Drive-In Morality, Child Abuse, and the Media

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This country is littered with mutilated, decapitated, raped, and strangled children," according to John Walsh, activist on behalf of missing children. The crisis has reached such proportions, even the President is involved. He established a yearly Missing Children's Day and last year urged the National Newspaper Association membership to help "in locating the well over a million children who disappear every year," by including a regular feature in their newspapers displaying missing children's faces and descriptions. At least one politician, California assemblyman Gray Davis, based his electoral campaign's advertisements on his commitment to finding those victims of strangers' ill will. Several politicians have cited with alarm the figure of 50,000 as the number of stranger-abducted children in the nation. Advertisers of all kinds of products, from J.C. Penney drapes to Mrs. Field's Cookies, have pitched in to the effort.

Yet four years ago nobody even kept national statistics on missing children. In 1980 the Chicago Tribune had only one article about child abuse perpetrated by a non-family member. By 1984 this paper devoted 129 articles to themes of abuse, molestation, and abduction by strangers, teachers, Boy Scout leaders, nurses, church figures, day care workers, and kiddie pornographers.

Ironically, there were, according to the FBI, only 67 stranger-ab ducted kids in the whole country in mid-1985. About five percent of the total thirty thousand missing children had been kid-

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napped by a parent in a rancorous custody dispute. The remaining
missing children, the overwhelming majority, were runaways, usu-
ally from abusive parents. Talk in the media is scarce, though,
about the one million children who are abused or seriously
neglected by their parents each year, or the estimated five who are
killed each day at their own parent's hands.4

Compared with the Chicago Tribune's great leap in reports on
stranger abuse, its coverage of domestic abuse has been a thin and
more or less constant trickle since 1979. Other major periodicals—
Time, Newsweek, Reader's Digest, U.S. News and World Report,
National Review, and the New York Times—showed similar trends
in reporting. In 1974 there was no category "child abuse" in the
Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature; under various other head-
ings were four articles on related topics including one on Shake-
spere's use of the incest theme. By the late seventies, domestic
abuse became an issue, but within a year, reporting of missing
children far overshadowed coverage of abuse within the family.

Why the inundation of milk cartons, shopping bags, advertising
flyers, and bus posters? Why has reporting on these extra-familial
forms of abuse so outstripped reporting on the much more com-
mon problem of domestic abuse? How, and why, have the media
fueled the fervor of this panic?

I seek answers to these questions at the intersection of two lines
of inquiry. One looks at what normal American "common sense"
would have to say about child abuse. The other looks at how the
media speed up and exaggerate certain aspects of this common
sense simply through their everyday routines.

In the American version of common sense, privacy reigns sup-
reme. Tensions surround any questions of morality or control.
Moral questions are usually seen as private matters, not open for
public debate. However, as Donzelot, and Ehrenreich and English
describe, the "modern" nuclear family is in many ways a prod-
uct of public—state and market—forces.5 Ehrenreich and English
point out that at the turn of the century, home economists taught
immigrant girls to replace foreign spaghetti and extended families
with American baked beans, bread pudding, "household habits"
(in the words of Jane Addams, famous social reformer of the era),
and, most important, with the orderly solitude of the nuclear fam-
ily. In the fifties this trend continued, and the housewife was de-
scribed to advertisers as "Woman USA: The World's Greatest Con-
suming Phenomenon."6 As the point of entry into the family for
toasters, blenders, and child-rearing techniques, and the point of
departure for "well-behaved," hard-working kids, the woman has
been a constant focus of sellers and employers alike. Examples
illustrating this point easily multiply, showing that our worship of
private home life conflicts with the real manipulation that has
been the history of the modern, and especially American, family.

Missing children enter here, guarding the tense border between
public and private, providing a suitable replacement for domesti-
cally abused children, making it seem that we really do have a
private life and really are unwilling to allow impersonal forces to
 disrupt its sanctity. If people were aware of how common domestic
abuse really is, it might undermine any faith they had in the merits
or stability of the nuclear family system. Abuse by strangers, how-
ever, leaves the moral righteousness of the nuclear family not only
intact, but strengthened.

