

The Devil in the Details: Media Representation of "Ritual Abuse" and Evaluation of Sources

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published in
Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education
Volume 3.2 (May 2003)

An important part of information literacy is developing the ability to evaluate sources critically. Though much attention has been given to helping students evaluate the validity of web sources, less focus has been placed on methods of evaluating traditionally published information. This article discusses how the controversial concept of "ritual abuse," accepted widely as a social problem in the mid-1980s, was represented by various media. It demonstrates that understanding the different traditions media have for telling stories and validating claims is a crucial and complex aspect of becoming information literate.

Introduction

Developing a mental tuning fork for the credibility of a claim, gaining an instinct for when to trust and when to doubt a source - these are two critical components of becoming a confident and effective researcher. Techniques for evaluating web sources have received a great deal of attention in the classroom in recent years, and for good reason. The web is notoriously lacking in editorial control, and students are aware of it. Two large-scale studies of college student research behavior confirm that students question the validity of information found on the web and believe sources found in the library are, by and large, more credible (Friedlander, 2002; OCLC 2002). Yet many students who learn to be resourceful investigators of the claims made by web sources are relatively ignorant of traditional media and the editorial traditions underlying their communication of ideas. It is probably safe to say the majority of undergraduates today have a clearer grasp of how web content is created than how journal articles, newspaper stories, or books are produced. Potter (1998), a proponent of media literacy education, has found through testing that "many students lack even a rudimentary understanding of the media industries or their effects" (p. xi). Further, though teaching methods to assess web sources theoretically prepares students to evaluate any sort of text, focusing on web content alone may have an unintended consequence. The notion that the web requires particular care may tacitly suggest that traditionally published sources - journal articles, books, and so on - are inherently more reliable because they went through an editorial process. With little exposure to what exactly those editorial processes are, students may think all formally published texts have been vetted by an expert and therefore can be safely called upon as authoritative sources. [1]

By taking a close look at the media's coverage of a single controversial topic, a phenomenon that

gained the name "ritual abuse," I will demonstrate the following four points. First, the media have different traditions for establishing which stories are worth telling, traditions shaped by economic as well as organizational, professional, and socio-cultural values. Second, mass media have different processes for establishing credibility or validity of the "facts" related in those stories. Third, each of the media I will examine allows for a range of conflicting claims to be published, though the standard deviation from a centrist position is wider in some media than others. Finally, all of these conditions make Standard Three of the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000) - "The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system" - an extremely challenging one. Yet, if my first three points are valid, information literacy has little meaning if we don't seriously address how students might evaluate sources if they have little idea how they come into existence. [2]

The evolution of the concept "ritual abuse"

From the early 1980s through the mid-1990s, ritual abuse was widely accepted as a genuine problem by a large percentage of the general public in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in other parts of the developed English-speaking world. A *Redbook* magazine poll (Ross, 1994) found that 70% of their respondents believed that at least some people claiming to recover memories of ritual abuse were telling the truth; perhaps more surprisingly, 32% believed the FBI and local police ignored evidence of ritual abuse crimes. Victor (1998) reported there was also a high acceptance rate among psychotherapists, counselors, and social workers and described ways in which professional conferences and workshops played a role in spreading the belief in these fields. [3]

Ritual abuse was believed to be an organized and long-existing form of sadistic and bizarre mistreatment of children perpetrated by secret cultists in order to indoctrinate and exert power over its membership. Its features included sexual abuse of numbers of children by multiple adults (generally featuring multi-generational incest), physical and psychological torture, brainwashing, and ritualized animal and infant sacrifice. Some believed it to be a deviant religious practice; others believed it was a deviant pathology that used satanic ritual elements as a tool to terrorize and dominate victims. [4]

Although the Library of Congress did not assign the term "ritual abuse" as a subject heading until 1995, one form or another of that phrase was in use since the early 1980s. Nathan (1995) reported that the term "ritual abuse" was first used by therapist Lawrence Pazder at an American Psychological Association meeting in 1981 (pp. 187-188). It is common for there to be a time lag between a term being coined and adoption of a standard subject heading, and some common terms are never adopted for use in databases. "Ritual Abuse" does not appear in the thesauri for *Psychological Abstracts* or *Medline*, though there are references in both databases to literature on the subject. The changes in vocabulary mirror the evolving views of the issue. Early on, the term "satanic ritual abuse" was most frequently used, frequently shortened to "SRA" - an abbreviation that conveniently minimized the controversial satanic element without eliminating it. It also made the concept sound like a medical

syndrome. Hacking (1995) refused to use the common shortcut "MPD" in his book on Multiple Personality Disorder, saying "there is nothing like an acronym to make something permanent, unquestioned" (p. 17); that logic seems to be in operation with the shorthand "SRA" as well. Lanning (1992) had such strong objections to the commonly-used terminology that in one report on the subject he substituted the phrase "these kinds of cases" (set off in quotes) repeatedly before arriving with some reluctance at a label he found more acceptable: multidimensional child sex rings. He concluded, after examining the records of over 300 of "these kinds of cases," that not only was the common label imprecise, there was no evidence to corroborate the existence of crimes with features attributed to ritual abuse. [5]

