Transformations of public and private knowledge: audience reception, feminism and experience of childhood sexual abuse

Jenny Kitzinger, Cardiff University

Abstract

This article examines an extraordinary cultural transformation in public and private knowledge: the discovery of child sexual abuse. It draws on interviews and focus group discussions conducted over eleven years to explore how dramatic changes in mass media coverage influenced public and personal perceptions of this issue. Focussing on the experiences of women and girls in the UK, my research highlights the media's special role, quite distinct from other cultural resources, in helping to confront and name sexual abuse. Media coverage made a crucial contribution to a spiral of recognition. It encouraged the formation and expression of private identities around this very fragmented and silenced experience. It helped sexual abuse, particularly incest, to enter public discourse. This article highlights the value of feminist media studies engaging with the 'public knowledge project' and vice versa. I argue that campaigns to address private, interpersonal violence and make it a public, political issue provide crucial case studies for analysing how media coverage impacts on society. Through such studies we can explore the media's role in constructing experience, identity, and social dialogue and also examine the potential and limits of audience creativity. Such case studies can help to identify how the media contribute to, rather than merely reflect, social change.

Keywords: sexual abuse, effects, influence, change, violence, identity, audience reception

Introduction: a brief overview of the media's discovery of child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse, particularly incest, became a high profile issue in many different countries during the 1980s and 1990s. The foundations for this change in the UK (and in the USA) lay in early efforts by feminists to address the physical and sexual abuse of adult women. Battered women's refuges established during the 1970s began to find women seeking help because of sexual abuse of their children. Similarly, some of those ringing Rape Crisis lines were calling, not because they had been attacked recently, but because of abuse during childhood, often by men that they knew. The issue was further uncovered in consciousness raising groups and through the testimony of individual survivors (Armstrong, 1994). During the late 1970s and early 1980s, childhood sexual abuse was addressed in a series of key feminist texts: theory, testimony, fiction and autobiography. These included: 'Kiss Daddy Goodnight' (Armstrong, 1978); 'The Best Kept Secret' (Rush, 1980); 'Incest: fact and myth' (Nelson, 1982), 'Father-Daughter Rape (Ward, 1984) and 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' (Angelou, published in the USA in 1969, but not in the UK until 1984).

It was not until 1986, however, that the UK mass media discovered the issue (a similar 'discovery' having occurred in the US a little earlier). Prior to this date UK media attention to child sexual abuse was characterised by flurries of coverage around abductions and rapes by strangers. Incest was barely mentioned. Sexual abuse was known by a roll call of murdered children and profiles of particular individuals (most notoriously in the UK Ian Brady and Myra Hindley). The start of broader public recognition, particularly of abuse by family and friends, was signalled in 1986 with Esther Rantzen's programme, 'Childwatch'

which launched the children's helpline, Childline. This was accompanied by a remarkable expansion in attention from the rest of the media. Analysis of The Times newspaper, for example, shows that coverage of sexual abuse increased by 300 per cent between 1985 and 1987 and attention shifted toward sexual abuse within the family (Kitzinger, 1996). Such abuse also became an issue for documentary programmes, featuring in flagship series such as Brass Tacks, (BBC2, 7 July 1987); Everyman, (BBC1, 8 May 1988); Antenna, BBC2, 10 May 1989) and Horizon (BBC2 19 June 1989). It also became a topic for magazine programmes, discussion and chat shows (e.g. Oprah) and was the focus of TV films (e.g. Something about Amelia, BBC2, 6 March 1989). By the early 1990s child sexual abuse began to appear in regular police, hospital and legal drama such as The Bill (ITV, 29 January 1993), Casualty (BBC1, 6 February 1993) and LA Law (Channel 4, 16 March 1994). It also featured in soap opera story lines, most extensively the 'Beth Jordache' story on Brookside, which ran from March 1993 (see Henderson, 1996).

