

The McCanns and the media: A morality tale for our times?

Since Madeleine McCann went missing from her holiday apartment on the Portuguese coast in May 2007, the global media (assisted by her parents) has relentlessly pursued 'the story of the century'. Here journalism lecturer and broadcast producer John Mair reflects on some of the many ethical issues raised by the 'Missing Maddy' coverage

It is the 'story of the century' so far. Millions of words and tens of thousands of frames have been written, shot, published and transmitted. Yet, most of the coverage is speculation at best, invention at worst. What does the 'Missing Madeleine McCann' story tell us about the modern media worldwide?

Let's begin with the facts. Three-year-old Madeleine McCann disappeared from her parents' holiday apartment in Praia de Luz on the Portuguese Algarve on the evening of 3 May 2007. They were away having a meal with friends elsewhere in the Mark Warner Holiday complex. Since then there has been a worldwide appeal and campaign to find her and three 'arguidos' or official suspects have been named by the Portuguese police: Madeleine's parents Kate and Gerry and a local expat in Portugal, Robert Murat.

Those three facts have kept scores of journalists in employ in Portugal, the UK and wider afield for the nine months since 'Maddy' disappeared. Some of the British press pack are still based in the Algarve; some are back with the McCanns in Rothley, Leicestershire. The Portuguese press are still active on the tale too.

The McCanns have been very media savvy from day one or two. Once her 'disappearance' was

discovered, relatives in the UK started working the media. Broadcaster Kirsty Wark got a knock on her Glasgow door within 48 hours of the disappearance. A neighbour was a McCann cousin. The campaign by 'Team McCann' to find 'Maddy' was quickly launched. Central to this campaign have been the McCanns' personal 'spin doctors' – Clarence Mitchell and Justine McGuinness.

Mitchell, a former royal correspondent for the BBC, was initially sent by his employers, the British government, to manage the media in the Algarve for the McCanns. He was replaced for three months by Justine McGuinness whose background was in political PR. Later, Mitchell resigned as a government 'spin doctor' to join the McCanns full time in October as their 'spokesman'. He is paid by a salary of £70,000 a year by a sympathizer, Brian Kennedy, the double glazing magnate. Mitchell works as, in the word of television commentator Mark Lawson, 'the personal Alastair Campbell' for the McCanns. His work raises many ethical issues.

I have produced two events with Mitchell (whom I knew while he was a journalist and in government PR): one at the LSE on 30 January this year (with polis@lse) and one last October as part of the highly successful Coventry Conversations series which I run weekly at the university. Both were lively. Both were packed out with more than 200 attending each event. Both were recorded and are available as podcasts. They form the basis of this article.

Saviour and protector

Mitchell has come to see his role as the saviour and protector of the McCanns from the ravages of the modern media. He admits that 'Gerry and Kate engaged with the media from the off' but refers to himself as a 'buffer' between them and the media. Back in May 2007, he saw from London that they were being overwhelmed and pleaded with his Central Office of Information bosses to be allowed to go to the Algarve to offer his services. He was.

In that role, he tried as best he could to control and be the conduit for a press pack that was getting bigger and more hungry by the day. The 'Missing Maddy' story had captured the world's imagination; everybody in the press pack wanted a piece of the action and their own angle. His phone rang and continues to ring off the hook

Mitchell made sure of continuing interest by arranging a series of PR stunts in Portugal and

elsewhere: a 'visit' by the McCanns (devout Catholics) to the Pope (in reality a brief handshake from the Pontiff), another to North Africa to 'find' Madeleine, yet another to the USA. He even used his experience as a royal correspondent to organize 'pools' for radio and television journalists rather than packs on the trips. Plus regular beach and other photo 'ops' with Kate and Gerry in Praia de Luz. To avoid visual fatigue, at regular intervals new photographs or videos of 'Missing Maddy' have been released. If the oxygen of publicity was needed for this story to keep its 'legs', then Clarence was the gas generator.

To this day, he is still the master of the media trick – a 'suspect' drawing here, another there, keeps the hungry hacks fed. If invasion of privacy is problematic for the McCanns then they might be said to have invaded their own privacy aided by their spin doctor. That having been said, the UK media at least have proved restrained in some respects: there are, for example, few pictures of Madeleine's younger twin brother and sister in the public domain. The PCC rules there. Mitchell has opened windows to the McCanns and their plight but those avenues have been carefully chosen and orchestrated. 'There is nothing to hide,' he says. 'We have no problem with investigative journalism on this at all as long as it's responsible.'

