fire websites" – and the expectation

that the Devon-based crime specialist will produce four to eight "leads of 350 to 500 words" on a "typical day". This production-line culture translates into anxiety on the part of reporters to ensure they are always in a position to churn out immediate, publishable copy for both print and online, *wherever* they are – in turn, fostering a reluctance to leave the office (or their computers) for fear of missing calls or failing to file 'on time', and fuelling dependency on official sources and their communications departments. Despite having recently relocated to the "heart" of his "city-centre", the Devon reporter described the opportunity to "go out on a job" as "a one or two-times-a-week affair at best", while the Somerset reporter's days are "almost entirely desk-bound", meaning she is only allowed to meet personal contacts in her spare time – unless *certain* of "coming back to the office with something".

Moreover, the overreliance on official sources such workplace cultures promote is exacerbated by a creeping 'de-professionalisation' of newsroom staff-profiles, resulting from cuts in permanent posts and over-reliance on trainees, interns and reporters on casual contracts - according to several interviewees, including the mid-market weekend news editor. Gradual sapping away of professional expertise caused by the failure (or inability) of editors to replace experienced reporters who move on with similarly qualified successors leads to a loss of "older staffers" capable of serving, in Breed's words (1955, p.330), "as models for newcomers". And the increased pressure consequently heaped on the reduced number of veterans who *do* survive means they have little time between rattling out daily quotas of regurgitated press releases and official policy announcements to mentor trainees and interns. Not only that: the example they set is that of "churnalists" (Davies, 2007) or effective stenographers for officialdom (hardly a model of 'fourth estate' integrity).

And, in this new age of rolling 24/7, 'web-first' newspaper deadlines – in which it is never too soon to file a 'story' – the primary motivation for *editors* is fear of falling behind their rivals, rather than, realistically, outflanking them with exclusives. The culture of discouraging reporters from spending time out of the office 'digging' for off-diary leads is intrinsically related to hard-wired anxieties about 'missing' something someone else has (no matter how inconsequential). So highly prioritised is the continuous churn of content that, on days when it is their 'turn' on

the duty rota to cover an early morning or late shift, it is considered more important for even specialists to attend to the multiple (highly mechanised) ways in which routine information channels are monitored than work on their specialisms. This "means round after round of calls to fire and police, checks on online press releases from the emergency services, tackling incoming calls and checking on other news sites", explained the Devon crime reporter, with "monitoring Twitter feeds" a recent addition to this head-spinning mix. As a result, he is often "glued" to his chair and "very frantic". And this incessant demand for 24-hour news production - and consequent over-reliance on steady streams of pre-packaged 'raw material', including press releases and newswire schedules – emanates directly from papers' nerve-centres: their editors' offices. The editorial director, who oversees a once modest family-owned newspaper business that has mushroomed to encompass eight paid-for weekly papers, six free-sheets, 10 websites, seven radio stations and various specialist publications, described his multimedia company as "web and radio-first", stressing that "the vast majority" of stories are uploaded to at least two websites and broadcast on air before appearing in print. The "exception", he said, was "an off-diary exclusive", like a major investigation. Even then, decisions to hold articles back for print were largely commercially driven: based on individual editors' judgments that they "will put on additional sales". Asked how often his reporters should be filing for the web and using social media in the process of writing stories, he outlined this dizzying routine:

"Reporters file all week for online. We have rotas that take us from 5am to 10pm each day, but in reality if something broke outside those hours I'd fully expect our reporters to be covering it. All have Twitter feeds, and we print their @names [Twitter contact details] in the paper. If something big breaks, the process is tweet one par (which will automatically appear on the site homepage) then file two or three pars for the web, with constant updates as and when we get them. Then, depending on deadlines and the story, re-nose for print."

From his position at the coalface, the Devon reporter described a similar food-chain: a new-found obsession with herding readers towards his paper's website that is "driven very much by the editor and news eds, who will say, 'can we have this for the web, now' and then expect you to rewrite it later for the paper". A "breaking story" was like "an armed siege", being "Twitter

and online-led until it is over" - when it would be rewritten for print, in distilled form, but "with 'new' angles if possible". Speaking for many interviewees who reported similar pressures, he described a routine "battle to explain you cannot file both at the same time and a story cannot be completed – or properly written – until you've finalised the calls and research", adding, "we're still in that, 'aarrgh – I'm not a bloody octopus' era, trying to do everything at once".

For weekly reporters, the step-change has been more dramatic, with once-a-week print deadlines supplanted by daily (or hourly) demands to upload copy – and added pressure to decide which stories to put online and which to hold back for print. The south-least London free paper places "big emphasis" on the web, with "all stories...expected to go up as soon as possible", while a senior reporter on a more traditional, family-owned group of north London weeklies has witnessed an even more dramatic shift to "web-first" - albeit vicariously. Criticising the 'mobile newsroom' approach favoured by her rival paper, whose reporters work out of the office on laptops, she described a culture so constrained by the straitjacket of hourly online deadlines that journalists were powerless to react when unexpected stories 'broke'. "They have to update their website seven times a day", she relayed, adding that when "[Prime Minister] David Cameron came to our area" the paper's chief reporter was "under so much pressure to upload to her website she misses out on questioning Cameron!"

Even on nationals – where websites are largely staffed by dedicated teams – print reporters worry they will inevitably be expected to write more for their websites in future. While the weekend tabloid news editor insisted "the online thing makes no difference" at his paper, where it was "a different operation", the broadsheet legal affairs correspondent said the pressure of "constantly trying to justify" his paper's charges for accessing articles online was routinely "communicated" to him by his superiors, who would "put some stuff online and flag it in the paper" to "drive people towards" the site. Meanwhile, a Sunday tabloid security correspondent predicted that, on the basis of recent trends, his paper was "sure" to follow the lead of "the whole *Mail Online* spectre", which was "taking over, *driving*" Associated Newspapers (publisher of the *Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*). Copy he filed for his weekly

paper was already routinely transformed by online reporters to make it more web-friendly by adding a "gloss" to it.

Pressure to *generate* dramatic, entertaining and 'interactive' stories

If the frenetic routines of digital-era news-making leave journalists ever-more reliant on particular types of *source* – notably readily accessible 'officials' and other elite knowers considered 'reliable' and legally 'safe' – this is only one factor conspiring to skew their focus towards specific kinds of *story*. While one outcome of the expansion of newspaper production into limitless online publishing spaces has been to increase pressure on reporters to generate vast quantities of (often bite-sized) pseudo-news to 'fill' it, another has been to stoke editors' appetites for bigger, bolder, more *dramatic* stories - replete with eye-catching headlines and pictures. An increasingly systematic feature of the process by which 'news judgment' is exercised is the use of cold, hard data on newspaper sales figures and online hit-rates to measure the relative 'popularity' of one genre over another. The implication of this trend is that, regardless of what might be 'objectively' happening in the world and the relative 'importance' of competing stories, reporters now face constant pressure to serve up content according to prescriptive recipes designed to lure in readers and advertisers. While this may seem only a logical next step from the age-old truism that newspapers knowingly write for target audiences, the effect of wilfully pursuing certain types of stories, and giving them disproportionate prominence in the hope of maximising income, marks a new, more nakedly commercial, driver at the heart of the news-gathering process. Not only does it undermine the integrity of journalists' professional news judgment, but it positions newspapers as a distorting prism which - by excluding or marginalising 'less popular' subjects and over-emphasising more 'commercial' ones – presents a version of social reality that is generalised, over-dramatic and lacking in nuance and variety. It is in the context of these efforts to chase market share above everything that newspapers are putting ever-more emphasis on pushing alarmist, unrepresentative narratives over others - including dramatic stories about children.

Data designed to focus news-workers' minds on generating 'sellable' stories is disseminated to journalists at all levels – from national news editors to junior weekly reporters. The local editorial director's daily routine is steeped in the business of analysing audience figures: starting at 8am, he scrutinises the "overnight calls log" provided by his duty radio newsreader, before "scouring" a list of potential leads for the day ahead and ensuring "social media platforms are sufficiently busy - Twitter to tease upcoming web stories, Facebook to harvest feedback on live issues". He then checks the company's main website "to gauge interest levels on current stories - which can in turn determine stories' placement in [the] paper". Information on the 'performance' of individual stories already on the site cascades down to the newsroom via memos emailed to every reporter each morning, detailing the number of hits their latest stories achieved. This leads to a "huge amount of healthy internal competition", on the basis that "if a story is generating a lot of interest, it will move up the running order" on the website and "inform the thinking" about whether, or how prominently, it appears in print.

Using such tactics to foster "healthy" internal competition seems to be having the desired trickle-down effect: motivated by the promise of free iPads for reporters who generate the most traffic, the Somerset-based journalist will "put stuff up I think will attract hits", based on "daily reports" she receives by email detailing "which stories have attracted the most". It is "constantly drummed into" her which categories of news are most popular - principally celebrity, travel, weather and (significantly, given the subject of this thesis) crime. The North London reporter faces similar pressures: thanks to figures from Google Analytics she is sent by her news editor, she knows there is a "massive spike" in web traffic for articles about "crime, stabbing, young people doing bad things". "Because we [reporters] are quite young, it's very competitive about web traffic", she added, describing how she would consciously "try to do something...bigger" than her "young counterpart" in another office if she knew he had "got lots of hits".

Not every reporter is fully signed up to this increasingly demand-led approach to news-making, however. As with the trends towards relying more on official sources, there are modest signs of 'resistance' from older hands. Though even the deputy editor of an atypical North London paper, known for its liberal politics, conceded "crime generally is very in demand", he

rationalised this as reflecting people's desire "to know what's happening on their doorstep". And, while the Devon crime reporter likened his paper's formula for prioritising web stories to "the theory used to determine what goes on the front page, what goes on page two, three, four, five and six", he cautioned that recognising "some stories...attract more attention than others" could ultimately lead to an "only-cover-stories-that-get-big-hits-online" approach. Though she stopped short of endorsing such practices, the web editor of a local daily paper in southern England admitted basing the choice of stories she uploads online at different times of day on "three peaks" in traffic coinciding with key points when office-workers are browsing online – the rationale being that she is serving a demand for "what do I need to know this morning?" and "what do I want to know as I'm winding down", with "funny stories for people to read over lunch" sandwiched between. The overwhelming example being set by nationals, too, appears to indicate 'reader-driven' news practices are here to stay. One Sunday tabloid specialist described disapprovingly how his paper's pace of production had been "*massively* cranked up" since it began embracing digital, adding that mention of its print circulation figures and online performance constantly "seep into general conversation". A colleague recalled the growing onus placed on journalists to find sellable stories on *The Independent* (a paper he had recently left), where editors "take it really seriously". He recalled "chatting to the guy who was in charge of digital production", who "had all these figures at his fingertips" illustrating which stories "generated x amount of hits" and which "were...less interesting". Although the weekend news editor saw print sales as more important – reflecting his paper's traditional, less web-savvy, readership – he argued its major rival could afford to be "laid-back" about its circulation because of its "big numbers" and the fact its website was the world's most-visited online news source. By contrast, as his paper attracted "smaller numbers", there was a tendency to think "what are we doing wrong?" if sales fell – and to encourage reporters to write stories focusing on subjects like pensions and health, that "get lots of interest from our readers". Similarly, for both a reporter on *The Sun* – Britain's biggest-selling daily newspaper - and the assistant news editor of a mid-market tabloid, the litmus-test of audience engagement with particular stories (or types of story) was a combination of print sales and qualitative feedback received through virtual and physical 'postbags'. The former referred to his paper's use of focus-groups to gauge

readers' preferences for different story types, and said of its predilection for "crimes", particularly dramatic ones involving children:

"A crime's a crime: we can't *make* crimes happen...I'm not going to say that...'in the morning we're bloody praying for some big murder', because I certainly don't work that way. If something happens, I'm as shocked as everyone else, but at the same time your journalistic mind is going, 'that's going to be a big story'. This is where there's a disconnect between the way a journalist thinks and the way the public thinks. To say to the public, 'we're always looking out for the macabre and the shocking' is quite grim, isn't it? It's quite cynical. Yet we know that's what people are interested in."

Likewise, while the mid-market tabloid journalist denied "searching the net" for grim news, he conceded his "eyes" were "looking for stories...involving adversity" while trawling the wires. Describing his paper's readers as "an immediate focus-group" that tells it what "sells", he said his editors would "forget about" an issue if "it dies a death after two days", because "we are...trying to sell a paper". The same 'bottom line-driven' approach to monitoring the likes/dislikes of 'reader focus-groups' – these days traceable as much through online discussion-threads and social media as print sales or web hits – is applied in local newsrooms, where it consistently leads to a morbid fascination with dramatic juvenile narratives. Referring to decisions about where stories should be placed – a traditionally editorial matter into which its "sales manager" now has significant input, on the basis of "previous sales" of issues with particular front pages – the Somerset reporter said "choosing stories that sell papers" for prominent positions was "definitely a factor" in decisions about what "to put on the front", adding, "we know crime sells well, as do family tributes to dead people". The editorial director concurred, describing "dramatic stories" about children as "more newsworthy than our traditional 'cute kids' supplements", which, while providing "steady sales increases", could not compete with "far higher increases" sparked by murders and kidnappings. The two "most-read" stories on his group's website "both feature attempted child abductions"- echoing the retired crime reporter's memory of how "sales would rocket" whenever his paper ran such tales.

In the first instance, then, the ability to analyse web traffic is inducing editors to track *how many* readers (or 'users') their stories attract – and, significantly, use these measures to inform not only the kinds of stories they select from the "news net" (Tuchman, 1978) but the sources they use to construct them. But the most enthusiastic online converts are moving beyond this, in the belief that the key to profiting from the web is not so much the *quantity* of 'passing trade' they draw in as the *quality* of relationships they develop with audience-members to persuade them to return for more – and even participate in the editorial process. One national broadsheet with a sophisticated method for monitoring online readership and participation uses this less as a way of guiding reporters to generate 'crowd-pleasing' *future* stories than to enhance those already running, by developing a "conversation" with informed readers. The paper's community manager explained:

"We are looking at what are people talking about on our site? What are they interacting on elsewhere? Should we be covering it? We find ourselves approaching journalists on the paper saying, 'we have this website: we have this huge shop window. How can we further your reporting?'"

But, while there are some signs that more web-centric local papers would like to develop similarly 'qualitative' approaches – the web editor of the local daily uses its "own analytics" to track "uniques" (numbers of individual visitors) while also monitoring the time they spend on the site, where they are "from", whether they were "new" to it, and even "how they move through" it while browsing – the major driving force remains data tracking *numbers* of users. So, while her "default position" is to make discussion-threads available beneath "every story" published online, in the hope readers might linger long enough to debate them, this editor concedes her first routine of the morning is to "put on the stories first I think will generate the biggest hits".

Inevitably, the continual bombardment of data demonstrating the commercial appeal of certain categories of news piles enormous strain on reporters, as they simultaneously keep their radar primed for 'popular' story-types while churning their required daily quotas of content. And on

occasions when they *do* stumble upon leads with perceived commercial potential, they can face almost unbearable pressure from their news editors to turn these into marketable stories - regardless of whether the facts back them up. "They [news-desk] almost *want* it to happen," explained a reporter on Brighton's *Argus*, adding, "once something is a story it's quite hard to knock it down: it *suits* everyone for it to be a story".

There is clear anecdotal evidence, then, to explain why the pursuit/prioritisation of stories judged to have commercial appeal based on past sales figures and hit-rates leads to papers disproportionately prioritising dramatic narratives about children - whether positioned as victims or threats. The deeper question of why such an appetite for these forbidding tales *exists* is explored later this chapter.

Pressure to *present* stories in dramatic and entertaining ways

Commercial pressure on journalists to produce articles that feed a perceived public appetite for juvenile drama also manifests itself in the language and imagery they choose to frame narratives – the aim being to, first, catch readers' attention then hold it long enough to persuade them to 'interact with' stories. These efforts to engage audiences are, in most cases, intrinsically commercially motivated, the rationale being that the longer readers linger over a story, the more time they are spending reading the paper (as opposed to doing other things) - and the more likely they are to browse other content, participate in discussion and, perhaps, tweet a hyperlink or post it elsewhere. Though, when questioned, journalists generally dismissed suggestions they knowingly "dramatise" (let alone "sensationalise") stories, they acknowledged a desire to make them "compelling" - even "entertaining". As a leading feature-writer on a Sunday broadsheet reflected, "you are aware you are competing in a crowded market: you are aware they [readers] don't have time. All the while you are trying to snag and keep the readers". Others were more brazen: the mid-market assistant news editor conceded that, in his paper's effort to "sell a product", it was "completely conscious" of exaggerating certain elements of stories to more deeply affect readers. "An instinct kicks in: you *know* what to do. You *do* have a sense of, 'how far can I take it?' You want to take it as far as you can", he

said, describing a mental process driven as much by commercial considerations as normative journalistic news values. "There's an infinite number of things you could write with any given sentence", he mused, adding, "why you choose to do one thing or another...reflects...what you see, who you're selling it to, who will read it, and you know certain facts written in the intro or written in the headline...make a good story - or perhaps *don't*, and that's what you leave out".

Indeed, the idea of playing up certain aspects of a story – and playing down others – for dramatic effect is hardwired into day-to-day reporting across the sector, with journalists encouraged to frame stories in ways calculated to strike emotional chords with readers and hold their interest. Though, like many interviewees, the Somerset reporter mostly tries to "play it straight" and let stories "speak for themselves", she uses an emotive tone with tragic tales to nudge readers towards particular responses; picks the "most dramatic element of the story for the intro", and favours "words such as 'horror' [or] 'shock'...when writing health pieces - i.e. sick children". "I'll definitely write it with the aim of making the reader feel sympathy", she added. Similarly, the North London senior reporter recalled her paper's decision to "exploit the fact that people were horrified" by a court story about "young people stabbing each other...at three o'clock in the afternoon" because of "a comment made about somebody's girlfriend". Describing this story as "a gift", she said the paper was "very aware" of exploiting the opportunity "to generate more copy", including opinion pieces, as well as straight news stories. The inclination to "pull out the thesaurus", as the Devon-based crime specialist puts it, when reporting incidents that are "worse, more awful, more traumatic, more distressing than others", is becoming increasingly normative, as journalists are pressurised to "snag and keep" readers (to quote the broadsheet feature-writer). Recalling extensive reports and background features he wrote about Vanessa George, the Plymouth nursery worker who photographed herself abusing children in her care (a horror story recalled by Chapter 4's focus-group mothers), the Devon reporter admitted having "waxed lyrical and got all literary" to "get across the horror of what happened". "The idea is still to keep the reader reading to the very end and if I have to make it more 'readable' then I won't beat myself up about it", he argued, adding, "what's wrong is being sensationalist when it's not needed".

And, while the group editorial director rejected any suggestion his journalists would "dramatise" stories – arguing that implied "exaggeration or embellishment, which isn't something we do" - he acknowledged giving dramatic juvenile stories extensive coverage, with "eye-catching headlines and pictures", for commercial reasons, explaining it was "really important to be entertaining as well as informative". As the plethora of online news outlets means local papers are no longer likely to be sources of "breaking news" for even the most parochial stories, his team had "to find ways to offer readers compelling reasons" for people "to continue to buy" - chiefly by "digging beneath the skin of a story and finding fresh, interesting angles". Given that "casual sales" to "the supermarket shopper" increasingly "make up a fair chunk of our readership", he conceded "that does certainly mean front pages are no longer as sober as in years past".

What he described as "digging beneath" a story's "skin" – giving it in-depth coverage that might have the *effect* (if not intention) of enhancing its dramatic impact – was echoed by the broadsheet feature-writer, who reflected on the changing role of papers in a world in which, long before the next morning's editions, the 'facts' of most stories have often been picked over online and/or by 24-hour news channels. "You get the facts – or even a live running interpretation of them – from News 24 or the website, so what you are looking for is *understanding*: you are looking for what it all *means*", he said, adding, "it's not just the Sundays doing this: we're *all* Sunday newspapers now". A former assistant editor of another national broadsheet, in which capacity he was directly involved in decisions about how to structure the paper with the "absolutely imperative" aim of boosting readership, he said he habitually took "an inordinate amount of time" coming up with "an arresting image that will make people stop and want to read that page when they are going through the paper". Though he would "reject the word 'entertainment'" to describe this process, he said it was about "presenting the story in a compelling way" - in so doing locking into a continuum of story-telling traditions stretching back through time, whether " around the fireside or down the pub".

More prosaically, journalists also play on *present-day* continuums by deliberately plugging 'new' stories into ongoing societal narratives - drawing on dramatic symbolism/archetypes with

which audiences will be familiar. In this way, they engage in conscious distortion, by caricaturing events and their protagonists for maximum narrative impact. So public perceptions of the menace posed by "feral youth" or "hoodies" were, argued the mid-market assistant news editor, "reinforced" by the nature and scale of press focus on this group – with the effect that "older generations" now complained about the threat they posed despite "never having seen them, never having met them" and knowing about them principally "through the prism of the media". Admitting his paper had consciously drawn on the hoodie motif when covering England's 2011 urban riots, he said it had "of course" taken the decision to "emphasise" the involvement of "disaffected youth: the bored, lazy youth". It "almost doesn't matter if they're technically outnumbered by over-25s", he added, because "a disproportionate number" of youths were involved:

"If you're writing a story and you're saying, 'in this part of London there are youths smashing shop windows', that's far more interesting than saying, 'half of them were over 25.'"

Given the same journalist's previous admission that he scans newswires for "adversity", it is clear that decisions to *construct* individual narratives in distorted black-and-white terms are matched by similar distortions in the process of initial news *selection*. The net 'effect' of this twofold distortion is that newspapers are culpably misrepresenting reality for profit. If nothing else, the feature-writer acknowledged, the tendency to give blanket coverage to cases of "child abduction and disappearances" – side-lining other major stories in the process – creates "the impression that it happens more often than it does".

Journalists as door-to-door salespeople

Pressure on today's newspaper journalists to proactively 'sell' their stories does not begin and end with the processes of selection and framing. The commercialisation of reporting has now gone far beyond this – to the extent that reporters' jobs are not 'done' until they have taken more *direct* steps to market their wares to the public. "Now you know you've got to beat the opposition and there's a new way of doing this: you can tweet your line", lamented the security

correspondent. Describing the regimes at other nationals, he said tweeting had become almost mandatory at his former paper, *The Independent*, while colleagues at the *Telegraph* had "been told to tweet", with "the last edict to go down" to its news-desk stipulating "you must tweet 10 times a day".

Indeed, 'direct marketing' – or virtual 'door-to-door selling' - of papers' news lines using social media has become such a standard part of daily reporting routines for many that the Devon crime reporter now feels it is "not a lot to expect" him to tweet about his (and colleagues') articles, while much of the local web editor's time is spent "managing" her paper's Twitter and Facebook profiles. But the application of social media goes beyond using it as a mere marketing tool: it is also increasingly aiding the process of news-gathering itself, with audience-members encouraged to bring information to the table, through user-generated content that might generate follow-up stories and/or add value (and readers) to those already running. The web editor said this happens "all the time", especially in relation to 'child victim' stories such as those focusing on "kids who have died in car crashes". Whereas "before you would have had to wait for police to release the name" of the deceased, today "family and friends" will tweet pictures, tributes and biographical details, or "come onto discussion-threads".

At the national broadsheet, reporters also "use the comments around their articles and hash-tags" to "enhance what they are writing", said its community manager. But, while she insisted her paper primarily used such contributions to improve the quality of its reporting, for most others any editorial value they add is trumped by their commercial benefits. The hope is that participating audience-members can create virtuous circles, whereby yet more (and more active) readers are drawn in - and, with them, more advertisers. As the editorial director bluntly put it, in relation to a wider point about the industry's pursuit of online audiences, "an advertiser will buy a certain number of page impressions...and once the site has received that number of visitors his ad disappears - so it's in our interests to drive as much traffic as possible to present maximum commercial opportunities".

Journalists' rationales for the narrative resonance of dramatic juvenile stories

In constructing their dramatised representations of social reality, journalists knowingly draw on narrative tropes and conventions of literary and cinematic fiction. And their use of such framing devices reflects an implicit understanding that, in 'serving' a perceived public appetite for cautionary tales involving children, they are - like gothic novelists and genre screen-writers - drawing on horror traditions stretching back centuries. A common term used by journalists across the spectrum to rationalise the apparent appeal of stories revolving around unresolved child abductions or murders was "mystery". "There is a nub of stories that are universal to *all* newspapers... and that is *partly* because...they are great stories: they're stories people will be talking about in the pub", reflected the broadsheet crime correspondent, and "in the *crime* context" readers were "always intrigued by mystery". For the *Sun* reporter, the essence of the most commercially popular tales was their particular mix of "ingredients" – and the abduction of blonde-haired, blue-eyed Madeleine McCann from a Portuguese holiday resort "had them all - it had...every parent's worst nightmare – the...very well-to-do family, a beautiful child and...a very innocent circumstance". In an explicit evocation of both the popular appeal of crime fiction and the deep-seated tendency of readers (and journalists) to project plausible scenarios back onto themselves – a 'people like us' instinct that emerged in both focus-group discussions and Chapter 7's journalist interviews – he expanded:

"You can imagine the conversations at home: '*we* did that, we leave our kids, remember that time we left little Johnnie and went down for a drink in the hotel?' And then you throw in the foreign element...It was almost a murder mystery: you know, 'what happens next? What *might* have happened?'"