This whistle-stop tour through the recent history of media coverage provides a crude but striking index of a revolution in the public profile of sexual abuse. This was not a smooth and unproblematic transition. Although media coverage acknowledged widespread abuse, much of it evaded the full implications of assaults within the family (Kitzinger & Skidmore, 1995). In addition, peak news coverage has focused on contested allegations, including the Cleveland and Orkney scandals and, more recently, the phenomena of so-called 'false memory syndrome' (see Nava, 1988; Campbell, 1997; Kitzinger, 1998, 2000). In any case journalists' attention was seldom informed by a feminist consciousness. Indeed, the media have been extensively criticised for everything from promoting stereotypes of abusers and disempowering children (Kitzinger, 1988; 1999) to exploiting an incest entertainment 'industry' (Armstrong, 1994).

However, these critiques are not the focus of this paper. Here attention is drawn, instead, to the overall growth in coverage and the way in which this marked a decisive swing from cultural vacuum to multiple media mediation. This paper demonstrates how this shift in media recognition impacted on public consciousness and how it influenced, and was used by, those with personal experiences of abuse. I argue that the sheer fact of media acknowledgement challenged abusers' monopoly over definitions of reality and undermined some of their power to silence victims. It created the potential for redefinition of experience into the public domain. This thesis is propounded through analysis of all references to the media by the survivors of abuse, and mothers of sexually abused children, whom I interviewed during the 1980s and 1990s.

The research: recording personal accounts during the 1980s and 1990s

The material used to inform this article was collected as part of two separate research projects, one conducted in the 1980s, the other in the 1990s. I started work around child sexual abuse as a feminist activist, coming from a background in social anthropology with little knowledge of media studies. In the early 1980s I became involved in a collective setting up a help-line and then a refuge for teenage girls needing to escape sexual abuse at home. The young women who contacted us needed accommodation and support; they also expressed a desire to hear and read about other survivors' experiences. This was the original impetus behind my first research project. This involved tape-recorded interviews with 40 sexual abuse survivors and mothers of sexually abused children. The interviews explored their experiences of dealing with sexual abuse and the process of survival. The youngest interviewee was16 years old, the oldest was 59. These interviews were conducted over a time period which proved to be one of decisive social change: 1984 to 1989 (with most interviews being conducted between 1985 and 1987). Although media

representation was not the focus of this research, it emerged as a crucial issue for my research participants.

The second research project which informs this article was conducted in the mid 1990s. By this point I had developed an interest in media studies and joined the Glasgow University Media Research Group. After conducting a series of projects about audience reception of health issues (such as AIDS) I obtained an ESRC grant to study the production, content and reception of media coverage about child sexual abuse. The audience reception part of this study involved 49 focus group discussions with 275 participants, aged between 14 and 79. These research participants included both men and women, and those with and without personal experience of sexual abuse.

This article draws primarily on my first piece of research. However, it also uses some data from the more recent focus groups. The time span covered by the two projects (1984 to 1995), combined with the wide age range of the research participants (14 to 79), means that the data covers a broad historical period. Many of the abuse survivors I spoke to had been children in the 1940s, 50s, 60s or 70s while others, interviewed for the second project, had been children during the 1980s and early 1990s. Most of those interviewed in the first project grew up (and were abused) during a time when the subject was completely taboo. Some were interviewed while that taboo still prevailed. Others, interviewed after 1986, had lived through a dramatic transition in public discussion of sexual abuse. By the time I conducted the second project the context had changed. Some younger participants who spoke to me during the mid 1990s had grown up surrounded by a plethora of media representation of sexual abuse. Teenage focus group participants interviewed in 1995, for example, had been being abused during the late 1980s and early 1990s (after the launch of Childline and during the media furore about the Orkney scandal). Re-reading both sets of transcripts I was struck by the strong sense of history that emerges. The transcripts highlight how the dramatic changes in media recognition which occurred during the course of the two projects transformed public knowledge. They also demonstrate how the media is implicated in 'private' knowledge: making sense of intimate experiences of violence within domestic space, providing a framework for personal interaction and reference points for building a sense of identity.

