Contemporary Incidents of Captivity and Media Interventions

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Abstract

This article examines the various media interpretations of the some of the most high-profile contemporary incidents of captivity. With the objective to underline how such interventions negatively impact the lives of the survivors, the study analyses five such incidents, including the cases of Natascha Kampusch, Jaycee Dugard, Elizabeth Smart, Elisabeth Fritzl, and Pooja Gaud. By analyzing sensationalized media accounts, the study highlights how such interventions often exacerbate the survivors' trauma, contributing to their "second victimization." The article delves into how factors such as "news values" and "newsworthiness" drive this sensationalism, leading to reductive narratives that overshadow survivors' resilience. Furthermore, it critiques the broader implications of these representations on public perception, societal norms, and survivors' rehabilitation, urging a shift towards more sensitive and informed reporting of incidents of criminality.

Keywords: Captivity; Media interventions; Second victimization.

Introduction

Human captivity has occurred in some or the other form for as long as recorded history or perhaps even in the prehistoric times. Often used interchangeably with terms such as kidnapping, abduction, and hostage-taking, captivity refers "to the detention of an individual, against their will and without legal authority, for a particular motive" (Alexander and Kleinn 177). It is essentially characterized by a situation where a person is transposed from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar one; often violently and coercively under the subjugation of another person. This phenomenon is a historical and modern transcendental occurrence across cultures and societies and is also rampant trans-nationally. Through the

ages, such instances of captivity have been retold in oral histories and recorded either in published or archival resources, modern media and popular literature.

Today, "the phenomenon of captivity encompasses many kinds of experience, including kidnapping for ransom or political ends, abduction by strangers, abduction by non-custodial parents, human trafficking, and more" (Irvine and Alshaibi). For instance, in October 2018, an American teenager, Jayme Closs was abducted from her home in Barron, Wisconsin. Her abductor, Jake Thomas Patterson killed her parents and drove her to a house in rural Gordon, Wisconsin where he held her captive for 88 days until she managed to escape on January 10, 2019. Jaymee Closs's case is the most recent example of the abduction of young girls, followed by years of captivity and unspeakable abuse and torture at the hands of their captors. In these past two decades, numerous such cases of captivity have come to light. Jaycee Dugard, Elizabeth Fritzl, Natascha Kampusch, Sabine Dardenne, Katie Beers, Elizabeth Smart, Michelle Knight, Gina DeJesus, AmandaBerry and Pooja Guad are amongst those whosekidnappings made headlines. Possibly, there are more about whom there are no records. In some of these cases, the period of captivity has lasted for as long as twenty-four years. What shocks one about these incidents of violence is perhaps their occurrence in liberal, developed and sensitised cultures, which to the naked eye seem immune to injustices of such gory detail. In some of these cases, like that of the Fritzls and Jaycee Lee Dugard's abduction, the crimes remained undetected despite the perpetrators holding criminal records when they had abducted their victims.

When such details of the cases emerge, "...they're also very highly impactful on, not only the families, the individual people involved but the communities and the regions and sometimes even the whole nation when they happen" ("Kidnapping" 03:22-28). Today, Austria, for example, is irreparably scarred by the Kampusch and the Fritzl case which were discovered just two years apart from each other. Further, in contemporary times, wherein technology, social and digital media allow greater access to stories of criminality, the chances of being affected by them increase in higher multiples. Kidnapping stories, in particular, represent "...how our culture views children, parenthood, and sexuality and how it defines strangers, community and crime" (Fass 19). Therefore, besides being detrimental to a nation's global image, news about violent crimes such as the ones under discussion have a decidedly negative effect on a community and its members. For example, in the immediate aftermath of Natasha Kampusch's escape, there was a growing anxiety amongst parents for the

safety of their children. One of such instances reported a man having been set on fire on being suspected of kidnapping his neighbour's daughter. Since there are fewer crimes which "...elicit as much fear and concern as child abduction..." (Miller et al. 523), the media's response to them often alters between being informative and sensational. While the former can be beneficial to the case, the latter often disrupts social fabric by disseminating chaos within the members of a community.