Uncovering these traditional anxieties will be my first line of
inquiry. The next line traces the influence the media have had in
this "moral panic."7 I will examine some particular journalistic
conventions and other techniques for disseminating public infor-
mation to see how they dovetail with those recurrent American
anxieties.8 As Bellah and his co-authors conclude, in a society
with very little sense of public life or community, and little mora-
lity which does not justify itself in terms of private preferences,
there is little space in the public sphere for genuine, satisfying
moral commitment.9

To the media has fallen the impossible task of providing most of
the public debate in American society.10 The news media are cru-
cial tails, then, of the moral fashion that passes for the
American public sphere. Acting as arbiters of the nation's mora-
ality, however, is not the primary goal of most newspaper editors;
their primary goal is to sell papers. For this, newsmakers always
need new, decontextualized fragments to wrap up in their invisible
cloak of common sense. They cannot continue to harp on a single
issue, no matter how worthwhile. A New York Times editor ex-
plained his paper's lack of coverage of a large protest in the seven-
ties: "America is tired of protest."11 More recently, Sam Donald-
son, ABC News White House correspondent, said about ABC's lack
of reporting on Reagan's "gaffes," "I've told my audience before
that he doesn’t know facts so often, is it news that today he doesn’t know facts again?" 

Our images change so rapidly, it becomes harder and harder to believe that there are any enduring public standards. Postmodern life is absolutely relativist. Jameson calls this the culture of the “simulacrum.” For him, the simulacrum, a representation of something for which no original exists, has become the new basis of non-liberatory culture:

Appropriately enough, the culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use-value is effaced, a society of which Guy Debord has observed, in an extraordinary phrase, that in it “the image has become the final form of commodity reification” (Society of the Spectacle). 

Morality has become a means to the ends of selling papers and advertising: witness the rash of “patriotic” ads. Missing children and day-care scandals have become new products at the moral drive-in window. Simulacrum issues are nothing new in American politics; it is the velocity with which the images have become exchangeable that has changed, to the point that the difference has become qualitative.

Such prepackaged morality may be easy for the media and advertisers but, as mere fashion show, it only increases our traditional anxieties about the stability of our moral standards. We want morality, but we got a fashion show.

Why has this American, postmodern problem erupted now? One new dimension—its speeded-up character—has already been introduced. Changed also is the place of women in the interface between public and private. In the 1840s Catherine Beecher saw that the “glorious temple” of mill and state was based on women’s domestic management. A woman’s role was to ease the needs of the state and market into the family’s daily life, to build the foundations of that glorious temple.

Changed here is the degree of tension. It is true that women are now located outside the home, in the public sphere, significantly more often than in the 1800s. Nevertheless, the current ideology of women’s role in the public/private circuit expresses what have been historically constant themes about women’s job of providing a soft quiet conduit for the needs of the state and the market into

the family. The problem may be that the penetration of those forces into the family may not be quite as well lubricated as they once were. Media coverage of the missing-children panic addresses the anxiety evoked by the tensions surrounding women’s role on the public/private border.

The Truth in Numbers

Children have needed protection for a long time. In a Chicago suburb, reports on child sexual abuse tripled following the broadcast of “Something about Amelia,” a program on incest. Despite nationwide cutbacks in child protective services since 1980, reports of all kinds of abuse have been growing steadily in the past six years. This does not mean that the actual incidence is necessarily growing, as my discussion of the problems involved in data collection should make clear. I am assuming that the mere fact that so many people are willing to operate as if child abuse is a growing issue reveals some anxieties which must be present whether they surface as more abuse or simply more talk about abuse. The way these issues are systematically bent in favor of reports of abuse outside of the family, though, suggest that something other than a simple altruistic response to children’s needs is occurring.

