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# **REBROADCAST #342: Dynamics of scandal: On facilitating, denying and covering up institutional child sex abuse**

VOICEOVER

This is *Up Close*, the research talk show from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Hi, I'm Lynne Haultain and thanks for joining us. The intersections between crime, the justice system and the public interest have long provided fascinating case studies and material for charting the relative power of institutions, citizens and the fourth estate. But that's reached new heights with the advent of citizen journalism, the insatiable 24/7 news cycle and a parallel drop in our respect for authority. Recently revealed cases of historic child sex abuse, whether they surround institutions like church denominations or the BBC or go to individuals, bring this dynamic into very particular focus. Professor Chris Greer from the Department of Sociology at the City University London has spent many years closely observing the interactions of these players through frameworks of the sociology of crime and media. Chris is in Melbourne as a guest of the University of Melbourne and he joins us today. Chris, thanks for your time.

CHRIS GREER

Hello, thank you.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Globally it seems like we're in the midst of an intense focus on historic child sex abuse cases. We've got Ireland, the UK, the US, Australia and I'm sure many other countries, but those quickly spring to mind. Does a day go past when we don't see a new development?

CHRIS GREER

It certainly seems that the tipping point has been reached after decades of denial and discrediting of victims who were coming forwards and institutions which, with extraordinary success, managed to conceal or cover up or not know about institutional abuse which was taking place.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Can you put your finger on that tipping point? Is there a point in time?

CHRIS GREER

Globally not so much, no, but certainly in terms of the UK situation where my research is primarily focused, the tipping point has been the Savile scandal. There have been scandals in the past and there have been stories about institutional child sex abuse, but it has escalated and amplified beyond anything we've seen as a result of what I call the Savile effect.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Let's talk about the Savile effect in detail in a few minutes, but I'm really interested in the framework that you've put around this because I think it gives us an opportunity to understand the various steps in this chain and understand the agendas of the players involved at various points. So you have carved this up, if you like, into four main steps: scandal hunting, activation, amplification and justice. But take me to the cast of characters. Who are the people and the institutions involved in this? So we've got media obviously who play a critical role, individuals and pressure groups, institutions that you've already nominated in terms of the BBC and the likes. Then we've got police investigation and the legal process.

CHRIS GREER

And the victims themselves of course who come forward and make disclosures about these things. One of the first things to grasp about this is that most scandals don't break, most scandals aren't activated. Gossip and rumour and hearsay can remain precisely that within institutions for decades.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

So is it a scandal if it doesn't break?

CHRIS GREER

No, it's a latent scandal. For a scandal to be activated there has to be a forum. It might activate on social media, but there also needs to be a mainstream media institution which is prepared not only to disclose the nature of the allegations, but to name the alleged perpetrators.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

So that's a risk.

CHRIS GREER

That is a risk. That is a risk whenever libel is a constant threat and the fact that whenever the Savile scandal broke, Jimmy Savile had already died, was undeniably very significant. But if editorial teams are sufficiently convinced that the evidence is compelling enough to be worth taking that risk and if the public interest is strong enough, if the story is likely to be newsworthy enough and if the public outcry is likely to be sufficiently vociferous, then the scandal will be activated.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

The agenda in there must involve from the news outlets' point of view how many eyeballs they get on their screens, how many copies of the paper they can sell.

CHRIS GREER

It is that, it's almost like a new business model now, particularly for the press in the UK in a shrinking market to do more dramatic things in order to get readers, but it's not only that. It can't be explained away purely as an economic pursuit, although clearly that's pretty important. There's also a clear moral agenda here and there's an ideological and political agenda here, so different scandals will be adopted by different news agencies to pursue different agendas; different forms of transgression will be alleged or whistleblown by different types of claims makers in order to try and promote different types of scandals to fulfil different agendas.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Well let's talk about some of those claims makers, because you call some of them moral entrepreneurs?