On the personal level, these incidents do not just violate the victims' bodies but usually leave them trauma stricken and have a devastating psychological effect. It is precisely in this context that society's role in influencing the degree of trauma on the survivor becomes important. Judith Herman explains that a "supportive response from the other people towards the survivor may alleviate the impact of the event, while a hostile or negative response may enforce the damage and aggravate the traumatic syndrome" (Herman 44). The courage and strength that help these women while surviving through captivity can often falter when they have to confront a world which labels them 'victims' and is hungry for all the gory details. The continual media interventions on these incidents further intensify the public's hunger for details Therefore, to grapple with society becomes a challenging task for the survivors- sometimes leaving them more destroyed than rehabilitated.

As a social phenomenon, crime affects all sections of society, and therefore crime coverage in print and electronic media is more than often designed in a manner which aims at ensuring maximum public attention. Since the media is usually the first major source of information on which society relies in order to gain knowledge of most local and global affairs, it plays a crucial role in influencing public opinion. However, the media cannot "...be considered as a neutral intermediary between the event and the observer" (Nišić and Plavšić74) because news reporting is primarily a creative process. It involves collecting information, selecting what is to be reported, and then editing them to assemble the final product. In fact, through the process of explanation and interpretation of information, the media actually "constructs" social reality, "…in a way that they add to the information some elements that the original information did not have, that they form information according to the requirements…" (Nišić and Plavšić74). The 'requirements' can be anything, ranging from higher ratings to appeasing political or other interest groups

The advancement in technology has heightened this process of 'constructing' reality. With the increasing accessibility of the Internet, the dynam-

ics of news production and consumption have evolved manifold and diverged to various platforms from print to social media. The array of online options available has made it easier for journalists to reach their audience without necessarily relying on the long process of sorting, writing, editing, printing, publishing and distributing. Instead, they can gather news from multiple sources, including email, online interviews, video streaming channels, social networks and instant messaging software and immediately communicate them to the audience through similar platforms. The audience, on the other hand, can get access to this information by just clicking a button or touching the screen of their mobile phones. In being so easily accessible, the reach and immediacy of news in the audience's lives have extended, which also implies that content is quickly pushed aside to make way for newer headlines, cutting out any scope of deliberation. As Neil Postman suggests, the development in technology has created a "...peek-a-boo world, where now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again" (Postman 77). Additionally, the degree of customization made possible by the Internet has changed the fundamental makeup of the content that audiences are exposed to. The new media, which is typified by internet-based channels, allows the audience to choose content in accordance with their interests, unlike conventional media where the communicator's choice of content determined what the public would get to watch or read. To add to the customisation trend, new media sources such as social networking site and on-demand digital libraries allow consumers "...the ability to find sources that will match even the most idiosyncratic views or interests" (Heath et al. 83). This ability to identify supporters for any view, coupled with the ability to filter out any voices that disagree with that view, has fundamentally changed the audience's role from being the passive consumer to active media co-producer. Resultantly, besides focusing on large, passive, heterogeneous audiences, media operators now tend to target small homogenous audience who are more interested in stories peppered with sensation and drama.

In terms of crime news, the recourse to sensationalism is directly related to the fact that in addition to personal experiences, individuals acquire their understanding of the world "...from the experiences of others, and to a considerable extent, from the portrayals found in the media" (Surette 30). Since the public has limited direct exposure to such crime cases, they primarily rely on the media for gaining an understanding about them. This limitation of the audience gives media operators the liberty to prioritise their own need of ensuring higher programme ratings and circulation figures over the audience's need to gain knowledge. Alternatively, criminal incidents are usually "...sensational, dramatic, and at times colourful"

(Amzat et al. 64). As a result, they exert an extraordinary pull on the audience- inducing both fear and concern. This fascination for crime news, in turn, leads media owners to lose sight of the primary job of relaying information and instead, focusing on maximising profit. Resultantly, under the pressure of creating content which is capable of breaking "...through the crush of other information being presented..." (Heath et al. 86), the media often resorts to exaggerated and sensationalised reporting.