Rise and backlash

The concept of ritual abuse followed on the heels of a series of widespread concerns in the 1960s and 1970s, among them the "discovery" of child abuse in 1962 when Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, and Silver published a seminal paper on "The Battered Child Syndrome" in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. The similar discovery of incest as a common social problem came a few years later. Though children have been abused and incest has been practiced throughout human history, they were identified as major social problems that deserved public scrutiny only recently (Hacking, 1991). At the same time, there was a succession of highly-publicized panics concerning missing children, mutilated livestock, child pornography, religious cults that allegedly brainwashed and manipulated members, and the supposed corruption of youth through the infusion of occult imagery in popular culture. As anxiety rose, so did the popular acceptance of the fundamentalist Christian notion of Satan as the personification of evil. Kincaid (1998) linked this surge in religious belief to fears about child abuse, suggesting that Satan had become a "pattern child molester" (p. 176) in the public imagination. Simultaneously, the notion that therapy was a powerful tool to improve people's lives gained popular acceptance; through professionally-guided "memory work," long-buried traumatic experiences could be recalled and confronted, leading toward healing of psychological wounds. [6]

Ritual abuse bundles together all of these concerns into a single, sensational narrative that features elements of deviant sexuality, child abuse, pornography, abduction, brainwashing, secretive religious cults, and satanic worship - elements frequently uncovered only through therapeutic intervention. The idea of ritual abuse appears to have first coalesced around some of the features described in a purported memoir of gruesome child abuse by a survivor, Michelle Smith, *Michelle Remembers*, published in 1980. The title words emphasize two threads that would continue to run through the rhetoric of ritual abuse. First, it is a singular and personalized experience (Michelle's), although she recounts an experience that claims wider social implications. The memoir of abuse could be seen as a type of late twentieth-century North American *testimonio*, a personal account that bears witness to the experiences of an oppressed group in a time of crisis. One of the compelling arguments for believing in ritual abuse (despite its sensational and incredible elements) was that the evidence was typically presented as actual, first-hand experience. To doubt the victim's account was to participate in the abuse

- in the same way that women who reported being raped by family members were doubly abused by the system that doubted them. Anything short of uncritical acceptance could be interpreted as betrayal of an entire class of victims. [7]

Moreover, the story is about Michelle *remembering* with the help of her co-author, Lawrence Pazder. Personal testimony of childhood memories recovered through therapeutic intervention became a staple feature of ritual abuse narratives - just as ritual abuse episodes became a staple feature of recovered memories. Therapy as the key to recovering and overcoming traumatic memories is a fundamental trope of most ritual abuse narratives, including testimony provided by children in criminal cases. The evidentiary value of eyewitness accounts coaxed out of children by therapists assisting law enforcement officials became a highly tendentious aspect of ritual abuse prosecutions (Ceci & Bruck, 1993; McGough, 2002). [8]

Elements of ritual abuse appealed to the belief systems of disparate and incompatible audiences. *Michelle Remembers*, the first ritual abuse narrative, is marked by a strong, charismatic Catholic element. The abuse is attributed to Satanists and the struggle for Michelle's salvation is being fought at the highest levels, including the direct intervention of the Virgin Mary. The idea that ritual abuse was the scene of struggle between the forces of good and evil appealed to fundamentalist Christian audiences and moral conservatives who believed this form of abuse was further evidence, along with heavy metal music, Dungeons and Dragons, and sinister symbols encoded in Proctor and Gamble's corporate logo, that Satan was on the offensive. At the same time, other elements of ritual abuse narratives appealed to a feminist audience, many of whom were uncomfortable with the religious interpretation of the conflict and who were quick to drop "satanic" from the name of the problem and from its etiology. [9]

One feminist scholar had difficulty reconciling her conviction that ritual abuse was a widespread problem with the beliefs of fundamentalists who shared her concern: "Sensationalism has brought suspicion on behaviors that, although they may evidence satanic practice, are often simply forms of teenage rebellion, such as listening to loud rock music, drug experimentation, and unconventional clothing. Listening to loud, even violent, rock music as a teenager was an important part of my early political rebellions and gave me useful models of aesthetic and social nonconformity" (Cuomo, 1994, p. 142). This author, however, did take seriously the claims that Satanists were involved in ritual abuse and attributed satanic motives to the serial killers, Charles Manson, David Berkowitz, and Jeffrey Dahmer - while also drawing parallels among ritual abuse, white supremacist practices, and fraternity hazing. [10]

Curiously, even with satanic trappings selectively excised from the definition of ritual abuse, one would expect other features to be challenged by feminist audiences. Women were accused of being ritual abusers in proportions far higher than any existing empirical data would predict. The vast majority of criminal sexual offenses against children are committed by men (Snyder, 2000), but ritual abuse accusations were marked by the widespread involvement of women - most often mothers. Ian

