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Prof. Jenny Kitzinger,  
School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies,  
Cardiff University, King Edward VIIth Av  
Cardiff, CF10 3NB  
UK  
[kitzingerj@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:kitzingerj@cardiff.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

This article introduces, and attempts to define, the concept of 'media templates'. Drawing on focus groups discussions, content analysis and interviews with media personnel I demonstrate how template events help to shape news narratives and guide thinking not only about the past, but also of the present and the future. The argument is illustrated by examining the position of 'the Cleveland scandal' (and the subsequent 'Orkney crisis') in discussions of child sexual abuse. The discussion explores how templates such as 'Cleveland' are established and maintained by source strategies, social power relations and journalistic/audience reception processes, I also examine how templates operate in relation to existing theories around key events, framing and news icons. The article concludes by outlining the implications of templates for media production practice, media studies theory and audience reception research. Media templates are, I argue, a crucial site of media power, acting to provide context for new events, serving as foci for demands for policy change and helping to shape the ways in which we make sense of the world. The paradigmatic examples and associations which surround any particular issue can come to seem natural and inevitable. It is the task of media theorists, practitioners, policy makers and audiences to question how such accounts and links are constructed, to examine the conditions under which they are produced and reproduced, and to ask how they might be different.

**Keywords:** Child sexual abuse, templates, narratives, framing, audience reception, public understandings, media power, production, focus groups.

## Introduction

'Watergate', 'Vietnam', 'the Wall Street crash', these are some of the decisive events in discussions of politics, war, and economics. 'The Moors murderers', 'Jasmine Beckford', 'Jamie Bulger', these are some of the names which populate discussion of murder and abuse. Some of these phrases will only be recognised in Britain or North America, others have a broader constituency. However, in every mass media society major social issues have such reference points: events that attracted intense media interest at the time and which continue to carry powerful associations. This article examines the ways in which some high-profile episodes come to outlive the conclusion of events on the ground and become part of a litany of key moments inseparably associated with particular issues in public debate. I argue that some of these episodes come to be more than simply key events and operate differently from 'news icons' (Bennett and Lawrence, 1995). They become 'media templates'. Routinely used to highlight one perspective with great clarity, templates serve as rhetorical shorthand helping journalists and audiences to make sense of fresh news stories. They are instrumental in shaping narratives around particular social problems, guiding public discussion not only about the past, but of the present and the future. Analysing media templates is thus crucial to developing understandings of how reality is framed and how media power operates.

The argument is illustrated by examining the position of 'the Cleveland scandal' in discussions of sexual abuse in Britain and how this was related to subsequent events in Orkney. The Cleveland scandal was a highly contentious case involving allegations of wide-spread sexual abuse which were vehemently disputed. It is used routinely as a paradigmatic example of professional malpractice and inappropriate intervention into innocent families. It is a scandal which has been echoed by events in other countries: from the Jordan case in the USA (Hechler, 1988) to the Christchurch and Spense cases in New Zealand (Atmore, 1996; Guy 1996). This article starts by providing a brief overview of media reporting of events in Cleveland at the time, 1987. I go on to illustrate the ways in which Cleveland was referenced in on-going media reporting and people's talk about sexual abuse during the early to mid 1990s. Mainstream interpretations of Cleveland are then contrasted with a much more recent TV documentary (1997) which revisited the Cleveland case ten years after the event and challenged some dominant assumptions. I draw on this documentary, interviews with journalists and the focus group data to argue that, while templates such as Cleveland often seem natural or inevitable, they are actually created and maintained by source strategies, social power relations and journalistic/audience reception processes. The article concludes by briefly relating the notion of templates to existing ideas about framing and about news icons before mapping out a tentative definition of media templates and outlining the implications for media production practice, media studies theory and audience reception research.

'Key events' have long been of concern to media researchers. Momentous happenings attract peak media coverage (indeed this is something of a tautology). Media analysts have tended to be media-led and studied major news stories such as wars, assassinations and disasters or examined events staged specifically for the mass media (Dayan and Katz, 1994). However, most of these studies have focused on contemporary reporting, rather than looking at retrospective references. Most also

focus upon analysing media content rather than audiences. Indeed, Dayan and Katz in their book Media Events declare that, due to lack of empirical evidence, their discussion of audience responses is largely based, not on research, but on 'the folklore of collective experience' (Dayan and Katz, 1994: 120). The research reported here, however, draws on a three-stranded study examining production, content and audience reception<sup>1</sup>. The project explored the emergence of sexual abuse as a social problem. It involved content analysis of media reports, interviews with journalists and in-depth focus group discussions with audience groups to explore what they knew, and thought, about sexual abuse. The audience sample consisted of 49 groups, involving 270 people from a variety of demographic backgrounds (e.g. an age range of 14 to over 70). The groups were predominantly made up of people from the 'general population'. These research participants were drawn from a range of sites, including youth clubs, friendship networks, community centres, churches, and work places. For example, discussions were conducted with members of a club for retired people, a group of football fans, women who knew each other through a knitting circle, and workers in the same factory and colleagues in a local government office. I also included some media workers (journalists and news editors) and some special interest groups such as social workers and support groups for abuse survivors.

The group discussions were conducted during 1993 and 1994. It soon became clear that one case played a central role in people's discourse about sexual abuse. This case was spontaneously named in most groups, aroused strong feelings and firm beliefs, and was used to help interpret and recall more contemporary events. The case, which hit the headlines six or seven years earlier, was known as: 'The Cleveland scandal'.

### **The contemporary and retrospective media reporting of 'Cleveland'**

In 1987, at the time of the Cleveland crisis, child sexual abuse was a very new issue for the modern media. In fact its modern media debut in Britain can be located just one year earlier in 1986 when Esther Rantzen devoted her programme to the issue and launched a children's help-line, Childline. Suddenly child sexual abuse became a topic for documentaries, chat shows and numerous newspaper reports, feature articles and editorials. Coverage of sexual abuse in The Times, for example, more than doubled between 1985 and 1986. It peaked in 1987 with over 400 individual items in this one newspaper alone (Kitzinger, 1996, 320).