CHRIS GREER

Yes.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

?which I think is a fascinating phrase. Who and what are they?

CHRIS GREER

Moral entrepreneurs is a term that was first used I think by the great Howard Becker in the 1960s, one of the most creative sociologists who has ever been writing on the subject. The moral entrepreneur can be an institution or an individual who wants to try and create or have enforced a particular normative behaviour, which frequently has a moral potency, a moral force to them. So if you think about campaigns around abortion, it's highly moralised. If you think around drinking in public or drunk driving

or under-age sex, all these things are moralised and you will have moral entrepreneurs, or sometimes they're known as claims makers as well. But the media are a contested terrain whereby people want to be believed and people want to be given the authority to pronounce 'the reality?', in inverted commas, of a particular situation. So it's not just who can shout loudest, it's who has the most resonance, the most legitimacy, the most force behind their arguments. So you will have moral entrepreneurs not always agreeing, frequently disagreeing in fact, having a contest across the terrain of media to try and become the definers of a particular issue or the authorised knowers of a particular debate.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

In order to sway the general populous to their view, is that their intent?

CHRIS GREER

To sway the general populous to their view, but also get political power, to get resources. So people identifying that there is a problem, people suggesting that the problem is widespread, people suggesting that there is a solution and people suggesting that they're the ones to provide it or at least they know who should provide it and what that solution should be.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

So it's legislative reform, or it's resources, as you say, to provide services to the victims.

CHRIS GREER

Yeah, to victims or to offenders, depending on the moral entrepreneurs at work or the agencies at work or changes in legislation or institutional reform or the sacking of a boss, or increased transparency and accountability for publics or victims' groups who for years have been discredited and denied, which is precisely what we're seeing now with the activation of these interconnected institutional child sex abuse scandals.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Let's talk about institutions, because our attitude to them has changed fundamentally, I think, over the last 40 or 50 years and we no longer trust them the way we did, do you think?

CHRIS GREER

We can't rely on them the way we used to supposed to be able to. Now it's an individualised society. Now it's a rights obsessed consumerist culture. We kind of understand over the last 30 years we've been told repeatedly you've got to look after yourself, rely first on yourself and then rely on the state as a backup. Thirty, 40 years ago, a generation, two generations ago, that was different. Whenever the state and

public institutions in particular took on responsibility to protect, took on responsibility to carry out those tasks that we're increasingly being required to carry out ourselves. So whenever the state was fully publically funded, there's been an ongoing process of individualisation and of privatisation, what some sociologists call the 'hollowing out' of the state.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Then there's the justice system which goes to both the police investigation or whichever body does the investigation and then the legal process that is the sort of end phase, if you like, of your construct. They seem to be quite overwhelmed by the circumstances in many instances and certainly in the UK and in Australia and elsewhere, by the volume and the complexity of what they're now having to respond to. Do you think that's revealing the hollowing out, if you like, of that institution also?

CHRIS GREER

Well the hollowing out of the state has certainly changed citizens' attitudes towards it. Citizens are asked to do more and more for themselves and rely on the state less and less so whenever the state doesn't do the bit that it is supposed to do, people quite rightly get angry about that. You know, we're being asked to do more, you're telling us you can do less, the bit that you do do, you'd better do right, that's why we're paying our taxes. There is privatisation in the justice system, but what's overwhelming the system at the minute is the volume; because this tipping point has been reached, because the floodgates have been opened, the volume of cases which are coming forward and the state institutions of justice having the capacity to deal seriously and adequately with each of those whilst maintaining the public interest in the glare of an absolutely relentless and frequently hostile media spotlight.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

And a social media spotlight, do you think that's played a part?

CHRIS GREER

Absolutely because that is a much more difficult space to regulate and there have been some instances of legal action for tweets which have been sent out or Facebook updates which had been sent out. But it's a much more difficult space to police, so the legal boundaries of Twitter and Facebook and other social media are still kind of being figured out. You're on much more firm ground with traditional, if you like, news media.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

And mud sticks once these allegations are made, despite the fact that they may well prove to be false or inappropriately cast months down the track with the legal

process, the individuals are still caught up.

