

# **Hiding in Plain Sight: Gender, Sexism and Press Coverage of the Jimmy Savile Case**

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## **Abstract**

In 2012 – less than 12 months after his death – TV personality Jimmy Savile was revealed to have been a prolific sexual abuser of children and young adults, mainly girls and women. This study advances research on the gendering of violence in news discourse by examining press coverage in the period leading up to Savile's unmasking. It investigates the conditions in which Savile's predatory behaviour – widely acknowledged in his lifetime – finally became recast as (child sexual) abuse. Specifically, it challenges the gender-blind analyses of media coverage which have typified academic responses to date, arguing that Savile's crimes – and the reporting of them – need to be understood in the broader context of everyday sexism: a contemporary, as well as an historic, issue.

## **Keywords**

Jimmy Savile; news; journalism; gender; child sexual abuse; gender-based violence.

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## Hiding in Plain Sight: Gender, Sexism and Press Coverage of the Jimmy Savile Case

Jimmy Savile was a fixture of British broadcasting – and, in particular, the BBC – for more than four decades. He was the first – and, more than 40 years later, the last – host of the television music show *Top of the Pops* (BBC, 1964-2006), and made children's wishes come true as host of the Saturday night show *Jim'll Fix It* (BBC1, 1975-1994). In his later years, Savile was as well-known for his voluntary work, fundraising and establishment connections as for his presenting roles.

Savile is now more likely to be known to readers in the UK and beyond as a serial sexual abuser. Rumours about Savile's abusive behaviour (Davies 2014; Cross 2016; Smith 2016, Chapter 6), as well as the specific allegations which lead to his posthumous downfall (Owens 2012; Goslett 2012), had been in media circulation for some time. However, it was the broadcast of the ITV documentary *Exposure: The Other Side of Jimmy Savile* on October 3, 2012 which triggered far more widespread coverage of his abuses. In addition to naming Savile as a prolific sexual abuser, the documentary raised questions about the editorial decision to shelve an earlier investigation into Savile, conducted by BBC's flagship current affairs programme, *Newsnight*, in the weeks following Savile's death (1). From this point forwards, the Savile story has been as much about institutional denial, complicity and responsibility as about Savile himself.

Even so, it has been widely claimed that once Savile was named as an abuser – specifically, as a paedophile – the damage to Savile's reputation was immediate and wholesale (Greer & McLaughlin, 2013; Furedi, 2013; Madoc-Jones et al 2014; Cree 2013; Cree et al 2014) and the implications for the organisations which employed and supported him, in particular the BBC, extensive and long lasting (Smith 2016). Partly because the story was, at one level, *not* new, after the ITV documentary the allegations against Savile quickly became reported as fact. Following this, academic commentary on the case – and, specifically, on its media coverage – has tended to hinge on the way in which the story unfolded: as institutional child sex abuse scandal (Greer and McLaughlin 2013), as moral panic (Cree et al 2014), as moral crusade (Furedi 2013), as crisis for the BBC (Purvis 2012; Aust and Holdsworth 2016).

Whilst writers like Jenny Kitzinger (1999) and Liz Kelly (1996) have been highly critical of the ways in which media organisations have mobilised the figure of the "paedophile", they have also been critical of the way in which media critics adopting the "moral panic" frame have tended to be dismissive of the real fears behind these "panics". There is some debate about whether the *disproportionate* nature of the mediated response to specific risk is a necessary and defining condition of moral panics (David et al 2011). However, a concern about disproportionality certainly seems to underpin work on Savile (Cree et al 2014; Furedi 2013, 2015). Given the neglect of this story for decades, the scale of the allegations of abuse emerging after his death, and the celebrity Savile had enjoyed over more than 40 years, this prompts the question: what would have been a *proportionate* media response to this story?

It is certainly possible to argue that the problem was not the level of attention the Savile case finally generated, but rather that it *did not* generate sustained attention or credibility in the abuser's lifetime. Whilst Savile's readiness to pursue the media through the courts offers a partial explanation for this, much of the behaviour for which Savile is now rightly castigated *was* in the public domain – and, indeed, admitted by Savile – long before

his death (Smith 2016; Cross 2016; Davies 2014). It was known. But it wasn't recognised as abuse.

Furedi's analysis of the Savile case (2013, 2015), in particular, ignores this. Instead, Furedi asserts that the allegations against Savile, "effortlessly acquired the status of a cultural truth, since it is widely believed that, rather than rare, the abuse of children is a very common activity" (2015: 7). Not only does this negate the decades-long struggle some of Savile's accusers have endured to make their stories heard (Smith 2016) but, as I will argue in this article, it misrepresents the way in which the Savile case unfolded. Specifically, I will demonstrate that the allegations were *not* widely taken up when they were first reported in the press the aftermath of his death, and that – even when they were – they were not necessarily reported *as abuse*.

This article will argue that one of the reasons Savile's behaviour wasn't recognised and named as abuse in his lifetime – even after the first reports of the allegations which brought about his downfall – is that it was part of a wider cultural acceptance (contemporary as well as historic) of men's sexual entitlement to, and abuse of, women. In examining coverage of his "exposure" – specifically, in the UK national press – the extent to which understanding Savile's crimes as child sexual abuse comes to obscure the gendered nature of the violence is one of my central concerns.