From cultural vacuum to multiple media mediation: survivors' accounts of the media's role

Prior to 1986 the UK media provided very little acknowledgement of child sexual abuse within families. Nor did this issue appear in other public fora accessible to ordinary people. This made it hard for victims to name their abuse. During their childhoods some interviewees recalled trying to ignore or block out what was happening. In so far as they had definitions for what was being done to them some recalled thinking of it as 'being tickled' or 'being punished', or as 'something that all daddies do with their little girls'. Some grew up thinking that abuse was perfectly normal, others believed that what they were experiencing had never happened to anyone else. (Even though some had siblings who were also victimised, it was never discussed.)

Even as adults, survivors were faced with a cultural vacuum. Research participants described their sense, prior to 1986, of being dislocated from all cultural reference points, with no models of how to respond and no words to define what was happening, or had happened, to them. This lack of social or cultural recognition was identified as one of the most frightening and disorienting aspects of abuse. Some found it hard to name their own

experiences or to speak about it. Some, who did try to talk about their abuse, found that they were disbelieved or dismissed.

This cultural vacuum was quite tangible during the course of interviews conducted during the 1980s as women struggled to articulate the literally unspeakable. The interview itself was self-consciously experienced as a process of discourse construction with interviewees working to unpick definitions imposed on them by their abusers ('you are my little princess', 'this is special', 'you want this', 'you deserve this'). Women also often made self-reflective comments about the interview experience including statements such as 'I've never said this before' and 'I'd never seen it that way until just now'. They often questioned me about other interviews I had conducted and wanted to know how their experiences were similar, or dissimilar, to other survivors. Returning transcripts to interviewees proved to be a particularly powerful process. Reading their own accounts was often quite shocking as well as being quite liberating. Some made comments such as: 'This is the first time I've seen anything like this in black and white'. I read one woman's transcript to her over the phone because it was not safe to send anything to her home. Even though it recorded her own words she commented that it was the first time she had even heard such a story.

Obviously, there are structural aspects to child sexual abuse that may always generate a sense of isolation, dislocation and confusion. Complex feelings may be generated by abusers' manipulation of reality and their insistence on secrecy and the stigma associated with victimisation. Issues will also arise because of the early (even pre-verbal) age at which children might be abused and their efforts to accommodate to repeated abuse (see Summit, 1989, Kitzinger, 1990a). Many survivors speaking out today, will recognise feelings described by those talking in the 1980s. However, the contemporary UK scene means that there are now far more cultural resources for confronting abuse and women who spoke to me during the late 1980s were starkly aware of this change.

As children, teenagers and adults, prior to 1986, survivors described struggling to make sense of what had been done to them within the conventional categories available to them at the time. Many had, for a long time, been confused or unsure about their own memories. They made comments such as: 'I just had these funny ideas floating around in my head - I had no way of making sense of them', 'It was not part of my waking day at all' and 'The hardest thing is trying to keep belief in it all - trying to grab hold of it. It just disappears through your fingers as you try to grasp it'. One interviewee described her confusion and distress about her stepfather's 'fondling' and contrasted this with her sense of clarity and legitimation when he finally penetrated her and she could identify what he had done as rape. She recalled this generating a sense of 'relief'.

> Afterwards I thought, 'Jesus, I've been raped, I've been raped'. Like all the stuff before was just other things. I'd never seen it as rape because whenever you're told about it in newspapers or school it's always that, it's never anything else. So I thought 'I've actually been raped this time. He's actually raped me now'. It felt quite real. It felt real because I could call it something. It really happened. (Liza, my emphasis)[i]

Another young woman, however, was unable to name her experiences as rape because, in spite of her father penetrating her, she felt that she had displayed insufficient resistance and could not describe his actions as violent. In fact she argued that she could never be raped by anyone because: 'I would just lie down and take it, to get it over with'. She could

certainly not envisage her father's actions as rape because she saw rape in classic terms as 'a man with a knife lurking in an alley way'. [#][ii]