(2000) proposes this may be a new wrinkle on Freud's Oedipus Complex, suggesting there is a "Chronos Complex" at work, a widespread but suppressed parental desire to harm one's own children; ritual abuse merely transfers that desire to demonic others. [11]

Concerns about working women and liberalized abortion laws contributed to the social definition of ritual abuse as a threat. The most common site for accusations was the day care center, clearly a locus of social anxieties about working mothers trusting their children to institutional care. And, as Showalter (1997) pointed out, there were strong parallels between the ritual abuse motif of breeders providing infants for sacrifice and anti-Semitic blood libel, dressing concern about abortion in a familiar guise of evil. Yet because believing the stories of victims was so strongly a part of agenda-setting in making the public aware of the evils of rape and incest, feminists as a non-hegemonic interest group were reluctant to doubt the claims of self-styled ritual abuse victims. Medicalization of the concept allowed feminists to believe female abusers were themselves victims, caught up in a cycle of abuse. [12]

A similarly disparate group opposed the concept of ritual abuse and led a strong and vocal backlash that gained ground in the 1990s. Among them were humanists and skeptics who argued the religious and conspiracy claims made by adherents were illogical, incredible, and driven by intolerance. Many social conservatives embraced the backlash for quite different reasons: they felt parents should have latitude in raising their children and that ritual abuse accusations were an attempt by social workers, medical professionals, and law enforcement to interfere with their natural rights. [13]

By 1995, when the Library of Congress codified the concept as a category in its subject headings, ritual abuse had lost its hold on the popular imagination and, at the end of the 1990s, it had largely faded from public memory. [14]

The media and the marketplace of anxieties

Ritual abuse exhibits some of the features of a "moral panic," a term coined by Cohen (1972) to describe a public response to a perceived threat to commonly held values, one that illustrates how complex are the relationships among the media, its sources, and its audiences. The transmission of information is not a linear one, but rather circular and complicated by multiple feedback loops. In the case of journalism, Gans (1979) pointed out how news media depend on sources who have their own agendas, and must summarize, filter, and refine what they get from sources to satisfy a consuming audience that, in turn, often challenges the media's credibility and motives. The dynamics of information creation and transfer are complex and interdependent. [15]

DeYoung (1998) has found that the same societal anxieties that gave rise to ritual abuse as a moral panic contributed to its rapid spread. The "story" of ritual abuse - actually a constellation of stories - was newsworthy because it was complex enough to require coverage from multiple angles, evoked an emotional and personal response, and suggested the problem was serious enough to require action. She

points out, however, that the media response was hardly monolithic. There is "an intricate web of relations between various interest groups, the kinds of claims they make, and the media that present and contest them." Further, the many audiences that receive media messages are not "passive dupes" but rather play an active role. "Whether as actors, observers, readers, or listeners, audiences actively appropriate and decode the 'facts' of the claims of moral panics and act in relation to them" (p. 275). In fact, she suggests, Cohen's definition of "moral panic" needs to be revisited in part because the interrelationships among sources, media, and audiences are more complex than is generally recognized, and the very values under threat during a moral panic are undergoing revision as the threat is publicly engaged. [16]

The following analysis of various media responses to ritual abuse shows that not only were responses to ritual abuse far from monolithic, but also that each medium approached its relationship to sources and audiences differently. [17]

Book publishing

It is not surprising that the first appearance of ritual abuse was in a book from a trade publisher. Trade houses, small presses, and self-publication were active venues for coverage of the topic of ritual abuse in the '80s and '90s, ranging from memoirs and self-help manuals to exposés of the evils of ritual abuse and backlash books about how ritual abuse accusations have caused harm. [18]

Trade book publishing is a consumer-driven, for-profit industry. Works are chosen for publication based on estimates of public interest in an author's work supported by the added value of editorial, design, marketing, and distribution services. While editors take pride in acquiring quality books, their career depends on choosing books that will sell. Major trade houses typically are not interested in a book that is expected to sell fewer than 10,000 copies, a number that has risen since the 1980s. Still, that figure is far lower than the required audience size for broadcast media or for most mainstream magazines and newspapers to be considered profitable. In general, books as a medium can be more tailored to niche markets than other media, so can offer diverse approaches to a topic with a wide standard deviation from a centrist position. On the other hand, though a profit can be made even in appealing to a niche audience, potential bestsellers are always in high demand and finding a manuscript that will sell well depends on editors developing a sense of what interests contemporary readers (Fister, 2001). [19]

Michelle Remembers, although it now reads as a bizarre and confusing psycho-religious melodrama, was evidently considered a good match for concerns of the times. According to a pre-publication article in *People Magazine*, the authors received a \$100,000 advance and paperback rights were sold for \$242,000 (Victor, 1993, p. 82). A review in *Publisher's Weekly*, a trade magazine for booksellers, concluded with an italicized note: "100,000 first printing; \$75,000 ad/promo; Literary Guild and Doubleday Book Club Alternate selections; author tour" - code words for "this will be big." ("Michelle