Before moving on to the analysis of press coverage, a brief outline of some key facts about the case is needed as these have become somewhat distorted in the post-*Exposure* re-construction of Savile. Firstly, to label Savile a paedophile is misleading: he did not just abuse children (Westmarland 2015). Although the numbers he abused may never be accurately known, a report published by the National Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Children and the Metropolitan Police Service three months after the ITV broadcast identified that 35% of the 214 allegations of criminal offences by Savile formally recorded by that time involved complainants over the age of 16 (Gray and Watt 2013, 15). Dame Janet Smith's (2016, 771) later report identified 72 BBC victims, of whom 38 (53%) were 16 and over at the time of abuse.

Savile did not only abuse women and girls: in the NSPCC/MPS report, 19% of alleged victims are male (Gray and Watt 2013, 15). Smith's report finds that 15 (21%) BBC victims were male (Smith 2016, 771). However, this does not undermine the broader argument I want to develop here: it is the display of male heterosexual entitlement – reinforced through homosocial interactions between men – which served as an alibi for Savile during his lifetime, making his abusive behaviour difficult to name as such because it was so culturally acceptable. He was adept at implicating others – particularly men – in his behaviour. I am not (only) thinking here of those who have subsequently become the focus of criminal investigations, but of the far wider audience who indulged, tolerated and tacitly approved of his behaviour. He made journalists, co-workers and friends the audiences for his sexual bragging and "jokes" about consent. His excessive flirting accompanied by unsolicited (and often unwanted) touching and kissing had an audience of millions in his lifetime, so central was it to his persona. Autobiographies and profiles repeatedly acknowledged – and sometimes celebrated – his sexually predatory behaviour towards girls and young women (Davies 2014, Cross 2016; Smith 2016).

In this respect, Savile's behaviour fits neatly onto Liz Kelly's (1988) notion of the "continuum" of sexual violence. Kelly's continuum focuses on women's experiences of sexual violence, but she notes that this concept can be mobilised to think of men's behaviour on a continuum, with "typical" and "aberrant" behaviour shading into one

another. If we think of Savile's behaviour on a continuum, then the abuse of vulnerable boys (and men), as well as girls and women, makes sense as a further expression of *his* dominance and power, something indivisible from a culture of male (sexual) entitlement. This owes a debt to Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer's feminist analysis of sexual murder and its discursive construction in *The Lust to Kill* (1987). They note that whilst sexual murder cannot be understood straightforwardly in relation to misogyny (not all victims are women), it cannot be understood separately from the social construction of gender. Similarly, in the Savile case, what was "normal" was a casual, everyday misogyny. This served as an alibi for Savile's abuse of children (of both sexes) because he so openly admitted aspects of his abusive behaviour towards young women in ways which implicated his audiences and made allies of other men, even if they were non-abusing.

Gender-blindness in relation to the reporting and understanding of child sexual abuse is, of course, not unique to the Savile case. Kitzinger (1999) and Kelly (1996) have noted the ways in which a moral panic around "paedophiles" in the British press in the 1990s became a convenient way of *not* talking about gender. The paedophile label – itself gender neutral – has been widely used in relation to Savile but even academic commentary critical of this has, to a certain extent, accepted these terms of reference: namely, that the Savile case is about child sexual abuse (Smith 2013; Furedi 2013; Greer and McLaughlin 2013 and 2015). In fact, many of those who have come forward – including some of the women interviewed for the *Exposure* documentary – describe repeated abuse over a number of years, before and after they could legally consent to sex. As Kitzinger (1999, 145) notes, one of the problems with the term "paedophile" is that it, "singles out the abuse of children, as if there were no connection between acts of sexual abuse and exploitation perpetrated against children and those perpetrated against adult women". In the Savile case, the children and adult women were – in some instances – the same individuals at different ages.

What I am arguing for here, then, is the importance of gender and power to understanding the way in which the crimes of which Savile was posthumously accused have been made meaningful. Of course, there are other important questions to be asked about the Savile case, not least about institutions and their complicity (2). However, my argument is that none of the questions raised by this case can be answered without also thinking about gender and power: it was sexism which allowed his abuses to hide in plain sight for so long.

## Scandal revisited

This article re-examines the way in which the story unfolded in the UK press from the announcement of Savile's death (October 29, 2011) until three days after the broadcast of the *Exposure* documentary (October 6, 2012). This is the same period of time covered by Greer and McLaughlin (2013) in their article "The Sir Jimmy Savile Scandal: Child Sexual Abuse and Institutional Denial at the BBC". Like Greer and McLaughlin, I chose this period as it allows for some consideration of "before" and "after" the broadcast of *Exposure* and I similarly constructed my sample using a Nexis search of the UK's national newspapers between these dates. My search for articles including the phrase "Jimmy Savile" anywhere in the text produced an initial corpus of 1210 articles. Once duplicates, teasers and articles in which Savile was simply mentioned in passing (e.g. in the context of a sports report or TV listings) were manually excluded, I was left with a corpus of 420 articles.

Whilst Greer and McLaughlin's work provides a hook and structure for my own, our interests are quite different. Greer and McLaughlin focus on how the scandal around Savile was activated and identify four main stages of the story: the default inferential structure adopted after his death which positioned Savile as a "national treasure"; the latent phase, which began with reports that a *Newsnight* investigation into Savile's abusive behaviour had been shelved and ran until, the third stage, the scandal was activated with ITV's announcement of the *Exposure* documentary; and, finally, the "amplification" of the scandal through the various stages of BBC denial which left both the BBC's and Savile's reputations in tatters. Whilst Greer and McLaughlin are most interested in identifying stages in scandal activation, in re-examining their material I ask why – despite aspects of the *Exposure* story being in the public domain for months (in some cases, years) – Savile was not widely identified as an abuser prior to *Exposure*.