While the crime genre looms large in the story-telling techniques used by journalists to convey dramatic incidents involving juveniles – not least because so many involve abuse, murder or abduction – equally prevalent is the imagery of fairy-tales and horror movies. For the feature-writer – whose "reputation" rests on his ability to write "entertaining, compelling" articles that are "more of a 'read'" than straightforward stories - the "archetype of the missing child"

provided a perfect locus for haunting narratives straight out of "the Brothers Grimm" with which parents everywhere could identify. Referring to the disproportionate emphasis papers place on reporting such stories when they occur against respectable middle-class/idyllic backdrops, as opposed to socially dysfunctional/crime-ridden ones – a 'deserving' versus 'undeserving' distinction to which we return below – he, too, evoked the 'people like us' theme:

"All these things are based on this idea, 'could it happen here? Could it happen to me?' If you get a place that looks beautiful it's perfect for that ancient narrative, in a story-telling way. That's probably part of the reason you don't get so much emphasis on things happening to kids against chaotic backgrounds: people are going to go, 'yeah, that's what happens in those awful places, isn't it?'"

His assertion that newspapers are tapping into an underlying societal obsession with a "serpent in paradise idea" was given empirical weight by the *Argus* reporter, who reflected on the role Chinese whispers (circulated by social media) played in fuelling public anxiety about the supposed spate of 'encounters' between Sussex schoolchildren and a would-be abductor in a "black car" his paper chronicled in July 2011. He later concluded this tale of 'threatening familiarity' – the subject of intense discussion among Chapter 4's focus-group participants - "wasn't true", but rather a self-fulfilling prophecy resulting from a stranger-danger 'awareness event' that led to a succession of children reporting adults behaving suspiciously. While defending the *Argus's* part in fuelling the rumours - arguing it *had* "to treat it like news", in case "somebody *did* attack a young person" – he said the activation of a council "early warning system" sparked by a report from one schoolgirl led to everybody "going round saying there's been an attack, or an *approach*, which they 'read' as an attack". Confusion caused by the subsequent viral spread of rumours on social media led to people "thinking they were getting fresh reports" when, in fact, their friends were misinterpreting (and re-posting) the same 'incidents' as new ones. The result, he argued, was an unjustified "panic" fuelled by a febrile combination of gossip, school pep-talks and the fact his editors felt compelled to include "something in the paper" to cover themselves:

"In the end they [police] had something like 30 reports...and I don't think they stood up a single one. These reports included...a kid fighting someone off with a tennis racket!"

If this tale of 'threatening familiarity' drew on the feature-writer's "serpent in paradise" motif, the retired crime specialist evoked the imagery of *Metamorphosis* in recalling a macabre court story about a couple who choked their babies to death. Describing a reporter's role as being to both "convey a story" and "touch nerves" among readers, he recalled comparing the sight of the baby "rocking" in a cradle in a squalid, fly-infested room "in the middle of summer" to "a scene from Kafka". And, though the feature-writer rejected any suggestion journalists would exploit nightmare scenarios as "entertainment" per se – insisting parallels between the outputs of Hollywood and the newspaper industry were based on art imitating life, not the reverse - he conceded papers might sometimes *tap into* the popular appeal of horror movies (an appetite attested to by several focus-group participants).While describing this as an "issue" for the "entertainment industry", not newspapers, he reflected that "people like to be scared...that's why they've made six *Saw* movies". "They [Hollywood] create hyper-real fictions on the basis of what happens. *They* copy *us*: we don't copy them", he said, before adding, "it may be that out of that compulsion we produce stories that resonate" and "have something in common with Hollywood and other forms of entertainment". And the suggestion papers knowingly play up audiences' (presumed) anxieties to attract - and more interactively engage – readers was accepted with fewer caveats by others. Despite arguing that tales of fear and distrust favoured by his mid-market tabloid are, in part, driven by readers - and the "bizarre psychosis" that attracts British audiences to "negative" stories - its assistant news editor conceded it promoted a worldview that "this country has gone to the dogs, everything is in decline", including "school" and "the family". For this reason, it was "with some justification" that his paper was "characterised as having quite a negative, misanthropic view of Britain [and] the world".

Constructing a 'deserving' versus 'undeserving' discourse

Just as the "serpent in paradise" and "gone to the dogs" metaphors evoke loss of innocence *over time*, so too do newspapers consistently distinguish between 'more' and 'less' innocent children (and families) in the *present*, when deciding how much (and what manner of) coverage to give otherwise comparable stories. In so doing, they implicitly reinforce a socially constructed opposition between deviance and respectability: them and us. Britain's press, argued the mid-market assistant news editor, is biased "across the board" in "valuing" a "white, upper middle-class person" over either working-class or "non-white" individuals, with "the social class of the child involved" or "sometimes the ethnicity" elevating one story and downgrading another, so "white, respectable, middle-class will get above black working-class". To this end, he said, today's reporters routinely check the level of 'social deservingness' of a child and/or family by typing their postcodes into (geographical visualisation program) Google Street View before deciding whether to cover a story and how much coverage to give it. "If there's a murder, 'what's the postcode'?" he said, admitting cases invariably received more coverage if their victims came from "big five-bedroomed, detached" houses rather than council flats. Similarly, the broadsheet legal correspondent said it was "all about the middle-class angle", with stories about "tug-of-war in divorce" or one parent taking "a child abroad" trumping all others – provided they involved well-heeled families. And a Sunday tabloid defence correspondent said he gained more kudos with his news-desk for generating human-interest stories involving the military if children, rather than soldiers, could be positioned as victims. In a further indication of the onus placed on finding dramatic stories about juveniles in general – and those from 'respectable' households in particular - he reflected that, with soldiers regarded as "society's sacred cows", their offspring were treated as "society's sacred *calves*". "You can't get better than a story about...this poor child of a soldier. Wow! The cache that would have", he said, reflecting, "in any genre, if you can get a child into the story it becomes big news".

For the feature-writer, the 'middle-versus-working-class' distinction was never more manifest than in the wildly contrasting level/nature of coverage given to, respectively, Madeleine McCann and nine-year-old Shannon Matthews, who disappeared from her home on a deprived

estate in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, only a few months later. Despite disapproving of this prejudice, he argued the immediate and blanket press interest in the McCanns' plight had another commercial dimension related to measures of 'deservingness', besides social class: the relative attractiveness (and articulacy) of the girls' mothers. "You will get acres and acres of Maddie because her mum was beautiful, whereas not so many acres and some really unpleasant stuff written on Shannon's family because her mum wasn't", he said. More importantly, by foregrounding one child victim over another – rather than giving comparable coverage to *all* such cases - newspapers were distorting social reality still further, by making the case of the middle-class, photogenic child appear even "more important than it actually is".

The flipside of newspapers' bias towards affluent, physically attractive, 'respectable' families in 'child victim' cases is the disproportionate attention lavished on stories positioning the children of down-at-heel, unprepossessing, 'dysfunctional' households as 'threats'. According to the *Argus* reporter, this press stereotype has become ingrained for pragmatic reasons, as the introduction of antisocial behaviour orders (ASBOs) – civil penalties used to target types of low-level disorder historically "concentrated in deprived urban areas" (Millie et al, 2005) - enables journalists to 'name and shame' errant juveniles without fear of legal redress, in a way that was impossible when such cases only came to light through criminal proceedings in youth courts, under which they were banned identifying them (Great Britain. *Children and Young Persons Act 1933*). "The ASBO thing comes to life", he said, because papers are allowed to print "the child's name, the street where he is". Yet, even if we accept the argument that press interest in ASBOs is primarily driven by utilitarian (not ideological) considerations, one outcome of its disproportionate focus on middle-class families in 'child victim' cases and working-class (or under-class) ones when writing about 'child threats' is that it draws an implicit narrative distinction not only between imagined halcyon days past and a similarly fictive present in which (to quote the feature-writer) "everything's broken" and "we need it fixed", but also the relative levels of 'deservingness' of *today's* children - and their "broken" or "fixed" families. In this sense, newspaper discourse of the present - and the simmering *public* anxieties it magnifies in pursuit of ever-bigger, more active audiences - displays the same cultural amnesia Pearson (1983) observed in his historical analysis of recurring moral panics about child "hooligans". Like

today's juvenile panics, all these 'outbreaks' of delinquency were, without exception, depicted by the newspapers of their times as (more or less) decisive 'breaks' with a more ordered, disciplined past. And, just as today's public moralists – from the *Mail*'s Melanie Phillips (2011) to Mr Cameron (Great Britain. Cabinet Office and Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, 2011) – distinguish between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' children in their discourse about "feral" or "troubled" families, the Victorians happily pitted the "sacralised" child (Zelizer, 1985, pp.184-5) against the "delinquent" (King, 1998).

Chapter 7 unpicks how this discourse plays out in practice - in the context of a contemporaneous case study of a textbook news story about a 'deserving' child victim and the 'lost' innocence of a close-knit, seemingly 'safe', community. By combining analysis of newspaper texts and discussion-threads, parent focus-groups and interviews with journalists who worked on this story, it explores how juvenile panics are crystallised in the public sphere through a dynamic transaction between primary definers, the press, its audience(s) and other players. In so doing, it demonstrates how, far from merely reflecting society's anxieties back on itself, papers have the power to *activate* and/or *reinforce* them – by exploiting and repackaging deep-rooted societal fears about misplaced trust and familiar strangers as entertainment.

Chapter 7 – Case study: the abduction of April Jones

On Monday 1 October 2012, at approximately 10.30pm, Dyfed-Powys Police issued a short statement via Twitter and its website, describing how it was "increasingly concerned for the whereabouts of a five-year-old girl" from the small Welsh market town of Machynlleth. Early the next morning it was confirmed April Jones had been abducted at around 7pm, after apparently climbing willingly into a car which had pulled up close to where she was playing with friends, unsupervised by adults. The story was immediately elevated to number-one headline status across British national radio, television, online and print news. Over the following week the police search for April received rolling coverage and consistently dominated national newspaper front pages. Every twist was examined in minute detail – from the revelation that April needed medication for cerebral palsy to the tragic irony that she had been allowed to play out late on the night of her abduction as a treat for receiving a glowing school report. The day after April's disappearance, 46-year-old Mark Bridger was arrested in connection with the inquiry and by Saturday had been charged with her abduction and murder. On Sunday it was reported that, far from being only distantly familiar to April, he was indirectly related to her – having had two children with the sister of her father's ex-partner.

If one lesson can be drawn from the manner in which press and public alike reacted to the disappearance of five-year-old April Jones it was that both chose to focus on (and magnify) key elements of the story familiar from the recurring narratives about child vulnerability explored in Chapters 4-6. The significance of the three sections that follow – analysing interviews with journalists who worked on the story; the framing of reports they produced; and audience responses to news of the abduction, as articulated online and in face-to-face conversation – is that they demonstrate a generalised, underlying juvenile panic discourse positioning children as continually susceptible to the predations of malevolent adults. As we shall see, journalists, their sources, their articles, and members of the public all drew on the same key imagery to make sense of (and distil meaning from) April's story. And it was the convergence of focus on these common tropes – unsupervised outdoor play, mystery vehicles, and abduction by

(familiar) strangers – at every interface in the news-gathering/creation and consumption/response process that conspired to crystallise the simmering panic discourse.

Journalist interviews

Interviews with journalists involved in reporting April's abduction for ten UK national daily and Sunday newspapers testify to an extraordinary level of across-the-board editorial interest in the story – from daily red-tops to Sunday broadsheets. They also go some way towards *explaining* this intense focus – and, by extension, the wider newsworthiness ascribed to stories positioning children as being at the mercy of nefarious adults – by reflecting on its qualities as both a projection of anxieties about risk and misplaced trust shared by audience-members and journalists alike and a classic late-modern gothic fairy-tale ideally placed to exploit these insecurities for commercial gain.

All hands to deck: prioritising April Jones

Given its strong human interest dimension – a missing five-year-old, distraught parents and the all-too-identifiable scenario of unsupervised outdoor play against which it unfolded – it is hardly surprising the story swiftly captured press attention. Nonetheless, the sheer scale of reporting operations launched by certain news-desks, notably those of *The Sun* and a particular mid-market title, surprised even some of their own reporters. The latter's disproportionate response was vividly recalled by the journalist tasked with making its first phone enquiries into April's disappearance after spotting a police tweet while working a late shift the evening she vanished:

"We sent one reporter, who's based in Birmingham - just said, 'go first thing in the morning'. Then, by the time I came into work the next day, it was on Sky News – the full rolling Sky News coverage - and we had about six reporters down there, specialists, like our crime specialist, a colour writer...They [the news-desk] just throw so many...bodies at it..."

The same journalist relayed how, days later, "everyone" in the newsroom was still working on the story – with the paper bolstering its 'ground staff' in Wales by assigning several reporters to spend "day and night" in Surrey, chasing up background information about suspected abductor Mark Bridger, after it emerged he originated from that county. Describing the forensic attention lavished by her paper on every aspect of the story, she recalled being ordered to request a copy of Bridger's birth certificate, in search of any previously unreported biographical details, and to "look up all the addresses of his hundreds of friends" using his Facebook profile, so "people on the ground could go round and see them".

A similarly exhaustive approach was adopted by *The Sun*, which still had at least one reporter stationed in mid-Wales seven days after April's abduction – only withdrawing him after Bridger's initial court appearance on Monday 8 October. Towards the end of the week the paper parachuted in reinforcements to supplement two reporters initially sent from its Manchester office to attend the regular police press conferences and 'door-step' April's family, friends and neighbours and the veteran journalist it had stationed in a local hotel to anchor the Machynlleth operation. Its main bases covered, another senior reporter was sent from London to "come up with something different" by mopping up details missed or glossed over by rival papers and re-interviewing peripheral individuals, including the neighbours Bridger had recently left behind on moving house. Describing the anchor's role as "just making calls, monitoring the wires, looking at websites, bringing everything together", this reporter said his own was motivated by his editors' commercial concern that "we've got it covered, but what are we going to do to make it different to everyone else?"

Far from being confined to conservative and/or tabloid papers, the disproportionate journalistic response was reflected sector-wide. Despite being understaffed compared to *The Sun,* the more liberal *Daily Mirror* already had three reporters and three full-time photographers at the scene by 8am the day after April's disappearance. One of its reporters described a military-style ground offensive, recalling how "the most important thing was we were well organised...and each of us knew what our specific tasks were each day unless there were some dramatic developments". Similarly, 'quality' newspapers were as quick to pour their

(more limited) resources into the town and nearby Aberystwyth, where frequent police news conferences were held. A reporter on a liberal broadsheet spent two weeks in Machynlleth, establishing an early routine of filing "a story first thing, one at lunchtime and others whenever something happened". Reflecting his paper's longstanding emphasis on web coverage, he was also "sending in regular iPhone videos and tweets", relayed to readers via a "live blog", before emailing his editors "what they wanted for the paper" later the same day. And, despite having a significantly smaller editorial budget, a rival broadsheet assigned two reporters to cover the story from day one – including its sole regional reporter for northern Britain and its crime correspondent, who rang his news editor on a "day off" to urge him to "look at sending on this one" after stumbling across the story online. The former described finding Machynlleth "under siege" from satellite trucks and frenzied reporters by the time he arrived early on Wednesday – stating that "even *The Times* had four people there" and the overall media presence felt "incredibly mob-handed". Interestingly, one of those *Times* reporters concurred with this view of overkill – remarking that "the TV crews were really getting in the way in the end" and "the police were going, 'what exactly are you going to do? Live coverage of us finding a body?'"

Even the Sunday papers – published nearly seven days after April's disappearance, at a point when (barring a 'fortuitous' last-minute murder charge on their eve of publication) major story developments had evaporated – invested significant resources throughout the week in keeping 'watching-briefs' in mid-Wales. A leading Sunday broadsheet feature-writer, whose joint by-line appeared on a page-lead the following weekend, recalled his news-desk's determination to make something of the case by "throwing some people at it", including its "best door-stepper". His bosses "wanted a spread from the very beginning", plus a comment piece and, "almost certainly", a "front-page story" with a "minimum two pages, maybe three or four" dedicated to it. Again, Sunday papers' early commitment to covering the story as extensively as possible was reflected universally - from bigger-selling to less popular titles, broadsheets to tabloids. Like newspaper publishers, instead of pooling its papers' resources, Express Newspapers had two separate operations under way in Machynlleth - one each for its daily and Sunday titles. A Machynlleth-based reporter from this group recalled how his sister paper "had cover for itself". Set alongside *The Sun's* desire to "get something no one else has got" and the *Mirror*

reporter's observation that "there is always pressure to get exclusive lines on these stories", the idea that journalists working for the *same* newspaper group were competing against each other for new angles and information on April and Bridger offers yet more evidence of the extreme newsworthiness (and commercial appeal) editors ascribed to the story. Asked whether they could recall ever being involved in larger-scale reporting operations, the *Sun* journalist could only name the McCann case, and while the mid-market tabloid reporter listed three others – the 2011 shooting of five-year-old Thusha Kamaleswaran, London's youngest ever gun crime victim (*Daily Mail*, 2011a); the 2012 assassination of the al-Hilli family in the French Alps (Wright, 2012); and (weeks before April's disappearance) the alleged abduction of 15-year-old Megan Stammers by her schoolteacher, Jeremy Forrest – the one element all these had in common was the involvement of juvenile 'victims'.

The disproportionate priority newspapers accorded the case over other news events is illustrated by more than just the *scale* of their reporting operations. The *Times* reporter was diverted from an assignment linked to a highly newsworthy ongoing public debate about deaths in police custody – an issue conforming to the oft-demonstrated news values of "continuity" or "follow-up" (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). He recalled being "phoned up...at about seven o'clock in the morning, and told, 'get to Machynlleth'" – a redeployment requiring him to "hire a car", as he had taken a train to his previous job (in Warrington). At the time his sense was "very much" that the abduction had eclipsed everything else. Similarly, the *Mirror* journalist recalled his editors' "massive emphasis on the April Jones story in that first week" - putting this down to the question of "what issues affect normal people more than others". Even set against the two other biggest rolling news stories of the week – an emerging scandal over allegations of historic child sexual abuse by late television presenter Jimmy Savile and the annual conference of the Labour Party, of which the latter's paper is a longstanding supporter – April's disappearance was felt to merit most attention. "There is little doubt", he rationalised, "that the abduction of a little girl from a normal working-class estate in Wales was much more relevant to people than the breaking Savile scandal or politics".

Indeed, only one interviewee (the live tweeting broadsheet reporter) disputed the notion April's story was the biggest/most newsworthy of the week. Despite committing several journalists to the operation, including its Manchester reporter, crime correspondent and a live blogger, he insisted his paper probably "put more resources into the Savile and Labour Party conferences" – stories it viewed as equally big "or bigger". The *consensus* view of April as number-one news priority of the week was summed up by the mid-market reporter who picked up the story on her late shift. She rationalised the intense press interest as being down to the fact that "with April Jones there was a real person" and "we had lots of pictures of a nice British family" – a source of appeal to a paper that "wants to get a real face and a real person attached to" stories. By contrast, "with the Savile case, it was anonymous people...you can't name because of Operation Yewtree [police investigation]".

Yet these simple statements of normative human interest news values offer only a superficial explanation of why this single story was held to justify such *disproportionate* investments of time, manpower and money that might otherwise have been harnessed to cover other events. The week of April's abduction witnessed not only Labour's conference and the start of a tsunami of allegations against Savile but also a tightening of the race to secure the US presidency between Barrack Obama and Mitt Romney and the latest twist in a long-running saga over the British government's frustrated attempts to deport Muslim preacher Abu Hamza to Jordan. Yet, far from according one or more of these a comparable investment of their scarce resources, newspapers instead chose to marshal their troops, on a mammoth scale, to provide saturation coverage of the frantic search for a missing five-year-old girl. If one mark of a moral panic is the degree of "disproportion" (Goode & Ben Yehuda, 1994) with which the media reacts to dramatic events that speak to widespread societal concerns - first selecting them over other stories, then framing them as dramatically as possible - the British press response to April's abduction offers a textbook illustration of this process in action.

So what reasons do journalists themselves give for this overkill? The rationales they offered as to why they/their editors found April's story *quite* so newsworthy included the following:

- the presence of a child victim from a respectable ('deserving') household/neighbourhood with which readers might easily identify

- empathy with the family felt by readers and journalists who are parents themselves

- the unexpected, dramatic and unambiguous nature of April's abduction

- snowballing commercial pressures to compete for angles once the story kicked off

- factors particular to this story – the use of social media by police/family to publicise April's disappearance and the coincidence of timing with the Savile scandal

Our kind of people: innocent children, respectable families and 'deserving' victims

As we shall see from analysis in coming sections of the news coverage itself and audience responses to it, April's abduction embodied several key elements of the classic 'child victim' paradigm alluded to by focus-group participants and journalists and reflected in Chapter 5's textual analysis. Chief among these was the perceived innocence of not only the young abductee but also her manifestly devastated parents – and, significantly, the relative *level* of deservingness many papers ascribed to April's ('respectable' working-class) family, and neighbourhood, as a consequence. This struck a marked contrast with the more suspicious attitudes some journalists recalled their editors' adopting in relation to ('dysfunctional' working-class) households/communities at the centre of other recent missing child cases, such as those of Shannon Matthews (Moreton, 2008) and Tia Sharp (Chesshyre, 2012). The importance papers placed on establishing *levels* of deservingness in April's case was illustrated by an instruction the mid-market reporter received from her night editor after alerting him to the tweeted police appeal to use Google Maps to check out the appearance and character of April's estate, in case "the family was just too 'rough' to be of interest" to the paper. "We looked and it was, 'ah, it's a council estate, but it looks...quite nice', and the mayor, the local councillor, was, like, 'oh yeah, they're a really nice family'", she recalled, adding, "it was a Welsh village: it wasn't as bad as an inner [city] and it was a place that was considered safe enough for a five-year-old to play out...and nothing had ever happened there for over 100

years!" Similarly, the *Sun* reporter emphasised the importance his paper placed on establishing the Joneses were "our kind of people" before plunging into the story. Should "this exact situation – 'a child gets kidnapped'" occur again but "the mum is a prostitute and the dad has been unemployed and has got a criminal record as long as your arm", he conceded, there would be "a lot of red flags" to deter papers from covering it so extensively.

Though describing such attempts to determine levels of deservingness as class prejudice, the broadsheet feature-writer acknowledged that, from his paper's standpoint, the Joneses' story slotted into the ('deserving') McCann mould more than that of ('undeserving') Karen Matthews, whose daughter's disappearance from their council home a few months after Madeleine's "got a different *kind* of coverage...a *hostile* coverage", as if to say "of *course* a child would go missing cos these people [on Shannon's estate] don't know how to care for children". Similarly, both the *Sun* reporter and liberal broadsheet crime correspondent explicitly distinguished between the apparent stability (and, by inference, respectability) of April's background and the more problematic one from which Tia had vanished months earlier. Having covered both stories, the latter described April as a "child that was loved, looked after, cared for", in contrast to Tia's "complex family story", which produced "a very early suspect...whose story didn't...stack up" (Stuart Hazell, partner of her maternal grandmother). His regional reporter colleague concurred that, from very early on, "it was pretty much established that she (April) was a deserving victim". A key measure of this judgment was the fact "there was nothing to suggest there was any parental involvement". Contrasting this with Tia's case, the *Sun* reporter argued that, though "a prime example" of "a shocking story...that...ticked all the boxes in the sense that, you know, 'a young child has been horrifically killed, it's just every parent's nightmare'", any clear-cut 'deserving victim' status of the family began "unravelling" as soon as journalists started examining "the parents and the family".

Aside from questions of social status and family background, several reporters noted how April ticked other 'deserving' boxes – citing her young age and gender, cute appearance, blonde hair and even race. Several drew attention to the historic media prominence of 'child victim'

stories focusing on girls, rather than boys: the *Mirror* reporter, liberal broadsheet crime correspondent and feature-writer all alluded repeatedly to the fact April was "a girl" (with the latter commenting that, other than James Bulger, he could not recall an abduction story concerning a boy as high-profile as those of April or "Maddie"). The mid-market reporter, meanwhile, emphasised the importance to her paper of the fact that April took a good picture – describing the advantage the story gained, in terms of perceived reader appeal, when she stumbled on photographs the five-year-old's cousins had posted on Twitter that confirmed she was a "cute child". As we shall see from the next section, pictures establishing April's angelic looks would play a key part in the framing of her narrative in almost all papers – particularly when juxtaposed with a widely used maniacal portrait of Bridger.