Remembers," 1980). [20]

Clearly, the climate seemed right for this book, and whether the events it depicted actually happened or not was less important than the fact that it was a story that would appeal to many readers. It sometimes comes as a surprise to the public that fact checking is not part of the editorial process in book publishing. A publisher's legal counsel may examine a manuscript to ensure there is nothing in the work that will put the publisher at legal risk, but questions of fact are the responsibility of the author, not the publisher. An editor might share a manuscript with other readers for a second opinion before acquiring it, and the editor and copyeditor will usually raise queries for the author to address, but ultimately it is the author's responsibility to get the facts right. [21]

Although checking facts is not a service normally provided, *Michelle Remembers* includes an unusual "Note from the Publisher," written in the passive voice, that attempts to bolster the book's credibility: "The many thousand of pages of transcript of the tape recordings that Dr. Pazder and Mrs. Smith made of their psychiatric session were read and digested; they became the basis of this book. The tapes themselves were listened to in good measure, and the videotapes made of some of the sessions were viewed. Both the audio and the video are powerfully convincing. It is nearly unthinkable that the protracted agony they record could have been fabricated" (p. xii). This claim of verified authenticity is bolstered by appeal to religious authority. The book opens with two epigraphs: a quote from the Pope asserting Satan exists and a statement from a bishop in the Canadian province where Michelle grew up, saying Michelle's encounter with the devil could have happened (though he refrains from saying he believes it did). The reviewer for *Publisher's Weekly* appeared partly persuaded: "Unspeakable practices described by Smith and her psychiatrist, Pazder, make their book hard to read or believe. Yet both seem sincere, and photos accompanying the narrative lend weight to the story." Not long after it was published, *Maclean's*, a Canadian magazine, published an article that ridiculed the book and challenged its accuracy, including vehement denials by Michelle Smith's father and sisters that the abuse portrayed ever happened (Grescoe, 1980), but still the book tapped into a wide and apparently credulous audience eager to read and to believe. [22]

Dozens of similar memoirs followed, many of them written by therapists, following in the genre established in 1973 by the enormously successful *Sybil*, a therapist's profile of a patient that popularized the notion of Multiple Personality Disorder. And in the vein of the highly successful self-help book published in 1988, *The Courage to Heal*, came many self-help tomes. One of them, from the same publisher as *Courage to Heal*, is *Safe Passage to Healing: A Guide for Survivors of Ritual Abuse* (Oksana, 1994). *The Courage to Heal's* profitability was enhanced by creating various product extensions, including a consumable workbook for those in recovery. *Safe Passage to Healing* takes a similar approach. It is not only for those who know they survived ritual abuse, but offers help to those who think they may have been victims, but aren't sure. In fact, being unsure is itself a symptom of abuse: "Periods of uncertainty are normal in recovery" (p. 134). Like many books in the genre, it suggests that not only does ritual abuse exist as a wide-spread phenomenon, but victims who take the necessary steps toward recovery are improved by the experience: "By meeting and healing the

tormented child, you can heal the wounded adult. It is a difficult journey, but there are immediate rewards with each step you take. Survivors emerge stronger, more at peace, and in control of their own life" (p. 135). In short, the book provides incentives for believing you are a victim, because by using its advice to discover and recover from past abuse, you will solve problems experienced in adulthood. Yet, as Gemin (1997) has pointed out, codependency is self-reproducing in self-help literature: "The desire for the codependency label exemplifies the desire for a clearer sense of identity . . . Nonetheless, that *recovery*, by reifying the concept of 'boundary,' sets up conditions for failure, and then establishes a self-produced renewal of *exactly* the same process . . ." (p. 263). [23]

Another class of trade publications on the subject are exposés that reveal sinister patterns in the rise of cult-inspired ritual abuse. One book frequently cited as authoritative on the subject is Larry Kahaner's *Cults that Kill: Probing the Underworld of Occult Crime* (1988). Though it is a popular and sensational work, it was influential not just for what it said, but because it was so frequently called upon to serve as an "expert witness" by other publications. Being able to cite an authoritative-sounding source published by a mainstream publisher improved the likelihood other writers' claims would be accepted. Ironically, Kahaner based many of his claims on dubious "experts" himself - self-taught law officers who gave seminars and workshops on how to recognize and deal with satanic crime. These "cult cops" became experts not because they had special training or had conducted empirical field research, but because they toured the country making presentations (Hicks, 1991; Lanning, 1992). Many of them became standard contacts for journalists who needed a comment on the issue; the more they were quoted, the more they gained the identity "expert." Similarly, books such as Kahaner's accrued authority by being frequently cited. [24]