News Values and Newsworthiness

Despite this gap between reality and its representation, the audience still needs the media to acquire knowledge and form their understanding of crime and criminality. Nonetheless, it can be concluded that media images do not project reality in its entirety. Instead, the mediated picture usually coerces an artificial truth, touching upon selected issues that can hardly be called all-encompassing. The version of reality that the media presents, especially in the form of news, is determined by several factors, including the process that goes into making news and the assumptions that news organisations make about their audience. All these factors culminate into what Walter Lippmann has called 'agenda-setting'- a process which helps the media in telling the audience not what to think about a topic but what topics to think about (Heath et al. 89). However, for events to be marked as one of those 'topics to think about', they must have specific 'news values' which can make media professionals prioritise them over other events. 'News values' primarily

> ...provide the criteria in the routine practices of journalism which enable journalists, editors and newsmen to decide routinely and regularly which stories are 'newsworthy' and which are not, which stories are major 'lead' stories and which are relatively insignificant, which stories to run and which to drop. (Hall et al. 54)

One of the earliest attempts at systematically identifying the factors that influence reporting was made by J. Galtung and M.H. Ruge in their 1965 study, "The Structure of Foreign News". Although they focused on news reporting in general and not crime news per se, their observations on how an event is more likely to be reported if, for example, it is dramatic, negative in essence, unexpected or geographically closer stand valid for crime news too. Borrowing from this study, multiple critics beginning from Steve Chibnall in 1977 have attempted to conceptualise crime reporting

with these news values[*].

More recently, in her book, Media and Crime (2004), Yvonne Jewkes has identified twelve factors that are given particular significance when evaluating the 'newsworthiness' of criminal incidents. Taking into consideration the changed media landscape with its overreliance on technology, the privatisation of most media outlets and the changing role of audience, Jewkes identifies 'Threshold' (Greater the magnitude of the crime, higher the chances of meeting the threshold of national and international media); 'Predictability' (allows news organisations to deploy their resources in an organised manner); 'Simplification' (Easier to derive meaning from and keep intact the binaries of good and bad); 'Individualism' (reflect individual actions and reactions rather than those of institutions or corporations); 'Risk' (plays into people's fears and anxieties); 'Sex' (Sexually motivated crimes); 'Celebrity' (Prominent figures of a society); 'Proximity' (geographical nearness of the event and its cultural relevance); 'Violence' (involves acts of violence); 'Spectacle or graphic imagery' (pictures and videos to verify the claims); 'Children' (Crime involving children); and 'Conservative ideology and political diversion' (contributes to some political agenda) as the factors which determine the newsworthiness of an event. According to Jewkes, the probability of an incident being reported increases if they score higher on "newsworthiness" scale - conforming to several if not to all of the twelve factors.

If Jewkes' ideas on 'news values' and 'newsworthiness' are used in the context of the incidents that this study focuses on, it helps one in reflecting on the media's obsession with them and how it impacts the audience's perception of such events. Since "...long term child abduction cases are really quite rare" ("Kidnapping"), their 'novelty' or newness makes them 'newsworthy' from the moment they are discovered. They quickly pass the threshold of both national and international media on the grounds of being atypical. The captivity cases under discussion by large deal with children who were held captives (Natascha Kampusch, Elizabeth Smart,

[*]   Some of these studies include Steve Chibnall's Law and Order (1977); Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order (1978) by S. Hall, C. Critcher, T. Jefferson, J. Clarke and B. Roberts; Understanding News (1982) by John Hartley; Alastair Hetherington's News, Newspapers and Television (1985); Richard V. Ericson, Patricia M. Baranek and Janet B.L.Chan's Visualising Deviance: A Study of News Organisations (1987) and Negotiating Control: A Study of News Sources (1989); "Trial by Fire: Media Constructions of Corporate Deviance" (1998) by Gray Cavender and Aogan Mulcahy; Ray Surette's Media, Crime and Criminal Justice (1998) and Chris Greer's , Sex Crime and the Media: Sex Offending and the Press in a Divided Society (2003).