The absence of media representation of the range and subtly, as well as the power dynamics, of incestuous assault made it hard for children to resist definitions of abuse as consensual. Some women felt they had never been able to identify what was happening at all. The lack of cultural tools to understand what was going on and the inability to 'call it something', was also highlighted by mothers of sexually abused children. Deficiencies in everyday language prior to 1986 were vividly illustrated by one woman who recalled searching through the dictionary for information about 'incest'. It was the only place she could think to turn to for information. The dictionary definition simply talked about marriage between blood relations and was of no help.[iii] Another mother, who I shall call 'Kathy', described how ill equipped she felt to confront the possibility of sexual abuse until she actually walked in on her husband with her daughter.

> [I felt] totally as though I was just in a nightmare and when daylight came I would wake up and it hadn't happened. And daylight came, and it didn't go away. [...] [Finding my husband in there] confirmed what I knew, although I didn't know I knew it. (Kathy)

Throughout her account Kathy stressed the absence of cultural reference points and having to respond 'by instinct', 'like an animal', without any guidance:

> It felt just as though it were a primitive kind of instinct. I had to protect her. It was just like an animal, you know, the young have been threatened and you just have to close round them and just protect them. And that is what I did, in any #way I knew how. But I had absolutely no model whatever, that was the horrible part of it. [...] I just didn't know anything about sexual abuse. I remember thinking: 'if only I had read something about it'. But I had never read anything about it. [...] only awful stories in the paper [about abduction], but no useful articles in women's magazines that said 'I did so and so'. These things just weren't around then. (Kathy, my emphasis)

There were only two occasions when any of my research participants described media coverage prior to 1986 as having been a positive resource. In both cases this was not because the media represented abuse, but rather the opposite. One young woman said she would watch TV sitcoms and draw from these programmes to make up stories about her own family life in order to disguise the abuse and neglect she suffered. Another interviewee explained that media representations of happy families helped her to realise that her experience was not normal.

> Because if you've been brought up with it [abuse] all your life then you can't even think about a different situation…So you don't actually have a vision of how life could be different, to motivate you to get something different. All I've got is […] the situations I see on television or when I go round to a friend's house and see the family altogether […] Their dads don't go in and say goodnight the way my dad did. Their dads just go in and say: "Goodnight, sleep well" and go back to their beds again. That never happened in my family. (Samantha)

From 1986 onwards, however, an overall rise in media coverage helped to increase general public awareness, inform parents, and became a resource for children and adults recognising their own abuse. This was clearly acknowledged in the focus groups I

conducted during the mid 1990s. Research participants made comments such as: 'Nobody knew about such things when I was young, now it's even on children's programmes like <u>Grange Hill</u>' (Group #) and 'I recall my parents saying: 'Now don't talk to strangers' […], that was about the end of it. But now everyone's looking round every corner […] the whole culture's changing or it's changed.' (Group 37). People often reported that this has altered their own views on the subject:

> We never talked about it in my day, I've no doubt it went on, but it just wasn't discussed. It's right to be out in the open now. I realise now it's going on. (Group 58)

> There's much more general awareness now anyway. Ten years ago I found it hard to believe that fathers abused their daughters. But now I realise it's often just like that. I know that largely because of the telly, it comes back to the media. (Group 5)

This recognition of a cultural transformation was even more acute among those with direct experience of abuse and had often had profound personal ramifications. Abuse survivors who had grown up without their experiences being recognised by the dominant culture, began to find words and images for what had happened to them. Many adults began literally to 're-collect' and 're-member' abusive childhoods. Some of those interviewed described how they had begun to re-assess what had happened to them - finally realising that it was wrong or 'not normal' or that they did not deserve it. Others found that media coverage forced them to confront memories that they had been trying to ignore. It was media coverage, rather than comments from friends or family, which was most often identified as a trigger for confronting childhood abuse.[iv] Amy, for example, described how she first sought help in the mid to late eighties because: 'It were too much, it were all coming on the telly and it were starting to really get to me.' Others described a slow process of making sense of what had happened in the context of increased publicity:

> It started being talked about a bit more in the media and then I heard a radio programme, that made me start thinking about it... Whenever he abused me he never said a word I always found this silence around it a very loud thing. It's all been so silent. (Joanne)

> When you hear [about abuse and incest] then it means it is possible, it can happen. That means you can start to put together all those funny ideas you've had in your head and begin to make sense of them. (Lynn)

Recognition and representation in TV programmes, on radio, in newspapers and in films became a vital part of women's process of naming and making sense of their memories. Some interviewees expressed a positive hunger to seek out such materials and the urgent desire to see more such discussion in the public domain. As Joanne explained:

> It legitimises your experiences, it is saying 'yes, it does happen' and you know that other people are reading it and are accepting it. Whether it's fact or fiction, whether it is research or autobiography or whatever, it's adding to this. I know when I read Sarah Nelson [a journalist who also published a book on sexual abuse in 1982] it was wonderful seeing all the basic feelings that I had there. [...] [And] it moves people forward all the time, and it isn't just odd people saying things [...] it is actually down on paper. [...] it's not just me having a fantasy in my head about this, many people believe this. (Joanne)

As well as legitimating the reality of incest ('it's not just me having a fantasy'), such reporting also, in very practical ways, helped people both to tell, and to ask, about such experiences. One young woman, for example, saved up two early articles about incest from women's magazines and used these to tell her mother what was happening.

> I was hysterical. I'd been smoking a lot of dope and I was feeling really, really low...I ran into the house screaming 'Mum, come and help me, I need to talk to you' and she came out and said 'Oh, what?' And she pushed me into the caravan and she couldn't understand what I was saying and I shoved these two articles from women's magazines under her nose. (Melissa)

Another woman quite explicitly relied on a particular programme to help her to find out whether her daughter was being abused.

> I didn't know how to approach it. But I remembered Esther Rantzen's programme which suggested asking: 'Has anyone ever touched you or made you feel uncomfortable?' So I asked her, and she said: 'Yes, today a boy threw a ball and it hit my head' [...] I said: 'Yes, that was today, what about anyone else?' And she said: 'Yes, dad' and started screaming. She wept and wept, I'd never heard a child cry like that. (Shiobhan)[v]

The media coverage triggered some survivors to discuss their abuse with other family members (only then to discover that they too had been a victim of the same perpetrator). For some women there was also a quite complex inter-play between media representation, public discussion and a re-definition and revelation of experience. One interviewee, for example, was in her early twenties when she attended a feminist film and post-viewing discussion about pornography held in her local arts cinema. This film, Not a Love Story included footage of explicit pornography. She was familiar with these type of images because her abuser had forced her to look at pornography as a young child. The film, and surrounding discussion, made her both re-evaluate what he had done to her, and provided a context for talking about it in public.

> Everyone in the audience was really shocked [by the porn] and I was thinking: 'God, I have seen all this before'. What got me in a state of shock wasn't that it was new, but that I had seen it all before and nobody else seemed to have. For the first time it made me think what a real bastard he is. It really brought it home to me what he had done [...]. After about three-quarters of an hour of them all talking about how upsetting it was, I told them that I had seen all that when I was eight. (Liza)

In the focus groups I conducted in the mid 1990s this sense of engaging with and using the media was even more prevalent.[vi] The media had become an important resource in identifying, exploring and comparing experience. One group of young survivors of sexual abuse, for example, discussed chat shows, discussion programmes and soap opera at length. A fourteen year old in this group commented on the portrayal of the incest survivor, Beth Jordache, in the soap opera, Brookside:

> You can watch it and say - I had those feelings like Beth, that happened to me. [...] We've got some kind of communication with the telly and can talk to each other about the way Beth is. (Group 48)

Another member of this group commented on how a TV film, Liar, Liar, had been helpful in communicating with her mother:

My mum watched it with me. In the film the mother doesn't believe - my ma watched it and saw what pressure the girl went through and it made her see how I could feel. (Group 48)

A third girl, whose mother was less understanding, had videotaped and repeatedly watched an audience discussion programme (Kilroy) because it showed supportive family reactions:

It was on about two years ago - families talking about how they'd reacted. I've got that on video and I kept re-watching it, wishing my mum had so much sympathy. (Group 48)

Far from feeling that their experiences were invisible, some survivors in the 1990s feel that their experiences have become public property. One girl, for example, described becoming upset while watching the film Liar, Liar with her little sister: 'My wee sister says: "What are you greeting [crying] for? It's only a film", But then she said: "Oh, that was you" (Group 48, f). Another girl agreed, adding:

You don't know if they are watching it, or putting you in the film and watching you. (Group 48)

Indeed, media representations (even positive ones) could cause considerable discomfort and distress, especially when a viewer was taken off-guard: 'When it comes on the telly and I'm not expecting it I go dead cold inside and it brings back memories.' (Group 48) In this context it is all the more crucial that representations are positive and not stereotypical, gratuitous or destructive. The character of Beth Jordache in Brookside was not only important as a cultural resource for talking about feelings (see above), it also offered an unusual and important model of survival (at least before this character was killed off while in prison from a rare and fatal heart condition). Before this happened however one girl summarised comments made by many other survivors when she declared:

Victims on TV, they're like a big shadow, all blacked out. That makes me feel terrible, they're hiding away. [...] I thought: 'I'm going to grow up and I'm going to be scared of everything'. But Beth [in Brookside], she's so strong, she's got a grip of everything. Before that, everything I saw seemed to say that if you were abused you'd be strange, different, keep yourself in a wee corner. Watching Beth has really helped me. (Group 48)

This young woman was not alone in her feelings. When news leaked that Beth Jordache was to be written out of Brookside through a fatal heart condition, incest survivors' groups demonstrated outside the TV studios to try to save this valuable representation of survival.

Discussion and conclusion

The media's role

The interviews and focus group discussion with survivors of childhood sexual abuse demonstrate the crucial significance of the media. Because this data was collected over a

eleven year span, during which there were highly significant changes in the extent and nature of media coverage, it also highlights the different role the media played in the lives of survivors over time. Prior to 1986 survivors of sexual abuse could glean very little useful information from a media (and broader culture) which largely failed to acknowledge their experiences. In the mid to late 1980s, however, sexual abuse, particularly within the family, gained a dramatic public profile. Media coverage helped many survivors to identify their own abuse and to speak out about what had happened to them. It led parents to recognise the possibility that their children might be victims and provided a context for asking or telling about abusive experiences. Media attention had profound implications for what people could imagine, what they could say and what they felt they could do. It influenced how survivors constructed their identities and envisaged possibilities for the future. The media 'discovery' of sexual abuse fundamentally transformed private and public discourse about this issue: opening it up for both personal reflection and community discussion.

Recognising the media's central role in this social transformation does not mean that the media achieved this in isolation. Nor can they be credited with initiating the 'discovery' of child sexual abuse. The ground work for change lay in earlier activities by feminists and survivors. However, the transformations witnessed over the last fifteen years could not have happened without mass media involvement. The role of the media in defining the public domain is such that, had newspapers, magazines and television reporting continued to ignore incest, this would have been a serious obstacle to public recognition. In addition, other avenues for inserting sexual abuse into public discourse were limited. The isolation, stigma and taboo around abuse were such that it was a difficult issue to raise (although, the fact that many survivors did speak out publicly was crucial). It was the recognition in a very public forum of the mass media which ricocheted through the general population in the UK and became a catalyst for change at an intimate, private, as well as public, level. The final section of this article reflects on the implications of such phenomena for future directions in feminism and media studies.