The peak coverage in 1987 was accounted for by one particular crisis: the Cleveland crisis. This highlighted a new problem: not sexual abuse per se, but problems around intervention. In spring 1987, 121 children were taken into care in the county of Cleveland in England. All of them had been examined by one of two local paediatricians: Marietta Higgs and Geoff Wyatt. Using the anal reflex dilatation test, these doctors diagnosed the children as showing signs consistent with abuse. The parents campaigned against the proceedings, claiming that the children had been misdiagnosed and the test was unreliable. A local member of parliament, Stuart Bell, and the local police surgeon, Alistaire Irvine, joined with the parents in criticising social workers and the two paediatricians involved. Relations between the police and social services broke down. Stuart Bell MP held a televised press conference to launch a dossier detailing the cases of 19 families which, he argued, provided proof that parents were being inappropriately targeted. Most of the children were eventually sent home.

Events in Cleveland were accompanied by a national media outcry on behalf of the parents. Although the contemporary coverage was not uniform (Nava, 1988), the broad thrust was that these were innocent families falsely accused by overzealous and incompetent paediatricians and social workers. Media analysts point out that the rhetoric of 'innocent families' obscured any possible conflict of interest between fathers, mothers and children. They also argue that the portrayal of Higgs was sexist, indeed at times she was presented as 'positively perverse' (Franklin and Parton, 1991; see also Jenkins, 1992; Ashendon, 1994). Studies of the reporting around the subsequent Cleveland inquiry show that the press gave most space to evidence provided by lawyers for the parents (Donaldson and O'Brien, 1995) and certain allegations against doctors and social workers persisted in the media, even after they had been challenged by the findings of the inquiry (Franklin and Parton, 1991: 26). A critical book about the case, written by a dissenting feminist journalist, (Campbell, 1988), documents the ways in which some inaccurate statements emphasising social work/medical malpractice were given a high profile, while corrections were tucked away. The media coverage, Campbell argues, often conveyed false impressions. For example, when children were returned home this was reported as if the obvious conclusion was that no abuse had occurred and no intervention had ever been justified. Indeed, a blanket embargo on media reporting of the settlements in wardship cases meant that when children were returned home no information was given to the public about any conditions imposed, such as social services supervision (Campbell, 1988, 148).

If the broad thrust of the media coverage at the time of the crisis and the subsequent inquiry promoted one particular understanding of the scandal, this was even clearer in retrospective asides about the case. Media references to Cleveland long out-lived the conclusion of the main news events connected with the crisis. During 1991, for example, Cleveland was mentioned over 200 times in the national UK press and TV news. Only a handful of these reports involved fresh developments in the Cleveland cases itself (such as the parents' fight for compensation). Instead, most reports used Cleveland in passing to help 'tell the story' of more recent events. Cleveland was used as an interpretative framework in reporting new controversies including one major case in Rochdale (in Northern England) which was treated as a kind of 'hyper Cleveland' (Aldridge, 1994: 95) and another in Orkney (in Scotland). It is on this latter case that I will focus.

The Orkney case involved nine children from five different families being taken into care (from one of the Orkney islands off the Northern coast of Scotland). They were taken from their homes simultaneously in what the media dubbed 'dawn raids'. The children were subsequently returned to their parents and no charges were brought. Media reports on Orkney frequently cited Cleveland as another case in which parents were 'wrongly accused' (Scotsman 15 March 1991; Daily Mail, 4 March 1991). Headlines included: 'How the nightmare of Orkney ignored the lessons of Cleveland' (Evening Standard, 4 April 1991); 'How could this happen again - storm as sex abuse kids fly home' (Daily Mirror, 5 April 1991) and 'Cleveland, Rochdale, Orkney: What's wrong?' (Sunday Telegraph, 7 April 1991).

The struggle to assert or deny the links between Cleveland with Orkney was quite explicit in the strategies adopted by the diverse pressure groups and organisations seeking to influence the public profile of the Orkney case. The Orkney parents quickly

sought support from 'Parents Against Injustice' (PAIN) - a national group of aggrieved parents formed after Cleveland - and held a press conference drawing attention to similarities between the two cases. Members of the Orkney social work department were left defensively denying the connection. Unable to renegotiate the public meaning of Cleveland, social services representatives in Orkney simply insisted that the cases should not be associated. Guidelines produced after Cleveland were, they said, not wholly applicable to the Orkney situation (where organised abuse was suspected), and the actions of the professionals in Orkney should not be lumped in with those of Cleveland. One article in the Guardian for example, headlined the declaration by Orkney social services: 'Orkney abuse case "unlike Cleveland".' (Guardian, 30 August 1991)

However, attempts to deny the link were largely unsuccessful. In the words of the Mail on Sunday, Cleveland and Orkney both represented 'the might of faceless bureaucracy' against 'the basic rights of bewildered families' (Mail on Sunday, 7 April 1991). The pattern of social work malpractice represented by Cleveland and subsequent cases was used to underline headlines such as:

In the dock again. The care staff who go too far (Daily Mail 5 April 1991);  
Throw the book at child stealers (Today, 29 March 1991);  
Ban these Blunderers (Daily Mirror, 14 March 1991);  
Sack the lot and start again (Daily Mail, 5 April 1991).

Newspaper reports described Orkney as 'only the latest' in a series of 'monumental cock-ups by social workers' (Daily Mirror, 14 March 1991). This line of 'cock ups' stretching back to Cleveland justified descriptions of social workers as 'neo-fascist' (Herald, 15 March 1991) or comparing them to 'the Gestapo', 'the SAS' and 'the KGB' (Guardian, 5 April 1991; Sunday People, 10 March 1991; letter, Sunday Times, 14 April 1991). One mother was quoted as stating that social workers were 'worse than Saddam Hussein' (Scotsman 5 March 1991) and the Daily Mail concluded that 'for the sake of all the broken-hearted families, we must get rid of the social workers and think again' (Daily Mail, 5 April 1991).<sup>2</sup>

Back in 1987 Cleveland was a one-off scandal, by 1991 it was seen as part of a pattern of malpractice threatening ordinary families. Cleveland ceased to be a stand-alone case. Its symbolic power lay in its status as a template.