For the feature-writer, the importance of pictures as framing devices – and rationales for selecting/magnifying some stories over others - was as much about establishing the 'people like us' status of the families affected by tragedy and loss as the innocence and vulnerability of the victim. Recalling early 'positive' coverage of the McCanns with the disparaging portrayals of the Matthews household long before Shannon's mother was implicated in her daughter's disappearance, he argued Maddie's story "got so many inches of coverage because she [Madeleine's mother, Kate McCann] was good-looking, because pictures...of the anguished mother, looking gorgeous, with the teddy bear in her hand and a summer top on, could easily fill three-quarters of a page". This was a manifestation of "the extent to which the parents are seen to be 'like us', or like we *see* ourselves to be". By contrast, the *Sun* reporter returned to his 'people like us' theme by arguing many tabloid readers would struggle to sympathise with a story about children (and, by extension, parents) from different cultural/ethnic backgrounds to their own – particularly if these could be related to lowly social positions. Describing grieving parents who "can't string three words together" as a "complete switch-off", and explicitly contrasting such people with April's mother and father, he argued there were "things that people empathise with and other things that they don't" – citing a hypothetical case of "a family of Romanian Gypsies who...were involved with drug-dealers and one of their children had been stolen" as a story tabloids would have "covered", but the *Daily Mail* was unlikely to place "anywhere near the front page".

As we shall see from the following textual analysis, in April's case, the process of 'othering' outlined by these two journalists in relation to news values used to distinguish between more and less deserving families was applied even more closely in the 'framing' of Bridger.

Readers (and journalists) as parents: universalising April through the empathy factor

Another key contributory factor to the importance attached to the story, according to several journalists, was the degree of empathy they/colleagues felt for April's family as parents *themselves* – and, by extension, the chord their editors felt it would strike with readers. As we shall see in the next section, this 'empathy factor' manifested itself in published news discourse - and online reader responses - as a generalised impression that stranger-danger and other extra-familial threats present ubiquitous risks to any parent who loosens his/her children's reins, and a similarly universalised sense of loss at April's disappearance. Relating April's story to the wider issue of why 'child victim' stories are accorded such high editorial priority, the feature-writer rationalised this 'empathy factor' as, in part, a reflection of the "age of the people who make decisions about news". "Editors tend to be people who've got teenage kids, news editors tend to be people who've got younger kids, reporters tend to be people who are just having kids - so we're all *primed*, we will automatically think that what we care about is what everybody cares about", he explained. Relating this 'empathy factor' more explicitly to the idea of *commercial* appeal, he added that, when Maddie disappeared, "people *did* turn on their televisions hour after hour, day after day, cos they were interested". A father of three, he was one of several interviewees who confessed to having been personally distressed by missing children incidents he had covered – describing "the Holly [Wells] thing, Jessica [Chapman] thing" and the abduction and murder of "Milly Dowler in particular" as stories that "really burned deep into my conscience as a...father". His view was echoed by the liberal broadsheet regional correspondent (who had two daughters). Describing incidents like April's disappearance as "the most disturbing story types...to cover and also to read about", he reflected that journalists' "attitude to stories about children changes dramatically" when they become parents. But it was the crime editor of a conservative broadsheet who offered the most sophisticated analysis of

how the relationship between the 'reporter-parent' and 'reader-parent' plays out in the news-making process. Referring to his own family circumstances, and drawing on what might be described as a paradigm of 'universalised parenthood', he suggested "we all have the same fears. I've basically got two families - when Sarah [Payne] happened my daughter was nine, and now I've got two other children, aged two and six. On a human level, you basically 'feel' it yourself and you know that all other parents are going to feel the same".

The 'empathy factor', then, appears to resemble a 'triangular' process: it is directed, firstly, through the emotional connection many editors/reporters feel with the plight of parents experiencing such horror stories and, secondly, their expectation that *audience-members* (or those with children/grandchildren) will be similarly emotionally affected. But there is arguably also another way of interpreting this circuit of news construction/framing and processing/response: the value-judgments applied by professionals weighing up the newsworthiness of 'child victim' stories against others they might have selected from the "news net" (Tuchman, 1978) during a given day/week can be seen, in part, as a process of translating empathy for tragedy victims into a cold-blooded, *commercial* assessment of the 'saleability' of such tales, based on their predicted impact on audiences.

The idea that dramatic stories about children promote a deeper engagement between audience and newspaper – and/or 'reader' and 'reporter' – than other news is explored in more detail as a commercial concept in the next-but-one section. Returning to it as an *empathetic* notion, however, the crime editor summed up the three-way discourse linking victim to reporter to reader in such cases as "the awful cliché" that incidents like April's abduction manifest "every parent's worst nightmare". No coincidence, perhaps, that this cliché recurred, as if culturally hard-wired, in three other journalists' testimonies, and repeatedly in both the news discourse and posts on newspaper discussion-threads analysed later in this chapter. Though almost all interviewees alluded (if often obliquely) to the 'empathy factor', mention of it was noticeably more marked among those with their own children. For the feature-writer, the power of April's story was the sense the apparently rare (stranger-danger) scenario it initially presented quickly transformed into a '*familiar* stranger' incident that could plausibly befall *any*

parent, once the chief suspect was established as a family friend. He transposed the idea of April's abduction as an *identifiable* scenario – a variation on the fear of abuse by familiars that even official statistics tell us is a relatively commonplace phenomenon, at least compared to stranger attacks (Krugman, 1995) - with the previously discussed notion that journalists and readers alike identify with 'people like us':

"...it's a sort of exaggerated version of what we [journalists and editors] go through, which is, 'are they like us?' And the question to that I think editors are asking as they look at the facts of a case is, you know, 'to what extent could this happen to any of us?' And with April, there's very clearly a chance that it *could*...Cos if somebody with no background whatsoever [of crimes against children] steps out of our friendship circle, and abducts a child, you know that could happen anywhere..."

As in Chapter 4's focus-group interviews and the newspaper texts analysed in Chapter 5, the concept of 'familiar strangers' and its relationship to a wider discourse of 'threatening familiarity', resurfaced repeatedly in news narratives and discussion-threads generated by April's case. For this reason, it is discussed at length later this chapter.

News values reaffirmed: 'unexpectedness', 'surprise' and an 'unambiguous' abduction

Another 'advantage' April's story had, in terms of perceived newsworthiness, over those of Tia, Shannon and various other 'missing children' (including, arguably, Maddie) was the *unambiguous* nature of her disappearance – a quality equated with a core news value identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965). If there was one factor besides her solid family background which seemed to confirm her as a deserving victim (with the accent on the *latter* word) it was the unequivocal way the case was reported from early on, by police and press alike, as abduction. As the feature-writer summed up, conflating the story's unequivocal drama with the idea of reader identification with her family:

"April was a really classic case of the missing child: good-looking, young child goes all of a sudden...Every parent's nightmare but...actually every *citizen's* nightmare, in a way."

Though not a father himself, the liberal broadsheet crime reporter viewed the story similarly, distinguishing between April's case as "a classic...snatch" and the fact there "will always be missing people" – not all of whom will be deemed worthy of (comparable) attention. "Sometimes these things are slow-burners, but this was very obviously abduction...and she was *five*", he reflected, adding, "the age of the child and the nature of her disappearance" resonated particularly with editors. The *Express* reporter also cited the story's "classic" abduction tropes as key to its newsworthiness. These tropes – unsupervised outdoor play, a mystery car and an apparent stranger-turned-acquaintance who personified the 'threatening familiarity' concept – recalled many of the strongest fears voiced by focus-group participants. They also recurred consistently in both the framing of April's narrative in print and responses to the story from focus-groups and those contributing to discussion-threads, both considered later this chapter. "The fact she was only five years old and...was seen in a vehicle and then driven off" were, argued this reporter, elements of the story that rang early alarm bells - as was the fact "the police put a message out straightaway, and it didn't look like a family member". There was "a 'feel' about it being a bit more serious", he added, referring to the fact Bridger "lived not far from the mum and dad" as a detail that leant a further frisson.

Establishing that April's disappearance was being treated as a criminal incident involving someone from outside her immediate family circle also proved vital for the mid-market reporter. Verifying this with the police was another of the preliminary checks she was ordered to conduct before writing anything for the paper. "The news editor was like, 'right, can you just check it out? It's a missing girl, but she's probably just, like, been picked up by her stepdad'", she recalled, alluding to a procedure used by journalists to distinguish between genuine kidnappings and "runaways" or children "abducted by the parents" during custody disputes. Similarly, the *Mirror* reporter argued that "context plays a role" in news judgments about whether to treat a child's disappearance as a story, because "children go missing almost every day from all kinds of backgrounds", often turning up "safe and sound".

Significantly, like the mid-market tabloid reporter, the *Mirror* writer raised the importance news-desks attached to gauging the *level* of seriousness with which police were viewing an incident before committing themselves to a high-stakes investment in a story. His statement that "you can usually take a cue about the nature of the disappearance by the police reaction" demonstrates the level of journalistic reliance in such cases on official sources with their own institutional agendas – in this instance to appeal for witnesses to a serious live incident and, in so doing, sensitise public awareness about the possibility of such crimes and the (vital) role they play in combating them. This reflects the pattern of newsgathering observed in many other studies of the construction of moral panic narratives (e.g. Hall et al, 1978) - a theme returned to in coming sections.

The rare and "unambiguous" nature of the abduction scenario (Galtung & Ruge, 1965) that unfolded very soon after April's disappearance clearly helped dramatise the story – and justify rapid investment of scarce journalistic resources – in *general* terms. However, the level of "unexpectedness" (Ibid) or "surprise" (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001) arising from this *particular* incident was magnified by the fact the location where it occurred, Machynlleth, had (to those aware of its existence) a long-held reputation for atypical neighbourliness and low crime rates. Reflecting on the added newsworthiness this fact lent the story, the *Sun* reporter recalled journeying to an "idyllic part of the world", while the broadsheet regional correspondent described the town as a "little hippy idyll" and the *Express* journalist the sense of "going back in time" as he drove into the Welsh countryside – impressions that, as we shall see, leant a further dimension to the evocative narratives reporters conveyed in their writing. Careful to distinguish between April's unusually isolated yet community-oriented council estates and (less deserving) neighbourhoods of a more ghettoised, dysfunctional kind – a distinction insinuated in some published coverage discussed later this chapter - the *Sun* reporter described Machynlleth as "a largely working-class town" where "people tend to know everyone" and there is "hardly any crime" apart from "the occasional fight outside a pub". The sense that one baleful act (the abduction of a five-year-old girl) had stolen not only *her* innocence but her *community's* became an integral ingredient of the way the story was dramatised in newspaper

coverage, and is discussed in detail below. For the feature-writer, though, the combination of *general* "classic" abduction tropes discussed earlier with the highly *individual* setting in which this particular crime took place also lent it a literary dimension. Likening the story to a dark, late-modern "Hansel and Gretel" – a throwback to certain themes explored in relation to historical representations of children in Chapter 3 – he described the "deep, dark, mysterious part of the country" it occurred in as somewhere you might find yourself if you "keep going for a couple of hours" beyond "the edge of nowhere". "There is an elemental aspect to the landscape, too, with the mountains and the woodlands and the forest - so there is a...kind of dark poetry about it in a way", he reflected, emphasising the evocative appeal of "a nice-looking young kid who goes missing suddenly in this mysterious, elemental, fairy-tale-type space". Yet, while emphasising the story's fable-like qualities, he also attributed its potency to the fact it fed into a continuum of latter-day cautionary tales about "the archetype" of "the missing child" preyed on while out of her parents' sight – another example of the "continuity" often identified as a consistent news value of western journalism (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). "We *know* this story, we've *seen* this story", he reflected, adding, "*I've* covered this story: this is Milly...this is Holly and Jessica".

Selling papers: commercial appeal of missing children stories and the 'snowball effect'

An extension of the 'empathy factor' underpinning the rationales offered by journalists for April's perceived deservingness as a news subject – her youth, angelic looks, stable family background and 'similarity' to readers' (and reporters') own children – was the *commercial* appeal attached to her story. Interviewees cited a mix of personal impressions and anecdote to support the notion that one consideration editors had in mind when judging how much to invest in such stories was their potential to attract more readers, engage them more meaningfully and, by extension, generate higher profits. For the feature-writer, the measure of a story's commercial potential was its ability to produce not only quantitative gains like newspaper sales or web hits but a (qualitative) *depth* of involvement with readers. By playing up its symbolism and mystery, editors hoped to immerse readers hard-wired to societal concerns about risk/trust as *active participants*, rather than passive consumers. The commercial element, he said, was

"not just slight", because stories like April's were "the ultimate 'interactive' stories" - ones greeted as a boon by newspapers that "want everybody to *participate*...in the multimedia sense...*across* the platforms, and get on the forums". "What you're asking people to do", he added, "is not just to say, 'oh there's a poor little girl gone missing', but to *think* about her: 'where could she be? Could she be in your back garden?'" Implicit in this remark was an intriguing suggestion that the viral nature of (online) rumour-mongering about such tales – a source of confusion debated at length by Chapter 4's parent focus-groups – is something of which newspapers are entirely conscious as they conspire to create (commercially driven) 'conversations' around them.

Just as some journalists interviewed for Chapter 6 spoke of their news editors sharing with them data on their papers' sales figures/hit-rates, the *Sun* reporter raised the importance of focus-groups as a determinant of gatekeeping decisions news teams took when choosing to lavish such attention on April. "We have focus-groups of our readers who come and sit down in a room and say what they're interested in", he said, adding that, from "an entirely commercial perspective", executives would greet some stories with the hard-nosed business response, "hold on a minute, we don't want to be doing stories on this because we've already seen from focus-groups that this is a complete turn-off for readers".

Another way in which journalists articulated the commercial imperative underpinning interest in missing children stories was as a 'snowball effect' beginning with the initial decision by some outlets to go big on them – and the inducement this gave competitors to follow suit. Rather like the process of "continuity" observed in newspapers' coverage of certain events and issues by Galtung and Ruge (1965), Harcup and O'Neill (2001) and others, once a story like April's has got off the ground, and there appears to be a public appetite for regular updates, competition between rival publications for new details/angles - and the level of importance news-desks attach to these - *intensifies*. For the *Sun* journalist, the April 'snowball effect' was driven by 24-hour television news channels, which had the advantage of being able to report the story as a live unfolding drama from Monday evening onwards – a day-and-a-half before most print papers were in a position to splash it. Inferring evidence of demand for updates on the story

from the relentless nature and extent of TV coverage *supplied*, he said, "if TV think it's a good story and there's 'events' - there's a search going on and it's on Sky all day and night, and everyone wants more - that kind of ramps up the...necessity to produce the coverage on *your* part". Nonetheless, even more important than edging *ahead* of one's competitors was the need to *keep up* with every newsworthy development they covered – an expression of the "pack" mentality so often observed in newsroom ethnographies and interviews with journalists carried out for earlier studies (Tuchman, 1978; Ehrlich, 1993). He illustrated this point by conjuring up an imagined quote from April's mother, Coral, which would have appealed to journalists' commercial instincts as they raced to outwit each other to write the most involving story:

"If...you know that all your competitors are looking at this line that, I dunno, the mum has...described her daughter as an 'angel from above' or something, then, you know, that's very powerful, so...everyone kind of...'follows' each other."

The intense competition newspapers faced to *keep up* with rivals (and other media) out of pathological fear of 'missing' any development, however slight, tells only one side of the story: as the *Sun* reporter and others argued, what the print press ceded to rolling news channels and online outlets in terms of timeliness they were expected to make up for in synthesis and exclusive 'extras'. For him, this gave papers willing to commit sufficient resources in the field clear *advantages*: while the police search of "quarries and caves" and the presence of "divers in rivers" made for "great, gripping TV" that stoked viewers' "emotions" (in so doing, fuelling their appetite for further coverage), the largely descriptive nature of the visuals they presented appeared, after a time, "very dry and very straight". By contrast, the press were freer to speculate and explore the "theories" or latest "line of inquiry" around April's disappearance, allowing them to "run a story that, you know, police are searching this quarry system" that is "full of...mine shafts and holes, where you can leave a body".

Intense competition for new angles was also alluded to by the *Express* journalist, who recalled striking lucky by bumping into one of April's few relatives not to have given interviews prior to the weekend (her maternal grandmother) and persuaded her to speak to him. This was a line

he was "keen on getting" high up in his published story "because we had that exclusively to ourselves". Similarly, the late-shift mid-market reporter who helped break the story said of her paper's day-to-day pursuit of additional angles over and above those revealed through the numerous police press conferences – the source of much of the coverage printed in less well-staffed titles, according to interviewees – that papers "needed *multiple* lines" to stand out from the crowd, because "there was so much coverage".

Evidence of intense competition for new lines – especially in relation to biographical background on Bridger and his connections to April's family – and efforts to 'keep up with the pack' were both visible in the textual analysis of print coverage explored later in this chapter.

Social media, citizen searchers, and Savile: the April Jones case as 'perfect storm'

Most factors journalists cited to justify the degree of newsworthiness attached to April's story – and the nature and scale of the coverage it garnered - appear to reflect normative (if commercially driven) news values they/editors would apply to the majority of dramatic tales involving child victims. However, as several interviewees reflected, additional elements came into play in this case which conspired to further elevate the story's profile. One particularly influential factor was the role technology (especially social media) played in facilitating many aspects of the coverage – from the tweeted police statement and newly instated Child Rescue Alert system initially used to publicise April's disappearance nationwide to the frenzy of Twitter and Facebook activity that followed from family, friends, celebrities and concerned members of the public. Technology not only accelerated the process of disseminating press statements and news updates to media organisations from official channels, but frequently became part of 'the story' itself – as, for instance, April's family harnessed social media to post images of the five-year-old immediately after her disappearance and 'webcast' their appeals (and the related 'pink ribbon' campaign) over ensuing days (Lawton, 2012, p.1). Moreover, social media also proved crucial to the process of audience meaning-making, as shown by responses the story generated from focus-groups and newspaper discussion-threads (analysed later).

Of all the influences technology exerted on the *news-making* process, however, it was the use of social media as a tool for raising the alarm initially that was perhaps most 'unique' to this story – with a small local constabulary, Dyfed-Powys Police, issuing its witness appeal via Twitter and becoming the first UK force to activate a then new US-style national alert system for missing children introduced in 2010 by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre. While the latter fact became the subject of newspaper coverage in itself ('First test of national alert system yielded 700 leads: behind the story', *The Times*, 3 October), journalists who covered the story in its early stages recalled how crucial social media was in helping them source and verify information - and do so quicker than would otherwise have been possible. The reporter who wrote the first 'snap' alerting newspaper news-desks to the story from the Press Association (Britain's main national newswire service) recalled frustratedly struggling to access the Dyfed-Powys police website for confirmation of April's disappearance after her night editor asked her to investigate the source of a rumour trending on Twitter. Only by 'excavating' back through a long succession of viral tweets and re-tweets posted by anxious members of the public was she able to establish "the cops were on Twitter and that's where it was coming from". While she went on to use more traditional reporting skills to develop the story further, at every turn she was aided by technology – using Google Maps to locate a local pub and service station from whose owners she obtained quotes and a "reverse phonebook" to contact April's godmother in Aberystwyth. The mid-market reporter, working a parallel night shift, also cited Twitter as the primary source of material she used to confirm not only basic details of the story but also its suitability for her paper. This enabled her to add momentum to the unfolding tale by writing a hurried report for the following day's late print editions (which few other titles managed). She said:

"It was big on Twitter - people kept on re-tweeting about it. I went on Facebook. We didn't have her [April's] name. Well, we did have the name Jones – but *Jones*, in *Wales*.. I think we quite quickly found her parents on Twitter...and a cousin, I think, and they both had pictures of her."

Another key factor that enhanced the story's perceived newsworthiness – fuelled, in part, by the flurry of dialogue and Chinese whispers on social media – was the almost unprecedented

scale of public involvement in the manhunt. So huge was this operation, mounted the night she disappeared, that the service station the PA reporter contacted had stayed open so volunteers could re-fuel their vehicles and the pub landlord told her all his customers had left to join in. The search's continuation over coming days would effectively lead to the story splitting into what the liberal broadsheet regional correspondent described as "two parts": the investigation and "the town's reaction". Indeed, so extensive and persistent was the level of public participation in search efforts (at times defying police appeals for volunteers to leave it to the emergency services, as weather conditions worsened and the prospect of finding April alive receded) that growing tensions between professionals and amateurs spilled over into a major strand of later coverage – a trend addressed later this chapter.

If one factor above all else contributed to enhancing the story's newsworthiness, though, it was the fact April's abduction occurred in the same week as the first trickle of what became a relentless tide of allegations of juvenile sexual abuse against Savile. As juxtaposed headlines about (and images of) April and the deceased TV star attested in coming days, the coincidence of timing of these two disparate stories amounted to a perfect storm conducive to *crystallising* the simmering panic about child vulnerability in late-modern Britain that earlier chapters have identified. As the liberal broadsheet crime reporter observed, such explosions of publicity tend to come about in circumstances where there is some additional 'backdrop' - besides the drama of an incident itself - to elevate it above everything else. For Wells and Chapman, abducted and killed by Ian Huntley in Soham almost exactly a decade earlier, the scale of coverage had been influenced by the rhythms of the news 'calendar' and the fact they vanished during "a *quiet,* quiet summer". For April, it was the fact "the Savile thing kicked in" at almost exactly the same time. The *Express* reporter concurred, rationalising his editors' persistent determination to put April on page one – despite the gradual slowdown of developments in the story as the week wore on – as, in part, a consequence of general sensitisation to 'child victim' narratives resulting from the parallel unravelling of the Savile scandal. "I think we all kind of knew that it [April] was going to be front-page news because it had been such a big story – the timing of it, him being charged [and] it was that week of the Savile allegations breaking", he reflected.

For the mid-market reporter, however, Savile was only part of the equation: in fact, April's abduction took place against an *already* febrile atmosphere generated by not just the drip-drip of revelations about the DJ but also a succession of dramatic tales that had unfolded over preceding weeks, in which minors were positioned as victims of predatory adults. This continuum had begun in late summer with the disappearance and murder of 12-year-old Tia, followed by Megan's alleged abduction. Though she confused the order of these stories while recounting them, the reporter recollected going "straight from that [April] onto...the girl who was kidnapped by her teacher, within weeks – and then...straight onto Savile" – bracketing the string of dramas as "four, you know, 'paedo stories' in a row" and describing how each was treated as being of such importance that "everyone" on the paper "worked on" them. In fact, so dominated was its agenda by such stories by the time the April and Savile coverage appeared that there came a point when "editorial staff" in the newsroom "seemed worried there were too many paedophiles in the paper" – suggesting that, notwithstanding their intrinsic commercial appeal, it might encounter a law of diminishing returns if its pages became too saturated by this grim 'child victim' discourse.

As we shall see from the textual analysis of newspaper coverage and discussion-threads, journalists' concerns that they were contributing to a feeding frenzy of alarmism about the vulnerability of juveniles to the predations of dangerous adults were not without foundation.

Sourcing the story: how April's narrative was framed

If a single factor helped shape the way journalists *framed* April's story while committing it to the page - besides a shared sense of the inherent newsworthiness of key imagery it conjured up – it was the sources they chose to consult in researching it. In this case, most interviewees confessed to relying on the police even more than usual – a fact they put down to the remote location of Machynlleth and the absence of many other obviously informed sources, bar April's friends and family and various 'expert' emergency services recruited to coordinate searches of mountains and rivers. In choosing (or being forced) to rely so heavily on the police, though, newspapers were allowing themselves to be led by a statutory law enforcement agency

motivated by an agenda to promote the value and effectiveness of its work – a case founded, in part, on a portrayal of the world as threatening and prone to sudden, dramatic crimes. While it might be a step too far to evoke Hall et al's (1978) idea of crime as an "ideological construction" in this particular context, the economic backdrop of the times and, by extension, the pressures facing the police as a publicly funded institution were arguably very similar to those of the early 1970s explored in *Policing the Crisis* - with individual forces fighting to assert their importance in the face of swingeing austerity cuts (*www.bbc.co.uk*, 2010b).

Several interviewees went out of their way to praise the professionalism displayed by police officers overseeing this case, with the *Mirror* reporter describing them as "in control of the story from day one" and "extremely helpful to the media throughout". Likewise, the liberal broadsheet regional correspondent suggested officers were "very good" at "deliberately drip-feeding information to keep new lines bubbling". Though he described this, critically, as a form of calculated news management – a technique used to keep the story in the public eye by issuing a steady stream of information geared to media deadlines - he recognised its usefulness to him personally. As his paper's lone reporter based in Machynlleth, he would otherwise have been overstretched trying to find new lines for the following day's paper, compared to the multiple journalists sent by rival titles. His London-based colleague was similarly impressed by officers' command of the situation, recalling "the really good job" they did in "answering journalists' queries very well". One of many aspects of this "good job", besides offering "bubbling" updates on the search itself, was the detail they provided of progress in investigating the mysterious Bridger. One veteran broadsheet crime editor remarked on the "really unusual and quite legally controversial" decision detectives took to "stick his [Bridger's] name out" before charging him with any offence – six days before his alleged crime was formally elevated to murder. The very fact such moves were "unusual", of course, rendered them all the more newsworthy in journalists' eyes, while the police's provision of striking photos of everything from a wild-eyed Bridger to his (seized) Land Rover lent the story an irresistible visual impact.