Jaycee Dugard, Pooja Gaud) or were products of the continual sexual abuse that the victims were subjected to (Elizabeth Fritzl's children, Jaycee Dugard's daughters and Amanda Berry's daughter). As the general public easily sympathises and empathises with victims who are minor, these stories become newsworthy for the media. Commenting on violence against children and women, Chris Greer says, "Sex crime cases – including (perhaps even especially) those involving children – however distasteful they may be to the majority of readers, are extremely newsworthy and, on that basis, they are highly marketable" (Greer 101). These incidents are also highly embedded with violence and therefore, enables and "… fulfils the media's desire to present dramatic events in the most graphic possible fashion" (Jewkes 53). Further, with most of the cases involving the sexual exploitation of young children, it becomes easier for reporters to re-establish the binaries of good and evil, wherein the perpetrators are represented as evil and monstrous and victims as good and innocent. The media subtly places these stories within the social frames of good and bad, which resonate well with the audience, thereby allowing them to indulge in the moral evaluation and to build up judgements of it.

The Natascha Kampusch Case

While the factors discussed in the preceding section determine the newsworthiness of these captivity cases during the initial days of their discovery, it is significant to note that the media continues to capitalise on these stories long after the initial hype subsides. One of the primary ways in which this is done is through the creation of newer thresholds. These thresholds, as argued by Jewkes, give new angles to the stories and include anything which can possibly escalate the drama associated with the crime, provide an ironic perspective or even a counter-narrative that can heighten the novelty of the crime (41). The media's response to Natascha Kampusch's abduction is a case in point on how new thresholds are added to revive a flagging news story.

Natascha Kampusch had been kidnapped and kept in captivity by a man who committed suicide a few moments after she escaped. The perpetrator's death had made a court case relating to the crime unnecessary. Therefore, in the absence of a legal narrative from which to draw information, the media engaged in creating stereotypical narratives which could help in reaching to a simplified conclusion about the incident. Most of these narratives were essentially focused at probing into the motives of the crime and providing a closure to the story without however encouraging any nuanced interpretations. In order to arrive at these easy conclusions, the

media shifted its focus from the perpetrator to the victim. A few amongst such narratives were based on some old photographs of Kampusch. According to her, those photographs were just "…snapshots of a girl, who, like all kids, simply liked to dress up" (Kampusch and Gronemeier 182). However, the media described them as "pornographic imagery" and tried to brand her as licentious- the one who could have been the root cause for inviting the crime committed against her; for instance, The Sunday Times reported:

> Perhaps there was something about her that, unwittingly, drew his predatory attention. There is a series of photographs of Natascha …which show her in provocative poses that some people think are inappropriately sexual. She was said to be a vivacious, outgoing child, and this too may have been a lure to a paedophile. (Gilmour 655)

These narratives were in many ways, reactions against Kampusch's refusal to fit into the societal frames of victimhood. After her escape, Kampusch was not just calm and stable but also assertive of her rights and privacy. In a society that expects a survivor to have a subservient demeanour and exhibit signs of a "...broken person who would never get back up again, who would always be dependent on help from others" (Kampusch 236), Kampusch's assertion of her agency triggered unfavourable reactions. It prompted the media to cast her in a negative light.