Though skepticism about the reality of ritual abuse appeared first in print journalism, backlash books published in the 1990s became a genre of their own, including Nathan and Snedeker's *Satan's Silence* (1995), a collaboration of a journalist and a lawyer focused largely on flawed criminal cases, Hick's *In Pursuit of Satan* (1991), a heartfelt critique of the influence of cult cops on law enforcement practices, and Victor's *Satanic Panic* (1993) which used a sociological framework to analyze the phenomenon. [25]

Newspaper and magazine coverage

The most cautious approaches to the topic of ritual abuse can be found in newspaper coverage. Hachen (1998) argues that the public expects more objectivity, balance, and fairness in daily news sources than other media, and among the news media, newspapers fill the role of providing the most complete and current coverage of events. The following traditions served print journalism well: confirming information; third-party fact-checking; and providing balanced coverage of controversial topics by introducing multiple perspectives while refraining where possible from making overt judgments about them. Yet, the number of reports, however balanced they may have been, created a pointillistic picture of something happening on a huge scale. [26]

In the 1980s there seemed to be no end of reports on the subject, most of which were coverage of criminal cases. These often exhibit a curious erasure of ritual abuse as a root cause. It wasn't part of the story because most prosecutors were unwilling to introduce the most sensational ritual abuse elements into their arguments; defense lawyers could too easily leverage such claims to introduce reasonable doubt in a jury. For that reason, ritual abuse itself often went unmentioned in accounts of investigations and trials, though its markers - sexual abuse of young children, bizarre behavior on the part of the purported abusers, a high incidence of women accused, and a strong sense of moral outrage that innocence was being systematically violated - were all present and in such numbers that they indicated ritual abuse was indeed a wide-spread, mostly hidden evil that was an epidemic throughout North America. [27]

This cumulative effect was noticed by investigative journalists who were the first to pull together information on a number of cases to see what was going on. In 1988, reporters for *The Commercial Appeal* in Memphis published the first and most in-depth treatment of these cases, a six-part series analyzing dozens of criminal investigations, challenging the notion that ritual abuse was a widespread crime while establishing the fear that led to accusations was widespread (Charlier & Downing, 1988). Newspapers generally handled ritual abuse cases with more restraint than other media, but each publication shaded their stories differently. For example, coverage of one of the earliest criminal cases, one that led to 25 arrests in the small rural community of Jordan, Minnesota, was covered by *The New York Times* in language that was markedly cool and low-key, suggesting a certain skepticism by de-emphasizing the most sensational elements. *The Chicago Tribune* coverage, in contrast, was more exhaustive, employed more "local color" elements, and included more quotes from people who believed a large, secret ring of incestuous child abusers was operating in the town. Although its more detailed coverage may be attributable to geography - the story had regional importance for readers of the *Tribune* that it didn't have for the *Times*'s audience - its stance may also have been influenced by the *Tribune*'s relatively conservative editorial perspective. [28]

The Washington Post provided less day-by-day coverage of the Jordan case than the *Times* or the *Tribune*, but did publish an editorial after two of the accused were acquitted at trial and charges were abruptly dropped against all but one of the remaining defendants. (James Rud had 98 of 109 charges against him dismissed when he signed a 113-page confession implicating others; he later told a television reporter he had lied in order to receive a reduced sentence and ultimately received a 40-year sentence.) The same issue includes an op-ed piece by Cohen (1984) that suggested the Jordan case was the product of American anxiety about its children and media response. Cohen writes as follows: "A nation that tells us all to be wonderful parents, to love and nurture our children and yet to pursue a smashing career that means leaving the kids in the hands of total strangers was bound to have its Jordan. It's the place where all our fears about child care and baby sitters have gone - a made-for-television town, not only because a TV movie will almost certainly be made about it, but because it's a place where the things you see on television come true" (p. A21). [29]

The amount of space available in news magazines is far more restricted than in daily newspapers and

news stories tend to oversimplify in order to condense, using "hooks" to make readers care about a story without providing much factual detail. Magazines that focus on issues and advice rather than hard news play up emotional responses to issues - and often choose to cover an issue precisely because it has the potential to evoke an emotional response. *People Weekly* ended a report on the Jordan case with the image of a twelve-year-old girl glaring at a neighbor's house and asserting the accusations of abuse were true ("Divided," 1984). Readers were left with the impression that one's immediate neighbors are secretly capable of inflicting unspeakable abuse on innocent children, who suffered not only abuse, but suffered from being unable to convince adults of their trauma. A few months later, the magazine named the prosecutor, Kathleen Morris, one of the "Most Intriguing People of 1984." ("Kathleen Morris," 1984). *Ms.* published profile of Morris in the same year, portraying her as both a populist and feminist figure whose "aggressive prosecution of child molesters has won her recognition and a reputation for playing hardball in court" ("Tough prosecutor," 1984). Asked about the fact that half of the defendants were women, Morris commented that she found it difficult to prosecute mothers who sexually abuse their children. In response to the "ironic" notion that some believed Morris manipulated child witnesses to testify against their parents and other adults, she said she had the support of the average citizen; those who cared more about the county's reputation than children - "lawyers and the rich businessmen" - were her opposition. News coverage and statements made by the state's Attorney General suggested in fact the case was mishandled, with contamination of witness testimony and lack of physical evidence compromising the case, but to readers of *Ms.* the prosecutor was presented as a besieged but dogged professional. [30]