The template status of Cleveland was not only evident from analysing media content and source strategies. It was also clearly illustrated in interviews with journalists: the Cleveland case was an important part of journalists' vocabulary and a key reference point for them. This is not surprising. Cross-linking between events is a routine part of journalists' practice as they attempt to draw together discrete episodes and uncover relationships between them (Whitney and Wartella, 1992). Linking events is part of the journalistic endeavour to capture the zeitgeist or expose the need for fundamental policy reform. The cry 'Never Again!' is a classic headline and media logic will tend to mean that one major disaster will lead to a flurry of media attention to related problems (Kepplinger and Habermeier, 1995). A particular crisis can also 'sensitise the media so that the surveillance procedures and journalistic categories are sharpened to capture similar subsequent events' (Golding and Middleton, 1982: 60).

The meaning of the Cleveland case was 'self-evident' to many journalists and its links to Orkney 'obvious'. In interview, one journalist stated that not to have linked Orkney with Cleveland would have been a dereliction of duty. Over and above this, memories of Cleveland influenced how journalists actually reported more contemporary events. These memories (usually constructed from news cuttings or perceived public collective consciousness rather than direct knowledge of Cleveland) informed how some media personnel framed their reports about Orkney. This was vividly demonstrated in a group discussion with TV news editors. They were invited to write a bulletin about the Orkney case using a set of photographs taken from actual news coverage (for discussion of this technique see Philo, 1990 and Kitzinger, 1993). This group produced a script that they described as 'typical' but which one member criticised as 'unbalanced' and 'pro-family'. However, his colleague defended the report by saying that news had to be 'in context':

I mean at the time there had been several cock-ups by social workers all over the bloody country and so the assumption is that you are going to side with the families. [News editors]

### **Public recollections of 'Cleveland'**

This news editor's assumptions about audience expectations were borne out, and reflected, in the other focus groups conducted with members of the 'lay public'. Many of these research participants did indeed see Orkney as the latest in a long line of social work blunders stretching back to Cleveland. The Cleveland case was spontaneously named in over half of my 49 focus groups and, when mentioned by the researcher, was immediately recognised in most of the others. (The seven groups with no memory of Cleveland included four groups of young people, the members of which would have been children at the time of the crisis. The other three groups were composed of people who had not been resident in Britain at the time and/or whose first language was not English).

Memories of Cleveland, and its rhetorical use, were strikingly similar across and within a wide variety of groups.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, within groups, people were often able to finish each other's sentences as they attempted to summarise the case. The following example is typical of the way in which Cleveland was discussed. Note the high level of consensus between the three speakers and how Cleveland is first mentioned while trying to recall the Orkney case. Although they had been asked to talk about Orkney they quickly became diverted by their recollections of Cleveland:

f1: Orkney, is that...Oh no, I'm thinking of another one there.  
I'm thinking of Marietta Higgs.

f2: No, that was the Cleveland child sex abuse. Yeah, I remember that stupid woman, because she had 5 kids.

f1: They put something in the vagina or something and they said if the vagina dilated the child had been abused. Well, it was something incredible like that and it was this Marietta Higgs that was at the forefront of it all.

f3: They were testing any child that had been taken in for any reason.

f2: Bet they didn't test Marietta Higg's children!

f1: And there was a big outcry because then it was discovered that this method was not a good indication...But of course at that point...

f3: the damage was done.

f2: People's lives had been ruined and men were committing suicide. [Friendship 4 group]<sup>4</sup>

Other groups, including special interest groups with some professional concern, came up with almost identical memories. Research participants repeatedly spoke about 'innocent families falsely accused' through an 'arbitrary' test, which they said, was 'completely discredited' [Trainee journalists] and 'proved to be a load of rubbish' [Social worker]. Marietta Higgs was, they said:

Examining children and saying that there'd been sexual abuse when there hadn't. [Women's Aid workers]

She had a way of finding out, doing something with sphincter muscles or bums weren't it. But it went wrong and...loads of people [were accused] and they hadn't even done it. [Friendship group, 1]

People often believed that the test had been carried out randomly and, when asked for her memories of Cleveland, one woman said it was inextricably associated with 'being frightened to take your child to the doctors, in case...' [Christian Church group]. Many also asserted that the test had been the only evidence of abuse: 'the children [were not] speaking out in Cleveland, it was the doctor that was sort of making judgements' [Community Centre, 2]. Some also stated that the paediatricians had been sacked or even struck off because of her malpractice: 'What she said was a valid test wasn't a test [and the local Authority was] left with no choice but to sack her.' [Christian Church group]. Considerable hostility was expressed toward Marietta Higgs, attention invariably focusing on her rather than her male colleague, Geoff Wyatt. As one woman commented:

[Marietta Higgs was] warped, screwy...but I accept that my thoughts about that come directly from the media and that is the media images of her. [Academic researchers]

In addition to expressing hostility to Higgs, several research participants spoke eloquently about their distaste for the reflex dilatation test which they assumed involved penetrative examination of the anus:

Her test for child abuse was to stick her finger up a child's anus. Well if somebody did that to you, you'd jump. That's what I remember about it, it was a sort of stupid way to try and test. [Friendship group 2].

The anal examination was, in itself, an assault according to some research participants: 'A lot of these children could probably sue her for abusing them on the examination couch, frankly' [Trainee journalists].<sup>5</sup> Concern, and empathy, was also voiced for the children who had to endure such examinations:

f1: Here you're taking your weans [children] to the hospital to get a stookie put on their leg, and afore you know where you are there are these strange people doing all these things...All these kiddies all squealing and screaming and people doing things to them and there's no mammy and daddy.

f2: Takes us all our time to go for a smear test, how do the weans feel? [Community centre women's group, 1]

People also expressed considerable empathy for accused parents. They described, with great vehemence, how they themselves would have reacted in a situation like Cleveland or Orkney: 'If the social work department did anything like that to me I would probably commit murder' [Post-natal support group]; 'I would have stuck a knife in the social people' [Retirement club]; 'See if a social worker came and tried to take a kid out of my house, I think he'd be sorry. He'd be dead to be quite honest with you' [Bowling club].