Future directions for feminist media studies

We now have an established canon of feminist media studies which highlight the operation of gendered power relations in media consumption processes. Researchers have examined how women's use of the media reflects or challenges the traditional female role of wife and mother. They have reclaimed pleasure, fantasy and feminine genre as serious objects of study. They have documented, and demanded recognition of, women's cultural competencies (Ang, 1985, Brunsdon, 1981; Gray, 1987; Hobson 1980, 1982, 1985; Modleski, 1984; Radway, 1984; Seiter et al 1989a; Winship 1987). These areas of enquiry have been very significant in the development of media studies, but leave surprising gap in the field of feminist enquiry, particularly in relation to the 'public knowledge project' (see Corner, 1991, Gray 1999). Less focus, for example, has been placed on how feminist activism has impacted on the media or how media representations of 'women's issues' have been received (exceptions include Skidmore, 1998, Zoonen, 1994, and Schlesinger et al, 1992). Feminist work in these areas have tended to be isolated from mainstream media studies or not recognised as key contributions to the field. Yet, both these fields of enquiry offer important political and theoretical opportunities.

They are important *politically* because media advocacy work has historically formed a key strand in feminist activism and is likely to continue to do so. After all, a great deal of feminist activism has been concerned with ensuring that 'private' issues are placed on the public agenda. In the UK, during the last few years, media advocacy has been an

essential part of campaigns to change laws around provocation when women kill their violent partners. It has also formed a fundamental strategy for activists fighting for the public recognition of, and policies against, everything from stalking to the international traffic in women as well as being extensively used to promote women's health issues (e.g. around childbirth or breast cancer).

Studying how feminist activism has impacted on the media and how representation of 'women's issues' have been received is also important for media studies _theory_. We are in a unique historical period of being able to review the momentous social changes initiated by the Women's Liberation Movement. Studying such changes can generate insight for media studies precisely because they explore boundaries between private and public, personal and political, boundaries disrupted by feminist interventions around the family, relationships, the body, sexuality and domestic life.

Given the political and theoretical benefits outlined above I see the historical opposition between feminist approaches and the 'public knowledge project' as unhelpful (for discussion see Gray 1999). It is important that feminist media scholars research public knowledge. It is equally important that the 'public knowledge project' takes on insights from feminism, including enquiring into the intersections between the public and the private and addressing the crucial role of popular culture (the role of soap opera in representing child sexual abuse, for example, was vital).

In pursuing the media's role in creating 'public knowledge', feminist researchers can usefully engage with questions about media effects in ways which give due attention to the interplay between cultural resources and self-narration. For example, a crude hypodermic effects model could be used to argue that the 'epidemic' of adult survivors recalling sexual violence during the last fifteen years is due to the media injecting people with wrong-headed ideas and false memories. [#ref] Indeed, it is precisely this sort of model which appears in literature from the false memory societies based in the UK and the USA. Examples of adults recalling childhood abuse after viewing a television programme are seen as evidence of misleading cultural saturation and distortion. These sort of dismissive explanations have accompanied each new wave of exposure of sexual violence. Even before the discovery of 'false memory syndrome', various experts were noting that the Women's Liberation Movement was leading to an increase in what they called 'pseudo' or 'subjective rape' and women artificially reinterpreting past events. Donald West, for example, writes about 'retrospective accusations', 'distortion', 'jumping on the bandwagon' and feminist indoctrination (West, 1985). Such dismissal oversimplifies the complex relationship between cultural representation and the ways in which experiences are labelled, identified, recalled and reinterpreted, as well as how they may be suppressed, obscured and silenced. [vii] My research suggests that it is quite possible to track media effects, without falling into a simple hypodermic model. It is possible to see the media as helping to 'put together the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle', 'make sense' of abuse or 'grasp it' without assuming that the media must simply be convincing people that they have been abused when they have not been.