In *Victims, Crime and Society: An Introduction*, Davies et al. underline the importance of 'visuals' in crime reporting. They opine that with the rapid development of communications technology, media reports "...have become increasingly driven by visuals, incorporating: photographs of victims, offenders, or loved ones...These visual elements of the news product depict immediately, dramatically, and often in full colour, what it may take several paragraphs to say in words" (Davies et al. 56). Particularly, "...where victims of crime are concerned, the potential to visualise a case can have a direct impact on its perceived newsworthiness" (Davies et al. 57). Similarly, Jewkes opines that apart from contributing to the spectacle of crime and violence, photographs and videos help in demonstrating "...the truth of a story or verify the particular angle from which the news team has chosen to cover" (Jewkes 55). Likewise, besides adding to the spectacle of the case, Kampusch's pictures floated by the media became a medium for validating the media's vilification of her. The same photographs were used by the media to construct a different narrative about Natascha Kampusch- to highlight her troubled childhood. By describing

them as "lurid photographs of the girl, wearing lipstick and riding boots, brandishing a whip and showing her private parts" ("Kidnap Victim"), the media used them as evidence against her parents and extended family. According to them, Kampusch's parents had been exploiting her since a young age and "…planning to sell {her} 'indecent' photographs to persons interested in such material" (Kampusch and Gronemeier 182). These narratives portrayed Kampusch as already 'damaged' and therefore, "less worthy of sympathy" (Gilmour 655). So, the social framing of Kampusch was done negatively by the media, and accordingly, the public began viewing her in a negative light.

It is also possible to view these narratives of the "blameworthy" victim as attempts to redeem the investigating officials who had failed to locate Natascha Kampusch. Despite having received useful tips in the immediate aftermath of her disappearance, the sheer negligence of the Police led to the crime remaining undiscovered for eight years (Kampusch and Gronemeier 183). As argued by critics adhering to the Marxist approach, the content of the media reflects the views of the dominant groups in society (the State, the Police and the legal system). Instead of being a neutral agent, the media coerces the audience into forming opinions about offenders and victims as per the interests of those in power. In Kampusch's case, the Police had not only failed to follow up the tips which could have led to an early discovery of the crime but even after her escape remained more than a deterring force in revealing the truth. Kampusch discusses this aspect in her memoir, saying, "…the authorities as well have begun to treat me differently over time. I got the impression that in a way, they resented the fact that I had freed myself. In this case, they were not the rescuers, but rather those who had failed me all those years" (Kampusch 237). She further discusses how Herwig Haidinger, the former director of the Federal Criminal Police Office had revealed that the Police and the political leaders had mutually decided to cover up the mistakes committed in the case. On examining the case files after Kampusch's escape, Haidinger had alerted the minister of home affairs about these mistakes. However, the minister "…didn't want to face a police scandal so soon after the autumn of 2006 elections and instructed all investigations to cease" (Kampusch 238).

According to Kampusch, these revelations by Haidinger had nearly triggered a "government crisis' and led to the appointment of a new commission to investigate the truth. Surprisingly, instead of focusing on the missed clues, the newly formed commission directed their efforts at questioning Kampusch, who they believed was hiding the details of oth-

er accomplices. Such an approach at creating a controversy around the incident was clearly an attempt at deflecting the public's attention from the truths about the flawed system which had surfaced after Haidinger's statements. The media which basically intends at keeping the larger population "...quiet and supportive of a system that, in reality, works against their interest" (Marsh and Melville 31) in all likelihood found their best interest in whitewashing the State and the Police by tainting the one who had actually been wronged. The impact of the media narratives which basically capitalisedon the controversy created by the investigating officials was such that Kampusch received a deluge of hate mails accusing her of having enjoyed her time with her kidnapper and lying to the public (Salter 148). The mails went to the extent of suggesting that she does not deserve to be free and should be sent back to the prison (Weingärtner and Ankel).