For some men, in particular, such cases still generated fears and inhibitions about how they interacted with children. One commented: 'You're afraid to do anything to your own family now' [Bowling club]. Another remarked: 'Everybody was frightened, nobody could relax. It put the fear of Christ up a lot of people'. He added: 'Kids do drop you in it, you though', before tailing off into silence with the words: 'If it happened to me...' [Telephone engineers].

It was these fears, empathies, memories and associations around Cleveland which informed reactions to subsequent reporting of events in Orkney. Indeed people not only confused details of the two cases but explicitly used Cleveland to help them recall and reconstruct what happened in Orkney. One man recalled Orkney as: 'The exact same sort of thing as Cleveland and again I think that was found to be false. The thing with the Cleveland one, and the Scotland one, I think it was do-good social workers' [Football fans 1]. Another remarked that his reconstruction of events in Orkney was entirely based on his memories of other cases: 'I don't remember anything about it [Orkney] [But] I do remember that there was strong allegations that social work had got it wrong, as usual, inefficient and incompetent' [Evening class group]. Some research participants explicitly stated that it was obvious that the Orkney parents were innocent because social workers were known to indulge in 'mass hysteria' [Trainee journalists] and are 'always picking on innocent people' or 'always poking their noses in and always getting it wrong' [Academic researchers]. Seeing sexual abuse wherever you look had become a 'fashion' and a 'social work trend'. Social workers were 'obsessed with sexual abuse' and 'jumping on the bandwagon' [Neighbours, 1].

Even some of those who declared themselves suspicious of the media reporting or 'open-minded' about events in Cleveland, seemed to be influenced by the images, assumptions and fears generated by the case and its subsequent place in the history of 'abuse scandals'. Many, for example, were left with a reluctance to call in social services and could only explain this with reference to such media reporting (Kitzinger, 1999a).

Retrospective references to Cleveland did not simply mirror the main thrust of contemporary reporting during the crisis. There were some interesting and consistent differences between the contemporary reporting and public recall – in particular in relation to the relative roles of doctors and social workers.

The role of the paediatricians in Cleveland was a central theme in the original coverage, and recalled by many research participants talking in the mid 1990s. However, it is social workers rather than the medical profession who bear the lasting stigma of Cleveland. Marietta Higgs was not seen as typical of her profession. As one participant commented: 'It was hard to believe how a doctor could get it wrong'



[Football fans 1]. A similar statement about social workers is hard to imagine. Over and above this some people described Cleveland as a 'social work scandal' with no (or only belated) mention of the medical profession at all. A few research participants even thought that Marietta Higgs was a social worker. They spoke of 'social workers examining children's bottoms' and 'social workers' fetish for anal dilatation' [Charity workers] or made comments such as 'It was a mistake of this Marietta Higgs - a social worker - it was a big cock-up' [Friendship group, 4]. Such a shift provides an important clue to how templates operate and are operated upon. It would seem that as cases become associated with one another - osmosis occurs in both directions. The template case (in this example, 'Cleveland') is modified through the interaction between contemporaneous and retrospective reporting.

To summarise my argument so far, the accumulation of 'social work scandals' around sexual abuse seems to have become a defining feature of the public debate: encouraging suspicion of social services, justifying demands for radical reform, informing parental fears and focusing concern on false allegations. Just as phrases such as 'another Vietnam', 'another Chernobyl', or 'another Hitler' sum up a particular set of fears, so the phrase 'another Cleveland' provokes a set of powerful pre-packaged associations.<sup>6</sup> References to Cleveland fixed an image in many people's minds which placed social workers firmly in the dock, drawing on and contributing to spirals of negative publicity surrounding social workers. It seemed as if each new case might be more readily received as evidence of professional incompetence because the image 'fitted' with what people already knew (for the concept of 'fit' in relation to audience reception and racist images of Africa see Kitzinger and Miller, 1992). In combination all the 'sex abuse/social work scandals' gained an explanatory momentum, a powerful logical association, propelling audience reception in particular directions.

However, not everyone accepted this way of referencing Cleveland. Some research participants drew attention to the conflicting information available in some parts of the media back in 1987 and 1988 and made comments such as 'I just did not know what to believe'. However, many could only remember the more straightforward consistent accounts of Cleveland (and, of course, over time, it is only these accounts which remain easily accessible to the general public). However, other research participants adopted a 'no smoke without fire' approach (a cliché in its own right which some people thought required no further explanation). There were others who refused to accept a simple 'innocent families torn apart' narrative because of their own personal experience (e.g. of abuse), positive contacts with social services or political perspective (e.g. having been alienated from the reporting by sexist representations of Higgs). I do not have the space to explore all these minority variations here (see Kitzinger, in press). However, there were two ways in which the simple use of a Cleveland template were rejected which are particularly pertinent for developing an understanding of how templates operate. The first involved people pointing to the conflicting narratives around physical and sexual abuse. Physical abuse of children is associated with a roll call of names such as, in Britain, Maria Colwell, Jasmine Beckford and Tyra Henry, all children who met their deaths at home. The main accusation against social workers in such cases was their inaction and their failure to take the children into care. How, then, some research participants asked, could we complain when social workers seemed over-zealous? The parallel templates seemed to contradict each other.

The second interesting example of template rejection seemed to be a sort of template 'boomerang effect' (see Curran, 1987). Far from seeing the Cleveland 'fiasco' as confirmation that social workers in Orkney were likely to have acted improperly a few comments suggested that the history of Cleveland might make some people more likely to accept that Orkney social workers were justified. Take the following agreement between two neighbours

f1: I don't think that the social workers would have acted like that [in Orkney] if there had not been...They're not going to put their careers on the line.

f2: Especially after Cleveland. [Neighbours 2]

There were thus some challenges to the dominant Cleveland template at the level of audience reception. There was also one striking example of a challenge to the template from within the media. It is instructive to take a closer look at this one TV programme which challenged pervasive understandings of Cleveland. This was broadcast in 1997 and is a useful case study with which to develop the theory of templates and conclude the empirical part of this paper.