Reporters' professed dependency on the police echoes the findings of numerous earlier studies, in which academics have warned of their overreliance on official sources whose

systems are geared to providing them with reliable channels of 'oven-ready' information – and the knock-on effect this can have on the framing of news narratives in terms reflecting (ideological) societal norms (Tuchman, 1972; Chibnall, 1975 and 1977; Gans, 1979; Schlesinger, 1978; Fishman, 1980; Bantz, 1985). Perhaps the most vivid illustration of the shared consensus between news media and police influencing the construction of this particular story was the crime editor's revealing remark that, when reporting dramatic stories such as 'live' missing children cases, he had come to think of himself as fulfilling a "public service". It was not only acceptable but routine, he argued, for journalists to dispense with editorial conventions in such cases by agreeing to publish – and "nowadays to tweet" – numbers the public should call if they had information that might help solve them. Such stories were "as high a priority for us as they are for the cops, for pretty much the same reasons: to get the message out there".

Though the police were, overwhelmingly, the most relied-upon 'formal' contact in this case, it is notable how many early tributes to April gathered by journalists on the ground (and via social media) came not from her family but other official/semi-official sources, including elected councillors, the local mayor, a vicar and April's teachers - the latter representing a profession with clear vested interests in promoting child protection, arising out of their institutional position as guardians in *loco parentis*. Given the close-knit nature of Machynlleth's community, it may have seemed logical to contact such individuals, in the expectation they would be familiar with the Joneses (not to say easier to track down in the earliest stages, when reporters were frantically trying to establish the facts of the case, confirm it as abduction, and liven up their copy by obtaining quotes from people who knew April). Nonetheless, it is surely significant that the mid-market reporter – who drew particular attention to the practical problem of locating the Joneses – set such store on the fact that the "mayor" or "councillor" she succeeded in contacting on the night April vanished confirmed they were "really nice" (and thus 'deserving' of her paper's sympathy).

Besides officials, the key sources pursued by journalists reporting April's story were primarily her relatives, friends and neighbours – as reflected in much of their testimony (and print

coverage analysed later this chapter). The most common reason given for door-stepping these individuals was to lend the story a 'human interest' dimension, a degree of emotion that would heighten readers' empathy towards the family – something not so easily provided by official sources. The liberal broadsheet regional correspondent's explanation of the division of labour between himself in Machynlleth and his London-based colleague was that he was tasked with "focusing on the human side" by reporting on the "town's reaction". Meanwhile, the desk-bound PA reporter explained her night editor's determination to get a regional reporter to the scene as soon as possible after publishing her initial snap as a desire to "talk to local people" and "humanise the story". A vivid example of how sensitive handling of friends and neighbours could potentially pay off with sought-after exclusives for individual papers was mentioned by the *Sun* reporter, who recalled a colleague persuading "a friend of the family" to part with a photo of April riding her pink bicycle. This image ended up a front-page splash - in recognition of its poignancy, given the widely reported fact she had been playing on the same bike the night she vanished.

But the journalists were unanimous that the prize 'human interest' contacts were April's own family – and, with Machynlleth and its environs besieged by reporters within hours of the story breaking, it is hardly surprising everyone, from both sets of grandparents to her godmother, were swiftly subject to feverish press attention. Indeed, the intense competition between papers for quotes from family members who had not yet been interviewed elsewhere as the week wore on is reflected in the *Express* reporter's anecdote, cited earlier, about his determination to frame his story around his exclusive (if fleeting) chat with April's grandmother.

From the interviews alone, then, it is clear that journalists relied on two principal categories of source in their efforts to, first, keep up to date with the manhunt and, second, project human faces onto the unfolding drama: official contacts (principally police, April's school and councillors) and the Joneses, their friends and neighbours. The fact that both investigators and April's parents were making coordinated use of press conferences, tweets and Facebook appeals (notably the 'pink ribbon' campaign), to keep her name and image in the public eye even as hopes of her safe return faded, rendered the press ever more *dependent* on these

sources – and, by extension, wary of deviating from 'official' portrayals of the story as they deliberated over how to frame articles. The only way any exclusive – therefore, 'individual' – angles generally emerged was through a reporter occasionally striking "lucky" (to quote the *Express* journalist) by obtaining a quote or photo not seen elsewhere. But even when this occurred, the overwhelming object of speaking to new sources – once the 'deservingness' of April's parents had been established – was to humanise the story by, first, *generalising* it to symbolise incidents that could befall *any* family and, second, framing Bridger as a sinister 'familiar stranger', in opposition to the virtuous 'people like us' signified by the grief-stricken Joneses and their community. The question of how journalists' choice of sources, in combination with news values they applied to the story, translated into the framing of April's abduction on the page is one to which we now turn.

Textual analysis

The lavish manpower and resources newspapers invested in covering April's story in the week following her disappearance was reflected in blanket coverage in their pages – another classic illustration of the "disproportion" associated with moral panics (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). In the week commencing with the first full day of print coverage (Wednesday 3 October), the nine dailies and 10 Sundays sampled ran 157 separate articles on April between them, spread over 156 pages – many devoted entirely to the subject[5]. While the *Sun* and *Daily Mail* printed the most pieces (20 and 18 respectively), close behind was a 'broadsheet', *The Times* (16) - a mark of the overwhelming consensus about the story's newsworthiness. And, though geographically distant from Machynlleth, the Brighton *Argus* reflected this 'universal' appeal by leading its sole national news page with it on 'day one' (*The Argus*, 2012, p.2). Significantly, its two other biggest national stories were the latest twist in the Savile saga and schoolteacher Forrest's appearance before an extradition hearing in France over Megan's alleged abduction.

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[5] As news of April's abduction broke late on Monday 1 October (Press Association Mediapoint Wire, 2012), early evening deadlines meant only later editions of one or two newspapers were able to report the incident the next day. For this reason, the seven-day period of textual analysis commenced with the first full day of print coverage: Wednesday 3 October. *The Sun* ran the most articles on April in the first week (20), with the *Independent* carrying the fewest (10). On the single Sunday examined (7 October), the 12 national titles collectively printed 24 articles, over 29 pages. Nearly a third of these (46) featured on front pages, most as leads (splashes). For a full breakdown of the number of articles per newspaper, see Appendix 2.

Skewing the agenda - the imbalance between April coverage and other stories

A key measure of the disproportionate prominence April's story achieved was the extent to which its reporting eclipsed that of other, arguably equally newsworthy, subjects. Various stories that might normally have benefited from extensive column-inches went largely unreported – or under-reported[6]. A vivid illustration of this under-reporting of competing stories can be glimpsed by contrasting the limited range of subjects covered in the nationals on Wednesday 3 October with the more extensive menu of potential leads listed on the previous morning's news schedule published by PA (Press Association Mediapoint Newswire, 2012). Though far from prescriptive, these schedules are circulated at least twice daily to every national newspaper and other subscribing organisation, and list the main events the agency's editors are assigning their own reporters to cover on subscribers' behalf during the course of the day. As Manning White (1950) observed more than six decades ago in his classic study of the different levels of gatekeeping filter represented by wire agencies and, in turn, editors who select stories from their output, there is usually some variation between the choice of events prioritised by the wires and those selected to appear in the next day's newspapers. However, the disparity between the 7am "PA Headlines" published to subscribers on 2 October and the balance of coverage given to competing stories in print the following morning was marked[6]. While the top story listed on PA's schedule after April - Labour leader Ed Miliband's keynote speech to his party conference – was widely reported on 3 October, several of its other leads featured minimally, if at all. These included two stories conforming to long-recognised news values of "continuity" (Galtung & Ruge, 1965) or "follow-up" (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001), by

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[6] The Abu Hamza story was reported in only three nationals: the *Guardian*, *Independent* and *Times*. Other overlooked stories that day included a fatal crash between a pleasure boat and ferry off the Hong Kong coast. Though this appeared in every paper bar *The Times,* in *The Sun* and *Daily Mail* – two papers normally noted for their appetite for human tragedy – it merited only 107 and 78 words respectively (ProQuest Newsstand, accessed on 8 March 2013). Other stories 'under-reported' by newspapers during the seven days commencing with news of April's abduction included publication of a critical report by the Resolution Foundation think-tank into the British government's then controversial welfare reform programme – the subject of exhaustive media coverage at other 'pinch-points' over preceding months. On day three of its April coverage, the paper that had previously devoted the most space to the welfare debate, *The Guardian*, allocated a full page and two articles to April but only eight paragraphs to the think-tank study - on the same page as yet another lengthy report on Savile.

representing the latest developments in high-profile sagas: the latest twist in a long-running controversy over the putative deportation of Hamza, and an appeal by the British Chambers of Commerce for Ministers to invest billions in infrastructure projects to stimulate economic growth after four years of on-off recession. The latter was ignored by every sampled paper (*ProQuest Newsstand*, 2013).

By contrast, the one story of the week that enjoyed almost equal billing with April's was the unfolding scandal of historic child abuse allegations against Savile, which generated 156 articles – stripping out the 16 pieces focusing on related claims levelled at another celebrity, Freddie Starr[7]. The combined effect of the blanket coverage given to the April/Savile stories – the faces of their key protagonists often juxtaposed on front pages – was striking over the seven-day period analysed. That the Savile saga was, like April's abduction, a horror story positioning children as victims of extra-familial threats posed by (superficially benign) predatory adults only added to the sense that the week's news agenda was dominated by a febrile and crystallising juvenile panic discourse focusing on 'familiar strangers'. Hardly surprising, perhaps, that a mid-market tabloid's reporters should end up grumbling about there being "too many paedophiles" in their paper (see last section)

As if consciously tapping into this panic discourse, at the same time as they began devoting disproportionate space to analysing the circumstances of April's disappearance, speculating on her whereabouts, and following every twist in the ensuing search, the papers reserved sizeable chunks of the limited room left to cover the remaining news for *further* stories casting children as innocent victims of violence, abuse, neglect and other assorted threats. As at other crystallising moments of juvenile panic – whether the frenzied, campaigning coverage arising from the abduction and murder of Sarah Payne or the Soham girls or, by contrast, the bogus youth crime-wave hysteria dwelt on by Hall et al and Fishman (both 1978) – newspapers

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[7] A significant number of the articles centring on Savile were to be found on comment, leader and opinion (rather than news) pages, and it seems reasonable to assume there would have been many similar pieces on the April case had writers been as free to air their personal views on this subject as they were about the growing mountain of evidence against the deceased (and legally powerless) television presenter. Given that police had already arrested a suspect in the April case even before the first print articles rolled off the presses, almost from the outset editors were constrained by the Contempt of Court Act 1981 (Great Britain. *Contempt of Court Act 1981*) and Press Complaints Commission's editors' code of practice (Press Complaints Commission, 2014) when deciding how to relay the story. Had they not been, April's abduction might well have generated even more articles – putting it further ahead of the week's other stories in terms of coverage.

appeared to be actively trawling the "news net" (Tuchman, 1980) for stories that supported the dominant discourse underpinning the April and Savile cases: namely that children are helplessly beset at every turn by all manner of external dangers. Among the myriad 'child victim' stories unrelated to either individual that appeared in the nationals' pages during the first three days after the girl's disappearance were the following: 'On trial for child abuse 63 years ago', 'Tot death: mum hid his injuries', and 'Girl, 2, died after swine flu blunder' (*Daily Mirror*, 3 October); 'Killer used his kids as pawns', 'Boy's car fall death' and 'Girl hit by tube train' (*The Sun*, 3 October); 'Tragic tot: nursery staff held' (*Daily Express*, 4 October); 'Did having ears pierced make this teenager's heart stop?' (Daily Mail, 4 October); 'Brit child is ferry victim' (*Daily Mirror*, 4 October); and 'Girl bitten by friend's Collie' (*Daily Star*, 5 October). On one day alone (Friday 5 October) the *Daily Mirror* ran a side panel about the court appearance of former newspaper tycoon Eddie Shah for the alleged rape of a 13-year-old girl two decades previously ('Eddie Shah sex charge'); a single-column filler about a three-year-old boy who had been allowed to wander, unsupervised, out of his nursery and onto a road ('Mum slams nursery for tot walkout'); a basement (bottom of page) story about a "serial paedophile" who attempted to kidnap a boy of 10 while his mother bought groceries at a supermarket checkout ('Kidnapper perv jailed'); and a facing page-lead focusing on a photograph of grieving mother Erica Pederson posing happily with the two young children her estranged husband had stabbed to death the previous weekend ('My angels are in heaven now'). Moreover, of all the "headline" stories promoted by PA's 2 October schedule the one that achieved the highest 'hit-rate' in the following day's papers (besides April's disappearance and Mr Miliband's speech) was the abduction of teenaged schoolgirl Megan. This featured heavily in the *Sun*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian* and *Independent*. In short, by lavishing saturation coverage on the April and Savile stories and devoting so much of their remaining space to other tales positioning children as victims - in many cases of nefarious adults – national newspapers contrived to promote a bubbling panic about juvenile vulnerability that became the overwhelmingly dominant news discourse of the week.

Framing April: stolen innocence, 'threatening familiarity' and declining social trust

If the coincidence of April's abduction with the Savile allegations provided the *context* for the ensuing panic, a key way it *manifested* itself was through the dramatisation of particular aspects of the missing child story in press coverage. The headlines, intros and overall choice of language and imagery newspapers used to construct April's story on the page – and details they emphasised – reflected many classic framing conventions identified in Chapter 5. In so doing, they also tapped into concerns repeatedly voiced by mothers and grandmothers interviewed for Chapter 4 who fretted about "the dark", sinister cars and the half-familiar (ergo potentially threatening) "man in the park" – gothic fairy-tale tropes calculated to heighten readers' emotional identification and involvement with the story. By dwelling on the proximity to April's home of the abduction scene and the lack of coercion apparently used to persuade her to climb into the vehicle that spirited her away, papers drew heavily on the 'threatening familiarity' paradigm. In print reports from Wednesday 3 October onwards, Superintendent Ian John was quoted as saying April had "willingly" entered the mystery car - raising the prospect she had known (or recognised) her abductor. And, as more elements of the story clicked into place over ensuing days, it was increasingly dramatised as a late-modern cautionary tale about misplaced trust and 'familiar strangers' – with early suspect Bridger cast in the 'wicked uncle' role. This framing of Bridger was visible from an early stage, with *The Sun* already asserting by day one of its print coverage (effectively day three of the story) that he was "close friends" with April's father ('NICKED: Family pal arrested by April cops' and 'LET OUR GIRL COME HOME', *The Sun*, 3 October 2012) and the *Telegraph* informing readers the next morning that two of his children "live yards from April" ('We are desperate for news of April. Please, please help find her' and 'April had been in arrested man's car', *Daily Telegraph*, 4 October 2012).

Nonetheless, there were two clear stages in the evolution of the 'familiar stranger' narrative that eventually prevailed: the more traditional 'stranger-danger' abduction scenario painted by the press, through its dialogue with the police and members of the local community, in the first 36 hours after April's disappearance; and a subtly distinct 'strangers in our midst' narrative that emerged through the slow drip-drip of biographical details linking Bridger ever more closely to

her friends and family in the days following his arrest. The former paradigm was best symbolised by hazy descriptions of the phantom car into which April had unwittingly climbed in the drizzly gloom that Monday evening – a montage of, often conflicting, recollections attributed to her young playmates. In early reports, the vehicle would sometimes transform from a "light-coloured van" into the blue Land Rover belonging to Bridger that detectives seized from a repair shop, in the space of a single article (Alleyne, 2012). As early as day one of the print coverage, however, the question of the car's colour was being glossed over, as police confirmed they were looking for a left-hand drive vehicle and the 'fact' that only a handful of these – including Bridger's – were registered to owners in the Machynlleth area insinuated itself into stories (Chamberlain et al, 2014). Taken together with the growing body of evidence pointing towards Bridger's familiarity with April's family, suddenly the identity of her captor seemed to have moved considerably closer to home.

'Safe' spaces, deceptive faces

Beyond the familiar tropes of mystery cars and threatening familiars, newspapers chose to emphasise an added dimension in their storytelling: the sense that, unlike on other occasions when children had been snatched in comparable circumstances, in this case April herself represented only one aspect of the innocence stolen by the events of 1 October 2012. The other was the safe, secure reputation of a sleepy, close-knit rural town long viewed as an idyllic enclave insulated from the perils and predations of more crime-ridden neighbourhoods. To this extent, April's narrative not only displayed newsworthy qualities like "negativity" and "personalisation" but also an element of "unexpectedness" (Galtung & Ruge, 1965) or "surprise" (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001) beyond that associated with more commonplace 'child victim' stories. By way of illustration, the *Mail*'s capitalised front-page headline on the first day of sampled coverage read 'PLEASE LET OUR LITTLE APRIL COME HOME SAFE' (Wright, Bentley, & Evans, 2012, p.1), and its intro quoted them directly pleading for the return of "our beautiful little girl" (words repeated two paragraphs in). Later in the same piece (one of three the *Mail* carried that day) it pointedly described her "former" council estate as "quiet" and its residents in "shock", with a lengthy quote from one, Matthew Harris, describing a

neighbourhood where "kids play out together and everyone looks after everyone else". Alongside various tributes from relatives to the "bubbly" girl with "a lovely character" contained in an inside piece profiling both April and Machynlleth, reporter Rebecca Evans ran a string of quotes from family friends and neighbours describing their estate as, variously, "a safe environment", "a very safe place to live" and "somewhere you don't have to worry about letting your children play outside" (Evans, 2012, p.5).

This device – contrasting the sinister nature of April's disappearance with the conflated virtues of the five-year-old herself and her atypically caring community – was reflected across the spectrum. The double-page spread *The Times* devoted to the story that day opened with her family's "desperate appeal" for the safe return of their "beautiful little girl", in an extended quote which stressed the "small, close-knit" nature of their neighbourhood (O'Neill et al, 2012, p.4). Here (as in numerous other reports) Machynlleth's community spirit was further emphasised by a separate article focusing on the huge overnight search mounted by volunteers, initially from the local area but subsequently "near and far", in addition to the 'official' hunt coordinated by emergency services (Jenkins & Bannerman 2012, pp.4-5). Similarly, the *Telegraph* used the "beautiful little girl" quote in both its front-page headline and opening paragraph (Rayner et al 2012a, p.1). An extended version of the same quote, also on page one, again saw the parents refer to their "close-knit community", while the second of three pieces (Rayner et al, 2012b, pp.2-3) described April's abduction as "barely comprehensible" to locals, relaying the PA line that, in a show of solidarity, a nearby petrol station had "reopened its pumps", enabling volunteers to top up on fuel to aid their search, while refuse collections were temporarily "suspended" so even bin-men could "join in". At the other end of the market, *The Sun* (Phillips & Wells, 2012, pp.6-7) quoted Gwenfair Glyn, April's head-teacher, not only on the girl's "bubbly" and "very popular" personality but also the "close community" in which she lived. In one of many 'appearances' in newspaper stories over coming days, town mayor Gareth Jones was quoted praising the "remarkable and not unexpected" community spirit exhibited through the "rallying together" of local people determined to find April. By contrast, the headline of a *Times* colour piece on Friday (Bannerman, 2012, pp.4-5) spoke volumes about the sudden

loss of innocence felt locally, bearing a headline echoing this ominous reflection on broken trust by café-owner Sam Burkill: "Maybe it's an illusion that everyone knows each other."

The notion of threatened innocence was also expressed both through the way newspapers referred to April's family and their reporting of police efforts to coax information from friends said to have witnessed it. To illustrate, the *Daily Star* (Lawton, 2012, pp.4-5) quoted neighbour Judy Price praising the "very good and caring home" from which April had been taken, before noting Supt John's assurance that the little girl's playmates were "being treated with sensitivity" by "specialist officers trained to deal with children". *The Independent* also stressed the "gentle questioning" police were undertaking with the child witnesses and directly quoted Detective Superintendent Reg Bevan on the "delicate and time-consuming" nature of that task (Peachey, 2012, p.2). Among many compliments showered on April's family was that from local councillor Michael Williams, whom *The Sun* quoted describing them as "hugely respected in the town" (Phillips & Wells, 2012, pp.6-7). The emphasis placed by interviewees on the loving, respectable character of the Jones family – and the repeated selection by reporters of quotes reflecting this – echoed the sentiments of interviewed journalists who pointed out a distinction they noted while researching the story on the ground between April's stable personal circumstances and the more 'dysfunctional' parental set-ups of other high-profile 'working-class' child abuse victims, like Shannon and Tia. Taken together with the overwhelmingly positive picture painted of her "former" council estate – which several stories later in the week informed us had recently been named "Best Kept Estate in Montgomeryshire" (*The Times*, 2012, pp.4-5) – the overall portrayal of April's background across all papers struck a stark contrast with those of the run-down, ghettoised sink estates depicted in those other cases. Just as newspapers routinely use postcode visualisation programs like Google Maps/Street View to judge whether a story is 'right' for their readers and, by extension, how much effort to invest in covering it, so, too, the framing of April's versus Shannon or Tia's neighbourhoods symbolised the underlying 'deserving-undeserving' disjunction distinguishing between children from 'respectable' homes and those from unstable ones. Given that both Shannon, aged nine, and Tia, 15 – though victims of severe parental cruelty and murder respectively - were also

considerably older than April, it could be argued the 'young-old' measure of 'deservingness' was also applied by newspapers in these cases (Sommerville, 1990).

Profiling Bridger: the construction of a folk-devil

An all-too familiar feature of even the earliest print reports about April's disappearance was the clear contrast drawn between the sweetness and innocence of the victim and the reputed shadiness (and probable malevolence) of Bridger. By the time the first 3 October editions went to bed, the 46-year-old was already in custody, and, though not yet officially named by officers, every paper bar the *Express* identified him on the basis of information credited to unspecified local sources. Though these early reports were notably devoid of the more lurid labels attached to suspects in other notorious cases (albeit generally at later stages in inquiries, when foul play had been proven or described in court), from the outset Bridger was subject to the language and imagery of "othering" (Mooney, 2009) – with background details selected to illustrate his dysfunctional relationship history, physicality and loner-like status in the community. And though not all papers ran photographs of him on day one, most that did pointedly juxtaposed the same hazy, torso-length shot of a pumped-up man, sporting tattooed chest and goatee beard, with one of several interchangeable (and generally clearer) shots of an elfin April - whether in a pink party dress, blue-and-white-checked school dress or the purple coat she had worn the night she disappeared.

The most detailed early picture of Bridger appeared in the *Telegraph* on 3 October (Evans, 2012, p.2). Like several papers, it described him as a "former soldier" - a claim that later turned out to be false (*www.itv.com*, 2012) - who had also worked as a lifeguard, welder and slaughterhouse-worker, and fathered up to six children (Rayner et al, 2012b, pp.1-2)). Significantly, it balanced this run-down of his colourful CV and personal life with the assertion "he is also thought to have spent large periods of time unemployed" (Evans, 2012, p.2). Among the anecdotes raked up about his recent past was the revelation that the "fit and active man" had been evicted from a previous house after his landlady discovered he was keeping chickens indoors. The paper also described an alleged sighting of Bridger by local woman

Gloria Edwards shortly before his arrest which further played into the image of a shifty ex-Army type – describing him as "walking quickly towards the bridge that led into the town, wearing sunglasses and a khaki jacket and with his head down". *The Times* adopted a similar focus on Bridger's chequered employment history and love life, describing how he had "recently separated from a partner who had young children" and was "said to have had relationships with several women in the area" (O'Neill et al, 2012, p.4). By the following day, Bridger's name had been formally confirmed by police and coverage of their investigation switched to the isolated cottage to which he had recently moved. The emphasis reporters placed on this location – *The Sun* described the house being "ripped apart" by forensic officers (Wells & Phillips, 2012, pp.4-5) – was supplemented by suitably moody shots of its exterior. In addition, the ongoing depiction of Bridger as a furtive figure with something to hide was enhanced by prominent use in both *Sun* and *Mirror* (in the latter's case, on page one) of a fuzzy screenshot taken from footage filmed by *Channel 4 News* apparently showing a man scurrying along the bank of the River Dyfi (Aspinall, 2012). The image of Bridger as a diehard military man – one, perhaps, used to covering his tracks - was again alluded to by several papers, through descriptions of the clothes he was reportedly wearing at the time of his arrest: a green jacket and (beneath his waterproofs) "camouflage trousers" (Chapman & Riches, 2012a, p.5). This gung-ho image would be further embellished the next day, when the *Telegraph* ran a piece describing him as a "keen weapons collector", based on claims by neighbours that he "kept samurai swords and deactivated guns" at home (Rayner, Marsden, and Silverman, 2012, p.3). Meanwhile, Bridger's official identification encouraged certain titles, notably the *Mail*, to opt for full-blown character assassination – prefiguring mention of his name with loaded adjectives like "divorcee" and "unemployed", and detailing how he had "struggled to hold down a steady job" since moving to Wales and beginning "a string of relationships" with women whose children he had fathered (Evans & Bentley, 2012, p.5). These loaded references to Bridger's itinerant status were not confined to tabloids: even the normally sober *Independent* described him as a "regular in local pubs", who, after splitting with his latest girlfriend, initially slept in his car (Brown, 2012, p.6).