CHRIS GREER

Well it can happen. This process of trial by media where people are put on trial and judged and sentenced in the court of public opinion, it's never going to replace the executive authority of the formal judiciary, it's not going to happen. But its consequences can be no less damaging in terms of shredding reputations and destroying careers. If somebody is alleged to have done something, they may or may not be charged in a court of law, but their entire lives can be placed on trial in the public media and the consequences of that can be devastating for individuals. Now that said, there are those who argue that the response to institutional child sex abuse and what we're seeing now is a moral panic; it's just completely disproportionate. Really? I would ask then what a proportionate reaction would look like then; what's disproportionate about this precisely.

There are generations of victims who haven't been believed and who have been discredited and who have been silenced and frequently in institutions paid money to go away and be quiet. This is why we have a justice system. All of these cases that are coming forward need to be taken seriously; they need to be investigated on the basis of the evidence. If it was away from the starkest glare of the media spotlight, that would probably be helpful in a lot of these cases.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

But you talk about the broadening of the net, the throwing a very wide net and the thinning of the mesh so that the school captured, if you like, is larger than ever and can be fairly indiscriminate. That's, as you describe it, the trial by media process where people may get caught up in this consequentially or incidentally to other investigations and their names forever associated.

CHRIS GREER

This is the process of trial by media fuelling a thing that we call scandal amplification. So you can have a scandal which relates to an individual and it may stop and start with that individual. So the Jimmy Savile scandal, which we'll come on to in due course, may have stopped and started with Jimmy Savile, but quickly it became a question of the institution of the BBC. Once an individual transgression becomes institutionalised, it's impossible to explain it away on the basis of one bad apple. The problems become systemic. So police violence has been subject to this for years and lots of criminologists have written about this in detail that violent police officers are explained as rogue police officers, it doesn't represent the institution, it's not endemic. What we can do is we can deal with that individual, or historically not deal with that individual, but we can deal with that individual and then we'll move on and then the institution will arise purged and re-legitimated in the public eye.

If a scandal moves from the individual transgressor to institutional processes and practises which facilitated or which denied or which, still worse, actively covered up those transgressions, then you get a whole different order of scandal. Once you get

to the institutional level, then the next question is, well who else was involved?

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Yes, absolutely.

CHRIS GREER

Who's next? And that's the widening of the net and the thinning of the mesh and more and more people will get caught up in that. That question of who else is guilty, who else is responsible and guilt then isn't just of the actual transgressions, it's of complicity, facilitation, denial, cover-up of those transgressions. It's a much bigger range of transgressions to deal with.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Professor Chris Greer is the Head of Sociology and Co-director of Centre for Law, Justice and Journalism at City University London and he's my guest today on Up Close looking at the intersection of crime and media and justice and what that means for us in the 21st century.

Chris let's talk about Jimmy Saville because as you've pointed out, it is a really useful case study in bringing all of those elements together. Talk about it to me through that frame of the four elements. What happened? How did it activate, how did it amplify and how did it come to justice? He was dead.

CHRIS GREER

He was dead, which is not insignificant, because the scandal could have broken at any point over the 40, 50 years before it actually did. Journalists, we now know, were aware, people in the BBC we now know were aware, people in the health service we now know were aware. The National Health Service has now published, I think the number is 41, reports into what was happening in national health hospitals during that period.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Let's paint a little picture of Jimmy Savile and the character that he was and how he managed to inveigle himself into all these different networks. He was a phenomenally successful BBC television and radio presenter, he had a very long campaign life in terms of media presence in a variety of forms. He was beloved by generations of Britons and he also was a philanthropist.