### **Challenging the template: an alternative media account**

Although the commonly understood meaning of the Cleveland scandal was very stable in media representations during the late eighties and early 1990s, the dominant paradigm was challenged in 1997 by one particular documentary: 'Cleveland: Unspeakable Truths' (27 May 1997, 21.00-22.00, Channel 4). This programme presented a radically different image of Cleveland than had been portrayed in the mass media until that time (even though most of the information it presented had been available almost a decade earlier in evidence to the Cleveland Inquiry).

The tone of the programme was set by the first few minutes. It opened with a series of traditionally emotive images such as a riderless rocking horse and low-angle shots of stairs in a family home. This was overlaid with statements about the ubiquitous nature of sexual abuse and questions such as 'why are families better protected than the children that grow up within them?' The narrator's voice was then replaced by the voice of a woman who had been sexually abused as a child in Cleveland. The audience were immediately invited to empathise with how an abused child might feel and start to think about repeated abuse instead of concentrating their horror on the violation of an anal examination. The survivors' voice was followed by text appearing on the screen: 'A judicial enquiry did not resolve what had happened to the children [in Cleveland]. The public was led to believe that innocent families were torn apart.' The screen was then filled with the words: 'This is the true story.'

Unspeakable Truths set itself up to challenge the 'myths' surrounding Cleveland. It directly contradicted the ways in which Cleveland had been routinely referenced (both in the media and in general public debates). It hailed viewers in ways which invited empathy with abused children rather than accused adults and statements in this programme can be directly contrasted with some of the beliefs evident in my focus group discussions. The programme pointed out that most of the diagnoses in Cleveland were confirmed by an independent panel, that Higgs had not been sacked (although she was transferred), and that anal reflex dilatation test was not as controversial as assumed. For example, the police surgeon, Alistaire Irvine, went on national news in June 1987 stating that the majority of colleagues did not accept

Marietta Higg's interpretations of reflex anal dilation. However, his own professional body, the Police Surgeons Association advised its members that reflex anal dilatation 'should certainly give rise to strong suspicion that sexual abuse had occurred' (cited on Cleveland: Unspeakable truths 27 May 1997).

Unspeakable Truths stated that the children were not examined arbitrarily. There were usually prior suspicions and reflex anal dilatation was rarely the sole indicator (other evidence included venereal disease and statements by some of the children). The programme also highlighted the fact that some of the children were living with men previously charged with sexual abuse. The 19 flagship families summarised in Stuart Bell's highly publicised dossier included 3 adult males already charged with sexual abuse and a further two where the father was a convicted sex offender.

Unspeakable Truths went on to challenge routine understandings of Cleveland in other ways too. Where some of my research participants saw the children's return home as proof that they had not been abused, and none of the evidence stood up in court, the programme challenged this interpretation. It drew attention to the protection packages under which some of the children were returned and the fact that some were re-referred to social services within two years because of suspected abuse. It informed viewers that no one knows what happened subsequently to the 'Cleveland children' because, in 1989, the Department of Health decided that all records relating to them as a group should be destroyed and there should be no further follow-up.

Instead of focusing on social workers, Unspeakable Truths turned the spotlight on the police. It argued that police reactions made it difficult to process some cases correctly. The programme stated that Cleveland Constabulary adopted a policy whereby it virtually withdrew from investigating any sexual abuse cases diagnosed by Higgs or Wyatt. For example, one of the 121 cases involved in the Cleveland crisis concerned a girl whose father had previous convictions for sexually assaulting three other children. After Higgs diagnosed likely abuse, the five-year-old herself apparently confirmed this and the mother believed her. However no action was taken against the father. The police officer's record of the interview with the girl stated: 'she told me that she had a poorly tuppence which was caused by her father moving his fingers up and down inside...she stated that this had been going on for some time...In my opinion, there is no doubt he is responsible for the assault, but with the present policy I was unable to charge him.'

Unspeakable Truths argued that the 'real' (or additional) scandal of Cleveland was not necessarily (or only) that so many children had been taken from their parents, but that some children had been returned, possibly to face on-going abuse. The information it conveyed did not prove that most, or even any, of the accusations of sexual abuse, were justified. However, the programme did convey facts which had not been widely available prior to that point and challenged some widely circulating assumptions. It certainly challenged many of the 'facts' which formed the building blocks of people's beliefs about the case as expressed in the focus group discussions. It also disrupted the status of the Cleveland scandal as a straightforward template of unnecessary intervention into 'innocent families'. Some of the information in this programme might have changed public reactions to the case. For example, community reactions to convicted sex abusers being rehoused in local areas suggests that many people would not trust such a person in their street, let alone leave children in their care (Kitzinger, 1999b).

I do not have systematic audience reception data about how people reacted to the programme. However, discussion with colleagues, friends and acquaintances suggests that some (but not all) who viewed Unspeakable Truths had to radically rethink their views. Because Cleveland was such a key case they had their opinions about subsequent case (such as Orkney) disrupted too. I was also able to re-contact some of my original research participants. One woman who had taken part in a focus group discussion with me in 1993 commented that watching Unspeakable Truths four years later left her 'really shaken. If those were the facts it really made me re-think everything I'd assumed' (comment to author). Another, who in a focus group in 1993, had said she viewed Marietta Higgs as 'warped' and 'completely wrong', revised her opinion after viewing the programme (which I arranged for her to watch on video). She summarised her reactions as follows:

From what I remember at the time, it was completely hidden that some parents already had convictions. Of course that makes a difference to what you'd think. Also, I thought Marietta Higgs had wrongly diagnosed, and the programme suggested that probably she was right...I bought it [the original reporting] hook line and sinker, Marietta Higgs was damned. I hadn't realised that Marietta Higgs and that man (I still can't remember his name, even after just watching that programme) hadn't been struck off - so they were clearly vindicated by their profession. I'm sorry if I said Marietta Higgs was a sleaze ball. I take it back!

(Focus group participant from 1993, interviewed in 1998, after viewing a video recording of Unspeakable Truths)

Such comments suggest some pointers to how audience understandings of Cleveland might have been transformed if the media coverage had been different. However, in the absence of more systematic audience reception research, perhaps the most important point highlighted by the Unspeakable Truths documentary is that the presentation of episodes such as Cleveland are not pre-determined. The meaning of such events are constructed in the course of competition between sources, routine media processes and audience reactions.