The melodramatic use of language in headlines and intros, especially in tabloids, appeared designed to set up an implicit opposition between April's desperate (therefore virtuous) parents and her unyielding (ergo heartless) abductor. For instance, on day one the *Mirror* juxtaposed the sinister image of the five-year-old being "snatched" (Smith, 2012, p.1 and Smith & Aspinall, 2012, pp.4-5) with that of the "distraught" parents she had left behind, while *The Sun* substituted this adjective with "tormented" and described how Mr and Mrs Jones had "begged" her captor for her safe release (Phillips & Wells 2012, pp.4-5). Significantly, both papers accompanied their splashes that day with similarly oppositional 'portrait' shots: one of tattooed Bridger, the other innocently smiling April. But perhaps the most potent aspect of Bridger's othering occurred from day two, following the release of his official police mug-shot - which, thanks to its ubiquity in newspaper coverage over coming days, would soon become the 'iconic' image of the suspected abductor. In it, a ghostly Bridger stared into the camera, wide-eyed, ashen-faced and unshaven – the personification of the unknowable, deviant and/or unhinged, loner. This single photo accompanied nearly one in four of all 157 articles about April printed over the following six days.

From 'strange familiar' to 'familiar stranger'

The second, decisive, phase in the 'framing' of Bridger – his repositioning as 'familiar stranger' - began unfolding in a handful of newspapers as early as our day one (Wednesday 3 October) and was fully established by the second full day of print coverage. Thereafter, rival titles became increasingly competitive in their efforts to root out additional – wherever possible, exclusive – titbits of information about the nature/extent of his links to April's family, to sate their readers' appetites for updates on the increasingly unsettling case. On 3 October, even as other papers (principally the *Telegraph* and *Mail*) sought to position Bridger as a shadowy, feckless loner with an inability to hold down either stable jobs or relationships, *The Sun* was already describing him as a "close friend" of the Joneses (Phillips, 2012, p.1). Another key detail to emerge from the first day's print reporting was the police's insistence that April appeared to have "willingly" climbed aboard the car/van – and, in the absence of confirmation that it was a left-hand drive vehicle, potentially also into the driver's side (*www.bbc.co.uk*,

2012). This detail was amplified in the *Mirror* with further nuggets of indirect witness testimony relayed by friends and neighbours, including the haunting claim that, before clambering aboard, April had reassured her anxious playmates with the words, "it's all right: I know them" (Smith & Aspinall, 2012, pp.4-5) - the plural raising the prospect (alluded to occasionally elsewhere over coming days) that there might have been more than one captor. The paper was also the first to mention widely reported rumours that April had been playing "in the same vehicle two or three days ago" (Ibid). Similarly, the *Telegraph* reported one of Bridger's daughters was with April at the time of her abduction (Rayner et al, 2012b, pp.2-3).

The closeness of Bridger to April's family circle, however, only began to fully emerge on days two and three of print coverage. Having been the first paper to run a full 'profile-style' article on the suspect the day before, the *Telegraph* amplified readers' picture of his familiarity to April on 4 October by relaying how he had taken her and friends "for a ride in his Land Rover" a couple of days earlier and not one but two of his children (a 10-year-old daughter and 12-year-old son) had been playing with her around the time she disappeared (Rayner et al 2012c, p.1 and 3). Meanwhile, in what appeared to be a coded reference to information disclosed days later about Bridger's more direct relationship to April – notably the revelation he was the uncle of her two half-sisters (Evans & Ford Rojas, 2012) – *The Guardian* pointedly noted how police "refused to speculate" on "how close Bridger was to any members of April's family" (Morris & Laville, 2012, p.3). A day later, with news Bridger had been re-arrested (this time on suspicion of murder), a raft of new details emerged – including the *Telegraph's* soon-to-be widely reported disclosure that he had attended the same parents' evening as Paul and Coral Jones shortly before her disappearance (Rayner et al, 2012d, p.1) and an anecdote *The Daily Express* and others reported that he had taken April on a crabbing expedition with two of his children earlier that year (Chapman & Riches, 2012b, p.5).

"Every parent's worst nightmare": normalising and universalising 'stranger-danger'

Most of the analysis so far has focused on the disproportionate *amount* of coverage April's abduction generated in newspapers compared to other stories during the week of her disappearance. But there is one further pattern indicative of disproportionate news framing which emerges from detailed study of these texts: the suggestion that April's disappearance was far from the rare and isolated occurrence most independent research would indicate (Furedi, 2001) and that it actually represented a threat any parent might face anywhere - at any time. This normalisation, or universalization, of stranger-danger as an all-pervading, ever-present prospect was expressed in various ways – most notably through newspapers' selection of background information to (de)contextualise the case and emphasise particular comments made by claims-makers, ranging from police coordinating the inquiry and uneasy locals to politicians and even celebrities.

The notion of omnipresent stranger-danger was perhaps best symbolised by a frequently quoted pronouncement of officers leading the investigation into her abduction. On Tuesday 2 October, at the first of many media conferences, Superintendent Bevan described April's disappearance as "every family's worst nightmare" (Rankin, 2012). While this truism emphasised the extreme and unusual nature of the incident – and, by extension, the unlikeliness of its happening to anyone else – it was to be so widely repeated in coming days, not least in newspapers, that it would come to signify something quite different: in short, a sense that *every* family should be on their guard. A simple Google search of the terms "April Jones" and "every family's worst nightmare", conducted on 15 February 2013, demonstrated the extent to which Supt Bevan's words were reported as news, and repeated/disseminated via social media, in the months following his remarks – throwing up 25,500 results, from all the main national newspaper websites to those of regional titles like the *Liverpool Echo* (Mullin, 2012) and news-aggregating sites such as *www.inooz.co.uk* (*www.inooz.co.uk*, 2013). In so doing, it testifies to the heightened "sensitisation" (Cohen, 1972) to juvenile threats manifest in audience responses to coverage of the story, as demonstrated below in the sections on newspaper discussion-threads and parent focus-groups. Similarly, 13,700 Google results were

produced by a search using the terms "April Jones" and "every parent's worst nightmare", also carried out on 15 February 2013. This phrase was widely reported after being used by one early contributor to a Facebook page set up by April's family and friends to raise awareness of her disappearance (coincidentally, it was also the exact tagline of *Vanishing Point*, a child abduction thriller by best-selling writer Val McDermid published a month earlier). As if to add to the simmering panic discourse, meanwhile, it took precisely two days for the words "every family's nightmare" to be uttered by British Prime Minister David Cameron, who was widely quoted in newspapers on Friday 5 October appealing for help in finding April following the revelation she needed medication for mild cerebral palsy (a condition suffered by his late son, Ivan). This twist had, in itself, only added to the vulnerable image popularised of the little girl (Chapman & Riche, 2012c, p.4).

But it was not just the words prominent claims-makers used to frame April's story that articulated a universalised sense of 'strangers in our midst' in those first few days. Deliberate editorial choices newspapers took when contextualising the story also appeared calculated to give the impression that child abduction/kidnapping was a pervasive, rather than isolated, phenomenon. The liberal *Guardian* was one of the papers to play most proactively into this narrative, going out of its way to dramatise stranger-danger as a widespread problem – in so doing, adding weight to Meyer's (2007) conclusion that, when it comes to issues like child abuse/abduction, its discourse falls broadly in line with those adopted by tabloids. In a discrete article on the first full day of print coverage, headlined 'More than half of abductions are by a stranger' (*The Guardian*, 2012), the paper quoted a 2004 Home Office study showing that, of 798 police reports of minors being abducted in England and Wales, 56 per cent had involved strangers. Only by closely reading the full text would readers have discerned that eight out of ten such incidents were *attempted*, rather than successful, abductions – and, of the 44 per cent of cases involving adults known to their victims, more than half were perpetrated by parents.

A more typical device newspapers used to convey the idea of pervasive stranger-danger was their frequent allusions to other high-profile recent cases. In addition to reproducing a slew of tweeted appeals from celebrities – television presenters Philip Schofield and Davina McCall,

Stephen Fry and comic actor Simon Pegg were among those name-checked - many papers quoted sympathetic comments from Kate and Gerry McCann, whose daughter, Madeleine, had vanished days before her fourth birthday, during a family holiday in Portugal. *The Sun*, meanwhile, ran a full-page day-one piece angled around the haunting similarities Sara Payne supposedly saw between April's case and that of her own daughter, Sarah, who had been abducted and killed by paedophile Roy Whiting a decade earlier (Payne, 2012, p.6). The intro offered a master-class in how disparate crimes might be speciously conflated into a wider discourse about the prevalence of particular dangers:

"THE mother of murdered schoolgirl Sarah Payne has spoken of her 'devastation' after five-year-old April Jones was snatched in a chilling repeat of her own daughter's abduction." (Ibid)

Getting it out of proportion: the 'April panic' on discussion-threads

Journalists, politicians and other claims-makers cited in newspaper coverage were not alone in reacting to April's disappearance disproportionately. As with online comments generated by 'child victim' stories examined in Chapter 5, the discussion-threads several newspaper websites ran beneath early reports about April's abduction testify to the story provoking similarly alarmist responses in (segments of) their audiences – and the process of meaning-making in which readers engaged while processing the story leading them to draw from it a sub-textual message about the perceived pervasiveness of 'stranger-danger'. Though these heightened reactions were presumably shaped, in part, by the way details of the incident had been filtered and framed – both by news and *social* mediation – a particularly striking manifestation of disproportion visible in the 580 posts on one site, *www.mailonline.co.uk*, was the number of times readers castigated the newspaper for not reporting April's story prominently *enough*. Typically, the 20-plus posters who criticised the site for initially failing to accord the story 'front-page-lead' status couched their comments in the form of disbelieving questions – for example, "DM...why is this story not currently at the top of your page?" ('jax,

Essex'), "why is this not the first story? Clearly a lot more important than Jimmy Saville[8]" ('soon to be ex pat [thank God]'), and "what does it take for stories like this to be the main headline" ('Loubymlou, Liverpool'). The most extreme example of this collective call for the *Mail* to reprioritise its news list, however, was this near-hysterical hyperbole from 'John, Nottingham':

"THIS STORY SHOULD BE THE TOP NEW[S] IN THE WORLD, you the people of the world this is your time to help we need to find this girl."

An extension of this disproportionate group (gut) reaction was the several-times-repeated concern that Britain should introduce a national alarm system to notify authorities/communities nationwide immediately a young child disappeared, to maximise the chances of finding him/her unharmed. Among those calling for "an automatic alert, with a picture if possible, going out to EVERY mobile phone in the country" was 'bridal 234, Portsmouth, United Kingdom'. As it transpired (and the following day's print edition reported), April's abduction actually marked the first occasion when a then recently launched Child Rescue Alert system *had* been activated in Britain (Laville, 2012). The fact this US-style alarm system had been introduced at all (in 2010) – and utilised so soon afterwards – was arguably itself indicative of escalating sensitisation to the prospect of child abduction indicative of a simmering juvenile panic.

The most unequivocal evidence of disproportion in the responses generated on discussion-threads, though, can be discerned from a straightforward breakdown of the balance between comments *affirming* the hegemonic narrative and those adopting more "negotiated" or "oppositional" standpoints (Hall, 1980). For legal reasons, discussion-threads on newspaper websites that ran them were largely withdrawn or shut down by the evening of 2 October - by which time Bridger was in custody and editors would have risked contempt of court prosecutions had they continued allowing potentially prejudicial views and speculation to be published (Great Britain. *Contempt of Court Act 1981*). However, of 736 posts left by that point on the *Mail, Sun, Express* and *Times* websites – the only sampled publications to run threads - nearly two-thirds (471) were straightforward reactions, of which 95 per cent (445) affirmed (or

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[8]NB discussion-threads extracts have been quoted with spelling and punctuation errors uncorrected, to exactly replicate how they were worded by posters

failed to challenge) dominant reading(s) of the story, as reported. The overwhelming consensus among readers who took time to contribute to these discussions, then, supported the underlying 'parental panic' discourse promoted by the reporting frenzy April's disappearance had provoked: namely the cautionary tale that, if left to play out unsupervised, even among friends and in local/familiar surroundings, young children were susceptible to being poached by predators.

The spectrum of dominant readings: some illustrative posts

As with Chapter 5's discussion-threads, many readers aired views amounting to 'echo-chambers' for the dominant narrative they inferred from news accounts of April's disappearance. Typical posts included a warning from 'Lizzie, London' that "this happened in a small town and it just goes to prove it can happen anywhere" and 'Cupcake, Southeast's' baleful entreaty to parents everywhere to "be aware of the dangers this sick world has at every turn and protect the child!" Similarly, 'Nigel, Doncaster' – who, perhaps significantly, hailed from a town only recently the focus of national media attention over the notorious "Doncaster boys" case (*Doncaster Free Press,* 2010) – despaired:

"Not another one! What's wrong with people? How has society got to this state?"

Several posters also expressed horror at April's abduction by parroting the line voiced by detectives quoted in early reports on the story that the scenario represented "every parent's worst nightmare". Nine people used this phrase on the *Mail*'s discussion-thread, with another five echoing their sentiments on *The Sun's*. But perhaps the most extreme (and literal) 'universalisation' of April's case – and the proximity to readers everywhere of both the story itself and the omnipresent threats it was seen to symbolise - was the alarmist warning from *Mail* poster 'uk is finished, bath' that "we all need to be vigilant, April was put into a van, this kid could potentially be next door to YOU". Similarly commonplace were posts emphasising April's youth and innocence – 'metzymems' described her as a "little petal" on *The Sun* website, while 'Bex, Kent', 'Karine Stewart, Falkirk' and 'harries, huddersfield' referred to her on

www.mailonline.co.uk as a "poor little angel", "poor wee princess" and "beautiful child" respectively - in stark contrast to the diabolism many ascribed to her abductor. The then unknown malefactor was variously reviled by *Mail* readers as a "monster" ('Nan, Scotland'), "sick" (for instance 'Molly Malone, Everywhere, Greece'), "evil" ('lorna Jones, dublin') and, of course, "predator" ('mari, London'). The habit of alluding to him as either or both a freak of nature and feral beast – a dual trope familiar from both news narratives and discussion-threads analysed in Chapter 5 - was extended to the language posters used to describe punishments they wanted him to suffer. 'Patrick Siu, Tsuen Wan, Hong Kong' said he should be "annihilated", 'blueheart, Torquay' demanded his "castration", and numerous others called for the return of the death penalty. A related feature of many pro-hegemonic opinions was the sense that readers had been both emotionally and *physically* repulsed by thoughts of a child being taken (and abused/harmed) – visceral responses echoing focus-group mothers who spoke of their anxieties about what child abductors might be "doing to" their captives (see next section). Posts in this vein included 'darlodave, darlington's' complaint about feeling "sick to the stomach" and other readers' claims to feel, variously, "sick reading this" ('nottslanding, England'), "cold and shaky" ('Lauren Agg, London') and "ill" ('archiesmum13' on *www.thesun.co.uk*). One melodramatic *Mail* poster, 'JeanOdwyer, Limerick', even claimed her "heart literally broke".

Besides upholding a view of the world as a dangerous place where child-snatching predators lurked around every corner, the other main facet of affirming opinions was a belief that – while children should have the 'right' *in principle* to play out independently – there was a cut-off age below which none should be out alone. Countless posters on the *Mail* and *Sun* websites expressed angry criticism of April's parents for letting her out of their sight. Such tirades often adopted a rhetorical approach, as illustrated by this from 'Andy, Manchester' on the *Mail* site:

"What kind of parents allow a five-year-old to play outside unsupervised in the evening?"

Some posters even spelt out what they felt April *ought to* have been doing at the time she was playing unsupervised. 'Pippye483, lancs' argued she should have been "in the bath, having a

bedtime story or fast asleep at 7.30" – images of responsible child-rearing echoed by several other parenting critics. Most punitive was 'Sam, Bradford', who called on unspecified "authorities" to investigate April's parents and "consider placing the [other] children in a home" after drawing an explicit opposition between the (sensible) practice of ensuring five-year-olds "were in jamas in the warm having supper & a story at 7:30" and the idea April had been carelessly left "roaming the streets". Significantly, even those who stood up for April's parents against the tide of condemnation still generally distilled the same underlying 'meaning' from the story: while disputing the fairness of blaming the girl's family for her disappearance, they concurred with the view that (stranger) danger lurked everywhere. Responding to the last comment quoted above, 'polo, Nottingham' castigated fellow readers for suggesting April's siblings be put into care, but implicitly endorsed their view that April had been "left out to play later than you would let your own". And 'nataliesabSun, kent' was one of several lamenting the level of vigilance expected of parents in today's Britain, while still accepting the notion that unsupervised children *were* perpetually threatened. "It's so sad that we can't let our children play outside where it should be safe without the fear of them getting kidnapped!" she despaired. Others adopted the contradictory position best exemplified by 'Acey B, Plymouth, United Kingdom' - namely that, although "the only person to blame for this is the perpetrator", nevertheless "some fault has to be levelled at parents who are so willing to take chances with their childs safety".

Questioning the consensus – negotiated and oppositional readings

Despite the overwhelming pro-hegemonic consensus, a more nuanced, negotiated, class of comment was occasionally visible on both *Mail* and *Sun* discussion-threads. In these, posters went beyond reluctantly agreeing with 'nataliesabSun, kent' that children should not be allowed out alone. Instead, while conceding *some* parental caution was justified, they seemed angry and frustrated that random, exceptional crimes had induced risk-averse parents to routinely restrict their children's freedoms so severely. As 'pm123' put it on the *Sun's* site, it may have been "a bit late for a 5 yearold to be out playing", but "it is absolutely terrible that a child is not

safe just a few yards from their home" - a fact that suggested "those very few 'sick' people are turning them into prisoners who cant do anything".

But, though a small but noteworthy number of posters adopted oppositional perspectives, those who did so were in even more of a minority than their counterparts in Chapter 5 (amounting to about one per cent of the total). One factor that might explain this is that, unlike with many of the discussion-threads analysed in that chapter, those commenting on April's case were confined to a single day, between news breaking of her disappearance and Bridger's arrest. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the overwhelming tone conveyed by these posts was rawer and more charged than usual. Ranged against such insurmountable opposition, though, the few brave dissenters came out fighting, as demonstrated by this stream-of-consciousness tirade from 'jessicanye82, Morden, United Kingdom':

"...so because of that all children should suffer you should keep them locked up from the world she was probably just enjoying the last few days of being able to play on her bike outside maybe people should stop with calling the parents evil and find the evil person that did this..."

Evidence-based responses

As ever, the most compelling posts were those that 'brought to the table' additional – or conflicting – information with a bearing not so much on the *facts* of April's story as its underlying 'parental panic' narrative. In this case, the majority who supported the dominant reading of the story was slender (around 52 to 48 per cent – see Figure 7.1), and most evidence-based posters *contesting* it purported to live either in Machynlleth itself or similarly idyllic/'safe' locales. Given the tiny number of oppositional *reactive opinions* – just five out of 470 – on this occasion those challenging the prevailing discourse appeared to stick their heads above the parapet only when they could do so confidently, by claiming personal experience/expertise or other privileged background knowledge.

Supporting evidence

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most evidence-based endorsements were asserted by individuals professing first-hand experience of child-rearing. Though not all such posters were critical of April's parents, several were. A typical endorsement from a *Mail* reader upholding the dominant 'scary world' paradigm *without* condemning April's parents was 'cheryl, basingstoke's' statement that her "thoughts are with the parents", as she "would be going out of my mind" if this had happened to her five-year-old granddaughter. By contrast, 'family5, Bromley' adopted a position typical of those critical of the Joneses' parenting (explicitly or by inference) by questioning why, "in this day & age where things are getting worse" – a clear evocation of the recurring idea that today's world is scarier and *less safe* than it once was - some families were "getting more relaxed". Likewise, 'Clara, Dublin' stated there was "no way I would have my 5 year old niece or any 5 year old playing outside at that time", before displaying textbook anecdotal evidence of the power of media coverage to heighten sensitisation to the possibility of child abduction:

"Do people not read what happens on the news!???"

The most powerful evidence-based endorsement of this "things are getting worse" paradigm, however, was the way 'bar, notts' invoked fairy-tale motifs harnessed to polarise angelic April and demonic Bridger in newspaper coverage to dismiss the "make-believe" attitudes of latter-day parents whose children were "kept in an innocence that is not really safe". In a lengthy allusion to a nostalgic, near-mythic, view of innocent times past, (s)he wrote that while it was "true" children could play out safely in villages "in the late fifties", when "everyone looked after everyone elses children", there was "not so much car ownership" and "the creepy men that lived in your area were generally known about", today's child abusers could "travel around" more easily.

Besides drawing on the underlying fairy-tale tropes of news discourse, this contribution was significant in explicitly conflating two day-to-day concerns about child safety repeatedly voiced

by Chapter 4's focus-groups – traffic and predatory paedophiles – by envisaging a world in which "creepy men" cruised around in cars preying on unsuspecting children. Another revealing evidence-based endorsement came from the wistfully self-christened 'somewhereovertherainbow, bucks', who referred to her fears emanating (at least partly) from the media, in saying she "wouldn't let my 5 year old out to play with friends at 7.30 on a school night" because "all you read recently is bad things in the news about children".

Oppositional evidence

An abiding feature of the most effective evidence-based rebuttals was the use of direct personal knowledge of Machynlleth (or rural Wales generally) to contest the suggestion that stranger-danger lurks everywhere - even in locations once thought safe and 'crime-free'. 'RhianStephanie, Cardiff' was one of several posters to leap to Machynlleth's defence, reinforcing idealised newspaper representations of the community by asserting (albeit in the past tense) that "serious" crime there was "non-existent" and "everybody knows everybody". A more illustrative approach was adopted by 'Rr, Machynlleth', who went beyond concurring with oft-repeated descriptions of "Mach" as a place where "everyone knows everyone" to portray it as an enduring pastoral idyll where normative protective behaviours expected of parents in "a city or even a large town" were not necessary – or, at least, hadn't been up to this point. "I don't think people realise how small Machynlleth is!" he/she said, describing "big open greens, surrounded by houses" which "nobody has ever considered...a danger". It was "really normal" for "a child to be out in front of her own home with her mates before darkfall" and "all the people saying that April shouldn't of been out on her own" were "wrong" – not least because "at 7 o clock ...it isn't even dark!"

Indeed, a recurring characteristic of many evidence-based rebuttals was the polar distinction drawn between 'small town' or 'village' (safe) and 'city' or 'big town' (dangerous) – implicitly invoking the idea of (lost/stolen) innocence repeatedly transposed onto Machynlleth, and April's neighbourly estate, in press coverage. 'Caz, Wrexham' was one of several posters to

speak up for small-scale communities everywhere – not just Machynlleth - in defiance of any suggestions stranger-danger was a ubiquitous menace:

"I notice a lot of comments from places like London, Manchester and other huge connurbations asking why a 5year-old is playing out at 7.30pm. Well in many places in the UK parents are not constantly looking over their shoulders as they live in friendly communities where they feel safe. Children here in North wales regularly play out at this time."

By drawing a polar opposition between "friendly communities" and the rest, however, such posters arguably made a more nuanced point than merely challenging the consensus about the pervasiveness of extra-familial threats to children's wellbeing. Rather, they implicitly distinguished between 'good' and 'bad' (or more and less crime-ridden) neighbourhoods – in so doing, tapping into the less 'universalised' observations about the safety or otherwise of children's "home habitats" (Hillman, Adams, & Whitelegg, 1990) raised by the focus-groups.

In addition to oppositional posters who mobilised personal knowledge/experience to challenge the dominant discourse, as in Chapter 5 there were those who simply 're-presented' facts down-played in newspapers to offer different readings not only of the *circumstances* of April's abduction but also the underlying 'pervasive juvenile threat' *narrative*. 'Gill, UK' implored fellow *Mail* posters to stop "judging the parents" and "saying 'why is she out so late'", while emphasising "IT was only 7.30, she was with her friend and is SOUNDS LIKE IT WAS IN A SAFE AREA". While comments contesting the dominant critique of April's parents generally received short shrift from those backing the consensus – 'Gill, UK's' remark met a terse "clearly not" from 'Jenny, Leicester' – pro-hegemonic voices were less nimble in parrying the blows struck by oppositional posters who drew on previous media stories about lax parental judgment by middle-class families to point out the double-standards applied to those from different social backgrounds. Echoing sentiments expressed by the journalist who contrasted the media's swiftness to condemn Shannon's parents with the universal sympathy initially expressed for the McCanns, 'mystic1981, newport' queried the 'responsible-versus-irresponsible parent' distinction implied by those critical of April's freedom to play out late, by reminding fellow *Mail*

readers "when a doctors and a teachers child went missing from an appartment" (presumably a reference to the McCanns) they were not "judged so much".