 The misrepresentation of the Kampusch story by the media further devastated her life and could have been more painful an experience than being in captivity. Even today, Kampusch remains a controversial figure who invites "...mixed and sometimes hostile reactions from the media and the public" (Gilmour 646)[**]. The hostility that Kampusch had to experience can be seen as an illustration of the symbiotic relationship that the State and the media shares in the present times- mutually deciding to cover up flaws and at the same time indulging in deflecting the public's attention from the real issue.

The Jaycee Lee Dugard and the Elizabeth Smart Case

Although there have been fewer instances of the kind of hostility that was shown towards Kampusch, the media's response to her case is not unique. Other survivors like her have also been subjected to similar criticism. For example, the media reports on Elizabeth Smart and Jaycee Dugard kept stressing that they were suffering from Stockholm Syndrome - a psychological condition in which a victim begins to empathise with the perpetrator. According to one of these reports, Smart could not escape from her kidnappers because she had begun identifying with them: "She began to understand and empathise with their reason for kidnapping her -- whatever that reason was" (Davis). Similarly, in their bid to sensationalise the news of Jaycee Dugard's kidnapping, the media insensitively reduced her experience to headlines such as "Bonding with a Captor" and "Kidnapping Victim's Guilt a Sign of Stockholm Syndrome". What is significant to note here is that unlike the Kampusch case, the abductions of Jaycee

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[**] Kampusch shares the details of her experience with cyberbullying inherlatest book, Cyberneider (2019).

Dugard and Elizabeth Smart were relatively easier to comprehend as after these women were discovered, the perpetrators had been taken into custody, interrogated, found guilty and sentenced to imprisonment. Most importantly, the media and the state missionaries had worked in consonance to rescue the two women, and therefore, their cases were resolved without a controversy per se. Despite the victim's getting justice in the two cases, they and their families had to remain at the receiving end throughout because of the media's hunt for new thresholds.

At present, both Smart and Dugard work as social activists and have spoken about the negative impact of these narratives. Smart insists that such easy interpretations of these incidents can scar the victims beyond repair. In her views, media constructions like these pose a hindrance to the recovery process of the victims. Since they influence the public into believing that the victims had somehow not done enough to save themselves, such narratives deter the victims from recovering and reintegrating into the society. The National Center for Victims of Crime, U.S.A has also pointed out that

> ... the media can inflict 'second victimisation' on some victims by exacerbating their feelings of violation. This can occur in a number of ways, by searching for and reporting anything 'negative' about the victim, by inappropriately delving into the victims' past and attempting to interview victims at inappropriate times, such as during trials, or at funerals or in hospital settings...And in high profile cases, the media coverage will be more intrusive and, potentially, distressing to the victim(s) – perhaps particularly when a combination of media sources are competing for scoops about the story. (qtd. in Marsh and Melville 109)

The inappropriate and insensitive handling of these stories by the media can further traumatise the victims. Dugard comments that viewing the psychological conditions of most of the victims through the same narrow framework of 'Stockholm Syndrome', can lead to the possibility of getting stripped off from one's individuality and the uniqueness of one's experiences. She has time and again spoken against how the media's treatment of her and Smart's cases has resulted in the public often confusing between the two women. She writes,

> Many confuse me and my story with Elizabeth Smart. Just for the record, I am not Elizabeth Smart. Even though we both have blonde hair, we have had vastly different lives and experiences. I

am the one that was captive for EIGHTEEN YEARS! Not months. Not to say that what she went through wasn't as bad as what I did. I am not comparing us, but some have. (Dugard xv)

The insensitive approach of the media in comparing the lives of Dugard and Smart has resulted in further denigrating the two women. Therefore, Dugard emphasises that she was held captive for "EIGHTEEN YEARS". The experiences of one's pain is highly unique and cannot be compared with that of the other and by acting in such an irresponsible way, the media, in fact, inflicts 'second victimisation' on the victims. The public who is always looking up to the media for information builds up its perceptions on what the media actually intends to offer. This inability of the audience in distinguishing between Dugard and Smart reflects the Postmodernist perspective on how the media contributes towards the development of a culture which is centred on 'immediate consumption' and gives little or no importance to contextualised knowledge. With the media's constant attempts at cycling and recycling of information in order to make them re-emerge in newer contexts, the audience's endeavours at seeking the truth are lulled by the passivity of feeding on all the exhausting information.