This required a qualitative, inductive approach to the material: I read through all of the articles multiple times. Initially, I read chronologically to enable me to flesh out the four stages in Greer and McLaughlin's analysis and, in particular, to pay attention to the ways in which Savile's relationships with women and girls were discussed at different stages. This also allowed me to chart the development of the abuse story, noting both the language used to describe claims at different stages in the story and the ages of reported accusers as the story developed. Some basic content coding of stories was also undertaken, in particular to allow me to better map the use of sources.

I am not arguing that gender was the only important vector in the Savile case: Savile's untouchability was not simply a position of gendered privilege, but one enhanced by wealth, celebrity and connections with the establishment. However, the absence of gendered commentary both in press coverage and in the academic analysis of media representations of Savile to date is an alarming gap, and one this article will address. This involves paying attention not only to the "hard" news scandal – which preoccupies Greer and McLaughlin – but also to the "soft" news scandals which pepper coverage of Savile in the months after his death.

In terms of broader debates about the gendering of "hard" and "soft" news (North 2016), my analysis points to the gender-blindness in Greer and McLaughlin's analysis of scandal. They differentiate between "soft" news scandals – which "involve the transgression of superficial or tokenistic values that distract and perhaps intrigue, but fall short of truly scandalising British society" – and "hard" news scandals which "involve acts of incompetence, immorality and/or criminality by high-profile individuals or institutions that embody clearly defined moral or ethical principles" (2013, 245). They identify the Savile case as a hard news scandal, but in so doing they ignore a number "soft" scandals involving Savile's relationships with women which – as I will demonstrate – briefly dominate news coverage in the period studied and set the scene for the initial treatment of the abuse allegations. I will argue that when the scandals around Savile are "soft" – that is, related to personal morality, sexual preference and (lack of) emotion – sexism, and even sexual abuse, can be admitted but not recognised as problematic. Sexism in and of itself does not scandalise. Only when the story become a "hard" scandal – implicating institutions, involving multiple victims and raising questions about the process of news gathering itself as well as about justice – do these "soft" scandals become understood as evidence of abuse.

In what follows, I approach the story chronologically to unpick how Savile was able to hide "in plain sight" (Davies 2014) even after his death, and the conditions in which the abuse story finally came to prominence.

## **Savile's death and funeral: October & November 2011**

Greer and McLaughlin (2013, 248-50) identify a default inferential structure of public validation in the obituaries and news reports of Savile's death and funeral. According to Greer and McLaughlin, this period is characterised by reports celebrating his life and career, presenting Savile as a unique, eccentric but familiar figure: a "national treasure". His most famous catchphrases are affectionately appropriated to headline tributes in which his charity fundraising is emphasised. However, Greer and McLaughlin note that there are hints of a different side to Savile with broadsheets noting,

that Savile's critics had labelled him a self-publicist who would do anything to ingratiate himself with the British establishment. His lifelong bachelor status, idolisation of his mother ('the Duchess') who lived with him until she died, and antiquated views on 'ladies' had also generated speculation and innuendo about his sexuality. (2013, 250)

Even in the days immediately following Savile's death, when there appears to be greatest consensus about him, his difference – eccentricity, oddness – is repeatedly marked. In my re-examination of this material, I was struck by the way his difference so often hinges on his relationships with women (no significant romantic relationship in his lifetime; an obsessive closeness to his mother) and on his own statements about women and children. It is repeatedly reported that, although he presented himself as a ladies' man, he never married. A number of reports quote Savile as referring to heterosexual relationships as a "headache" or form of "brain damage" and note that he preferred casual sex.

However, what is interesting for my purposes is the fact that the comments about his relationships with women are typically presented as part of a narrative of absence or loss, something which renders him odd but a curiously sympathetic figure who lacked love. That he treated women as accessible and disposable is not an issue in and of itself. The most striking example of this is an article by Jane Fryer in the *Daily Mail* (October 31) in which she writes, in the first person, about her encounters with Savile. The headline sets up an expectation of sexual intimacy ("When Jimmy Asked Me to Stay the Night") and is followed by:

JANE FRYER knew Jimmy Savile for years. He was one of the kindest and oddest men she ever met. And she can vouch he had an eye for the ladies.....

There is a play of intimacy and distance here – Savile is simultaneously known and unknowable - but also a claim to authenticity: Fryer "can vouch" for Savile. The reasons he might need this kind of alibi are vaguely and briefly addressed, but what is striking is how Savile's implied sexual harassment of Fryer (who first met Savile when she was a young journalism student) is deployed - against a backdrop of his fascination with his mother, and the innuendos around his sexuality - as evidence of an appropriate but ill-executed heterosexual masculinity:

I didn't know what, if anything, to believe. Jimmy was often described as a 'professional exaggerator'. But he was fabulous company, particularly when he

relaxed and stopped performing (yes, I did stay the night in his late mother's spooky room, which was extremely kind of him, if very odd) and took me for a slap-up dinner in Scarborough. And no, he didn't pester me (that time).