Some very rough figures can stand here as a clashing backdrop to the media’s theatrical rendition of the problem. Other researchers have arrived at different figures for all kinds of abuse, but these are the most widely accepted, and in fact, government-sponsored, national figures, which even journalists use. These are the figures to which journalists would most likely have easiest access. Since mid-1985, journalists have also had access to a Pulitzer Prize-winning exposé of the missing-children panic.

1. The most remarkable fact about the figures on abuse and neglect is their inconclusiveness. Even the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect contradicts itself. In one publication, NCCAN says, “The incidence of sexual abuse may even be greater than the incidence of physical abuse.” In another, the agency says the ratio may be less than one in ten.

2. About eighty per cent of the one million annual maltreatment cases (excluding sexual) may involve serious neglect. Neglect and violence, unlike sexual abuse, are strongly linked to poverty.
Judging from the media’s overwhelming predilection for reports on sexual or at least violent abuse, it would seem that reporters knew these to be the most prevalent types. Perhaps it is easier to report on problems that can seem psychological. Discussions of poverty normally beg structural explanations.

3. Of those sexually abused, about one third to one half are victims of incest: parents may directly or indirectly contribute to over seventy per cent of all sexual abuse cases, though the media and advertisers do not treat this as a national emergency on the order of the child abduction crisis.  

4. About ninety per cent of the sexual abusers are male, and most victims are probably female, despite article upon article in the popular media describing female abusers.  

5. These male abusers, are, in almost all cases, psychologically indistinguishable from the “normal” upstanding gentleman, and are almost never homosexual in their adult sexual orientation. This too may come as a surprise to those who have been barraged with spurious links in the media between the kidnappers of Etan Patz (one of the first well-publicized cases of what most likely was a stranger-abducted child) and the North American Man/Boy Love Association.  

These figures are, of course, general estimates. There are serious problems involved in collecting data on child abuse. As Suzanne Sgroi says, “Recognition of sexual molestation in a child is entirely dependent on the [professional’s] inherent willingness to entertain in the possibility that the condition may exist.” The same can be said of other kinds of abuse. To collect such data, then, one needs some theoretical tools.

There are many reasons to believe, for example, that incest is even more underreported than other kinds of abuse. This may result from the child’s economic and emotional dependence on, and love of, the father; fear of being deserted by one or both parents; the difficulty of “telling on” the father when he is one person the child would normally tell. It may result from the mother’s dilemma, not being able to take the child’s complaint seriously if separating from the father means losing the family’s source of income and thus doing yet more harm to her children. These problems would not arise in data collection on abuse by a stranger.

Clearly, then, any hypotheses on these matters must involve some theorizing on complicated family politics. Unfortunately, having to make theoretical assumptions explicit is not part of the professional journalist’s normal lexicon. However, the fact that no major organizations dispute these figures illustrates the general problem I am addressing. Nobody disagrees, they just do not use the figures to make coherent stories that squarely address the problem.

The only real discrepancy in figures is the one between the FBI’s sixty-seven missing children and the media’s and legislators’ thousands or millions. Yet when anyone is pinpointed as a possible source for the larger number, he or she shifts the blame elsewhere. The president of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), Jay Howell, claims there are 1.5 million missing kids every year, only about one thousand of these being abductions.* Child Find, an organization formed to search for missing kids, gave out the inflated 50,000 figure from 1981 to 1984, but the associate director of the group says she thinks the figure “came out of a hat.” Similarly, an official from the NCMEC said that the figure most typically cited—the 50,000 missing children—is “not even a best guess. The numbers come out of the sky.” Politicians attribute the ripple to police or missing-children experts, police blame the journalists, journalists attribute the ripple to missing-children experts, missing-children experts to journalists, the sky, or hats.