When publishing features about social issues, magazines not only employ stories about ordinary people whose lives have been affected by the subject, bolstered with what the "experts" say about it, but they also add graphics that telegraph what the story is about - and how readers should respond emotionally. In 1993, *Ms* published a cover story, "Surviving the Unbelievable: A First-Person Account of Cult Ritual Abuse," which purported to be the true account by a woman who was raised in a satanic cult that, among other atrocities, slaughtered newborns and indulged in cannibalism. The author's credentials: "Elizabeth S. Rose" was the pseudonym of a woman who was working on a novel about ritual abuse. Sidebars to the first-person story advised other victims to help themselves using *The Courage to Heal* workbook and recommended organizations including, oddly enough, the conservative American Family Foundation. Readers were told to avoid being affected by sensationalistic press accounts while in recovery. However, it would not be easy to ignore the reader's first introduction to the story: a lurid cover illustration of a frightened, naked toddler enmeshed in the coils of a demon-headed serpent whose scales are marked with astrological symbols and pentagrams. Below it, the tagline: "Believe it! Cult Ritual Abuse Exists! One Woman's Story." [31]

Magazine publishers were slower than newspapers to challenge the idea of ritual abuse. One exception was a 1990 article Dorothy Rabinowitz published in *Harper's* about a woman sentenced in a dubious day care case, strongly condemning prosecutorial gullibility and misconduct. Nathan (1995, p. 234) reported the thoroughly-researched story was originally commissioned by *Vanity Fair*, which killed it

because Rabinowitz took a stance that the editors considered too controversial. [32]

Television coverage

Best (1990), exploring the rhetorical construction of network news coverage of child abuse issues, pointed out that "claims-makers compete for press coverage less as an end in itself than for the advantages it offers in the social problems marketplace" (p. 87). Television news time is in even shorter supply than magazine news space, and those stories chosen for coverage have to be considered relevant to a wide market. As Fiske (1989) observed, it is a "high-status television genre. Its claimed objectivity and independence from political or government agencies is argued to be essential for the workings of democracy." At the same time, news is an expensive commodity that "has to be popular, has to produce an audience" (p. 281), an imperative that complicates its image as a reflection of reality. [33]

Best analyzed the content of 101 network news stories on threats to children broadcast between 1969 and 1987 and noted that, on the whole, network news organizations treated their stories with a fair amount of balance. Satanism was not mentioned in connection with prominent criminal investigations such as the Jordan case, though they were reported as crimes committed by organized conspirators intent on abusing children. As with print journalism, the nightly news was shaped by those allegations prosecutors were willing to highlight, ones that would not be detrimental to their cases, but the message that children were being abused across the country grew through the cumulative effect of multiple, if relatively restrained, news stories. [34]

In contrast, television specials, talk shows, and news magazine programs carried highly charged, sensationalized coverage of ritual abuse. Though the book *Michelle Remembers* may be the first appearance of ritual abuse in the media, the most influential media coverage of ritual abuse was most likely a Geraldo Rivera special, "Devil Worship: Exploring Satan's Underground," which reportedly reached 50 million viewers and later was used by cult cops to train law enforcement personnel (Nathan, 1988). One of the law enforcement "experts" interviewed on the program was Ted Gunderson, an ex-FBI agent who believed, among other things, that Satanists in the federal government were behind the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. Satanic cult crimes were also the subject of a *20/20* segment and discussed on popular talk shows, including Oprah, Sally Jesse Raphael, and Donohue, programs often not marked by restraint and very influential in shaping and reflecting popular opinion. [35]

As with other media, television offered a spectrum of viewpoints on ritual abuse. The PBS series *Frontline* aired three award-winning documentaries produced by Ofra Bikel on the Little Rascals day care case in 1991, 1993 and 1997, offering a different perspective on the ritual abuse scare, one that did not reach the wide audience of Geraldo, but which nevertheless was influential. [36]

Official publications

Statistics carry much rhetorical clout. As Best (1990) noted, the bigger they are and the more official the source, the better (p. 62). Government documents offer statistics and other information that come charged with a certain authority simply because they are official. A claims-maker who believes high officials are part of a vast satanic conspiracy may nevertheless use big, official numbers from government sources if they bolster his/her argument. Yet even this "official" medium can present conflicting "facts" that have been vetted and endorsed through a wide variety of means - empirical study by academics, testimony of a variety of experts, fact-finding commissions, or data routinely gathered by official agencies - often driven by legislative or executive responses to a popular concern. An example of how legislators play to popular concerns can be seen in the fact that at least five states passed laws against ritual abuse. Prosecutors, however, have chosen to pursue child abuse cases under existing criminal code provisions that are not likely to be struck down as unconstitutional. Although legislators scored points for passing the laws, none appear to have actually been used in criminal prosecutions. [37]