[...] There were constant innuendoes made about his sexuality. While he was a relentless, incorrigible flirt, he was never seen in public with a girlfriend (though following an unfortunate misunderstanding after dinner in London, I am quite sure he preferred ladies).

His sexual performance is presented as chivalrous ("he didn't pester me that time"), aggressive (the implication that he did pester her another time; the relentless and incorrigible nature of his flirting) and comically inept (the "unfortunate misunderstanding" which left no doubt as to his proclivities). With the benefit of hindsight, these comments might be read as what Simon Cross (2016) - drawing on political communications literature - refers to as "dog whistles": disclosing and simultaneously enclosing the reality of Savile's abusive treatment of women. However, I want to suggest something different here. Namely that there is a broader cultural complicity in Savile's behaviour which is not restricted to his lifetime but rather manifests in these early posthumous reports in which his sexual harassment of women is *not* hidden, but yet cannot be seen as problematic. He is simply a flirt, a womaniser, a ladies' man – all terms which are widely used in the reports following his death. That the abuse can be (parenthetically) disclosed and apparently seamlessly enclosed within the dominant narrative depends on a wider cultural acceptance of men's entitlement to women – an expectation that readers will not (on the whole) understand Savile's behaviour towards Fryer as abusive. My concern here is not with Fryer's understanding of the incidents she describes, or her intent in disclosing them: it is, of course, entirely possible that Fryer is saying as much as she was allowed to editorially. However, this story is symptomatic of the way in which Savile's behaviour towards women is widely indulged and condoned even at the time of his death.

The allegations surrounding children and young people are dealt with slightly differently. One strategy – used in a number of reports – is explicit denial: either in the form of a quote from Savile, or tautological editorialising that whilst there were rumours, as the story never broke, there is no story (3). It is also notable that these allegations are typically reported in relation to sex and morality: the rumours were about girls – typically fans - who were *underage*. Emphasising age presents this as an issue of the legality of sexual consent in which the focus is on the girls themselves (their age) and not on Savile's behaviour. At most, the question mark over Savile is whether he *knew* girls were under the legal age of consent, and, indeed, whether he could have been expected to know in the context of a licentious culture marked by the excesses of female fandom. If there is a question of sexual morality and responsibility, it is a question (implicitly) posed of the girls as much as of Savile.

In short, neither the (implied) sexual harassment of adult women or rumours about child sexual abuse (sex with "underage" girls) significantly troubles the construction of Savile as a "national treasure" in this period.

### **Soft(ened) scandals: December 2011 – July 2012**

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the first secrets – "soft" scandals - to be revealed in the weeks following Savile's death are sexual ones: the existence of a long-term lover, Sue Hymns, kept hidden by Savile for 43 years (widely reported from December 3, 2011); and a

possible “lovechild”, Georgina Ray, who had allegedly tried to approach Savile in his lifetime but had been rebuffed (widely reported from December 15, 2011). That Ray chose to make her paternity claim public only following Savile’s death generates considerable suspicion. The stories about Ray – a blonde, 40-year old divorcee, as most reports describe her – repeatedly circle around whether her paternity claim will obstruct Savile’s charitable bequests.

The secret lover and lovechild stories precede the initial reports concerning the dropped *Newsnight* investigation by 3-5 weeks, but both are still running when the abuse allegations break. Indeed, the lovechild story is mentioned in both the *Sunday Mirror*’s initial report of the abuse allegations on January 8 (“Newsnight Probe Into Sex Claims Against National Treasure Sir Jimmy Axed by BBC Bosses”) and the follow up in the *Daily Mail* the next day (“BBC Axes Expo Into Jimmy Savile Teen Sex Allegations”). In both reports the abuse allegations are described as sex. Although it is acknowledged that the claims relate to behaviour which may have been “inappropriate”, the women alleging abuse are never described as having been children at the time, nor is the word abuse used in either report. Savile’s family and friends are quoted, describing the claims as “muck racking” and asserting “He wasn’t a dirty old man” (*The Sun*, January 9, 2012, 4). As such, the claims are discursively situated in relation to sexual morality and greed. Like Ray, with her purportedly money-grabbing paternity claim, Savile’s victims are implicitly accused of “kiss and tell” duplicity; whilst Sir Jimmy – “national treasure”, “rich man”, “legend” - is defended against accusations of impropriety which are inappropriately classed, gendered and generational.

If the scandal remains latent at this point, then, it is at least in part because it is still a sex scandal which is perfectly in keeping with Savile’s existing, aggressively heterosexual persona. Less than a week after it ran the *Newsnight* story, *The Sun* carried a salacious short report about an auction of Savile’s belongings, worth quoting in full:

**JIMMY'S LEG ROVER;  
FOR SALE: STAR'S MOBILE BED**

ROMEO DJ Sir Jimmy Savile's old Range Rover is up for sale - complete with its own BED.

The bachelor, who died last October aged 84, took the car on charity tours. And after fund-raising he would leg it into the back for some R&R.

The entertainer - who once bragged he bedded women everywhere "except on the ironing board and chandelier" - bought the 1978 Range Rover Carrawagon new for £3,000.

But the car, which has a wash basin between the front seats, is set to fetch £16,000 at auction in Weybridge, Surrey, next month.

(*The Sun*, January 14, 2012, 35)

Notably, the *Newsnight* allegations are not mentioned here and the play on words (“leg rover”), language used to describe Savile (“star”, “Romeo DJ”, “bachelor”, “entertainer”), and emphasis on charity fundraising insulates him against critique. He is an eccentric, humorous figure, to be admired – envied perhaps – for his wealth and easy access to women.