The media's overwhelming interest in the victims' lives can also be attributed to what Jewkes has called the tendency to create a 'hook'. Jewkes opines that since criminal cases which "may take a long time to unfold, are difficult to report", the media looks for a 'hook' "…on which to hang such stories in order that they fit with the daily or hourly time-span of most media" (Jewkes 44); for instance, Jaycee Dugard was discovered in August 2009, and her captors were convicted in June 2011. While it took two years for Dugard's case to be closed, in Elizabeth Smart's case, the perpetrators were convicted eight years after she was discovered. With such a time-gap between the discovery of these crimes and the completion of the legal and judicial proceedings, it becomes crucial for the media to keep the audience's interest intact by constantly providing newer details and once they exhaust their information on the perpetrators, they shift focus to the victims and their families. However, as long as they serve the purpose of securing reader and viewership, it becomes a matter of insignificance that whether or not these details adhere to the truth.

The Fritzl Case

Perhaps a more disturbing example of the media's fixation with the victims is its treatment of the Fritzl case. Of all the incidents discussed in this thesis, the story of Elisabeth Fritzl's abduction has received the maximum

media coverage- both locally (Austria) and globally. The reason behind the massive attention to this case is related to what Chris Greer has called the "shock factor". According to Greer, "shock factor suggests 'novelty' – it conjures images of an event, situation or example of a phenomenon which...is 'deviant, equivocal and unpredictable'" (Greer 56). Moreover, since "...journalists are continually under pressure to find and report the exception to the rule", even within sex crime, "...it's got to be quite an unusual rape to get the headlines these days" (Greer 56). What made the Fritzl case more shocking than any other case is that Elisabeth Fritzl had not been abducted by a stranger but her own father. He kept her as his captive for twenty- four years, raped her at his will and fathered seven children out of the incestuous relationship. The severity of these facts made the Fritzl case "...the story of the century for the hundreds of journalists, from countries ranging from Iran to Australia, who were sent to cover it" (Connolly). However, a publication ban was imposed by the Austrian government to protect the identity of the survivors.

Nonetheless, amidst such restrictions, the pressure to get a story out of this extremely 'newsworthy' incident led the journalist to be overly aggressive to the family. This particularly became evident the way the Fritzl children were described in the media reports. For example, an article entitled "Monster Fritzl's animal children" published in The Sun presented them thus: "...the two boys plucked from monster Josef Fritzl's dungeon in Austria talk to each other with animal-like growls. And one walks like a monkey, sometimes crawling on all fours" (Terrobuster). Another article in *The Evening Standard* reported thus:

> The children held prisoner in Josef Fritzl's cellar complex communicate with each other by "growling and cooing". They can just about speak in proper sentences to the police and doctors who are helping them. But the effort leaves them exhausted and they quickly revert to their secret animal-like language among themselves. The youngest, five-year-old Felix, crawls rather than walks and squeaked with excitement when he saw the sun for the first time when freed at the weekend. (Low)

Although owing to the difficult living conditions in the dungeon, the Fritzl children did suffer from physical disabilities such as stunted growth and sensitivity to light, the sensationalised representation of the children in the media was simply meant to maximise the 'shock' impact. The media's portrayal of the Fritzl case, especially with respect to the children is an aspect that Emma Donoghue has criticised in her novel, *Room-* an

alternative narrative to the rather sensational media accounts.

