

The McCanns and the Media: could the tabloids be right?


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There is now a wave of media commentary condemning journalists for their treatment of the Madeleine McCann [story](#): but could the tabloids be right? Roy [Greenslade](#), a former tabloid editor, seems to share the distaste expressed by people like Jenny [McCartney](#) in the [Telegraph](#) and Max [Hastings](#) (a former tabloid editor at the [Standard](#)) who writes in [The Guardian](#) about his ‘shame’ at the way his former colleagues have covered the story of the disappearance of this young girl while on holiday in Portugal. I [warned](#) at the beginning of this story that things could turn nasty when the British media pack are at play abroad. I pointed out a Portuguese [website](#) devoted to UK media excesses. But I think that Simon Jenkins was more right than he realised when he [wrote](#) approvingly of the need for a ravenous media beast.

Recent twists in the McCann story have confirmed that this *is* a compelling human story. It may be that the Portuguese police *have* been less than competent. There will certainly now be a dramatic period as the Portuguese judicial system decides what to make of the alleged evidence and the credibility of the parents. Those people who primly dismissed this as “just another child abduction story” were wrong. As former [Sun](#) editor Kelvin MacKensie [argued](#), if anything, the British media has not put enough effort in to the story – it has not been thorough, critical and determined *enough*. More effort could have gone in to a open-minded inquiry with greater context at the beginning of the story. Instead, the media got over-excited about David Beckham press conferences and the parents’ visit to the Pope. It created a logistical momentum (some would say hysteria) where TV and the tabloids (with the broadsheets demurely enjoying the ride) have gone over the top on presentation and speculation. Last night, for example, Richard Bilton, the BBC’s “Special Correspondent” managed to get three fact-free minutes of prime time news out of the parents getting on a plane and off at the other end.

The fact is that this is a fascinating story which is not being well-told. It is a gripping human tragedy (whatever the verdict) which is being treated as if it is a second-rate cop show or an episode of *Eastenders*. Reporters I spoke to over the weekend from tabloid and broadsheet organisations admit that they simply have no idea of the facts in the case. That’s hardly surprising, as it seems that the police don’t either. But in to that vacuum has been poured a heady concoction of misleading headlines and hysterical speculation. That doesn’t mean it is not a genuine story. The attention being given by the rest of the world’s media shows that this is not just a British obsession.

This is not a nice story. It is not the most important thing happening in the world right now. But it is a compelling narrative that deserves to be told. We should not shy away from it because it is unpleasant or because for one family it is a living nightmare. I hope the media continue to pursue this story but I hope they exercise much greater restraint in the way they tell it. 

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