In short, almost everyone official says it was a mistake. This mistake could have occurred through a careless reading of FBI reports: many children disappear each day, but the vast majority only disappear for an hour or two, or are found the next day. Simply to count the number of missing in a month and multiply it by twelve would yield a bloated figure. Many of the names are not taken off of the national computerized list. Some kids run away a number of times, and each time their name reappears on the list. Since this computerized system has only been in use since 1982, this could possibly account for some of the recent upsurge.

There is, however, one public figure who does not think the number is a mistake. John Walsh, the man who sees strangled and raped children littering the nation, is the head of the Adam Walsh

*The NCMEC is an offshoot of the Department of Justice, opened in 1984 as part of Reagan’s 1982 Missing Children’s Act.
Child Research Center (named after his abducted son, Adam), one of the private organizations devoted to finding missing children. He testifies regularly to Congress and other official bodies, maintaining that there are fifty thousand missing children who are not runaways or victims of custody disputes. This figure, he says, is “a ‘guessimate’ he heard from a coroner . . . and defended the high guess as a means of alerting parents.” As an individual case, his is perhaps psychologically understandable.

What is important socially, though, is that no major organization will stand by the overgrown number. The media, advertisers, and audiences as well often swallow the figures whole. The credulous public is willing to believe that one out of every twenty children aged five through thirteen (or about one out of every thirty, if we add into the pool for possible missing children the fourteen-to-seventeen-year-old group) has, as Nicholas von Hoffman put it, “gone through the doughnut hole into the anti-world.” Every classroom would have at least one. Further, this audience is willing to believe that a very substantial portion of these kids have been kidnapped by strangers.

That people are generally willing to believe that there are so many missing children in spite of their own experience of not knowing anyone who has indicates that this issue is not an Edsel of media production. In the monopolized media market, many people have “bought” this issue. After the showing of a program on missing children on TV in 1985, the NCMEC was deluged with over two hundred calls per hour. A poll conducted for the Denver Post in 1984 showed that most people believed that there were dozens of missing children in a state which in fact only had three. In San Francisco, hundreds of volunteers joined in the search for missing Kevin Collins.

Many people who become aware of this imbalance assume that the growth in reporting on missing children is simply due to media sensationalism. This approach does not, however, explain the fact that so many people—journalists, politicians, audiences—are willing to believe the incongruous statistics, and to ignore the correct ones. We need a counter-intuitive approach in order to understand these statistics. This is just what the American media are unable to give us. We are not always susceptible to all “sensational” media stories, but we certainly have fallen for them in the case of missing children.

“Have You Whipped Your Child Today?”

After we have liberated the poor, the blacks, the prisoners, the gays and the fatties, as well as the women and the men, who is going to be left [sic!] in this cockeyed society?

“We will!” a squeaky voice pipes up.

Now it’s children’s job that is on the march . . .

—Time

Common sense” conservatism assumes that any loosening of repressive morality, such as the women’s and gay rights movements advocate, undermines all authority. Yet tradition resists any public intervention in the nuclear family’s privacy. The missing children issue manages to juggle these contradictions which have snagged many other potential moral media sensations.

The contradictory “common sense” seems to suggest that the father, ousted from his position of natural authority, his natural control over others, may lose control of himself. He lusts after his kids instead of disciplining them. Oddly enough, what the right calls for here is more power to the father. Public discussion seems to have caused these difficult domestic problems, insidiously slackening hierarchy’s chain of command. The right wants all such questions reprivatized, so that “natural” solutions will emerge. The dilemma, then, is how to give dad more power without talking about him. “Missing children” is the answer.

State intervention to prevent his abuse is bad (except in the most extreme cases). But state intervention is not always bad: if it reinforces heterosexual parental authority, then it is good. The missing children issue puts dad back in control without ever requiring state intervention into the family. Other nuclear-family-strengthening issues—the proposed “squeal law,” anti-choice fervor, the recent Supreme Court ruling on sodomy, even seat-belt laws—require the state to enter directly into private affairs. “Missing children” manages to express anxieties surrounding the wellbeing of children in this society while avoiding the issues that caused anxiety. On the one hand, it avoids delving into murky family politics. On the other hand, it avoids any discussion of public intervention in the privatized family. It contains, neutralizes, and sanitizes these anxieties, even as it expresses them. It is “psychoanalysis in reverse.”