When the abuse claims are revisited – following Miles Goslett’s article in *The Oldie* (February 2012) – the language is less equivocal. For example, *The Mirror*, which a month



earlier reported on “sex claims” discursively linked to the lovechild story, reports on February 11:

The BBC has been accused on shelving a TV investigation into allegations that Sir Jimmy Savile *sexually abused* teenage girls at its studios.

Current affairs show Newsnight was looking into a woman’s claim that the late TV star *molested her* when she was 14 or 15 in his dressing rooms at a recording of 1970s show Clunk Click. [...]

It is alleged Newsnight spoke to several women who claimed Savile exploited his role as presenter of the hit programme to *groom and abuse* girls.

They also heard claims that two other celebrities, who are still alive, *abused* girls at Television Centre [...]

Surrey Police received a complaint five years ago from a woman who said Savile *indecently assaulted* her in the 1970s

(*The Mirror*, February 11, 2012: emphasis added)

Goslett’s article - which initiates this second stage of reporting - emphasises the potential BBC cover-up and is the first to state that the allegations investigated by *Newsnight* involved girls under the legal age of consent. It is only when the allegations are seen to involve children – and when the institutional cover-up angle gains traction - that they begin to be described as abuse. However, the story remains essentially moral at this point: it is the age of the victims and the institutional response to their claims, rather than Savile’s behaviour *per se* which is the problem.

Of course, this is not to say that allegations made by children are automatically recognised as abuse, or that such allegations necessarily render celebrities untouchable (witness Roman Polanski or Woody Allen). My point here is simply that until the age of the victims becomes part of the story, Savile’s behaviour is *only* understood as sex, and even when it is first alleged that Savile *abused* children, the claims do not – initially – stick.

Indeed, the child sexual *abuse* scandal remains latent and for a number of months the default inferential structure of Savile as national treasure persists (Greer and McLaughlin 2013, 251). Until late summer 2012, there is no reference to the abuse allegations in stories which, for example, focus on the charity auction of *Sir Jimmy’s* belongings or the publication of a new biography. However, a number of news items in this period *do* reference the lover and lovechild stories, not least in light of Alison Bellamy’s (2012) authorised biography which features a second secret lover. Whilst these stories do not necessarily cast Savile in a favourable light (he is shown to be cold towards these women), equally they do not wholly trouble the dominant construction of the lovable, charitable, eccentric (4). Adult women are acceptable collateral damage.

### **Exposed?: August 2 – October 6, 2012**

In early August, the first stories about the ITV documentary begin to appear. Just before this, however, there is an interesting column by Brian Reade in *The Mirror* which obliquely links Savile with child sexual abuse through reference to Operation Ore, a police investigation into child pornography rings:

#### **JIMMY GOES FOR A THONG**

I was thinking of popping over to Leeds for Jimmy Savile's auction.  
Until I realised owning a yellow bubble car filled with gold tracksuits, bright red underpants, pink satin bedspreads and pictures of smiling boys wearing medals that said an ageing bachelor with dyed blonde hair had "fixed it" for them wouldn't look too good if the Operation Ore II team came knocking.  
Still, I wish all those who bought memorabilia good luck with their purchases.  
Especially the middle-aged women who believe Jim's the dad they never knew and are now busy scraping saliva off his cigars for a DNA trace.  
(*The Mirror*, August 2, 2012, 23)

The reference to Operation Ore simultaneously discloses and encloses the abuse allegations as Cross (2016) discusses: Savile offends contemporary taste and mores, but in a humorous way which garners a certain amount of respect given his charitable giving. It is taking Savile's belongings *out of context* which renders them suspect and this activity is most associated with "middle-aged women" trying to stake a sexual and financial claim to Savile. Again, the story becomes about sex, taste, morality.

That this is also, fundamentally, a story about celebrity – and a particular brand of celebrity masculinity – is significant. Madoc-Jones et al (2014, 43) argue that "the celebrification of sex crime" in a British context is "part of the ideological spectacle of new sexism, extending and (re)marking the legitimacy of patriarchy." Their argument points to the fact that the celebrity is, by definition, marked as exceptional and whilst this can lead to "a more accepting discourse around the celebrity offender and a conspiratorial discourse around victim motivation" (42) – as in Reade's column – the exceptionality of the celebrity can also be reworked in line with the construction of the sexual abuser as monstrous, exceptional other (as begins to happen after the *Exposure* broadcast). This retrofitting of the male celebrity abuser is also coherent with a characterisation of the public sphere as dangerous for women and children, whilst family life is (re)constructed as safe.

This argument certainly holds in relation to Savile. The extensive reporting of his aversion to conventional family life – specifically to women of his own generation – means that when the allegations do finally stick his "oddness" can be reconstructed as "monstrosity". But, as Madoc-Jones et al also note, the way in which Savile's accusers have to move into the public sphere has a contradictory effect, at least initially, whereby their very presence in the world of celebrity casts doubt on their veracity (as similarly happens with "lovechild" Georgina Ray). The suspicion which sticks to his accusers in the first days of the scandal is voiced most consistently in the Letters pages. Whilst this suggests something of readers' investment in Savile and their reluctance to give him up, it is also resonates with wider cultural constructions of child sexual abuse in which the ability to disclose in itself is used to undermine the veracity of a claim: "authentic" child sexual abuse is unspeakable, it should render its victims silent (Walker 2005; Boyle 2009). When this is fused with the complex power dynamics in which celebrities, the media and fans are implicated, this goes some way towards explaining the reluctance to believe claims against some celebrities (5).