CHRIS GREER

He was, he was a national treasure. He was the celebrity altruist, he seemed unconcerned with the conventional trappings of celebrity. He wasn't pretty, he didn't care about flash cars or fancy clothes and he liked his bling jewellery; he was an eccentric and he was Britain's first celebrity DJ. So he went from the dance halls and

the clubs in Leeds and Manchester where he basically saved failing dance halls, to the BBC's main celebrity asset and they prized and protected him and he attracted millions and millions and millions of viewers. He changed lots of lives and he did have an extraordinary thing called parasocial power, or parasocial power is the relationship that was first researched by psychologists in the 1950s. This idea, they were interested in talk show hosts and game show hosts who would develop a parasocial relationship with the viewers, who felt some kind of identity with them, some kind of relationship with them, but would never really come into contact with them, so they would have this parasocial relationship.

Jimmy Savile was slightly different in the sense that he did come into contact with tens, if not hundreds of thousands of people, so his primary show, Jim'll Fix It, was about making people's dreams come true. They would write in, dear Jim, would you fix it for me to go on a big rollercoaster, or visit a football ground or do something? Bring them along, he invented the charity marathon, he raised tens of millions of pounds for charity.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Mainly children's hospitals and the like.

CHRIS GREER

Children's hospitals, National Health Service and all the while it seems he was with impunity abusing young people. He has been now exposed as a prolific sexual predator and his cultural resonance was such, his status as national treasure was such, there were always rumours and gossip about Jimmy Savile, there were occasional pieces placed in the media that he was a bit odd, that he had strange sexual predilections, but the scandal was never activated. It always remained at the level of rumour, gossip and hearsay.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

So what tipped it?

CHRIS GREER

It was a documentary, an ITV documentary. Strangely, it wasn't the press, because the TV normally follows the press, of course. It was the television that broke it because the press wouldn't go with it. There were various interconnected scandals. After Jimmy Savile's death, there were a series of tribute programs and eulogies for Jimmy Savile. He had a three-day funeral which was televised in Leeds and a big gold embossed coffin and all this was televised and much was made of how wonderful Jimmy Savile was.

Then a Newsnight program, which is one of the main serious news programs in the UK, it's on quite late in the evening, there were rumours that it had stopped an investigative report about Jimmy Savile's alleged sexual offending because it would

clash with the Christmas tribute programs.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

The tributes to him?

CHRIS GREER

To Jimmy Savile, yes. So there was a pretty obvious tension there between one piece of BBC coverage and another piece of BBC coverage and there were strenuous denials that this was the case and it had been discontinued through lack of evidence. But nonetheless, it started to move on. Then what really tipped it was an ITV documentary was broadcast, which basically named Jimmy Savile as a sexual predator and had victims come forward, alleged victims come forward who spoke, with their identities concealed and basically said this was the case. Then and only then the press started to run with this.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Then it went wide.

CHRIS GREER

Yeah, it started to amplify and it started to amplify because it quickly shifted from Savile the individual, who's now dead - there was quite a lot of outcry at the start about, you know, you're ruining the reputation of a man who's died and can't defend himself, but those voices very quickly silenced and more and more people started to come forward. Then the question was, well how could this have happened and the answer was, there was some kind of institutional complicity or denial or guilt or a cover-up.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

In this instance, that institution was the BBC, in other instances it's been churches or welfare organisations and the like, but this was the BBC which is, as you say, a global brand and known as Auntie.

CHRIS GREER

Yes and the Director General of the BBC resigned over that and was called into the House of Commons and was told that he has dealt horrifically badly with the Newsnight issue and with the Savile scandal and with how things had been going. I mean he's still probably the most senior person to resign as a result of it. So the institutionalisation of the scandal, then, allowed the question, who else?

Police quickly launched Operation Yewtree, which is the investigation of offences by Savile, offences by Savile and others known to him and offences by others not known by Savile and that has resulted in very significant number of public figures being brought in and questioned, some of whom have been found not guilty, haven't

had their lives put across the media, some of whom have been found guilty. This is now giving an opportunity for victims to come forward, as I've said, after decades of silence and discrediting and denial, saying that the police were now actively calling for people to come forwards. So this then shifted from the BBC to the other institutions where Savile had institutionalised himself, so the National Health Service, a few hospitals in particular in the National Health Service.