The Pooja Gaud kidnapping case

The media's fascination with the newsworthiness of abduction and assault cases is not limited to the Western world. In India, survivors of long-term abuse often face insensitivity and sensationalism from the media. A notable example is the Pooja Gaud kidnapping case. In 2013, seven-year-old Pooja Gaud was kidnapped on her way to school in Mumbai by a couple. After over nine years, she managed to escape and reunite with her family in August 2022. Given the extensive search and media coverage initiated when Gaud first went missing, her return immediately attracted national attention. According to data released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in 2022, 76,069 children were kidnapped in India, with 62,099 of them being female. A total of 51,100 minors are categorized as 'Unrecovered Victims of Kidnapping & Abduction', which includes data from previous years. However, Pooja Gaud was among the "...80,561 children (20,254 male, 60,281 females, and 26 transgender) who were recovered or traced" (Taskin). For a country with such alarming figures of missing children, her return after nearly a decade in captivity was viewed as "a miraculous escape."

Notably, unlike the cases of Elizabeth Smart, Jaycee Dugard, and Elisabeth Fritzl, Pooja Gaud's kidnapping was not sexually motivated. She was "...kidnapped by Harry D'Souza and his wife, Soni D'Souza, because the couple didn't have a child of their own" (Jagtap). Nevertheless, the media did not refrain from emphasizing the dramatic elements of the story. To attract readers and viewers, numerous headlines highlighted the physical abuse Gaud endured. For instance, one article with the headline, "9 years in captivity leaves kidnapped girl mentally, physically scarred" (Talukdar) reported that, "Pooja suffers from pelvic inflammation, spinal issues, ear infection…Pooja bursts into tears late at night recalling the abuse she faced" (Talukdar). While such articles convey the trauma and struggles survivors like Gaud endure, they often fail to highlight the resilience these individuals demonstrate. For example, the article ends by emphasizing the financial strain on the family, stating, "Poonam sells chickpeas to run the family…Pooja's family is currently reeling under debt taken for her treatment…They were promised financial assistance but haven't received any yet,"(Talukdar), thereby focusing only on their vulnerability and helplessness.

Another article with the headline, "'Missing girl' 166 reunited with fam-

ily after almost a decade" reduced Pooja Gaud's identity to a number, reminiscent of a Bollywood movie where the wrongly convicted protagonist is called by a number by all the prison officials. Interestingly, like the previous article, this one also fails to provide any information on how Gaud planned and executed her escape. It understates her efforts and resilience, beginning with, "In a miraculous reunion that was made possible by Mumbai Police on Thursday, a minor who went missing nine and a half years ago has been reunited with her family" (Mumbai: 'missing').

In her article, "Secondary Victimization of Children by the Media: An Analysis of Perceptions of Victims and Journalists," Neeti Tandon emphasizes that "to be of real benefit to the community, crime coverage should be educative. It must empower readers, providing them information that they can use to understand the problem and to prevent and solve it" (Tandon 121). The media coverage of Pooja Gaud's kidnapping has scarcely focused on the family's current needs and future support. This focus on lurid details of the abuse and insufficient factual reporting "creates an imbalance between public interest and the well-being of the survivor, thus ending up 're-victimizing the person concerned'" (Tandon 120)

Conclusion

Under such circumstances, wherein the media becomes a constant threat for the survivors, the survivors face the unprecedented challenge of putting speculations to rest. It is here that constructing a narrative and writing about their experiences often comes as a probable solution. Writing their life stories helps the survivors in confronting their traumatic past as well as exposing the media for continually misrepresenting them. As Heather Hillsburg puts, "Women who write about their prolonged captivity mobilize the imagined links between confessing and truth-telling in order to disrupt dominant interpretations of their suffering" (Hillsburg, 305). Natascha Kampusch, Elizabeth Smart and Jaycee Dugard have constructed their memoirs to narrate their experiences and put an end misinterpretations and while the world waits for more such unfabricated accounts, it is important to underline that there is a critical need for the media to lean towards sensitivity and reject sensationalism in crime reporting.

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