Many articles repeat, as if it is a fact to be taken for granted, the
idea expressed above: when sexual repression is loosened, any anti-social lust is possible. To reporters, as members of the larger society, the control mechanisms seem to have gone haywire. No longer do we have “natural authority,” “natural” limitations on freedom, “natural” roles, or the “natural” “revolution” we are supposed to have over incest and sex with children.

A *Time* article on child abuse in day care, after acknowledging that no one knows whether or not the real incidence of sexual abuse has risen, concludes with this:

One reliable expectation, however, is that in an age of sexual freedom, more people will act on forbidden urges. “Our society has become more lax about kinky sex,” says... an attorney.37

Pedophilia, in another *Time* article, is “yet another appalling development in the sexual front; a group devoted to child molester’s [sic—maybe there is only one] lib.”38

*Time* inadvertently threw two articles with contradictory messages into one issue. The issue contained a horrified article about the prevalence of child sexual abuse. Several pages later, *Time* showed us a photo of Brooke Shields, age eleven, posing in lacy pink underwear, with a cheery blurb about her latest role as a prostitute in the popular film *Pretty Baby*.39 If sex with children were such a universally repulsive proposition, there would be no need to be constantly repeating the fact. The thorny implication of the welter of contradictions surrounding the issue of sex with children is that child molestation may not be such a terrible idea for many adults after all.

**This is one of the problems at the center of the missing-children issue, but it is too difficult an issue to confront. For many increasingly powerful people in this country, it is inconceivable that there would be a family with no autonomously responsible citizens in it. Such a vision of family would call for greater state supervision, not familial privacy. So, instead of assuming that irresponsible adults are sometimes given too much control over kids, the conservatives assume that the problem lies outside the parent. Responsibility has been taken away from the honorable parent, and can only be restored through a reassertion of the “privacy” that had failed in the first place.**

A typical argument against state-sponsored programs to pre-vent child abuse suggests that we “will one day introduce legislation of the kind passed in Sweden which forbids any corporal chastisement of any children even by a parent.”40 Diverting attention from the outward parent, William F. Buckley here shifts the object of discipline; now the child, not the parent, is the one needing to be disciplined. The national secretary of the Moral Majority, the Reverend Greg Dixon, is reported to have called for the printing of a bumper sticker saying, “Have You Whipped Your Child Today?”41 If parental authority was lost because of a loosening of repressive morality, repression can resurrect it. Buckley explains:

It is now legal in Sweden for a father to sleep with his daughter but not to smack his son... the critics of the Moral Majority simply can’t stand the fact that there are schools out there that preach enduring truths, or at least that is how they denominate them. It isn’t that *Penthouse* (where the article criticizing the Reverend appeared) doesn’t believe in enduring truths, it does: The right, for instance, to enjoy undifferentiated sexual gratification is one of their enduring truths, and God knows they’ll try hard to tell you how to do it.42

If we treat most adults as if they were responsible, letting them take charge of how harshly to whip their kids, then they will in fact be responsible, Lockean citizens. And if the parents cannot be held responsible, then a redrawing of the boundary between public and private may be required. This idea touches a raw nerve in this society. All of these issues should be natural, and private. We zealously guard our illusory privacy, tense in the secret knowledge that we may not be as independent and responsible as we would like to believe.

**The recent history of the child abuse issue shows the problems of this approach. The issue of child abuse surfaced in the seventies after several decades of invisibility in the fifties and sixties. The focus on domestic violence began, as the missing-children issue did, as one of “no-cost rectitude” attending to an “easy” aspect of the problem (as opposed to neglect/poverty or incest, for example).**43

The seventies saw a growth in family-abuse programs and research. When research generated by the new public attention to the matter uniformly showed that this private problem was as
refusing her “natural” role (not one story mentioned a man’s shirking his responsibilities as a cause of abuse) simultaneously breaks and reveals the circuit between public and private.