Other posters cited alternative forms of prior knowledge, including official statistics, to question popular (mis)conceptions of the prevalence of threats. 'Caz, Glasgow' recalled data showing "children are at more risk from people they know than a stranger" (La Fontaine, 1990; Grubin, 1998; Pritchard & Bagley, 2001). While failing to specify the source of her knowledge – professional expertise or previous media reports – she pointed out "abductions like this are actually quite rare indeed, and that's if this is a stranger abduction". As with Chapter 5's discussion-threads, though, the most effective evidence-based rebuttal was that posted by a reader who authoritatively challenged not only the underlying discourse of newspapers' April coverage but a key detail of the story itself. Rebutting a central 'fact' repeated time and again by posters critical of her parents - the suggestion she had been playing out in the dark – 'JoJo, Swansea, United Kingdom' wrote:

"I'm in Wales, it was light at 7.00pm and still at 7.30pm..."

But, while such insightful counter-claims offered dynamic examples of persuasive challenges by citizens to the dominant discourse – and ones with *potential* to moderate other readers' perceptions of social reality – as in Chapter 5 they were rare. Nearly eight out of ten discussion-posts (583 out of a total of 737) supported a hegemonic reading of the signification of April's story. This bias in audience meaning-making towards a disproportionate perception of menace and risk was also reflected by parent focus-groups, as the next section demonstrates.

Figure 7.1 Breakdown of user posts by type (737)

- ■ Reactive opinion (470 - 63.8%)
- ■ Evidence-based endorsement (138 - 18.7%)
- ■ Evidence-based rebuttal (129 - 17.5%)
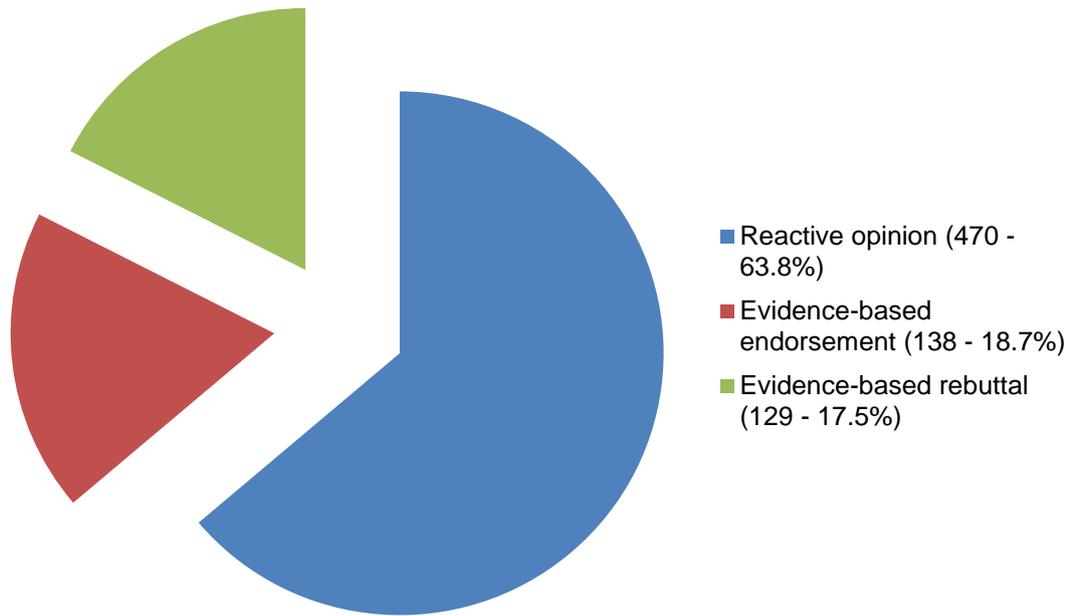
Table 7.2 Breakdown of types of reactive opinion (470)

- ■ Affirming - 445 (94.7%)
- ■ Negotiated - 21 (4.5%)
- ■ Oppositional - 4 (0.9%)
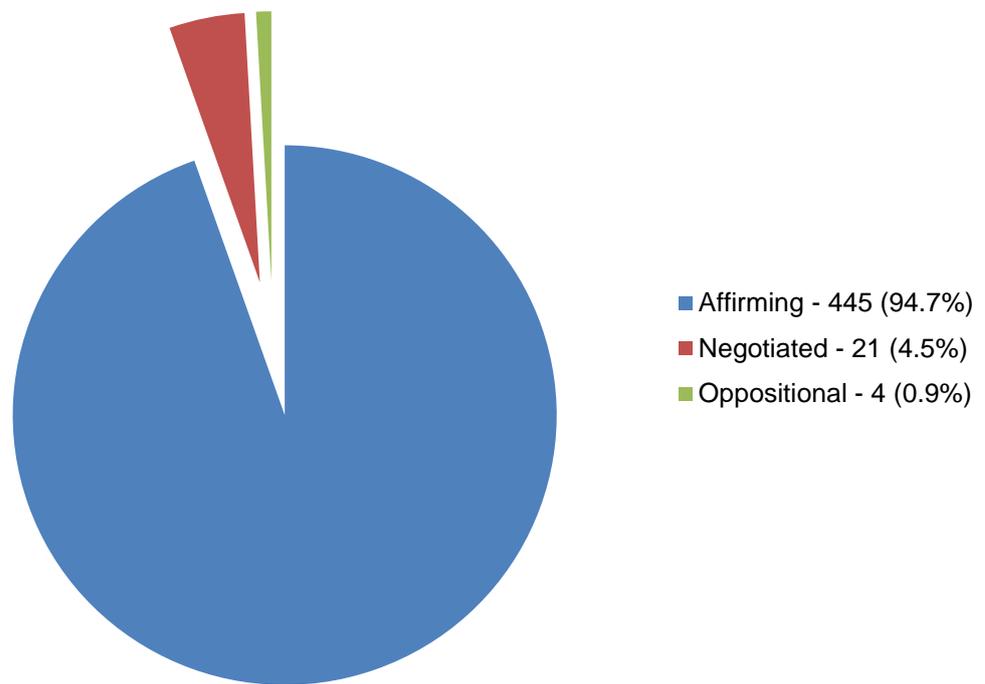
Figure 7.3 Breakdown of evidence-based responses (267)

- ■ Endorsement (138 - 51.7%)
- ■ Oppositional/negotiated response (129 - 48.3%)
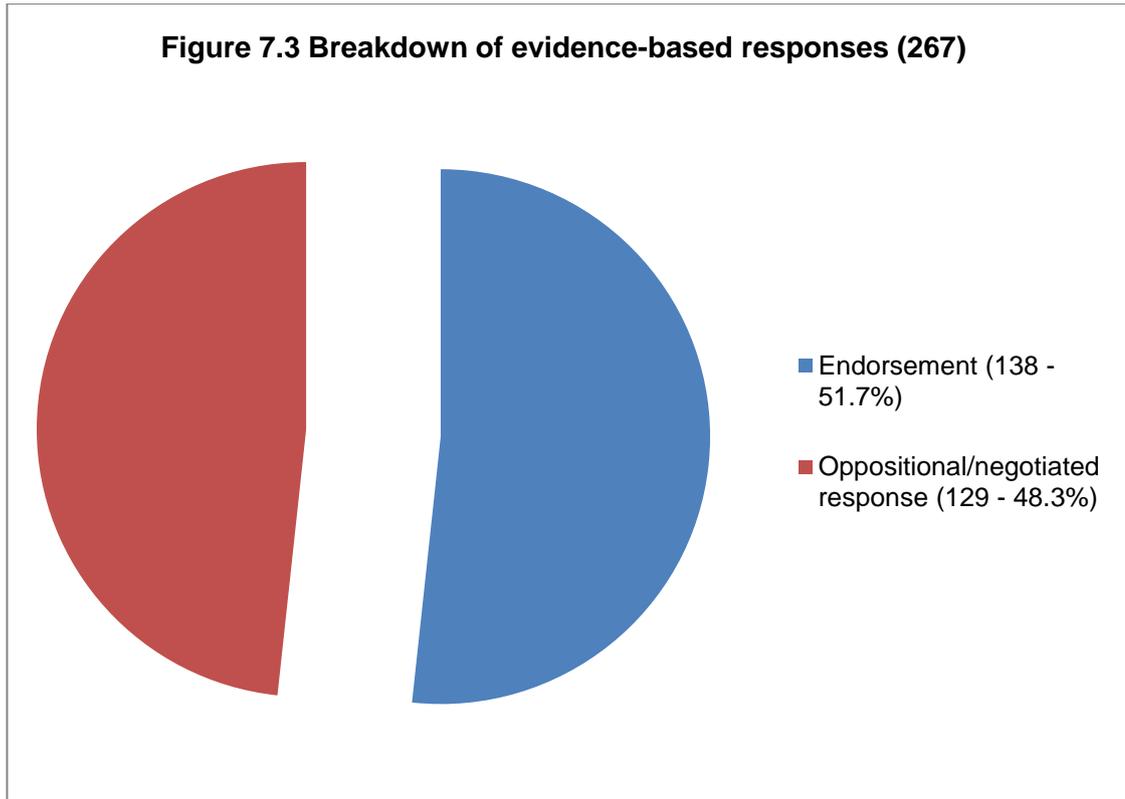
Focus-groups

As with papers' over-manning of the April story, and the resultant saturation coverage, the way focus-group mothers responded to the story was also disproportionately alarmist. A defining trait of many reactions was participants' confident assertion that the story vindicated restrictions they already routinely imposed on their children to keep them safe. However, while several parents confessed to giving their sons and daughters pep-talks, or further limiting their outdoor freedoms (at least temporarily), because of anxieties fuelled by the story, the general consensus was that it had strengthened their determination to maintain *existing* boundaries, rather than encouraging them to impose *new* ones.

Nonetheless, the strong sense of moral justification some contributors expressed when discussing the circumstances of April's disappearance - and explicitly contrasting their own (tighter) parenting practices with the Joneses' decision to allow her to play out, unsupervised, on a murky autumn evening - suggested the story had had the 'effect' of *reinforcing* protective attitudes. Echoing many sentiments expressed on discussion-threads, a self-confessed "over-

protective" 30–year-old working-class mother with two daughters, aged six and seven, said the story "backs up my...protectiveness", adding, "that's why I don't let my kids out!" Similarly, the nursery-nurse who had related her jitteriness to her single mother status in earlier sessions reflected how "stories like this reaffirm why you *don't* want your children out or why you are protective of them" because "it [abduction] *does* happen".

'Threatening familiarity' and April: strange cars, "the dark" and the "man in the park"

The strength of concern most mothers aired in response to April's abduction revolved around the fact the scenario reported by newspapers – and other key definers, notably police – tapped into themes, and validated fears, they had proactively raised in the earlier, more exploratory, discussions. Chief among these were various signifiers which, taken together or in isolation, drew on the potent 'threatening familiarity' paradigm. From a twilit playground on a close-knit estate to mystery vehicles of indeterminate make (and, in this case, colour) to a 'familiar stranger' (Bridger), April's tale contained all the elements of a latter-day suburban horror story – and was entirely consistent with previously articulated worries about "the dark", "black cars" and the shifty "man in the park".

Unsupervised outdoor play

The fact April was snatched by a mystery driver while playing outside with friends in encroaching darkness prompted some mothers to instinctively criticise her parents for allowing her out late unsupervised. As in many discussion-posts, several participants, particularly in the working-class group, voiced irritated disapproval – applying a rationale that *universalised* the prospect of stranger-danger, irrespective of how 'safe' a given neighbourhood might otherwise appear. A straightforward criticism came from the teaching assistant – despite the fact that she claimed to apply a more *laissez-faire* approach than her peers towards her own children's outdoor movements. "Where's the *parent*?" she said of her immediate reaction to April's disappearance, adding, "they shouldn't be...in their house...while their kids are outside...at seven o'clock at night". Similar sentiments were expressed by a mother-of-four with a new

baby, who was one of several contributors to contrast her own (more vigilant) approach with the (less responsible) one of April's mother – an echo of the 'deserving/undeserving parent' discourse underpinning observations on *other people's* children to which she had contributed in Chapter 4's discussions. She described how she "kept looking" at her own daughter, thinking, "she's [April] younger" and "I wouldn't even let [her] out at that time". And, in an exchange with the nursery-nurse explicitly focusing on children's vulnerability to risk, the teaching assistant dismissed any suggestion April's parents were justified in believing her safe because she was playing with older kids. Agreeing with the former's suggestion that "friends" can "get distracted", she said, "other children can be the *cause* of...accidents and stuff".

The middle-class mothers adopted a more 'live-and-let-live' attitude towards the fact April had been allowed out late – with more than one recalling the tragic irony that this was a one-off reward for a glowing school report. However, not all were convinced by the writer's remark that she had been "comforted" by the fact April was playing out with older children (rather than alone) at the time of her abduction. Though stressing she did not "mean to say, 'oh, I'm such a good mother'", the nurse recalled how "my children were always in bed by seven, aged five", while the midwife (a single mum) reflected her sons "would have been in having a bath, getting ready for bed" at April's age.

Belying more critical responses, one or two mothers in each group intervened to defend April's parents on the grounds her family lived in a safer, more secluded community than theirs – making it wrong to generalise about restrictions that should have been imposed on her. Even the self-confessed "over-protective" mum observed that, compared to the high-crime, less community-orientated neighbourhood in which she lived, "in Wales it's completely different", while the position adopted by one of two tower-block residents was modified by her childhood memory of being "allowed out on the street at seven o'clock" because "we lived in a close".

As with the groups' previous discussions about specific media stories, notably the McCann case, a common tendency was for members to project the circumstances of April's abduction back onto their own "schema" (Graber, 1984) – suggesting its significance for them rested on

the fact they could imagine themselves in her mother's predicament. But this empathetic response – a reflection of the 'empathy factor' *journalists* with children observed in their own reactions to such stories - worked both ways, with those critical of April's parents drawing on it as often as those defending them. In contrasting her own practices with those of April's family, the "over-protective" mum suggested she would have been more responsible in the same situation, adding her children (aged six and eight) "don't go out...on their own", so "that child shouldn't have been out". And, despite having enjoyed similar freedoms to April as a child, the tower-block tenant said her present home environment made it impossible to allow her own children similar leeway. Using vivid but unspecific language, indicative of a generalised concern about 'familiar strangers', she said she was afraid to let her daughter "go down on the communal garden on her own, because...there's somebody in my block that could do it".

As in earlier discussions, working-class mothers attributed the fact they erred on the side of caution when deliberating whether to let their children play out unsupervised to the particular nature of their (high-crime) neighbourhood, and its associated hazards/social problems. This guardedness – reflective of sensitisation to the threat of criminal activity previously observed among residents of such areas (Doob & Macdonald, 1979; Hirsch, 1980 and 1981; Dowler et al, 2003) – was summed up by the nursery-nurse as "not just" being about fears "people might take 'em", but a wider concern that "there's all sorts of dangers". But her words went beyond merely rationalising the position adopted by protective parents on her estate - acting instead as a neat summation of the montage of, often ill-defined, threats invoked by more highly sensitised parents in *both* groups. In essence, through the prism of a single (heavily publicised but extremely rare) news event, more safety-conscious mothers appeared to be manifesting a *generalised* sense of panic. As with the nervy, sometimes fraught, dialogue observed on discussion-threads, the process of meaning-making in which these mothers engaged while deliberating the circumstances of April's disappearance demonstrated another key stage in the crystallisation of the simmering panic discourse that is the subject of this thesis.

Snatching from vehicles

As in earlier meetings, working-class mothers were peculiarly exercised by the image of a young child being abducted by a mystery motorist – a key hallmark of April's story. At times, this menace assumed a spectral quality, fuelled by the fact that (as observed in the textual analysis) every aspect of the offending vehicle's description had fluctuated in early reports about April's disappearance, from colour to make and model and even whether it was a right-hand or left-hand drive. The car's symbolism provided a stimulus for discussion in two respects: it acted as a catalyst for recollections of other high-profile stories focusing on child abduction and a focal-point for exchanges of opinion about how and when parents should broach the subject of 'stranger-danger' with their children.

Of the previous news stories to be recalled explicitly, two surfaced prominently: the McCann case and the spate of local "black car" incidents reported the previous year, which they had discussed in depth at earlier meetings. Maddie's story was raised by the teaching assistant as a comparative case in the context of media speculation that Bridger's blue Land Rover was being scoured for DNA evidence by detectives – just as, for a time, Portuguese police had focused on the McCanns' car in seeking traces of her whereabouts. Tellingly, though, it was the mothers' almost mythic collective memory of the "black car" sightings that opened up into a wider, often self-reflexive, discussion about the need to strike a balance between warning their children about the possibility of abduction and frightening them unnecessarily. Echoing the criticisms of 'other people's' children (and other *parents*) voiced in earlier discussions – and in implied recognition of her own tendency to panic at times - the "over-protective" mother recalled how the black car sightings had left not only her but her son worrying unduly, because "everyone round here was all freaking out and running out all day, going, 'there's a car outside with tinted windows – let's go!'" As a result, her son became "completely panicky about kidnappers", believing "everybody was a kidnapper: *everyone*". "He was like, 'that man's a kidnapper! That man's a kidnapper! The man in the shop was trying to kidnap me!' And I was like, 'they *weren't*!'"

The lengthy, elliptical exchange about the black car motif was prompted by the nursery-nurse's admission that April's abduction had sensitised her to questions of misplaced trust and 'familiar strangers' – enduring fears to emerge from Chapter 4's discussions. In particular, it had prompted her to take her son aside before he attended a football match with her brother to caution him against saying hello to anyone familiar without his uncle's permission. By first relating April's case to one within her own purview (the black car sightings) and, second, drawing lessons from the abduction incident to guide her son on his soccer outing, this mother was both *universalising* the story's implications for parents everywhere and *personalising* them by projecting them onto her own circumstances. "I didn't talk about it *because* of the April Jones thing as such - I didn't mention that *connection*", she said, but "I just said, 'make sure you check with whoever you're with before you go off – you know, even if it's *me*'".

As in previous meetings, the conflicted feelings with which parents openly wrestled as they exchanged (frequently self-critical) observations about the 'impact' of April's case on their own parenting practices led to a broader discussion of the contribution of social mediation - in particular, Facebook and playground gossip – to the prevailing panic. Responding to the "over-protective" mother's anecdote about the black car scare panicking her son, the nursery-nurse relayed how April's story had a similar effect on hers, who returned home from school saying, "there's a bad man taking children *here*". This rumour-fuelled misunderstanding forced her to explain "it's not *here*...a girl *did* get taken – it wasn't *here*, but she was out on her own....and you don't go out on your own, [so] if you're out with an adult like me, then it's not something you've got to be worrying about'".

By mentioning social media and the school-gate rumour-mill as sources of *their own* anxieties - and playground gossip as the wellspring of worries affecting their *children* - the mothers were returning to the issue of 'Chinese whispers' as a conduit for promoting panics discussed in Chapter 4. Not only were parents across Brighton and Hove reacting to news of April's abduction hundreds of miles away by warning their own children about the prospect of a similar fate befalling them: more significantly, the viral way in which key elements of the story (unsupervised play, mystery car, 'familiar stranger') spread had the effect of *obscuring* - and,

by extension, *universalising* - the story's 'location'. In so doing it appears to have generalised the incident's 'meaning' for families everywhere. Similar evidence of a generalised discourse about child abduction - fuelled by the instantaneous nature, and "placeless proximity" (Baym, 2009, Gulbrandsen & Just, 2011), of online communications - emerged from the middle-class focus-group. The importance of online sites of rumour and gossip in crystallising and escalating moral panics in late-modern Britain, as demonstrated by responses to April's story, is reflected in the analysis of discussion-threads earlier this chapter, and will be revisited later in the context of a broader discussion of its role in the crystallisation process.

Besides offering a disturbing symbolic image for the perceived omnipresence of stranger-danger – as exemplified by both Brighton's black car scare and April's abduction - the mystery vehicle element appears to also have provided a helpfully tangible menace for those mothers minded to warn their offspring about the risks of being snatched, and an ominous, Grimmesque locus for their children's own processing of the story. To this end, the teaching assistant was one of several parents who admitted taking advantage of the opportunity to broach the subject of 'stranger-danger' after catching one of her daughters watching a TV report about April's disappearance. "Being seven...she was glued to this telly, going, 'mum, when's she coming home?' And we had to explain to her what had happened", she recalled. So persistent were the mothers' references to discussions April's abduction had provoked with their children – particularly around the mystery car - that these dialogues appear to have represented a key stage (for parents and offspring alike) in their meaning-making around the case. Moreover, by negotiating meaning in this way, families were actively participating in the wider societal process by which the simmering panic discourse underpinning mediated representations of this story (and others like it) was once more *crystallised* in the public sphere.

'Familiar strangers' (especially men)

Worries about misplaced trust – like those articulated in the above mother-daughter exchanges – inevitably lead to consideration of the story's 'bogeyman' element: in this case, the repeatedly invoked nightmare-figure of the 'familiar stranger'. In Bridger, the man arrested on

suspicion of April's abduction and murder within 24 hours of her disappearance, there was an almost immediate 'stranger in our midst', as it emerged he lived on the same estate, was the father of several local children and had allowed the little girl to play aboard his Land Rover a few days earlier. The subsequent drip-drip of biographical details only added to the sense of his being both known to April's family circle and strangely disconnected and unfathomable. We learned that, hours before she vanished, he had attended the same parents' evening as her mother – the fateful event that led to April's being allowed out unsupervised – and before the week was out it emerged her two half-siblings were his nieces.

The tangled, indirect nature of Bridger's relationship to April was lost in translation in much of the focus-group discussion – with members alluding to him, variously, as "a family friend" (tower-block resident) and "this geezer who just lived next door and kept himself to himself" (teaching assistant). But what did emerge strongly, as on previous occasions, was a widespread awareness that April was known to Bridger (and he to her), and a general unease at any thought she might have been preyed on by a man she believed she could trust. This haunting prospect – rehearsed in earlier discussions about paedophile nursery workers and recognisable parents with whom one is on nodding terms in the playground - was as much a concern for middle-class as working-class mothers. Recalling an anecdote she had shared previously about the message promoted by a crèche where she once volunteered - namely that "it's so unusual to have a predator, a paedophile" - the nurse described how April's story had shaken her long-held belief that children would be safe if they followed their "gut instinct" about whether to trust someone. "April must have trusted him in her stomach [and] what really scares me above anything else is that somebody could be deceitful", she said, projecting this scenario onto herself by considering the horrific thought that "someone I *know* might be having really dark thoughts about murdering a child or something".

Discussion of the familiar stranger dimension of April's story prompted both groups to recall another high-profile juvenile 'disappearance' with a similar element to it that had been extensively reported shortly beforehand. This was the case of 12–year-old Tia, whose body was found, wrapped in a sheet, in the loft of the home she shared with her grandmother and

the latter's boyfriend a week after they had reported her missing. As with April, it was only a matter of time before the familiar stranger of the piece – in this instance, Tia's step-grandfather, Hazell – was charged with her murder. As the midwife noted, "it's like with Tia Sharp...The mum thinking she's with her granny, and she's got a boyfriend, and thinking, 'that's my mother, and I trust my mum that this man's nice'".

Discussion about the malign intent that might lurk behind the friendly façades of familiar strangers appeared, as ever, to strike a chord most powerfully with those who could relate this concept to their own schema. Though she began by sounding philosophical about the risk of investing trust in people with whom one was only loosely acquainted, the hostel-worker quickly lapsed into voicing a generalised wariness of others that recalled her previous declaration that the nature of her work attuned her to the idea that the world was "more dangerous" than "other people think" - reflecting on the "very affable, very charming" facades" of "clients" who were "actually...a sexual predator". She also drew on a vicarious experience – coincidentally, from Wales – to further vindicate her concerns about familiar strangers. This concerned her sister's involvement in a disciplinary hearing arising from the case of a woman whose plea for help had been ignored after she telephoned police to report her daughter missing. Wrongly assuming the child to be with the woman's ex-partner, officers failed to "pull out all the stops" – only to discover she had actually been abducted, and abused, by "an acquaintance" who had been "brought in by a friend into the household". In the working-class group, meanwhile, the most vivid personal projection of the 'familiar stranger' strand surfaced in the form of a direct personal memory relived by the "over-protective" mother which drew on a montage of elements related not only to April's abduction but also coverage of the Savile allegations – conflating themes raised by the two stories, as newspapers had also done. As a household-name celebrity, Savile could hardly be described as a typical 'familiar stranger' – being at once extremely well known and, as a result, too distant from most people's daily lives for them to be acquainted with him personally. Yet sinister tales of this once venerated charity fund-raiser misusing his avuncular persona to win the trust of vulnerable hospital patients and children in care only to abuse them in private rooms or during country drives in his Rolls Royce reminded this mother of an uneasy experience from her own childhood that had informed her parenting:

"...I had a similar experience, which did happen years ago...I was quite young, and I knew – I ran out of the house and got my dad, straightaway...This was my mum's best friend...Man, I knew it was wrong. Nothing too far, but it was *wrong*. He shouldn't *be* in the bedroom: what was he *doing* here?"

