

All journalism is not the same: a case study

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Introduction

The Leveson Inquiry casts journalism in a bad light, but we all know all journalism is not the same: the best journalism should be distinguished from the minority which threatens to tarnish the reputation of the entire profession. Journalists should never miss an opportunity to promote the fact most journalism is ethical and responsible.

In regional journalism the difference is most obviously that journalists are very close to their consumers and therefore have to be more responsive to them. This short commentary piece investigates a classic example of this dichotomy in Leicestershire, where the coverage of the disappearance of local girl Madeleine McCann in 2007 was treated in diametrically opposed ways by local outlets and by the national tabloid media.

The fifth anniversary in 2012 of the disappearance of three-year-old Madeleine McCann will be marked by retrospective features in national and regional media. It is ironic that the media's coverage of the case has made so many headlines itself. But this case demonstrated as well as any other single story over those years the gap in standards between the regional media and the national tabloid press – and it is the redtop and mid-market tabloids on which many people make their judgements of journalism as a whole.

Three-year-old Leicestershire girl Madeleine McCann disappeared on May 3, 2007. This case inspired more coverage than any other of its kind, before or since. Two factors in Madeleine's disappearance meant the 2007 media response was greater than any before. The first was the willingness of the family to actively involve the media in the search for their daughter and the second was the availability of technology to aid the reporting process and to fuel the story by facilitating interaction and forums for discussion. What is crucially at stake here for the image and practice of journalism – as well as its study – is to attempt to understand how the coverage of Madeleine McCann's disappearance led to such an abandonment of the usual norms of journalism that it risked bringing the whole profession into disrepute.

Despite the widespread disregard for normal journalistic behaviour by the most extreme of the tabloid press covering the case, there was a branch of the media which had a greater interest in sticking to the usual norms of coverage. Both the Leicester Mercury newspaper and BBC Radio Leicester covered the disappearance extensively, but always as a local story. The difference between way these two organisations covered the story and the ways the tabloid press in particular treated it, offers an interesting view into current journalistic practice and standards.

The story breaks

Many national tabloids ended up having to pay damages to the McCanns and others covered in their stories. But most journalists knew while it was ongoing that the national tabloid media's coverage of the case was unjustified and unethical, if only because of the gulf between that coverage and the Press Complaints Commission's Code of Conduct. Legal action against many of the papers and the tabloids' capitulation and failure to defend their actions in the face of the charges was only a reaffirmation of what most in journalism already knew.

Leicestershire has two county-wide, respected and established news providers, the daily Leicester Mercury and BBC Radio Leicester. They both have large offices in different parts of the city centre and their readers can turn up there and demand to see local management with whatever brickbat or bouquet they choose to offer. They are both accountable to their local audience. Richard Bettsworth is the editor of the Leicester Mercury. In 2007 he was deputy editor of the paper, and played a leading role in its coverage of the story. Kate Squire is the BBC's head of local radio development. In 2007 she was managing editor of BBC Leicester, and oversaw her station's coverage.

The national and local press did not diverge much in their initial coverage, the first national reports not

needing to range too far from the dramatic facts of this new story. But both Bettsworth and Squire recognised from the outset this story was incredibly unusual and would find huge resonance with their respective audiences. Bettsworth recalls:

It became quickly clear it was a very unusual story. We made a decision very soon after Madeleine disappeared to send a journalist to Portugal. It was not something we would normally do. In this case it was so obvious it was such a big story and there was a huge level of public interest that we had to have someone on the spot.

But Bettsworth, as an experienced journalist, also quickly spotted the unique character of this story and the interest it would have for his readers, who would have the additional hook of knowing the central characters lived in the same county and worked in the same town or city, or in some instances were acquaintances or neighbours.

Squire recalls her station's successful early efforts to localise the big national and international story for her Leicestershire listeners. She said:

I think we first noticed the story on GMTV. We picked it up very quickly – we were running it that morning. We knew that day she was from Rothley and it built very quickly. We did a full breakfast OB a couple of days later from Rothley. We did the whole of the breakfast show from Rothley, setting the scene, talking to lots of people, because in the early days people were happy to talk. Ben Jackson, our breakfast presenter lives nearby, so that I think gave us a real connection with the story. His children had gone to the same nursery she had gone to, so he felt very attached to the story and I think that came across in just the way he spoke about it, in how he spoke about Rothley and what the people in Rothley were like – you can't buy that.