Public acknowledgment and acceptance of homosexuality also makes the nuclear family seem a less “natural” institution. Like women's activity in public life, homosexuality also breaks the circuit previously completed by the woman in the nuclear family. As is often the case in the news, the first reports on an issue set the stage for the ones to follow. Etan Patz's well-publicized case began when he was probably abducted in 1979, before the milk cartons and shopping bags. In 1981, police found a photo in a pornographic calendar possessed by a member of the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA). The police, but not the boy's parents, thought the photo resembled Etan. Later, it turned out that the calendar was from 1968, before the boy was born. But in the meantime numerous articles appeared in all New York newspapers, on New York and New England television, and in most national magazines, associating Etan Patz with NAMBLA.

The problem seems not to be only that homosexuality exists, but that there are people who are not tucked away in harmless, isolated nuclear families. The non-family members who mess with kids are usually organized conspiratorially. Missing children are usually presumed to be victims of “stranger abduction,” a crime of predatory cruelty usually committed by pedophiles, pornographers, black market baby sellers or childless psychotics bidding desperately for parenthood.49

The New York Times quotes Kee MacFarlane, director of the Child Sex Abuse Diagnostic and Treatment Center in Los Angeles:

We're dealing with a conspiracy. An organized operation of child predators designed to prevent detection. The preschool [Virginia MacMartin's Manhattan Beach, California, school, the subject of an enormous scandal covered nationwide, possibly involving dozens of children, sadistic day-care workers, sex, and pornography], in such cases, serves as a ruse for a larger unthinkable network of crimes against children.50

She goes on to describe how during the day at the preschool, the tots were flown by plane to a centralized location where, “hundreds allege,” they had been photographed pornographically. Her proof is that many of the kids know the same rhymes as kids in day-care centers in the parts of the country to which they say they were flown. Even though abuse is most likely to occur in isolated rural families, the media focus on a conspiratorial sex ring which “may have greater financial, legal, and community resources at its disposal than those attempting to expose it.”51

In a society so enamored of the privatized, solitary individual, it is easier to see conspiracies out there, to construct a group parallel to us isolated folks, a group that mirrors us in almost every way, doing the things we silently dream of doing. They are just like us, only they are together, cozy and proud, while we are alone and ashamed of our abuse. If NAMBLA did not exist, we would have had to invent it.

All the News That Fits Our Idea of What’s Fit to Print

Standard media practices twist the issues in crucial ways. Since journalists cannot report on the infinitude of the cosmos, they select according to the conventions of their trade. Unfortunately, the conventions systematically sift out certain kinds of events, and give certain kinds of slants to stories, even when the reporter’s intentions are the best. Specific media conventions can partially account for the fashion in which the missing/abused-child issue is framed.

For example, “events orientation” is often cited as a journalistic routine that systematically selects certain kinds of occurrences. Single cases of domestic abuse almost never become news, while single disappearances or charges of abuse in day-care centers receive the lion's share of the stories. Yet domestic abuse is no less important or interesting than the other two, except that the domestic problem happens so often, it’s “nothing new,” not eventful.

Unlike other kinds of news stories, however, events surrounding missing and abused children are secret, invisible, and never, by definition, in the presence of responsible adults who could serve as witnesses. The eventfulness usually comes from the novelty of allegations (a case of abused Siamese twins in a Chicago suburb called for over ten articles in the Chicago Tribune), new legal and psychiatric remedies for the problem, new laws passing, or public
reaction to the problem (as in the case of the volunteers searching for missing Kevin Collins). Even when single cases of abuse do become news, they have already been mediated by "common sense" public and institutional reaction to the original problem. The "events orientation," then, is, in issues of missing/abused children as well as in other areas, really a question of authority. Anything is a potential event, but only certain occurrences get defined that way. The question should be, who has the authority to define something as an event?