In the arena of ritual abuse, two official publications were frequently cited by opposite sides. In 1989 a task force was established by the Los Angeles County Commission for Women that published a pamphlet, *Ritual Abuse: Definitions, Glossary, the Use of Mind Control*. It established its purpose in an introduction: "Ritual abuse is a serious and growing problem . . . Parents need to be educated about the hallmarks of this abuse occurring in preschools and day care centers" (n.p.). It then went on to detail how satanic cults have operated in secret for generations, using mind-control methods to enslave members who are often so traumatized they "dissociate" and are unaware they are abusers themselves. Such cults infiltrated day care centers because Satanists needed more children for their rituals than they could produce themselves. Though the material would be right at home on a Geraldo special, it bore a certain stamp of approval because it was an official publication of a government-sponsored commission. One of the members of the commission was Lauren Stratford, according to the back jacket of her memoir of Multiple Personality Disorder, *Stripped Naked* (1993). She had a year earlier appeared on Oprah Winfrey segment on Satanic worship and published a best-selling account of being abused by a satanic cult, *Satan's Underground* (1988), which has the usual undocumented and sensational features of ritual abuse narratives. Interestingly, it was when cataloging *Stripped Naked* that catalogers at the Library of Congress added "ritual abuse" to their list of official subject headings. [38]

Another frequently cited official publication was published by the FBI for investigators dealing with ritual abuse cases, *The Investigator's Guide to Allegations of "Ritual" Child Abuse* (1992). The author, Kenneth Lanning, established his credentials as an expert in sex crimes against children explicitly in the first paragraphs and added, apparently in response to allegations that he was a Satanist infiltrator of the Bureau, that he was concerned the controversy and its inevitable backlash would endanger children who are truly victims of abuse by adversely influencing law enforcement practices. The language used in the guide is measured and reasoned but also, at times, passionate. We can surmise that Lanning was

frustrated with "cult cops" and with the intertwining of religious values and criminal investigation. Although he found no compelling evidence that ritual abuse was part of any criminal case that was reported to the FBI, he advocated for careful and professional investigation of all child abuse claims. [39]

Although these two publications - available in very few libraries, but quoted and reprinted in many media outlets - were perhaps the most influential official publications, two others prove Best's point that big official numbers are strong evidence for claims, whatever your claim may happen to be. A report from a research symposium sponsored by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect in 1988 alleged as follows: "Ritualistic abuse is increasingly being recognized as a threat to children. Unsubstantiated estimates currently suggest that 1 to 5 percent of sexual abuse cases may involve some kind of ritualism as well" (p. 2). Even though unsubstantiated and not particularly large, these estimates sound significant because they follow the words "threat to children" and the authors of the report consider them suggestive. The same Center later published an in-depth study that established in no uncertain terms that there was no factual basis for those estimates or for the general hysteria over ritual abuse (Goodman, 1994). However this study, the most exhaustive conducted on the subject and one that offers very big official numbers indeed, is not often cited, perhaps because by the time it was released, the backlash had already set in and fewer citizens believed it was a significant threat. [40]

Students in the feedback loop: Media and information literacy in a dynamic world

This case study of a single controversial topic that predates the web suggests that, although the various media for conveying information have distinct methods of deciding which stories are worthy for publication and have different traditions for validating claims, all of them provide latitude for a divergence of interpretation and all of them require critical evaluation. Book publishers look for stories that tap into the concerns of contemporary culture and can provide a wide diversity of conflicting versions of the "truth" to relatively small audiences while still making a profit. Newspapers are much more circumspect in dealing with controversy and have editorial traditions that emphasize an ideal of balance and objectivity, but even they color their coverage differently. More importantly, the sheer volume of individual stories told can shape public perception that an issue is widespread, which, in turn, makes stories that fit the trend more newsworthy and more likely to be reported. Newspaper stories act as granular bits of information that, over time, can turn molehills into mountains. Magazines and television broadcasts are more limited in the number of stories they can tell, and tend to seek dramatic and graphic hooks to engage their audience. Further, although there are different standards in place for validating claims in "hard news" as opposed to "infotainment," magazines and television both reach a wide audience and have a profound and immediate influence on popular culture. No book or newspaper article on ritual abuse reached the 50 million individuals that Geraldo Rivera's special did in one evening in 1988. [41]

Evaluating sources is a complex and yet very important aspect of how we interact with the multiple streams of conflicting claims that come to us across a diverse set of media channels. Most

undergraduates have some familiarity with most media (with the exception of scholarly communication channels), but few are aware of the various dynamics that go into choosing which stories to tell and how claims will be editorially validated. Simply knowing about those processes, however, won't address the need to sort through the many claims and divergent points of view that will be found within any one medium. [42]