The use of PR and press manipulation

There are more questions to be asked in general about the use of PR and press manipulation in such a high-profile and tragic case. It is not all one way traffic on the McCann side. The Portuguese police are allegedly bound by tight secrecy laws on this and any criminal investigations. Yet they seem to leak like a sieve especially to their local journalist friends. 'Stories' mysteriously appear as 'rumours' from the police in the Algarve, then via the Internet reappear in London and elsewhere as firmer before bouncing back to Portugal as 'fact.'

As Mitchell puts it: 'The British press on this are just lifting stuff willy nilly from the Portuguese press...They then re-run it over here which is then picked up by the Portuguese press the next day and the respected British press have run this story so it must be true.' He continues: 'Where it has been a hindrance is where reports are unattributable, unwarranted and unsubstantiated, and in some cases downright hurtful.'

'Missing Madeleine' has been one of the first major news stories of the Internet age. That has been double edged. 'Rubbish is reported in one

country and then the media in each country feeds on it and it becomes another angle on a story,' Mitchell says. 'The media feeds on itself. They wait to be spoon-fed in a wash spin-cycle, where they recycle the positions. If there were green awards for recycling it should go to the British and Portuguese press.'

Mitchell may be a former 'hack' but after nine months of feeding the hungry horses of modern journalism, the poacher turned game-keeper has not come out with an entirely positive view of the British press and their ethics. He laments the appalling standards, the sloppiness, laziness and lack of independence of thought and fact-checking.

What especially annoys him is the tendency of the press to fill the void of no real new facts or developments in the story by simply embellishing, reporting unsubstantiated rumours or making it up. He is harsh in his judgment of this journalism:

What we have taken issue with and continue to review is the aspect of coverage that is not only distorted but willfully misrepresentative of the facts, or the lack of facts. In that vacuum, some very sloppy standards have crept in. It is entirely founded on misinformation, misunderstanding, or willful distortion in the vast majority of cases, and I would say in the vast majority of cases that you have read or seen about them you can disbelieve absolutely, every single one of them.

Special opprobrium for the *Express*

Mitchell's special opprobrium is reserved for the *Daily Express*, which has positioned itself almost as the 'Official Missing Madeleine McCann newspaper' with a 'story' virtually every day, many as front page splashes. Former *Sun* editor Kelvin MacKenzie said at the LSE they had been ahead of the game on this, 'the most significant story of my lifetime,' but Mitchell sees baser motives. It's a story that sells papers; an average front page story can put up 70,000 copies on a mid-market tabloid such as the *Daily Express* such is the financial imperative.' That coverage (and profit) has come at the price of the trust of 'Team McCann'. 'We are not happy with the *Express*, nor the *Express* group,' explodes Mitchell, threatening litigation may not be far off.

Mitchell is a skilled operative in spinning for his clients. When he resumed his position in late September 2007, the tide of public opinion was turning against the McCanns. They had initially

been seen as victims. But they had just been named 'arguidos' and returned to Britain. They might even be the perpetrators of a dastardly crime. It could have gone badly wrong for them. In his first month back in the saddle, Mitchell managed to muddy the waters around the case very successfully so that the negative flow was at least abated.

But at a price. Both at the public events and in the blogosphere, he is a much-hated figure. Websites such as 'the3arguidos.net' are dedicated to prove the McCanns guilty and Mitchell a pure charlatan. The hatred of Kate and Gerry is based on their supposed neglect of children, their middle classness and their ease with and use of the media. The traffic on the 'Madeleine' sites is immense: so too the depth of the bile. They make for very unpleasant reading.

Mitchell and, by one remove, the McCanns have sometimes, some may say often, over-stepped the mark. Producing sketches of 'suspects' is not

properly their legal role. Nor the firm of Spanish private investigators employed (at a cost of £50,000 a month from the £1 million-plus 'Missing Madeleine' fund subscribed to by the public) to follow up any 'sightings', however flaky and wherever. That is more PR than detective work.

The 'Missing Madeleine' story and the ever-present Mitchell provide us with a moral dipstick on the modern British media. Populist, concerned, knowing its audience but at the same time easily manipulated, gullible and prone to laziness and lying. When (and if) Madeleine is ever found, one hopes the moral compass of tabloid journalism is there as well.

Note on Contributor

John Mair is a senior lecturer in journalism at Coventry University. He produced 'Missing Madeleine McCann: The perfect PR' in Coventry on 18 October 2007 and 'The media and the McCanns' at the LSE on 30 January 2008. Both are available as podcasts on the Coventry University and polis@lse websites. Email: Johnmair100@hotmail.com