So what is it that allows the claims against Savile to finally "stick"?

Notably, it is not until the first coverage of the *Exposure* documentary that the word "paedophile" is posthumously used to describe Savile in the press (6). Even so, a closer analysis of the way in which the first paedophile stories are reported suggests that the discursive linking of abuse with other *sexual* claims allows the inferential "national treasure" structure to briefly return. In the early August stories, for example, the allegations are still

refuted by friends and family, and references to Savile's "colourful" lifestyle, charitable giving and the posthumously revealed secret lover and lovechild stories undermine the severity of the allegations (7). That tabloid reports relating to the unveiling of his headstone and the charity auction of his belongings make no reference to the allegations as late as September 28 makes sense in this context. The word "paedophile" in and of itself does *not* immediately shift the discourse.

As the date for the ITV broadcast is announced and it becomes clear that Savile is to be named as a *prolific* sexual abuser, the terms of reference begin to shift. It could be argued that women and girls only matter in multiples (Boyle 2005) and certainly the emphasis on numbers – the ages of the girls, the number of accusations – in reports immediately before and after *Exposure* is striking. The Savile story quickly becomes a serial narrative, with new revelations adding to his abusive tally and daily rendering him more monstrous. However, the recasting of Savile as monster is not as immediate or as wholesale as previous commentators have claimed (Greer and McLaughlin 2013 & 2015; Furedi 2013 & 2015) and the ambivalence and contradictions in some of these early reports (not to mention reader letters) is revealing.

Although it is the allegations against girls under the age of 16 which receive the most widespread coverage, early reports include reference to no fewer than seven separate attacks on girls and young women aged 16 and over at the time of assault: these allegations include four separate rape allegations against Savile, and a further rape allegation against an unnamed accomplice. So it is not the case that the story shifts simply because the early allegations all involve under 16s (cf Furedi 2013). Something else is at stake.

Indeed, understandings of Savile as a prolific child sexual abuser jostle with debates about sexual morality which had previously fit, relatively comfortably, with Savile's media image. For instance, on September 29 (when *Exposure* begins to receive extensive coverage), an article in *The Express* quotes Savile's friend, Howard Silverman:

We all had fun where we were young but none of it was ever with under-age girls. I was a good friend of Jimmy and can assure everyone that none of this is true.

Silverman's denial negates the importance of consent by focusing on age: if the girls were of age, then they are assumed to have consented. This kind of slippage does not only occur in statements from those defending Savile. A number of articles focus on the "difference" of 1970s' culture as a way of explaining both Savile's behaviour and how he got away with it for so long (8). Even articles which are highly critical of the "different times" analysis still accept this framing of the story as fundamentally about the *possibility* of consent as legally determined. In many ways, this replicates their reports of Savile's own flaunting of his behaviour:

Savile's BBC producer of 21 years said he was a Pied Piper 'who regularly joked about girls of 16 being legal'. ("We Were Victims of Savile", *Daily Mail*, October 2)

I often had cause to ring him at home, and before I even said why I was calling he'd reply: "She told me she was 16 and I has no reason to doubt her!" ("Sinister answer masked as joke", *The Sun*, October 3).

Whilst these “jokes” sound very different in light of *Exposure*, my argument is that much of the initial press coverage of Savile’s crimes replicates – *as well as*, at times, challenges – Savile’s world view.

Moreover, it is worth reflecting on the “times” associated with Savile’s abusive career. Whilst the *Exposure* allegations relate to the 1970s, a number of additional allegations - including a widely reported claim that he raped a 15-year old girl at Broadcasting House in 1986 (October 2-3) - are made in the first week of October, suggesting that Savile’s abusive career continued well into the 1980s. (Allegations relating to the 1990s and 2000s emerge later.) The “different times” narrative centres around familiar (and comfortable) questions of the sexual morality of a bygone age. This is – of course – based on a very selective reading both of the “times” and of the allegations against Savile. For instance, these “times” also encompass the rise of second-wave feminism and the first published gendered analyses of child sexual abuse, as well as sexual harassment. The first feminist analysis of child sexual abuse – Louise Armstrong’s *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* - was published in 1978 in the US, followed by Sarah Nelson’s *Incest: Fact and Myth* in the UK in 1982. Catharine MacKinnon named the *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* in 1976, and Sue Wise and Liz Stanley expanded the consideration of sexual harassment to encapsulate a far wider range of experiences in 1987, whilst Liz Kelly proposed the “continuum” of sexual violence in 1988. Locally to Savile, there was a great deal of activism around men’s violence against women in Leeds and Bradford through the mid to late 1970s. Leeds Women’s Aid was established in 1974 and the first women’s refuge opened in Bradford in 1975. Both cities had Rape Crisis Centres from 1978 and the first Reclaim the Night march was held in Leeds in 1977 (Mackay 2015), with the late 1970s and early 1980s being a period of particularly intense feminist activism, not least because of the sexual serial murder of women in Yorkshire in this period.