Bettsworth recalls:

We were in that media pack in Portugal. The tabloid media really need new things to keep happening, to keep the story going. For us it was a local family and we didn't need lots of new things, we just wanted to cover it. The tabloid media were always looking for the next break in the story. There was some really outrageous reporting in some newspapers about Robert Murat [an early suspect]. It was the first example of where a different set of rules began to appear; defamation, contempt etc seemed to no longer apply. It seemed [to the tabloid media] to be OK to say all sorts of things about this guy. The bigger the story, the more it was a kind of open season. The normal rules of journalistic behaviour no longer applied.

BBC Leicester tried to retain its perspective, but recognised this was a big story and needed more thought and planning than run-of-the-mill news. Squire remembers that:

Naturally a huge amount of our time, energy and effort was dedicated to it because this was a story that was leading our bulletins, our programmes and the national stuff. We never consciously thought we had a different policy here, it was normal journalistic principles recognising it was a big story, having perhaps more planning meetings than we would normally have because you've got to keep it going. In a way it did just evolve but we didn't apply any wildly different principles to it.

The McCanns as suspects

The point at which tabloid national newspaper coverage appeared to start to point the finger at the McCanns, and particularly at Mrs McCann, in August 2007, is when Richard Bettsworth believes the clear divide between national and regional coverage became obvious. He recalled:

I can remember when the media changed. Stuff started to appear which began to make suggestions about the McCanns' role in it. Then the police questioned Kate and Gerry McCann and there was a frenzy. We steered clear of speculative pieces because there was no evidence for these. A lot of them struck me as defamatory and that's where we started to question about what was going on here. [Many of the national stories were based on] rumour, speculation and innuendo. That's not the role of a journalist.

Bettsworth said his paper took the decision to run what was fair to run, but decided not to run what was defamatory, deliberately damaging or seemed to have no basis in fact. BBC Leicester's Kate Squire remembers the temptation to be led by tabloid speculation, but resisted and let her local journalism principles dictate how her station handled that phase. She said:

When they [the Portuguese police] questioned the McCanns we didn't go along with all the horrible headlines, because they were just being questioned. We [BBC Leicester] just went into complete factual mode. We said right we stick to the facts, let's wait and see if they are charged or not. Our job as a local station is to treat all local issues with a degree of sensitivity. As a local station it is your job and your duty to treat your listeners and viewers with respect.

Tabloid explanation of the excesses of coverage

Tabloid justification of their reporting are hard to find, possibly because in conceding to the various legal

actions against them they were forced to apologise unreservedly for much of their coverage and remove stories they wrote and any contemporaneous justification for them from accessible media, particularly their websites. But Guardian Media commentator and host of Radio 4's Media Show, Steve Hewlett, reporting on a Media Society debate into the McCann coverage in January 2008, did manage to find an explanation of sorts for the reporting from a satisfyingly predictable source, former editor of *The Sun*, Kelvin MacKenzie. Hewlett wrote:

MacKenzie cautioned the audience against being too censorious on the grounds that it was their fascination with the story that led newspapers - which are, after all, commercial entities - to deal with it so prominently and frequently (guardian.co.uk, 31 January 2008).

And in the end, that was as sophisticated as it got. Readers and viewers were avidly consuming this story. Both the *Evening Standard* and the BBC website noted at the time that whenever they led their coverage with this story, readership significantly increased. It doesn't make it right, but they were trying to keep the coverage going because they knew people wanted to read it – the problem was they were abandoning the usual rules of journalism to keep that coverage going. Latterly, Peter Hill, the decade-long editor of the *Daily Express*, the paper many regard as one of the worst offenders in terms of its obsession with the Madeleine story, used the occasion of his recent retirement from the editor's chair to explain, rather than justify, his paper's coverage. In a *Guardian* interview, he admitted to Roy Greenslade:

I did too much on the story. I accept that. It was a huge story, and every adult in the country had an opinion on it. I admit it helped to sell the paper (*The Guardian*, 21 February 2011).

The Leicestershire perspective

One part of the *Leicester Mercury's* response also demonstrates a particular aspect of the local media's relationship with its audience which the national media necessarily cannot replicate – its role as a local champion. The *Leicester Mercury* also decided to go beyond just journalism and to get involved in the story. Bettsworth explained:

We followed it the usual way with due respect to issues such as defamation. [Our policy was to] just be responsible and to tell people what was happening [...] but just being sensitive about it. [What we were reporting was] responsible, accurate, sensitive, the normal rules of journalism. There was a lot of coverage. That's what our readers would expect. We tried to engage in doing something and giving readers the feeling they could help. There was a role for the paper then to be the means for doing something about it.