More generally, I would argue that such source competition, media production and audience reception processes also influence the selection of which key events are seen to define a social problem. In other words, the particular cluster of cases most closely associated with any particular issue is not inevitable, any more than the meanings attached to these cases. The importance of which (and what type of) events are associated with any particular issue can be illustrated by looking once again at data from the focus groups. Before opening the focus group discussion sessions, preliminary questionnaires were given to group participants. People were invited to note down 'typical' headlines about child sexual abuse. Thirty percent of the headlines generated in this way named Orkney or Cleveland or referred, in various ways, to 'botched interventions', 'dawn raids' and 'innocent families torn apart'. Child sexual abuse is inextricably associated with stories about apparent miscarriages of justice. This fact should not pass without comment. It would be interesting to ask a similar sample of people in Britain to write typical headlines about murder or about the IRA. I would not anticipate generating many headlines about Carl Bridgewater or The Birmingham Six. Alleged, or even proven, examples of injustice are not routinely used to exemplify issues around murder or the IRA. Why is there this difference? This is

not a simple reflection of 'reality', it reflects complex issues about the politics of categorisation, identification, source strategies and media representation. It is also inextricably intertwined with the operation of social power, class politics and the metaphorical and social status of both social workers and children in society (Aldridge, 1994, Franklin and Parton, 1991, Kessel 1989).

## Discussion

### Researching media templates: identifying and defining template events

The study reported here started by identifying and examining key reference points in public understandings of sexual abuse. This has demonstrated the importance of collective memories and historical analogies in audience reception, media representation and effects. The concept of media templates developed from analysis of this empirical data will, I believe, be relevant to examining source/media/audience relations over a broad range of issues. It can also be usefully positioned in relation to existing thinking about media influence, including work around 'framing' and about key events and 'icons'.

Media templates are closely related to the notion of 'framing' (Goffman, 1974; Fisher, 1997, Entman, 1993), 'ideological framework' (Chibnall, 1977) and 'inferential frames' (GUMG, 1980). (See also Gitlin, 1980; Gamson, 1992; Pan and Kosicki, 1993). The media template of Cleveland was used as an analogy in order to encourage a particular understanding of Orkney and to promote the frame: 'innocent families torn apart (yet again)' through the 'persistent incompetence' of social workers. The Cleveland analogy thus lies somewhere between the metaphors and the exemplars identified as framing devices by Gamson and Modigliani (1989: 3).

However, Cleveland was more than just another analogy. It was *the dominant analogy* for Orkney and a key reference point in thinking about the whole issue of sexual abuse which ran through every level of the circuit of communication, including journalists' thinking, the media content, and people's conversations. Cleveland had one particularly pervasive and dominant meaning which meant, in effect, that it carried with it an entire frame which closely circumscribed perceptions of the new cases to which it was successfully related. Whereas a frame is envisaged as a 'map' (Gamson, 1992) or 'window' (Pan and Kosicki, 1993) which can show different paths and perspectives, the template event implies a more rigid and precisely outlined perspective (which both *operates within*, and *contributes to*, a *specific* substantive frame). Rather than seeing templates in terms of 'maps' or 'windows', the more appropriate metaphor in this case would be the template document automatically summoned up each time one starts a new text file on a computer. Alternatively, the template might be envisaged as the pastry-cutting shapes used to cut out gingerbread figures, or the template allowing a worker to stamp out identical metal pieces in a shipyard.

Media templates might also usefully be related to writing around 'key events' and theories around 'news icons'.<sup>7</sup> Bennet and Lawrence (1995), for example, examined 'icons' such as the videotaped beating of Rodney King by white police officers. They argue that icons are a nugget of condensed drama which can 'stand alone as an

emblematic decisive moment that can be evoked with a simple phrase or visual reference'. They describe how such icons can be introduced in to other types of stories and thus 'break down narrative boundaries and open the news to...linkages between otherwise isolated events'. In this sense 'icons' share some characteristics with templates. However, Bennet and Lawrence describe icons as opening up innovation and historical reflection, evoking 'contradictions and tensions'. I would argue that templates operate in a rather different way - they are defined by their lack of innovation, their status as received wisdom and by their closure. Far from opening up historical reflection they reify a kind of historical determinism which can filter out dissenting accounts, camouflage conflicting facts and promote one type of narrative. I wish to highlight several distinguishing features defining media templates.

- Media templates are key events which have an on-going shelf life which extends beyond the conclusion of news happenings. Indeed, media templates are defined by their retrospective use in secondary reporting rather than contemporaneous coverage.
- Media templates are used to explain current events, as a point of comparison and, often, as proof of an on-going problem. Templates are used to highlight patterns in particular issues or social problems.
- Media templates have a single primary meaning rather than being the focus for debate. When a template is referenced in discussion of subsequent discrete events its relevance may be challenged (e.g. this case is/is not like Cleveland) but the template itself is rarely explicitly questioned.

The above definition of media templates has implications for how they operate:

- Simplification and distortion. In the process of transforming a key event into a media template, details may be blurred, dissenting accounts forgotten and facts (both from past and current events) may be misrepresented or disregarded.
- Minimal opportunity for alternative readings. Secondary reporting will often oversimplify or at least present the event 'pared down to its essence'. This minimises the opportunities for alternative interpretations from audiences only exposed to secondary accounts. It may also influence recall of the events even among those who were aware of the contemporary reporting.
- Osmosis. The meanings attached to template events are, in part, created by the interaction between such episodes and subsequent cases to which they are linked. Cleveland means what it means because of its link with the Rochdale and Orkney cases (and vice versa). The meaning of media templates may be both reinforced and altered as they are applied to events as they unfold (e.g. Cleveland has become a template of social work malpractice, the role of doctors has not been a reiterated theme).
- Templates are very powerful, and often invisible, influences, however they are not inevitably self-perpetuating. They may be recognised and challenged through routine audience diversity (e.g. people's own personal experience) and templates may be exposed and undermined through coming into conflict with contradictory templates or the creation of a boomerang effect. In addition, media personnel (particularly documentary makers) may take on the challenge of 'debunking the myths' in ways which provides an alternative to dominant templates.