Approaching this issue by limiting students' sources by type - for example, forbidding the use of web sources or requiring that only scholarly books and articles be used in a project - simply sidesteps the issue. Though the web is not under the control of an editorial board, there is important research material there. It is also an important locus for the expression of thought of all types and can provide a sense of the range and variety of approaches to contemporary issues. Conversely, the scholarly literature on ritual abuse is splintered and divergent as in any other media, although the differences are more subtly concealed in formal, documented prose. Peer review is only as bias-free as peers, and there are no markers visible to outsiders to the field that indicate which publications are considered core in the field and which are on the fringes of mainstream thought. A student trained to look for external signs that a work is scholarly (e.g., it has footnotes and uses big words) might be lulled into thinking an article in *Cultic Studies Journal* or *Issues in Child Abuse Accusations* is knowledge derived through the scientific method and untainted by bias, whereas each is an organ for organizations that have taken strong and opposing positions on the subject of ritual abuse. And, of course, even core journals with strong reputations will publish articles that represent divergent views on controversial issues. Further, artificially limiting the field of options by source type fails to prepare students for an ambiguous world in which information comes across multiple channels, often tackling contemporary issues that are picked up late, if at all, in scholarly discourse. [43]

Simple checklists for evaluating sources is another approach that fails to acknowledge the complexity of the task. Such checklists might, for example, instruct students to query whether an author is qualified. Based on what? Information supplied by the author on a blurb or in a one-sentence "about our contributors" line? Rarely does an undergraduate know enough to be able to make such a judgment. Students may also be told to rank their options based on the quality of the publisher. Even if they had the knowledge base to do so, such an appeal to external validity makes opinions unpopular with the mainstream automatically suspect, no matter how compelling. Another strategy - instructing students to evaluate sources by reading book reviews - not only sidesteps the fact that reviews are a highly flawed medium for evaluation, it also sends the message that the student must rely on external sources for knowledge and must consult other authorities to tell them what to think about their sources. This induces a continual slippage of authority from the student, when, in fact, the object is to prepare students to think for themselves. [44]

The best solution, possibly the *only* solution, is to give students many opportunities to develop their own ability to evaluate sources directly through practice. They must have occasion to select, using their own judgment, a wide variety of sources from different media, sort through the differences, develop the rhetorical sophistication to examine evidence used to support claims, and in some form

(whether through presentations, papers, or discussion) process what they've found into knowledge of their own. [45]

To situate these opportunities in the curriculum and provide support, it would serve their teachers well to talk more often across disciplinary boundaries. Media literacy and information literacy efforts have similar goals but are too often pursued as separate agendas, not out of theoretical differences, but out of lack of contact among the stakeholders. Media literacy, for example, tends to focus on how the audience can better process the information they are exposed to; information literacy begins with the concept of an "information seeker," someone who identifies an information need, then seeks sources of information that will satisfy it. These stances position the subject in substantially different positions and ask them to perform different tasks, although both invite the student to become more critical and informed about sources of information. Communication studies and composition scholars should also be included in the development of information and media literacy, since writing and speaking involves the rhetorical and critical use of information. Perhaps most crucially, faculty teaching in history, political science, biology, and other disciplines need to adopt this challenge as an important outcome of a college education because critical evaluation of *all* sources is an essential skill that depends on understanding how the media choose stories to tell, validate claims, and shape what becomes common knowledge. [46]

Ritual abuse may now seem an almost quaint aberration, a temporary fad that seized the popular imagination, as outdated as hula-hoops or disco fever. But our anxieties about children continue to affect our judgment. When a meta-analysis of research published in *Psychological Bulletin* (Rind, Tromovitch, & Bauserman, 1998) suggested that not all children under the age of 18 were traumatized by having sexual experiences before adulthood, the United States House of Representatives (1999) passed a resolution condemning the association. Not surprisingly, the popular outcry that led to the Congressional resolution was sparked by talk show celebrity Laura Schlessinger. (For more analysis of the reception of this paper, see Rind, Bauserman, & Trofimovich, 2000.) More recently, a book that explored whether overzealous response to fears about children and sexuality are harmful to the youth we seek to protect was published by the University of Minnesota press after trade publishers deemed it too controversial for their lists; Tim Pawlenty, then a state legislator, but who was elected governor of Minnesota in 2002, quickly moved to condemn the publication and the University for publishing it (Demko, 2002; Worth, 2002). [47]

Most college students conducting research will struggle to master forms of discourse they will never attempt again beyond their college years. But they will be faced with conundrums in future that will require that they evaluate a variety of perspectives and ultimately come to their own conclusions. Claims based on society-wide anxiety are frequently used to justify any number of political, social, and economic actions. When these anxieties reach fever pitch, the ability to evaluate claims is an important analgesic that, apart from equipping individual students to think independently, has wider implications for the role they might play in future as contributors to responsible social discourse. [48]

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