At this point then deputy news editor Sian Brewis had the idea to get 'Find Madeleine' wristbands made and sold at to raise funds for the Find Madeleine Fund. More than 50,000 were sold, raising £57,000 for the Fund. Bettsworth added: We made sure the McCanns were involved and we got a response from all round the country because the national media was supportive and people wanted to help."

Interestingly, as the McCanns began to be accused of having a part in the disappearance of their daughter the *Leicester Mercury* took a stand based not on fact or evidence but on policy and to some extent necessity, from a local point of view; its leading journalists began to say publicly they did not think Gerry and Kate McCann were responsible for their daughter's disappearance. The *Mercury's* stance was picked up by McCanns spokesman Clarence Mitchell in his response to the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee report into the press published in February 2010. He said:

The problem Kate and Gerry had was with a number of national newspaper titles not the regional press. The *Mercury's* coverage has always been broadly fair and balanced and for that they remain grateful. Kate and Gerry are also very grateful for the effort and thought which went into the wristband production and donations. Kate and Gerry are very pleased the *Mercury* continues to support them (*Leicester Mercury*, February 25, 2010).

Bettsworth says in fact the *Mercury* simply covered this case by the same rules it would have covered any story. It is merely the contrast with the nationals that points the differences up. He added:

Some of it [national tabloid coverage] was terrible but some of it was also quite good. Some of the national tabloids were very good at questioning the police case against the McCanns. If you are a local paper and something big happens you are still very concerned with the proper rules of journalism and the proper function of journalism. In some papers and in some instances there's a drive for sales that's so [great] that some of these rules go out of the window. You are less likely to abandon these rules if you're a local paper. I think journalism is pretty good in the UK and the tabloids are, to a large extent, pretty good. What it does tell us is that the proper role of journalism is not just to report whatever rubbish someone says - what journalism must do is try to establish what is the truth. [Tabloids can go to excess in a rush for sales and that] leaves people with the impression that they make stuff up, and that's deeply damaging and most of the time that's not true. I do think it damaged journalism. We should just have been supporting these people [the McCanns]. The

family not only didn't get this support, but also became pilloried by the media. That is deeply disappointing when you are supposed to be about championing and supporting people. We did stay pretty close to the story, we were consistent throughout and we didn't waver. I hope, even though there has been damage [caused by national coverage of this story], people can see there was a difference [between local and national coverage]. I'm sure there were some faults in our coverage but I think overall we were pretty good.

Squire also focuses on the unique nature of local journalism and its connection with its audience, which she argues ultimately makes its journalism better:

We are here forever in Leicestershire. The national and international press ping in and ping out and don't care who they upset. That isn't that we do anything different journalistically – you don't compromise our principles – you cover the story in the same way, but in terms of treating people, there is greater sensitivity definitely from the local media than from the national press, because you have a very close relationship with your listeners on a local radio station. They trust you to tell them the truth, to care about them, to champion local people and so it's a different sort of relationship. I think we care more about people, so we're perhaps more respectful in that way.

Conclusions

Roy Greenslade became one of the most persistent critics of tabloid excess. In November 2007, after six months of coverage, he wrote:

I know that papers understand there is a ready audience for speculative rubbish about the McCanns. I know how easy it is to concoct such rubbish. I know that editors are happy to defend their rubbish by asserting that they are exercising press freedom by probing a story in the public interest. But rubbish is rubbish (guardian.co.uk, 27 November 2007).

The approach of the local media, specifically the Leicester Mercury and BBC Radio Leicester, demonstrated a different set of standards operating in the regional media, standards higher than in the tabloid press, illustrating that recognition of the differences between national tabloid and local journalism is long overdue. Yes, this case is exceptional, but in this case of a local story also being a major national, and indeed international story, there can be little doubt that the local media tried to cover it responsibly and proportionately, while the national tabloid press did not.

Original Interviews

Bettsworth, R., deputy editor, Leicester Mercury, interview conducted at Leicester Mercury, September 22, 2009.

Squire, K., managing editor, BBC Leicester, interview conducted at BBC Leicester, September 25, 2009.

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