This context is notably absent in these accounts. The invisibility of feminist expert commentary within this press coverage (there are *no* feminist sources used in any of the reports in my sample), and in the official enquiries which follow (Westmarland 2015: 154), compounds this selective historicisation of the 1970s and 1980s. Further, many of the victims speaking out in these early reports – both in *Exposure* and in subsequent press coverage - describe how Savile used explicit physical force and psychological manipulation, and some note their attempts to report his behaviour to authority figures. In other words, there is evidence that some of the first reported victims understood Savile’s behaviour as abuse *even when it happened*. Yet, the “different times” narrative, combined with repeated descriptions of Savile’s victims being *underage* – a word used in 17% of all articles between September 29 and October 6 - discursively situates the allegations in relation to whether the girls *could* consent rather than whether they *did* consent, or whether Savile sought their consent.

This article has focused specifically on Savile and I have not investigated how other relevant cases were reported in the same period, *unless* Savile is explicitly mentioned in the same article. However, two columns from the *Daily Mail* deserve comment here for what they suggest about enduring attitudes towards statutory rape. Both columns deal with Savile as one of a range of news stories but, in both, one of those other stories involves a much older man’s sexual relationship with a girl under 16: a child abduction case involving a 37-year-old male schoolteacher and a 15-year-old girl (Peter McKay column, October 1, 2012); and a passing reference to Mandy Smith’s childhood relationship with Rolling Stone Bill Wyman (Richard Kay’s diary, October 2, 2012). Notably, in neither case is there an

allegation of force and both girls are reported to be willing participants, although they were not legally of an age to consent to sexual intercourse in the UK (Smith was 13 at the time). The columnists normalise and decriminalise the teacher's and rock star's behaviour, whilst simultaneously pointing the finger at the BBC for inaction in relation to Savile.

McKay's discussion of the child abduction case, for instance, has the header: "TEENAGE PASSIONS, THEY'RE AN AGE-OLD PROBLEM" and he spends much of the piece focusing on how "confusing" laws around sexual consent are, expressing considerable sympathy for the "charming, discreet, lovely man" held in police custody for child abduction. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, he reminds us, "girls routinely married in their teens": questions of power, agency and consent are completely sidestepped. Yet, he comments on Savile: "What a shame the BBC did nothing about him, despite rumours of his ill behaviour over 40 years."

The next day, Richard Kay's diary opens with a discussion of the BBC's failure to broadcast the *Newsnight* investigation. The next item begins:

Almost three decades after Mandy Smith, then a 13 year-old schoolgirl, was swept off her feet by wrinkly Rolling Stone Bill Wyman, she finds herself at the centre of another drama.

Here, Smith's sexual past is used as a hook for a story to which it is completely irrelevant: an investigation by the Charity Commission into irregularities in the charity she runs. Whilst this linking of women with sex is hardly unusual, in the context of this column it is particularly jarring: on the one hand we have the "glaring irony" that the *Exposure* documentary which damns the BBC was based on research initially conducted *for* the BBC; on the other, passing reference to a "wrinkly Rolling Stone" sweeping a 13 year-old girl – who has now become a suspect woman - off her feet. In these instances, the accusations against the BBC seem to be a means of deflecting attention from a broader *continuing* media investment in sexualising young girls and focusing on questions of morality and consent in relation to (allegations of) abuse against them. It is the morality of both "schoolgirls" which is scrutinised here.

As Greer and McLaughlin (2013) note, the Savile case quickly becomes an *institutional* child abuse scandal and these columns give some indication of what it at stake as this shift occurs. My own research confirms the institutional emphasis, with BBC sources being the most often cited after the victims themselves. As such, the possibility of reading these crimes in relation not to the morality of a bygone age and the failures of institutions to protect children, but to contemporary sexual politics, is left largely unrealised.

## Conclusion

In conducting this research, one of the things I have been most struck by – in individual news stories, official reports and academic criticism alike – is the apparent need to cast the Savile case in black and white terms. Before, he is a "national treasure". After, he is a "monster".

This is evident, for example, in Furedi's claims that the allegations against Savile "effortlessly acquired the status of a cultural truth" (2015, 7). But it is also, somewhat surprisingly, evident in Dame Janet Smith's report. Whilst Smith provides numerous, carefully considered, examples of cultural and institutional knowledge of aspects of Savile's

behaviour in his lifetime, she paints Savile's lifetime audience with surprisingly broad brush strokes as an adoring mass (e.g. 434).

There is, of course, an element of truth in both of these claims. But the analysis in this article points to the ways in which Savile's standing was *not* immediately or straightforwardly overturned in light of the allegations first investigated by the *Newsnight* team. Rather, by paying close attention to what Greer and McLaughlin (2013) identify as the "latent" phase of the scandal, I have demonstrated the ways in which the allegations were initially slotted into a wider cultural narrative around Savile in which a routinised everyday sexism was an acceptable – and accepted – part of this national treasure's public persona. This is not to suggest that the "Great British Public" (Smith 2016, 434) were ever united in our appreciation of Savile. Instead, it is to point to the ways in which evidence of Savile's relationships with women and girls could be interpreted and validated as part of his existing persona. It wasn't visible as abuse because what happened to these women and girls didn't matter enough. And it still didn't matter enough when the story first broke.