Finally, I think that feminist media scholars can ensure that women's perspectives are taken seriously and that our experiences are used to interrogate existing theory. This means respecting women's active engagement with the media without denying questions of power or the importance of representation, at least to some women, some of the time. Some media scholars assert that concern about media misrepresentation or under-representation is based on dubious or non-existent evidence and is theoretically naive (Gauntlett, 1995; Cumberbatch, 1998). Even worse such concerns are seen to cast

audiences as cultural dupes incapable of inventive identifications and re-readings. Those wishing to take a progressive stance on the media often argue that instead of seeing audiences (especially women and children) as victims of the text we should identify the inventive ways in which oppressed peoples appropriate images from the media in order to reflect their lives. Such work has been very valuable in highlighting the complexity of audience/text relations. However this research is often conducted with particular types of cultural groups and with 'fans' (those who have constructed passionate and intricate ways of engaging with a media product). To use such research to suggest that positive representations do not matter is to over-generalise.

The survivors of abuse whom I interviewed emphasised the value to them of positive and realistic media representations (see also the views of battered women reported by Schlesinger et al.,1992). Their accounts demonstrated the uses of such positive representation and also how the preceding lack of representation had undermined their reality and, in effect, colluded with abusers. In this context it is important to recognise the conditions which facilitate or inhibit audience creativity, appropriation or resistance. The interviews highlighted abused children's lack of resources and the very limited way in which they were able to use the media (e.g. as a way of learning about 'normal'/ 'happy' families and disguising their own abuse). Sexually abused children have no homeland, no common language, no sense of belonging from which to forge positive appropriations of media images. Thus it is not possible to neatly transfer theories about the media's role in relation to national, class, gender or ethnic identity onto the identity of abuse survivors. This is true not least because most people are brought up in families or communities which include <u>identifiable</u> members of their own national, class, gender or ethnic identity. By contrast most survivors grew up ignored, invisible and isolated.

In conclusion, feminist media studies has a great deal to offer both feminism and the broader field of media studies, particularly in relation to the public knowledge project. Existing work has already helped to challenge and develop mainstream practices and theories. I look forward to seeing how this new journal helps to take such work forward and expand new areas of enquiry.

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[i] All names are pseudonyms. Names indicate that the quotes come from interviews conducted for the first project, Group ID numbers indicate that quotes come from the focus groups conducted for the second project.

[ii] There are complex issues here about survival strategies which go beyond media representation and might feature in the accounts of children being abused today. I am not implying that such dynamics and comments are all dependent on the media.

[iii] Louise Armstrong, who wrote one of the very first books on this subject (Kiss Daddy Goodnight) describes a similar experience of going to the library to research incest. There was, she writes 'virtually nothing that did not lead to a door marked "taboo", with all the attendant baggage of myth and divine retribution. I listened at those doors to sombre dialogues about tribal exogamy, the pragmatics of marrying outside the family or clan in order to solidify relations and support with outside peoples. None of which had anything to do with my New York father's political and personal interest or motives.' (Armstrong, 1994: 13)

[iv] There were other factors which acted as a trigger (such as the death of the abuser, or becoming a mother herself) but it was the media which was the most likely to be mentioned as significant. For discussion of other life events see Kitzinger 1990b.

[v] By the late 1980s, post-Cleveland, parents not only had information about how to approach the subject, they also knew about the highly publicised dangers of social services involvement. As Shiobhan went on to explain, she delayed seeking help because of this: 'I was so scared, the first thing I asked the social workers when I did see them was, "Are you going to take my children off me?" You hear it on the telly, they just grab the children off you and I thought I'd be seen as incompetent. But it didn't turn out that way.'

[vi] Certain types of coverage also acted to inhibit children from seeking help. Indeed, one young woman who had been just eleven years old during the Orkney crisis, explained why she had been reluctant to confide in anyone for so long: 'I used to think I'd get sent away if I told. [Journalists] make social workers out to be big and bad [...]. They sort of put a barrier up.' (Group 48)

[vii] Some self-help books equally over-simplify the process of 'discovery. There is also an issue about the way in which identity becomes a commodity to be policed or 'sold' to consumers via an entertainment and therapeutic industry.