April Jones and parental perceptions/practices: towards measuring the story's 'effects'

So what, if any, were the *effects* of news coverage of April's abduction on these mothers? And, more importantly, is there any evidence the indisputable concern most of them expressed about the story (and the manner of its framing and dissemination) was sufficient to influence their *perceptions/behaviour* as parents, even if only in the short run? To begin at the simplest level, the avid attention most mothers claimed to have paid to TV, radio, print and online news - and the degree to which some had regularly 'tuned in' to it - demonstrated a level of interest bordering on addiction. The tower-block resident, writer and nurse all admitted being profoundly *affected* by the story (and, by extension, its coverage) - and obsessing about checking the headlines for any news of April's whereabouts. Like several other mothers, the writer recalled reading up on it in newspapers – at one point referring to a "family tree" a broadsheet published illustrating the convoluted connection between April and Bridger – but her most regular source of updates was BBC Radio 4's lunchtime news programme, *PM*, to which she "was tuning in every day...kind of waiting for news". Both she and the nurse rationalised their intense interest by referring to the empathy they felt for Mrs Jones as mothers themselves – another example of how participants repeatedly projected media narratives about children back onto their own realms of experience. The nurse gave this vivid account of how the haunting associations she drew from the story affected her:

"A few days later [after the abduction was first reported], when I heard the anguished plea of the mother saying, 'please bring my little girl back', I just absolutely broke down and cried my eyes out. I think that might be partly because…my second daughter's just left home, so...I felt like I'd lost my baby as well, and I just sort of howled in the kitchen. It was awful."

Similarly, the tower-block resident's rationale for following the story so closely was framed in terms of the fact she had "little ones" of her own. But she also alluded to the distinction between explaining media coverage she was watching to her children and giving them a full-blown 'stranger-danger' pep-talk – in contrast to the approach of others. "When I was watching it, I was saying to them, 'look, a little girl's gone missing'. You know, 'a naughty man did it' - you always have a naughty man, don't you? - but I can't say I've had 'the chat'", she said. Others expressed irritation at the fact mainstream news coverage had died down after a few days (following the charging of Bridger and ensuing contempt of court restrictions). In a revealing critique of professional news practices, the shy working-class participant described her frustration at the lack of ongoing updates. "It just sort of ended", she lamented, adding she was left thinking, "hang on a minute – why ain't it still broadcasting when she's still *out* there?"

Intriguingly, one or two mothers stressed they had pointedly *avoided* media coverage of the case after initially hearing about it, largely because it had distressed them. While this was precisely the opposite response to those of mothers who became hooked on the story, it indicated they were equally deeply affected. The retired schoolteacher – who insisted she "barely read the papers", "never" watched TV news, and "occasionally" heard "the Radio 4 news by accident" – described her frustration that reading about April left her feeling upset but impotent to "*do* anything". In Chapter 4's discussions this mother had mentioned her general avoidance of news and preference for "more reliable" sources of information like "books", during a debate about parenting practices and, in particular, the wisdom of leaving children unsupervised. Her attempted avoidance of coverage of April's abduction, and other stories embodying similar concerns, arguably owed much to her personal circumstances: as a single mother whose son had been subject to a protracted custody battle with her former partner. Significantly, she had voluntarily raised this issue several times during earlier discussions, at one point projecting a scenario onto the mystery about April's disappearance that appeared to draw heavily on her own schema. Conceding she had "some history" to inform her theory, she said her family had been "put through the family courts, and that's confidential", which "means you can't know about the various characters involved". This had led her to "wonder if

there's…there's another parent or…some connection…and the guy who's charged [Bridger] was trying to be a 'rescuer'…and that child is out there somewhere, happier than she was'".

As demonstrated by much of the dialogue already quoted, most mothers appeared to have been *affected* by April's story – particularly those who could relate to it directly because it chimed with personal experiences. No sooner had the shy working-class participant recalled her initial reaction to the news that "another kid's gone missing" - a response indicative, in itself, of a generalised sense of stranger-danger as ever-present (rather than isolated/unusual) threat - than she began reliving concerns for the safety of her own 14-year-old sister, who "ran away" fleetingly around the same time. Similarly, during a lengthy strand of working-class discussion focusing on several mothers' concerns about their children's tendency to disappear with friends without asking permission, the participant who had recently had a fourth child recalled calling the police in a panic the previous summer after her daughter vanished while playing outside. Her alarm had been heightened by the fact Brighton was then in the grip of the spate of "black car" incidents repeatedly alluded to by this group. She recounted this episode by conjuring up a nightmare scenario which seemed to draw not only on April's story but an amalgam of previous abduction cases - explaining "what was panicking me more than anything" was the question "what would they be *doing* to 'em?"

But beyond being deeply moved/disturbed by April's story (and others like it), how far should we go in inferring evidence of media *effects* from the mothers' responses? It is one thing to suggest someone has been upset or angered by a story encountered in the news and/or on the grapevine: quite another to infer this experience has had the *effect* of changing/modifying their existing perceptions or behaviours. Nonetheless, on the basis of their testimonies, for many of these mothers April's case seems to have justified, or positively *reinforced*, boundaries they already imposed to limit their children's independence, while (for a time) increasing their anxieties about the likelihood of abduction. This heightened "sensitisation" - long recognised as a key stage in an unfolding moral panic (Cohen, 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009) and cited specifically in previous writings about paedophile/abduction scares (Critcher, 2003c; Meyer, 2007) – manifested itself in various actions they admitted taking after

learning of the story, from giving their children pep-talks about stranger-danger to further tightening their reins around outdoor play and other activities. Of the mothers who responded by reminding their children about the risks of talking to/going off with other adults, several mentioned the fact that, by the time they had done so, these warnings had already been given by the child's school or nursery – a further indicator of heightened (community-wide) sensitisation in the classic panic mould. The nurse "immediately started feeling anxious about" her eight-year-old daughter "walking round to school by herself" – a worry that prompted her to "talk to her about not getting in people's cars", only to be told "oh, we know all about that: we've learnt about it at school". A similar experience was relayed by the nursery-nurse, who, while on work placement, overheard a teacher warning pupils not to "go off with anyone". This anecdote had the added dimension of reviving the discourse about 'familiar strangers', in that the teacher went on to say, "what if you saw *me* in the street and I said, 'come with me'? What would you say?'" Indeed, the teacher's explicit invocation of the 'threatening familiarity' paradigm had, this mother argued, risked undermining her pupils' confidence in her by positioning *herself* as a 'familiar stranger'. A more vicarious illustration of the way questions of trust about adults known to children appears to have surfaced in parental pep-talks following April's disappearance came from the midwife, who, despite trying to avoid "voyeuristic and gossipy" Facebook tittle-tattle, confessed to being disturbed by a forum in which mothers "were going crazy, like, 'right, we are having a stranger-danger talk tonight, blah blah blah'". Recalling a web-link posted by one contributor to a piece by "an American writer" urging parents to "talk to the children" less about "stranger-danger" than "wary individuals", she expressed disquiet at the emphasis placed on the need to "tell your child to always seek out a *mum*" - as if "all of a sudden, '*men are not safe*'".

Besides giving pep-talks, some mothers professed to becoming more vigilant (if only temporarily) in response to the story. The ex-teacher confessed she was "more wary" about allowing her son to play outside with friends in her cul-de-sac until his usual "7.30 cut-off", saying she had "found myself waving at one of the parents who came out across to go, 'where's [child's name]?'" The hostel-worker, meanwhile, alluded to the "effect" on her behaviour of the April coverage, recalling how, rushing to reach that day's focus-group session,

she found herself warning her 13-year-old son as she dropped him by a short-cut through a wood to "stick by another group of boys" and "don't talk to strangers". Asked if she was responding to April's story, she replied she "was probably slightly more worried, yes - yeah, there was definitely...an effect". The nursery-nurse also recalled reacting to the story behaviourally, saying she found herself "watching" as her son slept and feeling "really emotional, seeing him being safe". Describing her gut response to April's abduction, she added, "it hurts your heart" and "makes you feel more aware of...keeping your child safe".

While it is impossible to be scientific about any impact April's story might have had on these mothers, then, the focus-groups produced abundant anecdotal evidence to suggest it positively *reinforced* their existing attitudes towards child safety and the parenting practices flowing from these - at least in the short term. More significant, though, was the sense that participants had been demonstrably *affected* by the story (however they had learnt about it), and that it resonated with them because of the familiarity of tropes on which it drew – notably unsupervised outdoor play, mystery cars and the untrustworthy "man in the park".

'April Jones' as crystallising moment: towards anatomising a juvenile panic

So what do the interviews with journalists, analysis of published newspapers, and audience responses have to tell us, collectively or individually, about *how* this crystallising moment in the life of the rolling panic underpinning public discourse around children in contemporary Britain came about? More importantly, how can the disproportionate way in which this undoubtedly horrific case was processed and responded to at all levels in the process of story construction and meaning-making help us 'anatomise' the process by which panic narratives about children bubble back to the surface in the public sphere? Who were the key definers of this narrative, and whose influence was most decisive in shaping the terms and emphasis of discourse through the aegis of individual or collective news reception, interpersonal/ online social mediation and agency: the police/other (official) sources, news media, moral entrepreneurs like the citizen searchers from the Machynlleth community or all of us?

Key definers and the 'origins' of the crystallising moment

Beginning with the first (and perhaps simplest) of these questions, on the face of it April's story was – like the Moors murders, Bulger killing and any number of similarly horrific tales – a "noisy construction" of the kind Cohen identified in introducing the third edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, when he ruminated on the explosive ways simmering panic narratives periodically resurface in response to a "single sensational case" (Cohen, 2002, p.xxiii). This was not a panic concocted out of nowhere, but an authentic event: one which, with its montage of 'threatening familiarity' motifs (unsupervised neighbourhood play, mystery car, familiar stranger), conjured up a scenario all-too terrifyingly imaginable to any parent of a young child (including many journalists writing about it). To coin a cliché repeated by others at intervals throughout this chapter, it manifested "every parent's worst nightmare".

But who were the primary definers of April's story? In that she vanished in a (to most) remote Welsh town and the initial alert was circulated by the local constabulary as a brief statement on its website and (rapidly re-tweeted) message on Twitter, the obvious answer is the police. This argument is also justified by the reference made by working-class mothers, in particular, to their feeling that officers appeared to have deliberately controlled the flow of information about April to maintain a steady stream of media stories – a view shared by several journalists. For example, the teaching assistant drew attention to the fact the disclosure that she needed medication for cerebral palsy only occurred "three or four days" into the saga. Both groups also alluded to the crucial role April's family (particularly her distraught mother) played in spreading the word about her disappearance and appealing to the public, with the 'pink ribbon' campaign she launched to raise money for the search repeatedly mentioned in the context of frenzied social media discourse around the story.

As the analysis of newspaper coverage demonstrates, however, the very fact this story contained *so many* 'every parent's worst nightmare' elements – unsupervised play, mystery car, abduction – meant it inevitably generated vocal and immediate responses from all manner of other prominent parties, ranging from the Prime Minister to high-profile newspaper

columnists and numerous tweeting celebrities. Unusually, there were also two further factors at work in April's story conspiring to give it even more power than other stories of its kind to crystallise and concentrate underlying public concerns about child safety. The first was the unequivocal way in which, from an early stage after her disappearance, the incident was described (by both authorities and media) as "abduction" – rather than a *suspected* one, as in the McCann case. The second was the macabre coincidence that the story broke just two days after the first news reports focusing on historic allegations about Savile's systematic sexual abuse of vulnerable juveniles. The uncommonly coincidental nature of this occurrence led to some focus-group participants incorporating references to Savile in their reflections on April, as anecdotes quoted earlier show. And, as discussed previously, it encouraged many newspapers to juxtapose these two (distinct) stories on their front pages for days on end. In so doing, they symbolically conflated two very different cases as being somehow symptomatic of a common social problem: children's vulnerability to abuse by adults, in particular 'familiar strangers'. But of perhaps even greater significance to the question of "noisy" versus "quiet" panic "constructions" examined by Cohen is the fact that one 'effect' of the blizzard of April-Savile coverage was to encourage not only more alleged victims of abuse by celebrities to come forward but also various other organisations – from individual police forces to charities working with survivors of paedophile crimes – to piggyback on, or "newsjack", (Scott, 2011) these stories to raise awareness of their own child welfare-related activities and concerns. In this respect, what Cohen describes as a "quiet" construction (or constructions) successfully 'hijacked' the "noisy" construction(s) of April's abduction and the burst of revelations about Savile's predatory past.

At the same time, as in other such periods of febrile and disproportionate coverage of particular 'moral' matters, the media itself piggybacked on the April-Savile discourse to become even more exercised than usual by its habitual concerns about child abuse, paedophilia and other juvenile victim issues. Its receptivity towards piggybacking stories proffered by moral entrepreneurs appeared to be matched by an increasing inclination to actively 'look out for' similar/related narratives it could draw from the "news net" (Tuchman, 1978). The frenzy of coverage was contributed to, then, not only by numerous politicians, celebrities and other

(secondary and tertiary) definers who sent condolences to April's family and exhorted the public to help find her but various piggybacking moral entrepreneurs – ranging from the NSPCC, which reported a 60 per cent surge in reports of child sexual abuse (*NSPCC*, 2012), to various police forces that took advantage of heightened sensitisation to child welfare issues to publicise (ongoing or historical) investigations into juvenile-related crimes.

A testament to the cumulative impact of this generalised 'juvenile panic' narrative was the frequency with which focus-group participants explicitly referenced other recent stories besides those of April and Savile and the sense of wider societal issues they detected from the coverage – not to mention a self-reflexive awareness of *their own* propensity to be spooked by such narratives. Among the other 'child victim' cases referred to – drawing on a melange of disparate 'risk' scenarios – was a renewed search for the body of 21–month-old British toddler Ben Needham, who had vanished in Greece in 1991, and two stories drawing on enduring fears about 'neglect' (if not abuse) by professionals in *loco parentis*, including a report from the day before the working-class focus-group met to discuss April about a child who had choked on a dummy while at nursery. As the nursery-nurse summarised, in a remark that also offered a glimpse of the possible 'effects' on parents of such unrelentingly jittery popular discourse:

"You've got old cases from years and years ago...You know, *everything*...everything that's being talked about...It seems at the moment like it's non-stop. All the time there's something coming from somewhere – and that does make you jumpy..."

Another specific (this time, local) story brought up by both working-class and middle-class mothers – on the basis of (piggybacking) commemorative articles run by the Brighton *Argus* in the preceding few weeks - was the unsolved 'Babes in the Wood' case, in which two girls, aged nine and 10, had been sexually assaulted and strangled while playing out unsupervised 26 years earlier. The hostel-worker reminded her middle-class peers of this case, relaying how, on her way to work, she had passed a banner screaming about the fact there was "still no justice" in the cold case. Among the working-class participants, discussion of this story was more extensive – and testament to a heightened degree of sensitisation to articles about child

abuse/murder on the back of April's story. The fact it related to events that, though distant in time, had occurred locally was also significant, as it again demonstrated the tendency of mothers (and media) to draw connections/parallels between April's abduction and settings more familiar to them – *generalising* the sense that children were subject to pervasive threats to their wellbeing, particularly various forms of 'stranger-danger'.

The role of social mediation in crystallising panic narratives

Consideration of this generalised discussion of contemporaneous news narratives about threats to children leads to the question of how, once this crystallising moment had been 'initiated' – by primary (police) and secondary (news media) definers - the ensuing discourse escalated into 'panic'. More specifically, what forces were most instrumental in the process of manifesting and spreading the *sense* of panic? A key clue to answering this question might be elided from the testimony of both focus-groups, with the mothers minded to closely monitor developments in April's narrative citing two principal sources of updates, gossip and speculation: professional media and interpersonal mediation. And, in line with Chapter 4's focus-group findings, it was the latter that appeared most influential (and unsettling) – whether channelled through the conduit of playground chatter or the viral rumour-mill of social media.

As the above evidence demonstrates, active engagement with – or, in some cases, *avoidance of* - news reports about April played a substantial part in the process of meaning-making for mothers, as they absorbed the story and deliberated its wider implications. However, while their testimonies suggest they *did* use newspapers, websites and broadcast bulletins as key sources of information on the 'progress' of the story (and sensitisation to its connotations), as in previous discussions the impact of *direct* exposure to mainstream/professional media appeared to be secondary to that of the "personal influence" filter (Roper, Katz, & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Several mothers recalled first hearing about the story from a brief mention of that early statement by Dyfed-Powys Police expressing "growing concern" about a "missing" girl on BBC1's *Ten O'Clock News* the night April was taken, and the nurse found out through a radio report the next morning while driving her daughter home from Newcastle. However, a greater

number said their first exposure was through a friend or relative – whether in person or via online social media, primarily Facebook.

Of those who heard about it from someone else, the hostel-worker relayed how a tearful client approached her the morning after April's disappearance with the ominous words, "there's a girl gone", while the working-class mum-of-four recalled popping round to visit her mother the same day, to be greeted by the words, "have you seen the news...about April?" Indeed, the reference to April in first-name terms – an echo of "Jamie" (Bulger), "Maddie" (McCann), "Sarah" (Payne) and other abduction victims – was a feature of several accounts. April's positioning as a 'generalised familiar' whose plight could be projected onto the parents' own children – an extension of their personalising of the story noted previously – arguably also draws on a trope adopted by much of the media's coverage. As the writer observed poignantly, "she's already become 'Maddie', hasn't she?"

Almost all the remaining mothers said they had learnt of April's abduction through social media. The retired schoolteacher had done so when the news "flashed at me" while she was checking her emails, but a more typical source was Facebook (cited by the midwife and three of seven mums in the working-class group). The mothers' repeated singling out of both Facebook and playground gossip as sources of (often unsolicited) rumours about - and 'updates' on - the saga point to both as primary sites of the panicky discourse which came to characterise how the story was publicly processed/debated – as reflected in the textual analysis. As in the earlier group discussions, a (self-reflexive) concern expressed by both sets of mothers was the power of social mediation to generate "Chinese whispers" which, in turn, fuelled fear and uncertainty among themselves and, more worryingly for some, their children. The midwife voiced this anxiety vividly, explaining how a Facebook group she had previously set up for fellow mothers became obsessed with April's abduction. "My daughter's five - the same age as April - and so I've had to kind of keep myself separate from it because they have just been all absolutely…posting everything, reading everything and going, 'oh my God…'", she said, criticising them for "whipping it up between themselves" by posting links to "a version of the news conference with the mother crying" and "something from *The Sun*".

Like the ex-teacher, this mother admitted habitually avoiding newspapers and broadcast news - emphasising how she had deliberately sidestepped the endless twists in April's story relayed via social media, so she could carry on living, undisturbed, in a "nice happy bubble". Her admission that the story might unsettle her too much if she followed it closely was echoed by the hostel-worker - albeit with the self-reflexive caveat that, by allowing herself to occupy a "bubble", she might be "missing out on...important stuff". But, besides castigating Facebook as a source of hysterical gossip, the midwife was one of several parents to criticise the viral way articles, TV footage and information relating to appeals issued by police and April's family were shared between posters for projecting a dislocated (therefore unduly alarming) impression that the incident might have occurred closer to home. Making a similar point, the nursery-nurse (who also learnt of the story via Facebook) recalled social media 'coverage' being "confusing", because "people were like, 'have you seen this child?' and I was like reading it and going, 'in *Wales*? Well, no, I haven't seen a child in Wales today'". Criticising those who "just...copied and pasted things", she said even "people in Whitehawk" were guilty of this. As a result, she had been left worrying, disorientatedly, "is it something, you know, round here? Is it something you need to think, 'did you see someone?'""

The *generalised* sensitisation to the prospect of child abduction promoted by the sharing of appeal information about April via social media, then, appears to have represented an influential extension of the 'universalisation' of the story (and fears it manifested) observed in newspaper discourse/discussion-threads. But it was not only Facebook the mothers condemned for promoting this generalised depiction of April's story - and the ensuing (generalised) air of panic. As illustrated by the lengthy exchange arising from recollections of the previous year's "black car" incidents, they were also quick to criticise Chinese whispers spread by word of mouth from *other* pupils and parents at their children's schools, in a further manifestation of the underlying 'good/bad child/parent' opposition which repeatedly surfaced in discussions relayed in Chapter 4. Concern about their children being unnecessarily alarmed by this generalised discourse about abduction was further voiced through criticism of 'stranger-danger' pep-talks given by teachers following April's abduction. For instance, the "over-protective" working-class mother recalled her daughter returning home from school talking

about "'stranger-danger' and all that kind of stuff" and "going, 'if anyone offers me a sweet I'm not allowed to take them'", while the nursery-nurse complained about nightmarish stories her son's teachers used to warn them about misplaced trust – including one about a macabre abduction case involving a man who lured minors into accompanying him to "help" his injured puppies after "boiling" their legs so "they'd be in pain and crying" when the children saw them.

Yet the unfolding sense of panic was one to which, arguably, mothers *themselves* had contributed - by engaging in socially mediated speculation about April's whereabouts (and wellbeing). Taken together with the panicky, highly charged responses the story provoked in the hours after it was first reported (as evidenced by newspaper discussion-threads), what the 'scare stories' spread by Facebook/playground gossip and teacher/parent pep-talks appear to demonstrate is the power of social mediation to manifest - and magnify – simmering societal concerns about childhood vulnerability. The noisy construction of April's unambiguous abduction was rendered *more* so by the near-concurrent emergence of early revelations surrounding Savile. But, while this extraordinary coincidence of dramatic stories might have lit the match, it was a combination of wildly disproportionate news coverage (arguably of both stories) and similarly disproportionate audience responses that fanned the flames – in so doing, *crystallising* the story of a missing five-year-old girl into a phenomenon with all the appearance of full-blown panic.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

This thesis demonstrates the existence of a deep-rooted ambivalence towards children in contemporary Britain – contradictory feelings shaped, in large part, by the past. Childhood is perceived and portrayed as a state of both innocence and savagery, with juveniles besieged by a barrage of menaces while also presenting potential threats *themselves*. This ambivalence can be traced back through cultural deposits accumulated down the centuries - from political speeches and pedagogic tracts to folk-tales and visual art - which present a continuum of oppositions in portrayals of the young that has remained remarkably consistent over time. As Chapter 3 shows, wide-eyed infants have repeatedly been distinguished from wild-eyed youths, girls from boys, middle-class from working-class kids and one's own from other people's. And a recurring underlying feature of all these antimonies has been the implicit moral distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' children.

Today, this paradoxical positioning of juveniles is routinely reproduced through news values applied by the press and wider media in selecting stories and constructing them 'on the page'. As the interviews carried out for Chapters 6 and 7 illustrate, newsmakers are continually on the lookout for dramatic narratives about the young – with tales of child abduction and abuse, on the one hand, and outbreaks of lawlessness by feral teenagers, on the other, considered inherently more newsworthy than positive stories about child achievers. The high level of newsworthiness ascribed to such cases, and the disproportionate allocation of scarce resources to cover them, can be attributed to various factors – with journalists citing everything from their 'self-evident' human interest qualities to personal empathy for their victims, as law-abiding citizens and/or parents themselves. But the principal driver behind this disproportionate emphasis on alarming tales of child victimhood and indiscipline is *commercial*. At a time when newspapers are under more pressure than ever to attract and retain audiences, in the face of falling advertising revenue, intense online competition and the escalating cost of investing in digital publishing, their 'solution' is to minimise the cost of producing stories while maximising their saleability - by using readily available, tried-and-tested sources to generate vivid narratives that both arouse the public's *interest* and *involve* it more deeply. Fuelled by 'on-tap'

official sources with their own institutional interests in dramatizing the risks faced (and threats posed) by children, notably police and courts, the outcome of this hard-nosed commercial approach to news-making is a grossly distorted newspaper discourse which mobilises the literary tropes of the Brothers Grimm, horror movies and murder mystery novels to exploit deep-seated insecurities about juveniles for financial gain. As Chapter 5 shows, a clear majority of press articles about children published in any given month – nearly two-thirds in July 2011 – position them as either 'victims' or 'survivors', with by far the next biggest category being those portraying them as 'threats'.

