

McCanns and the Media: the debate

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The first ever debate about the media and the McCanns at [Polis](#) brought out some heated and painful issues. McCann family spokesperson Clarence Mitchell and former Sun editor Kelvin MacKenzie represented competing perspectives on a story that has gripped and disturbed the world for nine months.

Here are some of the points made that I felt represent how seminal this story has been (in no particular order):

- The British public now don't trust you if you have a public relations advisor
- The British public don't trust the media so they go to Internet forums to express their views on the case
- 24 hour news has eradicated all the traditional caution over sourcing stories
- Turning subjects in to celebrities now allows the public to suspend the usual sympathy for an individual

Now here are some of the factors discussed that make this case so exceptional:

- The fact that they were middle-class encouraged hostility
- The fact the Portuguese police did no press work mean a vacuum was created
- This is a narrative without an end so it allows endless speculation
- There is now a vicious cycle with Portuguese and British media recycling stories without references, sources or facts

Now some quotes from our speakers.

Kelvin MacKenzie:

"This is beyond Lord Lucan, beyond Diana, beyond Shergar...if this was a single black mother then it would not have been the same story...the public is obsessed so newspapers make a commercial judgement, they know that putting Madeleine on the front page increases circulation by about 3%, it did so from day one and it still does. People who criticise the papers ought to think about that and ask themselves if they get their money out when they see a billboard with the McCanns name on it...It's a class war issue. Ordinary people don't associate public relations with the truth, though I think hiring Clarence was a great idea and I believe what he says. What is so unusual and incredible about this story is that they are the main suspects and so when we write about it we are saying 'they may be the killers'."

Clarence Mitchell made a stout defence of the McCanns' innocence and was clear about the money spent on promoting their cause. He thanked the media for the support they had given in publicising the campaign to find Madeleine but criticised the 'sloppiness and laziness' of much journalism driven by 'a commercial imperative' which recycled stories 'entirely founded on misinformation, mostly wrong'.

David Mills who produced a Panorama on the McCanns which he subsequently disowned felt that the British media had failed to address the real story which was the failure in police procedure and forensics in Portugal and the UK.

Former McCann public relations advisor Justine McGuinness felt that the way that Madeleine had been turned in to a celebrity by the media (although surely the PR had a role?) meant that the public felt she could be treated with the same callousness afforded to a Big Brother contestant – hence of the appalling vitriol and unsubstantiated rumour on some internet forums: "A missing child has been turned in to a celebrity which gives the public the excuse to disconnect from human feelings because she has become a household name".

Former Mirror editor, now media commentator Roy [Greenslade](#) cited his own mother as an example of how the public still want to 'blame' the McCanns but he reserved his ire for the media. He sketched out how the media coverage went through four phases: sympathy (Overdone), scepticism (a sensible attitude), suspicion (based on nothing) and finally commercial cynicism. So the Express can print a headline, he said, that says "McCanns Split Over Maddie" which turned out to be simply a story that Gerry was going back to work while Kate was not. Greenslade said that the media has encouraged people to believe the worst about them and so it has now got to a point where people don't care about defamation – all reporting is at the level of gossip.

Roger Graef, who produced a film for Channel 4 about the McCanns said he found himself in demand by the international media. And yet the only thing he had to say was that there was nothing to say. There was one fact: that Madeleine was gone. And yet he found himself endlessly interviewed about how there was nothing to say. The fact that so many people now inhabit imaginary worlds of conspiracy around this story, he said, was partly because 'we cannot bear a narrative that has no end.'

That is, of course, most true for the parents themselves. They dared to try to use the media (on advice from experts said Justine McGuinness) and that decision and the media came back to haunt them and to hunt them down. The media initially swamped them with support and then finally drowned them in bile. The media suspended its critical faculties when it first joined a campaign to find a beautiful white middle class girl and it never recovered its judgement in the rush to judgement and in the daily stampede for front page fodder. The Internet provided an outlet for huge waves of sympathy for the McCanns – it also provided a forum for legitimate debate and commentary – but it was also the dark place that some very sad souls chose to huddle together, sharing their sick fantasies and reaffirming each other's sad obsessions. A few of those odd people turned up at our debate demanding action against the McCanns and an end to 'spin'. But as Kelvin pointed out they represent a big part of the public who don't seem to trust anyone anymore. I am not sure if that's the media's fault, but it sure ain't doing a lot to correct it.

Our debate chairman [Steve Hewlett](#) has written a very good article on this for the [Guardian](#) which stresses the doubtful benefits of PR in cases like this. And Tim Black from [Spiked](#) has also written a report on the debate [here](#).

Much more on this debate when my interns report back in – the podcast will be up when the LSE techies have done their thing. In due course, Polis will be publishing a paper on this issue. It's not a nice subject but I am convinced that it speaks volumes about the state of our media and the society that consumes it.

Thanks to the [Media Society](#) for their partnership on this event.

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