The above definition and arguments about the operation of templates have methodological implications for how media influence might be explored. The

significance of templates such as Cleveland demonstrate the importance of examining how events are cited at every level of the communication process: by journalists, in media reports and in everyday conversation. It also underlines the importance of examining how particular cases are referenced in retrospect (rather than just at the height of the crisis) and exploring people's memories and spontaneous associations with such case. Clearly, identifying the legacy of media coverage (and re-coverage) is as important as examining people's ability to critique media texts at the time. The cumulative effect of different media messages is not simply a sum of the parts.

The data presented here suggest that the method for identifying template events is essentially retrospective - examining how past events are referenced and how they are associated with (and transformed by) new, unfolding stories. None the less, educated predictions may be made about which contemporary events might become templates in the future. These predictions can be informed by close attention to the contemporary coverage, event timing, cultural resonance, the organisation of sources, and likely future developments. For example, Cleveland might have been predicted to become a template from the perspective of observers in 1987 on several counts. It attracted peak, dramatic and vitriolic coverage, it occurred very early on in the discovery cycle of sexual abuse and it was the first high profile case of its kind. It also tapped into strong feelings about children, social workers and family life. Given the structural and ideological context of social work it was also probable that similar controversies would happen in the future. It was likely that social workers would in the future feel compelled (and have the power) to take children into care in circumstances which seemed to go against 'common sense' or violate 'parents' rights'. Crucially, the Cleveland Inquiry also put in place a report (and guidelines) against which subsequent interventions would be judged. Another legacy of Cleveland was the fact that source organisations were set up (most notably PAIN) ready to draw attention to further cases of injustice. The structural as well as rhetorical foundations were thus laid for future cases to be picked up and linked with Cleveland.

### **Thinking with templates: implications for journalists, policy makers and the public**

Identifying key moments from the past and using analogies from history is not inherently problematic. Indeed such practices may well be essential if we are to learn from the past and make sense of the present. Journalistic references necessarily have to be condensed in the brief space provided by a bulletin or newspaper report. These constraints pose challenges, but to simply avoid referencing the past would result in media coverage being entirely a-historical. However, when some such associations and key moments become taken for granted as templates then it is easy to ignore the constructed nature of these accounts. It is as if frameworks for understandings are invisible because of their all-encompassing nature and as if truth could be created by repetition. In order to reflect on the role of media templates it is useful to turn to debates within the disciplines of political science and history.

Social historians argue that it is important not to assume that records of historical events are 'innocent acts of memory', but rather to see them as attempts 'to persuade, to shape the memory of others' (Burke, 1997: 47). Historians and political scientists also note that historical analogies are often used in misleading ways. Richard Neustadt (Professor of Government at Harvard) and Ernest May (Professor of

History at Harvard) analyse the use of such analogies by policy makers in their book: Thinking in time: the uses of history for decision makers. This includes detailed analysis of tapes of White House discussions around, for example, the Cuban missile crisis. They argue that problems arise when analogies are used in an unthinking fashion. They highlight the problem of 'fuzzy analogies' where there is a failure to think about presumptions, 'stereotyped suppositions about persons or organisations' and little or no effort to see choices as part of any historical sequence (Neustadt and May, 1988: 33). Analogies can, they argue, predispose people to 'come to conclusions with the minimum of analysis'. They suggest that we need to use history more reflectively. Neustadt and May advise systematically separating the 'known', from 'unclear' from 'presumed' and routinely analysing historical events for their likeness and difference from now (Neustadt and May, 1988: 40). Many analogies, they conclude should be better used as warning lights to alert us to a potential problem, rather than a beacon by which we set an unswerving course (Neustadt and May, 1988: 56).

It is instructive to apply this advice to the use of Cleveland as a template - or arguably a 'fuzzy' or at least 'limited' analogy informed by 'stereotyped suppositions about persons or organisations' (such as 'families' or social workers). There appears to be a consensus that Cleveland was badly handled and that it should 'never happen again'. But what is 'it' which should not be repeated? Here the consensus breaks down. For example, is 'it' children being taken from their parents and/or is 'it' some children being returned to potentially abusive situations? Is 'it' social work malpractice or police non-co-operation? There also appears to be a consensus that we should 'learn the lessons' of Cleveland. But this again begs the question: what are these lessons? Are they about social work practices or political intervention; childcare professionals or media reporting or do they reflect intractable dilemmas for child protection? Those questions are rarely asked. Both journalists and 'ordinary people' talking about sexual abuse often made remarks such as 'look at Cleveland'. But this phrase was not a genuine invitation to examine the case. Rather it was a rhetorical full stop. 'Look at Cleveland' was a statement made in the sure assumption that everyone in the group would recall the events similarly and that what we saw was self-evident. Such assumptions often proved to be justified, and dissenting voices were rarely heard on this particular issue. This was in sharp contrast to the nature of focus groups discussion of other questions around sexual abuse and, indeed, my experience of researching other topics or taking part in other group discussions. While writing this paper I've heard two similar forms of rhetoric used in conversation. In a discussion of Saddam Hussein one person remarked 'we know what happens when you appease dictators'. In the second incident, a conversation about the Scottish Parliament, the comment was: 'look what happens when you have a woman Prime Minister'. Both remarks started debate rather than concluding it, provoking the expression of widely differing views of the meaning and relevance of such statements.



## **Challenging Templates: implications for media production**

Given the analysis above I think we should value and seek to promote media reporting which develops the effective use of history combined with the accurate and innovative association of events, but which also adopts a questioning attitude toward templates. This is not an invitation to gratuitous historical revisionism, but a belief in reflective, responsible and in-depth journalistic enquiry. However, where one draws the line, and who defines this is a question for debate. The reaction of Stuart Bell MP to Unspeakable Truths was to describe it as 'a sensational rehash of half-truths and suppositions. It was a re-writing of history and perfectly useless exercise' (quote in Middlesborough Evening Gazette 28 May 1997). By contrast his neighbouring MP, Frank Cook, stated that he was deeply shocked by some of the information revealed to him by the programme. This information, he said, had altered his understandings of Cleveland, and, had it been widely publicised at the time, might have made a difference to subsequent policy making, such as The Children's Act (speaking on Unspeakable Truths 27 May 1997).