Then the question was, well okay, this is obviously not just Jimmy Savile, perhaps this was a cultural issue which was much more widespread, so who else might've been involved beyond celebrities? Then we have the church and we have other people in the education sector, the private schools, public schools and now allegations of a high profile VIP paedophile ring in Parliament in the 1970s and the 1980s.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

So what questions does this pose for you in terms of the confluence of institutions, individuals, these revelations and the almost insatiable appetite that there is for this sort of information?

CHRIS GREER

Well one of the interesting questions is, why now? Why has it taken so long for this to come to light? There's a term from Antonio Gramsci, this notion of conjunctural crisis. Whenever the stars align, if you like, it's the perfect storm of a scandal. There are various institutional, social and cultural and technological things happening which have all aligned at this moment and the fact that it's about institutional child sex abuse carries with it a moral force that other types of crime just don't carry.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Which calls into question a whole bunch of other societal norms around childhood, responsibility for children, who's looking after them, if they weren't, why not, the care that a society should show its most vulnerable and it makes us all question the nature of that experience, doesn't it, and the power that adults have and the blindness that we can show to people in alleged celebrity or authority and just let them away with it.

CHRIS GREER

Yeah and this isn't about the victims and this isn't about the offenders. You know, the victims and the offenders are key players, but this this is about institutions. It should be about the victims; it's remarkable how invisible the victims are in this process and the offenders come and go. But this is about institutions, it's about a fundamentally transforming relationship between the citizens, the state and the market, which is changing how we interact with institutions, it's changing the transparency and the accountability within institutions. There's an important cultural shift happening at the

minute around our relationship with institutions.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Well let's tease that out a bit more because we've already discussed the fact that institutions are no longer trusted in the ways that they were. So what relationship do we have with them now?

CHRIS GREER

Well we're consumers. We're consumers who are supposed to rely first on ourselves.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

So we don't value institutions that don't have that as their primary?

CHRIS GREER

You want two things in leadership. You want competence and you want honesty. If institutions are dishonest and incompetent, people quite rightly get very angry very quickly. What is remarkable about the Savile scandal is Savile had such cultural resonance because Savile represented the high point of the liberal democratic consensus around the welfare states, whenever the welfare state was at its strongest. The NHS when it was the gold standard of healthcare worldwide, that was what you could do with a public healthcare system, the BBC, which was a global brand before globalisation, and the state, before its hollowing out, before its privatisation, and we were supposed to be able to rely on those public institutions for care and protection. And Savile was deeply embedded in all of those, so his cultural resonance, built on top of this incredible parasocial power that he developed with people in real time, that connection with those institutions has just been absolutely shattered and this is now making British society reflect on its own social and cultural post-war history.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

I'm Lynne Haultain and today on Up Close we're discussing the interplay of crime, media and the justice system with Chris Greer, professor of sociology at the City University London.

Chris, when it comes to the legal process, the individuals in the dock, at the beginning of the process it's the actions of an individual that tend to kick it off. In between times, we focus on the institution and its failure. So we do sort of move in and out of that frame around individuals and institutions when we're thinking about this.

CHRIS GREER

I mean the victims have to be the ones who come forward and the victims have to possibly turn up in court and give evidence, which is an incredibly traumatic thing to

do. And there were reasons around not identifying victims and respecting privacy and actual legal requirements to do so which do make the victims' visibility less apparent. There's been quite a lot of commentary on this in the media themselves about, well where are the victims, where are the victims' stories? This is about institutions and there's a constant oscillation then between the individual and the institution because it's the institutional that makes the scandal of a higher order, its the institutional that amplifies the scandal and creates what we call an amplification spiral; went quickly, in Savile's case, from Savile to the BBC, from the BBC to the National Health Service and so on and so on and so on.