This article therefore admits some of the contradictions and complexities which characterise the moment when Savile's public persona begins to shift from "national treasure" to "paedophile". It also points to the way in which *both* of these characterisations depend on the marginalisation of adult women. For journalists reporting on child sexual abuse – and for academics studying their work – it therefore points to the importance of recognising the *links* between child sexual abuse and other forms of men's violence, particularly against adult women. These links span either side of the age of consent and, indeed, suggest some of the difficulties in continually foregrounding *sexual* consent in stories about abuse. In the Savile case, some of the initial reports concerned sexual activity with girls under the age of consent who did not actively refuse Savile's advances (which is not to say that they were necessarily able to consent). In such cases, it is helpful to reiterate the legal impossibility of their consent as "underage" girls. However, the uncritical use of the term "underage" can also be a dangerous red herring, not least as it implicitly creates a category of people – mainly adult women – who are *always* consenting. This is an area which has not – yet – been picked up in feminist guidance to journalists on responsible reporting of men's violence against women and girls (e.g. Zero Tolerance 2010) but is a concrete lesson to be learned from this analysis of the Savile case.

This is hardly the only recent case to demonstrate that sexism is not just a historic problem in public life and in media practice. But through a focused case study, this article has demonstrated that some of the attitudes which allowed Savile to continue his abusive career for so long can also be detected in the coverage which followed his death, and even in the (surprisingly limited) academic commentary it has generated.

## NOTES

(1) Following Savile's death, journalists at *Newsnight* were working on a story about Savile's abuse of young women at Duncroft School (a residential school for girls deemed to be "at risk"). The editor took the decision not to proceed with the story and the BBC broadcast a number of tributes to Savile in its Christmas schedule. When the abuse story finally broke, it was, therefore, a story about the BBC as much as about Savile. Had the BBC killed the *Newsnight* story to protect the reputation of the corporation? A first report into the circumstances surrounding the *Newsnight* investigation was commissioned and published within weeks (Pollard 2012). In 2016, Dame Janet Smith's far more extensive investigation into Savile at the BBC was published. Smith's remit was Savile's behaviour at the BBC; on whether concerns were raised – formally or informally – about Savile during his lifetime; on the extent to which BBC personnel were aware of – or should have been aware of – his behaviour; and on whether the culture and practices at the BBC during the years of Savile's employment enabled "inappropriate sexual conduct" to continue unchecked.

(2) In addition to reports focusing on the BBC (Pollard 2012; Smith 2016), there have – to date – been more than 40 National Health Service/ Department of Health reports into Savile's activities within different hospitals

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/nhs-and-department-of-health-investigations-into-jimmy-savile>), as well reports by the Independent Police Complaints Commission into potential police misconduct and handling of reports of sexual assault by Savile during his lifetime (<https://www.ipcc.gov.uk/investigations/jimmy-savile-west-yorkshire-police-surrey-police-sussex-police-and-north-yorkshire>).

(3) See, for example: "Sir Jimmy Savile: Obituary", *The Daily Telegraph*, October 31, 2011; "Hounding Eccentrics: The New British Sport", *The Times*, November 1, 2011.

(4) See, for example: "Still Fixing It, Jim Leaves £63.6m to Charity", *Daily Mail*, March 10, 2012; "Sir Jimmy Leaves His Lover £1000", *The People*, March 11, 2012; "The Waitress's Daughter Who Claims She's Sir Jim's Child", *Sunday Mirror* June 3, 2012. Ray becomes the focus again when she initiates a DNA test to stake a claim to Savile's fortune (June 3-10) and, following publication of Bellamy's biography, the revelation of a second secret lover makes headlines (June 10-14).

(5) There is further work to be done around whether a celebrity's cultural value impacts upon whether or not allegations of abuse will "stick" to him. It is striking, for instance, that some of the most high-profile cases of recent years where female accusers have received a degree of public and media sympathy have involved celebrities who – like Savile – are associated with domesticated media (television, radio) and with popular but culturally derided, feminised genres (light entertainment, music television, situation comedy, children's television). In contrast, allegations against filmmakers (Woody Allen, Roman Polanski) and musicians (David Bowie, Bill Wyman) tend to be seen in more ambivalent terms when they are acknowledged at all. Michael Jackson is a particularly interesting figure in this respect. Whilst, in his lifetime, child sexual abuse allegations were widely reported, led to a criminal trial, and were readily incorporated into the "Wacko Jacko" persona constructed by the press, in death these allegations have largely been eclipsed by a legacy focused on his contributions to music (Davies 2012). Even the obituaries following his sudden death in 2009 rarely mention the allegations or refer to them only euphemistically as "unfortunate incidents" (Naylor 2010).

(6) In his lifetime, Savile was asked to address paedophilia rumours by Louis Theroux in the documentary *When Louis Met.....Jimmy* (2000), and – ten years prior to that - by journalist Lynn Barber for an *Independent on Sunday* profile. Both interviews were widely revisited in light of *Exposure*. For a fuller discussion of these and other profiles of Savile published in his lifetime, see Cross (2016). Theroux revisited his own documentary in *Louis Theroux: Savile* (October 2, 2016, BBC2) which I discuss in Boyle 2016.

(7) See, for example: “Sir Jim Named as a Paedophile in TV Shocker”, *The Mirror*, August 5, 2012, 19; “TV Show to Claim Savile a Paedo”, *The Mirror*, August 6, 2012, 16.

(8) See, for example: “Savile’s Time Was Different,” *The Times*, October 4, 2012; “The DJs Who Thought They Could Get Away With Anything,” *The Express*, October 6, 2012; “BBC Chief ‘Appalled by Torrent of Revelations’,” *The Guardian*, October 6, 2012.



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