The appeal of these baleful tales is reflected in the relish with which audiences lap them up. Analysis of newspaper discussion-threads in Chapter 5 demonstrates not only high levels of public engagement in (and concern about) such stories, but posters' overwhelming affirmation of the underlying 'message' most such narratives project – namely that Britain is becoming a more menacing place to live. Indeed, many commentators act as little more than 'echo-chambers' for this dominant discourse, posting sweeping statements about everything from the perceived pervasiveness of 'stranger-danger' and youth 'antisocial behaviour' to the generally decadent state of contemporary Britain. And parents, grandparents and even children interviewed for Chapter 4's focus-groups displayed a similarly intense fascination with dramatic stories about juveniles – notably those awakening their own lay anxieties about child abduction, youth disorder and, especially, the possibility of hidden terrors lurking in familiar surroundings or behind the deceptive smiles of benign-seeming acquaintances. Moreover, the morbid curiosity that encouraged mothers to engage in debate and speculation about incidents experienced vicariously through the media - and the unease they expressed about the possibility of such misfortune befalling them – appeared to have the 'effect' of *reinforcing* protective behaviours towards their own children. Asked about the degree of freedom they habitually allowed their kids, they enumerated a variety of restrictions – justifying these by listing a montage of generalised risk anxieties, ranging from predatory paedophiles, hit-and-run drivers and cyber-bullies to TV violence, aggressive advertising and even inanimate household objects like razors and kitchen knives. Discussion about the *sources* of these concerns invariably identified two key 'culprits' – news coverage and peer-to-peer gossip, particularly

'Chinese whispers' spread via online social media – with scenarios generating the greatest alarm tending to be those involving aspects of 'threatening familiarity'. These ranged from a widely reported (and later discredited) local newspaper story from the previous year about schoolchildren being stalked by a would-be abductor in a black car to numerous national press reports about the abuse of minors by trusted adults like teachers, nursery workers or more loosely known 'familiar strangers'.

This thesis argues that the sensitisation displayed by focus-group participants to the nightmarish prospect of predatory adults lurking on the margins of *their own* social circles – and the possibility of abduction, abuse or even murder occurring in oft-visited, safe-seeming surroundings – is highly symbolic. Beyond reviving generations-old fairy-tale tropes about wicked uncles and witchy stepmothers, its salience at this moment in history lies in the fact that it represents a *displacement* for wider social anxieties situated in the conflicted, uneasy position of parents in contemporary Britain. In airing concerns about 'familiar strangers', and displaying an appetite for news stories exploring this theme, focus-groups voiced a generalised suspicion of other people's motives indicative of the erosion of social trust and mounting economic insecurity numerous other studies have attributed to increased individualisation arising from the marketization of UK society since the 1970s. It can be no coincidence that research also shows this period to have coincided with a steep decline in the levels of independence British children have been allowed outside the home.

A disproportionate preoccupation with generalised concerns about juvenile 'risk' is, then, hardwired into every level of today's news-making process: in newspaper narratives themselves; in the professional (and personal) values of journalists who produce them; and in their dialogue with audience-members, including those who publicly respond to stories (and largely affirm their agendas) on discussion-threads. Given the degree of distortion present in this discourse, and the clear consensus between news-makers, sources and public, this thesis argues that it bears all the hallmarks of an endemic juvenile panic. But, while similar in many respects to classic *moral* panics, the ongoing and (at times) nebulous nature of this particular panic makes it more problematic to classify. In tapping into fears about 'familiar strangers' and

other predatory figures, from prowling paedophiles to hooded hooligans – a malevolent 'rogues' gallery' one might readily describe as folk-devils – it clearly resembles the panics of old. However, in embracing a melange of disparate menaces (some personified, others not) it bears closer resemblance to the more generalised, less tangible risk anxieties that have emerged since the 1980s, in tandem with the wider changes in society and economy described above. What it shares in common with *both* more situated (moral) panics and simmering/ongoing risk anxieties, however, is a tendency to manifest itself at times when a collision of factors conspires to crystallise it in the public sphere. These 'crystallising moments' - pinch-points at which the simmering juvenile panic bubbles to the boil - tend to be provoked by alarming individual cases or eye-catching policies, campaigns or initiatives that, in turn, lead to ever-more febrile coverage and debate. And key to the crystallisation process is the news media – which, eager to ensnare and engage audiences, knowingly taps into (and plays up) these latent societal sensitivities in explosive, highly symbolic, ways. But, whereas 'one-off' panics, like those over Mods and Rockers or the MMR vaccine, might only have reached boiling-point once before slowly fading away, today's juvenile panic simmers *continuously* – meaning that (once any immediate hysteria has subsided) the longer-term 'effect' of its (recurrent) crystallising moments is to *keep it* simmering.

To illuminate the crystallisation *process*, this thesis examines one such 'moment': the 2011 abduction and murder of five-year-old April Jones, as she played out with friends a few hundred yards from her home. Focus-group discussions, textual analysis of news reports and interviews with journalists responsible for writing them testify to the fact that, as at other such pinch-points, a collision of factors contributed to the particular resonance of this single criminal act. Against the backdrop of Britain's already simmering juvenile panic discourse, the story gained added salience due to the unambiguous nature of April's abduction – a fact, confirmed by police within hours of her disappearance, that immediately elevated it to 'front-page status' – as well as the unsettling coincidence that it occurred in the same week that news broke of the Jimmy Savile child abuse allegations. The degree of seriousness ascribed to April's case was underlined by investigating officers' decision to initiate Britain's first ever national 'missing child' alert, and issue their first statement (and a succession of subsequent updates) via social

media platform Twitter. That April vanished from such an idyllic, neighbourly locale – spirited away by a shadowy figure who materialised out of the autumnal gloom, but turned out to be the archetypal 'familiar stranger' - lent the story the added quality of a gothic fairy-tale. In one sinister package it crystallised deep-seated anxieties about unsupervised outdoor play, mystery cars and the shady "man in the park" that emerged repeatedly from the earlier focus-groups and analysis of press narratives and discussion-threads. As countless commentators noted, this haunting montage of elements came to signify "every parent's worst nightmare".

Positioning this thesis in the literature

In identifying the *existence* of an endemic panic surrounding the positioning of children in contemporary Britain, this thesis is doing little more, on the face of it, than following the well-trodden paths of previous studies. Like Cohen (1972), Fishman (1978), Hall et al (1978) and others, it justifies using the term 'panic' by contrasting the blanket news coverage of dramatic stories involving young people not only with the lesser media emphasis on other newsworthy subjects, but the relative *rarity* of such extreme incidents in real life. The process of distortion at work in these representations of reality is exposed by a combination of textual analyses of newspaper articles and the citation of prior academic research and official statistics debunking popular myths about the prevalence of 'stranger-danger', domestic child abuse and youth antisocial behaviour in society (Hillman, Adams, & Whitelegg, 1990; La Fontaine, 1990; Grubin, 1998; Corby, 2000; Pritchard & Bagley, 2001; Furedi, 2001; Shaw et al, 2013). In highlighting both these disjunctions, though, the thesis is following long-established convention, by honing in on the "exaggeration" and "disproportion" seen as constituting fundamental features of (moral) panic discourse (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009).

However, while drawing on all-too-familiar precedents in defining the *parameters* of a juvenile panic, the thesis offers a fresh 'take' on the phenomenon itself. Rather than looking at young people primarily as the *cause* of panics – as in the classic studies of media-stoked flaps about drug-taking hippies (Young, 1971), Mods and Rockers (Cohen, 1972) and black teenage muggers (Hall et al, 1978) – it conceives of them as the *subject* of panics. Specifically, it 'fuses'

the running theme common to many of these seminal works – the idea that youth *itself* is deviant - with the more recent trend towards research focusing on panics over the young's vulnerability to the deviancy of *others* (McNeish & Roberts, 1995; McDevitt, 1995; Valentine, 1996a, 1996b, and 1997; Jackson & Backett-Milburn, 1998; Kitzinger, 1999c; Gallagher et al, 2002; Valentine & McKendrick, 2004; Meyer, 2007). Few scholars, bar Valentine, have recognised this paradoxical positioning of juveniles as "angels and devils" (Valentine, 1996a, pp.581-2), and, as a geographer, her study was primarily an exploration of parental controls on children's public spaces, rather than panics *per se* – let alone the *media's* role in fuelling them. In alighting on this ambivalence about the conceptualisation of children in the *present*, the thesis also opens up the question of how this state of affairs arose – and whether it is peculiar to late-modern Britain or has its roots in conflicted ideas about childhood that can be traced historically. Where other studies of discrete panics stop short of addressing this question, this is among a small number – most notably *Images of Welfare* (Golding & Middleton, 1982) – to locate its subject in a wider socio-historical context. And, barring certain sections of Pearson's insightful (1983) critique of the periodic panics about hooliganism, it is perhaps the first substantive piece of media research to do so in relation to the problematisation of *children*. More significantly, in setting out to explore changes (and continuities) in the way juveniles have been conceptualised through time, it arguably goes further than even Golding and Middleton: far from relying solely on a survey of secondary literature on the historical positioning of the young, it uses *intergenerational* focus-groups to illuminate the ways parenting attitudes/behaviours, and risk perceptions, have shifted in recent generations. In so doing, it provides a test-bed of data that both reflects and illuminates the escalating seats of parental anxieties that have informed ever-more stringent controls imposed on children's independent activities outside the home in recent decades, as previously identified (but only partially explained) by Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg (1990) and Shaw et al (2013).

The original take this thesis brings to the study of panics about the young also has another aspect: by focusing on the way *children themselves* are problematised (both as victim and threat), it adopts a subtly different emphasis to earlier studies. Other than the aforementioned works on 1970s *youth* panics, most research examining panicky discourses about children has

dwelt less on the problematisation of *juveniles* than that of multifarious deviants and other risks 'threatening' them. For example, the foci of Meyer's study of media-stoked neuroses about predatory paedophiles and Boyce's of the 'health panic' surrounding the mumps, measles and rubella (MMR) vaccine (both 2007) are distorted news representations and parental perceptions of paedophiles and a government-backed inoculation campaign respectively – *not* the accompanying portrayals/conceptions of children.

A further dimension this thesis adds to the study of juvenile panics is its attempt to pinpoint the precise *nature* of the 'panic(s)' on which it focuses – by plugging itself into current academic debates about the spectrum of different social phenomena that have (accurately or erroneously) been tagged with this label. Far from merely describing the 'victim or threat' positioning of children as a 'moral' panic and leaving it at that, it draws on the corpus of theoretical literature published since Cohen first popularised this term to cast its *particular* panic in the (amorphous) mould of the continuous/all-embracing panics seen by Waiton (2008) and Hier (2003) and others as symptomatic of atomised late-modern societies. Moreover, in considering the possible origins or 'causes' of this climate of "permanent" or "amoral" panic (Waiton, 2008), it casts the net beyond conventional academic literature - to examine the growing body of evidence gathered by non-government organisations from latter-day Britain showing a clear correlation between the embedding of neoliberal ideologies, growing financial insecurity and declining interpersonal trust.

Processing panics: from news-making to meaning-making

As well as being more intellectually *situated* than previous studies of panics – by relating its purview to unfolding debates in theoretical literature – this thesis also strives to be more *empirically comprehensive*, by adopting a 'three-dimensional' approach to investigating the news-making and reception process. In particular, it draws on ground-breaking focus-group work by the Glasgow University Media Group to illuminate the interplay between personal experience, social processing and news narratives, and the triangulated methodologies of the most effective panic studies (notably Golding and Middleton's) to directly interrogate *all levels*

of the communication process: from journalist/source to text to audience. Taking the latter point first, as the literature review demonstrates, most empirical panic studies adopt either 'outside-in' or 'inside-out' approaches to gathering and analysing data. In the same year Hall et al (1978) published a classic deconstruction of the media-fuelled panic about an all-but non-existent epidemic of black street crime by contrasting hyperbolic news coverage and public pronouncements by judges and politicians with official crime statistics disputing the cause of their hysteria, Fishman exposed a similarly fictitious "crime-wave" constructed by the American media (again in 'collusion' with officials) 'from inside' by demonstrating how news outlets (including a paper for which he was working) became unwitting propagandists for elite ideological bias by allowing commercial pressures to render them over-reliant on official sources. Both these studies, though rightly influential, failed to examine more than one or two 'tiers' of the communication process. Hall et al inferred journalists' 'ideologies'/intentions by analysing their published words, but without interviewing them, while the only evidence they gathered to illuminate the 'impact' of their output on audiences was by looking at a smattering of readers' letters to newspapers, rather than conducting interviews or convening focus-groups. Conversely, Fishman studied a newsroom ethnographically, but failed to analyse the texts that emerged from the news process – or, in any detail, how audience-members responded. Even the most three-dimensional studies of panics to date – those that might justifiably be described as 'anatomies' of these phenomena – have limitations in terms of their *volume* of primary research. While Golding and Middleton's study of popular perceptions and portrayals of benefit claimants saw them both analysing news texts and interviewing journalists and members of the public, the amount of textual analysis conducted for this thesis (almost all national newspapers analysed at five-day intervals over a month) and the number of people interviewed (30 newspaper professionals and six, intergenerational, audience focus-groups spread over 10 meetings) was greater. That the scope of this research also embraces the new dimension of web-based discussion-threads lends it further weight, by recognising that analysis of the dynamics of the communication circuit in a multimedia age would be incomplete without examining the (online) interchange between audiences and news texts/producers. Moreover, in 'testing' the findings of its earlier empirical chapters against a 'live' case study – involving follow-up focus-group meetings, interviews with journalists and analysis of news

texts/discussion-threads – this thesis presents a rare example of the kind of a "natural history of a news item" (Deacon et al, 1999).

One of the biggest debts it owes to the work of other researchers, though, is the inspiration it draws methodologically from the ground-breaking focus-group studies of Glasgow's Kitzinger (1993 and 2004), Philo (1990 and 1999) and Reilly (1999) on perceptions of risk – all of which recreated the naturalistic dynamics of interpersonal mediation that have long been a preoccupation of research into the complexities of news reception (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Roper, Katz, & Lazarsfeld, 1955). In so doing, they not only illuminated how audience-members process news, individually and collectively: they persuasively demonstrated that, while peer-to-peer exchanges of gossip and personal/vicarious experience may be key to the process of sense-making about social reality, the power of the media to stimulate debate about underlying societal concerns cannot be underestimated. By drawing together peer groups of mothers, grandmothers and children to discuss their families' parenting practices and reflect on the perceived risks/rights that shape them, this thesis, like Glasgow's studies before it, goes some way towards replicating the water-cooler/playground exchanges that inform day-to-day processing of stories read in newspapers or online, seen or heard on broadcast bulletins or, perhaps most significantly, picked up from 'the grapevine' via friends (or friends of friends). Moreover, in reconvening the same groups of mothers to discuss April's story months after they were initially convened for exploratory discussions, it draws on the more longitudinal approach to focus-group work used so effectively by Reilly (1999) to investigate changing public perceptions of the risk posed by BSE. While conscious of the debt it owes to such qualitative Glasgow audience studies, however, it also introduces a further dimension: namely the ever-escalating power of social mediation in the virtual (as well as physical) public sphere. It does so both by exploring the increasingly fluid and viral nature of meaning-making (and rumour-mongering) on online newspaper discussion-threads and, more vicariously, through focus-group participants' frequent references to social media (and Facebook in particular) as a primary source of news – and the site of much of the panicky discourse informing their ideas and behaviours. This is the one dimension missing from the

above-cited Glasgow research, if only because of the pre-social media environment in which it was conducted.

Limitations of this study – and pointers for future research

For all the strengths of this thesis, however, there are limitations to how far any one 'level' of the communication circuit can be analysed in a single study addressing all three. More specifically, the *breadth* of empirical research undertaken here – embracing news-makers, texts and audiences – has necessitated some compromises in *depth*. For example, there is clear potential for each of these crucial 'players' in the communication process, and the interplay between them, to be explored in a more textured, meaningful way through ethnography. While there is an undoubted ethnographic dimension to observing and interpreting interactions between focus-group participants, this is a tool for analysing news reception 'after the event' - once people have had time to mull over stories they have read/heard about - rather than *during* it, as in other studies (e.g. Morley, 1980). Similarly, while qualitative interviews with newspaper journalists provide a richer seam of anecdote and information than questionnaire responses, they force the researcher to rely on the fallible memories (and honesty) of interviewees. As Fishman (1978 and 1980), Gans (1979), Ericson et al (1987) and others have demonstrated, of the rhythms and routines of the news-making process yield most if experienced at first hand – and the opportunity to shadow journalists in the field, watch them interact with contacts, and attend editorial conferences in the context of the 'breaking' April story would undoubtedly have contributed a layer of understanding beyond that which interviews alone could 'recreate'. Moreover, there has been little in the way of ethnographic fieldwork, thus far, to bring the findings of seminal newsroom studies of the print/analogue era 'up to date' by factoring in the digital dimension of modern-day newspaper production. A research project building on this thesis to illuminate the mechanics of news-making in today's 'online newsrooms' would have much to add to the corpus of knowledge about 21st century news-making in *general* – not only in the context of an unfolding panic narrative. Similarly, a more inductive approach to analysing newspaper discussion-threads – one involving direct participation in these forums, akin to "virtual ethnography" (Hine, 2000),

rather than textual analysis – would potentially provide a deeper, more holistic, insight into the *nature* of the meaning-making process in which those contributing to 'conversations' around stories engage. In addition to the empathetic advantages of experiencing this interaction first hand (another argument in favour of participant-observation of newsroom practices), particular strands of debate and audience opinion could be more fully explored by 'directing the traffic' like a focus-group facilitator. While care would need to be taken to ensure such research was conducted ethically – by announcing one's presence on forums and outlining the nature of one's work - raising particular issues in one's own comments and pressing other posters to explain/support/contextualise views they express might facilitate a deeper understanding of the reasons why individuals interpret and respond to narratives as they do. In addition, just as first-hand observation of today's 'online newsrooms' in action would allow comparisons and contrasts to be drawn with the way newspapers operated in the past, so too would researcher participation in online discussions about published stories illuminate the similarities and differences between social mediation in the virtual and physical public spheres.

Further research could also greatly enhance the findings here in relation to news *sources*. While the question of which "claims-makers" (Cohen, 1972) and "primary definers" (Hall et al, 1978) are most frequently used to inform today's news narratives was addressed in Chapters 5 and 7, resource limitations prevented the researcher from 'interrogating' sources *directly*. Analysis of news texts and interviews with journalists offer us rudimentary insights into the way sources are selected and the reasons why some might be deemed more reliable than others, but they are inherently limited in their ability to illuminate the motivations/agendas/ideologies of those 'informers' themselves. A less 'outside-in' approach to considering the role of sources in the process of news (and meaning) making would add a valuable layer of understanding to our overall picture of the dynamics of panic discourse.

Finally, this thesis offers only a limited contribution to our appreciation of the impact of moral panic narratives on *deviants*. In focusing primarily on the problematic positioning of *the child* in panic discourse – both as victim and threat – it does little to illuminate our understanding of the 'natures' of folk-devils by which juveniles are (supposedly) threatened, let alone whether

popular debate about them has the effect of amplifying their deviancy (Young, 1971; Cohen, 1972). Meanwhile, the testimony of child focus-group participants is principally of interest for the insight it offers us into the kinds of restrictions their parents impose on them, and their rationales for doing so. Further focus-group work, with a different emphasis, would also be needed to tease out any evidence that negative positioning of (some) children in public discourse contributes to deviancy amplification on the part of juveniles *themselves*. As it is, this thesis's primary contribution to addressing the question of amplification relates to that of the voices of 'panicking' definers/claims-makers and, by extension, the panic discourse itself.

Countering the juvenile panic: towards a more rational conceptualisation of children

In demonstrating the existence of a simmering, media-stoked, panic about the vulnerability and unruliness of children in contemporary Britain, this thesis presents a quandary: what can (or should) be done to counter the 'hysteria' - and how should journalists play their part? To address this question meaningfully it is important to first acknowledge some uncomfortable truths. Panics about juveniles (or anything else) are seldom wholly without foundation. If there were no basis at all for a flurry of publicity about a particular event (or pseudo-event) that revived the panic discourse, that story would quickly wither on the vine – especially in this frantic 24/7 age, in which there are ever more would-be stories competing for our (ever more finite) attention. It would, then, be folly to argue that when genuine cases of child abuse or youth disorder occur they should not be reported and debated. Moreover, the most sudden and unambiguous incidents (April's abduction) and those that occur on a significant scale (the alleged crimes of Savile) arguably merit *more and bigger* press coverage/discussion than other matters, at least immediately after news of them 'breaks' – just as one would expect the sudden death or surprise resignation of a political leader or a train crash involving multiple casualties to briefly eclipse other (less serious/dramatic) events.

In relation to 'juvenile panics' specifically, there is also considerable justification for the argument that, were it *not* for the news media - and informed claims-makers who use it to 'raise awareness' of social ills we would rather not confront – many genuine, wide-scale child

abuse scandals of recent decades would never have been exposed. Systematic sexual exploitation of children in institutional care; the prevalence of paedophilia in some parts of the Roman Catholic Church; and, indeed, the fact that most abuse of minors takes place inside the family home, rather than at the hands of prowling strangers, are just three (previously suppressed) realities that, in its more enlightened and enlightening moments, the media has exposed to public scrutiny. As the broadsheet feature-writer interviewed here remarked at one point, defending his oft-castigated profession, the reason we know abused children are "almost always" the victims of "someone they know" is precisely *because* of "20 years of reporting of these kinds of cases". In lifting the lid on these dark truths about previously trusted institutions – children's homes, organised religion and even families themselves - the best and/or earliest of such stories arguably served the vital social function of not so much 'panicking' people as provoking necessary periods of self-reflection and reform. This is, surely, exactly the form of "anti-denial" approach Stanley Cohen recently advocated as a way to harness 'panics' for socially progressive ends (Cohen, 2010).

But, for every example of the media performing a genuine public service by exposing a previously hidden/denied social evil, many more testify to an irrational obsession with the problematic positioning of children out of all proportion to the levels of jeopardy they *actually* face/pose. The main problem with this mode of reporting, as argued extensively elsewhere, is its lack of *contextualisation*: individual events (or pseudo-events) are inflated and distorted out of all proportion with their actual significance in relation to everything else, and very rarely do the acres of coverage they generate make any serious attempt to address anything more meaningful than the *detail* of the isolated case, such as underlying social, cultural or economic factors that might have contributed to the circumstances in which it occurred. Dramatic cases of child abuse, abduction or misbehaviour are invariably subject to the worst kind of "episodic framing" (Iyengar, 1991) – with newspapers blowing up "concrete events" to "illustrate issues" (in this case, the supposed pervasiveness of criminal activity affecting or involving juveniles), rather than using the "collective or general evidence" of a "thematic" frame to present a more balanced, rational picture (Ibid, p.14). When a single incident displaying the news values of "continuity" or "follow-up" (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001) established by

previous dramatic cases, however isolated and small-scale, can knock almost everything else down the agenda – or, in the case of 'classic' abductions like April's, *obliterate* competing events entirely – media coverage warps into a distorted impression of reality that deserves to be challenged, even rejected. Not only does this saturation of the news agenda have the side-effect of downgrading other equally (or more) important stories, to the extent that they become scarcely noticeable - hardly befitting the role of the 'fourth estate' - but it achieves its dominance for no more noble reason than to line the pockets of media proprietors and shareholders, by cynically packaging up forbidding tales about the worst of human conduct as eye-catching commercial entertainments.

Given the manifest 'popularity' (and profitability) of this approach to news-making, it is unlikely newspapers reliant on maximising sales and online hit-rates for their income, to single out the press, will ever voluntarily abandon a winning formula. Part of the task, then, is to find ways of cajoling them to rethink their news values - and adopt a more measured, proportionate approach to *applying* these. Replacing the moribund Press Complaints Commission with a more proactive, transparent and independent regulator, with tough powers of enforcement backed by statute, would be a good start: as long as it is left to newspaper editors to police themselves, and they are allowed to do so purely reactively, in relation to individual cases formally brought to their attention by third parties, it is hard to imagine the underlying culture, practices and norms of the industry ever being questioned, let alone reformed. By contrast, a truly independent regulator, and one with the ability to *actively* challenge the balance and tone of newspaper coverage *in the round* - rather than waiting for complaints to roll in and reprimanding papers for *individual* articles, *after the event* - could, in time, make a tangible difference. This is not an argument for press *censorship* – but, rather, a regulatory regime that makes no apology for engineering a cultural transformation in the agendas (and newsgathering practices) of the press, in the service of values like balance, objectivity and impartiality still ostensibly held sacrosanct by many practitioners. One way a new regulator might do this is to regularly commission independent research into the evolving nature, purpose and practices of journalism to create a space for ongoing discussion and self-reflection. Against this backdrop, it can try to avert future 'crises' of news-making practice, primarily, by appealing to the 'better

nature' of newspaper editors and proprietors. However, it *should* also do so by issuing stricter guidelines on the handling of news issues (sensitive ones in particular) and not being afraid to publicly admonish those who transgress them.

Beyond this, our best hope lies (as in many other areas) in the power of education. Instead of concentrating so predominantly, as they have long done, on preparing trainees for the 'real world' of news-making *as it is* – by schooling them in the normative conventions of contemporary news judgment and the utilitarian necessity for newspapers, above all, to make money – journalism trainers should be *questioning* these 'givens', and mapping out a future course for the profession as it *might hope to be*. Somewhere amid the sea of distortion and panic that characterises much of today's news output, the 'purpose' of journalism – its responsibility for "finding out what is really going on" and "uncovering things" vested interests "would prefer to leave undiscovered" (Cole, 2005, p.22), as opposed to concocting and exaggerating stories with which they would happily distract us – is being lost. It falls to the educators of today, and the practitioners of tomorrow, to put this right.

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