Institutions can be tarnished, but in order for justice to be administered in a way which might satisfy the public or might satisfy the requirements of justice, individuals need to be there. So it was the BBC that had facilitated Jimmy Savile, but it was George Entwistle who had to go.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

But from what you've said, trust is broken in institutions to a very significant degree. Will they be able to rebuild? They'll have to reshape, won't they?

CHRIS GREER

Trust is very easy to break down and it's very difficult to build back up. If the public, the British public, were put in an opinion poll tomorrow saying, do you trust the BBC? Well do you trust them in terms of what? Do you trust them to protect children against institutional child sexual abuse? Probably trust would be pretty low. Do you trust them to deliver good programming on a global scale? Possibly the answer would be very different. So I guess it strikes to the fundamental question of what's the BBC for as an institution. Is that going to have a long term consequence? The BBC is already going through a process of recreation and reinvention. Actually, there's been a remarkable process across institutions of de-Savile-ing.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

De-Savile-ing, what does that mean?

CHRIS GREER

De-Savile-ing, quite seriously, I mean Savile being taken away from the *Top of the Pops* episodes, which used to be on YouTube, and it's almost as if the re-historicising of these institutions in a non-Savile way.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

We've talked a lot about the institutions, but the media of course plays a completely critical role in all of this in terms of ramping up the attention of moralising about it, as we've discussed, commentaries, news reports, endless focus on the process. What responsibility do they bear in what comes next in how to deal with this in future,

because they've played themselves into this game in a very, very clear way?

CHRIS GREER

The default position now, it seems, is scandal hunting. So there's an interaction between these different phases of a scandal. So the scandal first activates, after having been latent for however long, probably may never activate. Once it activates, it may amplify. Once it amplifies, then there's a process of justice and a process of scandal hunting in terms of what's next. So the media now, the press really, the mainstream press, are constantly on the lookout for the next scandal. Now if people have been corrupt, if institutions have been failing in their duty to protect, if they've been complicit in institutional child sex abuse, of course that should be exposed; isn't that what the fourth estate's for?

If, however, it creates a situation where never nobody trusts anybody in power and the default position among us all is that they're all corrupt and nobody can be trusted, then whether that is good for democracy or not, we don't know. But the institutions do have to try to rebuild trust.

Research I did some time ago, I interviewed a series of survivors of child sexual abuse who'd now grown up and a couple of them didn't even go to the courts because I'm not going to get any justice in the courts. They went straight to the media and they were named in the media and said, finally now that bastard's been named. That is, for those individuals, a form of justice.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

So does the media now hold the moral compass?

CHRIS GREER

Well the media are moral commentariat. This is an intensely moralised process. But at the same time, it's making a mockery of the formal justice system. This is an overly complex terrain and it's difficult to find the balance between people coming forward and being taken seriously and having claims and investigated thoroughly on the basis of their evidence and not being discredited and not being dismissed, versus an absolute free-for-all in the media, in a publically visible way, where prior to any tangible evidence being presented, people's lives are being broadcast to the world which can be incredibly damaging for them and they may or may not be guilty of something, but that's what the justice system is there to find out.

LYNNE HAULTAIN

Chris, it's been a great pleasure talking to you, thank you for your time.

CHRIS GREER

Thank you very much.

#### LYNNE HAULTAIN

We've been talking about public scandals, the media, justice and morality with Professor Chris Greer from the Department of Sociology at the City University London. He's also co-director of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Law, Justice and Journalism. You'll find details of some of his publications on the Up Close website, together with a full transcript of this and all our other programs.

Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne Australia, created by Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param. This episode was recorded on 28 April 2015 and was produced by Eric van Bommel with audio engineering by Gavin Nebauer. I'm Lynne Haultain, thanks for listening and I hope you can join us again soon.

#### VOICEOVER

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