Whatever the judgement on this particular case study, the point is that the news media are not well adapted for re-visiting history. Iconoclastic reporting can and does occur. However, given what we know about the sociology of journalism, it may be a vain wish to hope that such reporting will become standard. (Tuchman, 1978; Schlesinger, 1978). Along side the usually identified barriers to such coverage (deadlines, established source-journalist relations and emphasis on 'news of the day') reporting around child sexual abuse is also influenced by gendered hierarchies within news production (Skidmore, 1998; Kitzinger, 1998). More generally, although the traditional documentary format can encourage iconoclastic approaches, even this traditional strength is being eroded by current changes. Challenging received wisdom has never been the path of least resistance for programme makers. It is not usually quick or cheap and programme makers attempting this task may confront political difficulties. When I interviewed the producer of Unspeakable Truths he described obstacles to the programme's production at every level: from the Department of Health's decision to destroy all records relating to the Cleveland children as a group through to the difficulty of obtaining interviews with relevant professionals.

Some of the key people who used to work in Cleveland were pressurised by their current employers not to appear on the programme. The main social worker from Cleveland, Sue Richardson, was working for the National Children's Home [NCH] in Scotland. She did co-operate with Unspeakable Truths. However, she resigned from her job because the NCH threatened that if she took part in the programme she risked sacking for gross misconduct. After the programme was in production Stuart Bell MP also wrote to protest and senior management at Yorkshire Tyne Teesside Television then vetoed the documentary. This decision was taken despite the fact that they had already won the commission from Channel 4. The producer, Tim Tate, was only able to complete the documentary by negotiating to be released from his contract and continuing the production through his own independent company. When I asked him how the difficulties producing this documentary compared to previous experiences he replied:

I'm just thinking back. This is going to sound absurd, but the only comparable experience I've had was a film I made about the Chinese...system for political

prisoners, when people became non-people and black was white and green wasn't a colour at all. That's the closest I've come...For the life of me I can not think what is so important that you have to protect it with this chapter of lies and evasions. [Interview with the author]

Tim Tate added that his confidence in the eventual release of the programme was supported by 'Channel 4's robust reputation for resisting political interference'. However, so-called 'dumbing down' as well as financial constraints and changes in organisational structure may undermine such opportunities in the future. The form and content of media productions are being influenced by changes in the long-term employment and nurturing of experienced journalists, including those who have expertise in investigative reporting or those who have followed events over time and have their own complex memories and source relations. This may mean that one-dimensional newspaper-speak versions of events will be increasingly recycled and converge as journalists, working to a tight schedule, rely on 'going through the cuttings'. Under these conditions journalists will rarely have the time or space to re-visit history or produce in-depth investigations which might differ from mainstream opinion.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, I have argued that media templates are a distinct form of key event and that critical examination of templates is an important endeavour for anyone examining media coverage, source strategy, journalistic practice, audience reception, or, indeed, particular social issues. Media templates are a crucial site of media power, acting to provide context for new events, serving as foci for demands for policy change and helping to shape the ways in which we make sense of the world. The paradigmatic examples and associations which surround any particular issue can come to seem natural and inevitable. It is the task of media theorists, practitioners, policy makers and audiences to question how such accounts are constructed and linked, to examine the conditions under which they are produced and reproduced, and to ask how they might be different.

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## Footnotes

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<sup>2</sup> There were, of course, some significant differences between papers. Here I only have space to address some of the broad common themes but see Franklin and Parton, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to deny some important differences and examples of occasional dissent. As will be demonstrated later, those with personal experiences of abuse had often quite distinctive perspectives on this case. There were also geographical variations in memories of all the major scandals – those who lived in a region affected by a particular scandal such as groups from Manchester (near Rochdale) or Scotland (which includes Orkney) often had more detailed memories and stronger views.

<sup>4</sup> The case in which the father committed suicide involved a two year old being taken to casualty with convulsions and bleeding from the anus. It does not fit into the context in which these research participants raised it (e.g. testing 'for any reason' or with their earlier assumption that fathers and mothers were united against the social workers. Indeed, this child's mother tried to challenge media representation of her family's

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situation and commented: 'I don't agree with people trying to get rid of Dr Higgs, because other people won't speak out, and the same thing will happen to other people as happened to my daughters' (Campbell, 1997: 183).

<sup>5</sup> The image of the examination as itself abusive was promoted by police surgeons who opposed Higgs and Wyatt. In her evidence to the inquiry one police surgeon made a widely reported statement that the Cleveland paediatricians were guilty of 'outrageous sexual abuse' and that screaming infants had been held down to be examined. After being challenged by the judge in charge of the inquiry and by the Official Solicitor representing the children she withdrew the allegation. Her original accusation had been headlined by the press but 'her reluctant retraction was reported in only one paragraph at the bottom of one report in the Guardian' (Campbell, 1997: 58).

<sup>6</sup> Such framing by association is by no means unique. For analysis of the meaning of 'Watergate' and how this is reiterated, see Schudson 1992, for discussion of how, in the Ghana coup, Busia was represented as another Nkrumah, see Elliot and Golding, 1974: 243.

<sup>7</sup> The role of specific events has been noted in many case studies of media coverage. Chibnall's work highlights the importance of the 1966 Shepherds Bush killing of three policemen in developing the media's 'Violent Society' theme (Chibnall, 1977). Work by Hall and colleagues on 'Policing the crisis' notes the importance of particular crimes in importing the concept of 'mugging' (Hall et al. 1978). Golding and Middleton's research on representations of the Welfare State highlights the role of a particular 'benefit cheat' story which acted as a 'precipitating event' in the framing of 'scroungers' (Golding and Middleton, 1982). More recently, research focused on audience reception also notes the role of particular reference points. Corner, Richardson and Fenton, for example, write about the way in which the Chernobyl nuclear power accident is used as a 'datum event' in discussions of nuclear power (Corner et al., 1990).