For example, in the case of home abuse, but not missing children, a wide array of "primary definers" is possible: is it a crime or an illness? A private, community, or state issue? Do parents always know how much discipline is enough? Does the definition come from the (punitive) police, the (regulating) social services agencies, the (moralizing) president and church, or extra-state (feminist, in general) counselors, sociologists, and psychotherapists? For home abuse—but not abuse outside the home—there is a plethora of primary definers, none truly primary.

As described earlier, the federal government is no longer interested in the more private forms of maltreatment. Out of this plethora of possible definers, then upon whom does it rest to define the issue? Police are notoriously afraid of involvement in domestic quarrels. Families rarely bring offenders from within their own ranks to court, since most victims are interested in ending the abuse, not the family, and bringing the abuser to court does not further that end. Mental health professionals and domestic violence counselors may be primary definers, but their theoretical, and often explicitly oppositional, feminist analysis of the problem's roots are especially confusing to the press.

The issue of missing children, however, can clearly be cast as a crime problem. The FBI, and more recently, the NCMEC (funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency, a branch of the Department of Justice), keep statistics on this issue. As described earlier, the missing-children issue is easier for politicians to use to score moral points without offending anyone. So legislators, mostly Republican, solemnly intone the inflated statistics without bothering to inquire as to their veracity.

Further, the empiricist orientation of the press—an orientation that assumes that "the facts speak for themselves," rather than assuming that a theory, implicit or explicit, conscious or unconscious, exists for the reporter—underlies the arrangement and selection of news facts. It is instructive to watch the media try to cover so ubiquitous a form of deviance as parental child abuse, in the face of no definitive statistics. The statistics rely on theoretical interpretations, as my example of incest showed. Articles flounder through theory after theory desperately trying to fit the various non-common-sensible theories on child abuse into a seamless common-sensible narrative. What happens in the process is a perfectly illogical, perfectly incoherent blend of discrete idea units. The glue holding them together is nothing more than the style with which they are treated—the smooth overlay of banter that joins together all bits of information as if they were nothing but a collection of interchangeable parts. Even when the journalists do discuss seemingly radical theories of child abuse, or present facts that have the potential to negate or undermine the message of the rest of the article, the slippery gloss painted over the whole article makes it possible for readers to skate right through the disturbing facts as if they were never mentioned.

For example, Newsweek ran a cover story on child sexual abuse in which the writers told parents, "Don't blame yourself. Children should be taught, even before anything happens to them, that sexual abuse is not the victim's fault." Already we have shifted, after three words, from the parents onto absolving the child of blame. But more striking is the contradiction between this no-fault approach and the approach highlighted in a yellow box inserted in the main article.

In the insert, a man "whose expertise comes from being a convicted pedophile himself" declares:

The single parent family is the most important group to reach [to solve the problem of sexual abuse]. Generally the mother is unstable emotionally...if the mother is of immoral character and allows her boyfriend to "move in" then it is certain the eight year old will have her own boyfriend.... Many single parents, and married ones also, are so wrapped up in "self" that they actually pawn their children off on the pedophile...53

There is no discussion of the pros and cons of these two approaches. Given the strong resonance between the expert pedophile's theory and the already present anxiety surrounding the issues of the solitary parent, the critique of "being wrapped up in
self" probably seems more persuasive. The pedophile has found a cause for the problem which fits in well with the tensions already involved in living in an excessively privatized society; yet the other experts in the article could find no common-sense cause for the problem.

The same article declares, "It is no longer enough for parents to warn their children against accepting candy or rides from strangers." Out of the eight photos and one cartoon, six illustrations are clearly about stranger abuse, two are ambiguous, and only one (a drawing) illustrates a situation of abuse by a relative. All this despite the fact that there is no clear evidence on rates of increase of abuse by strangers.

In all of these anecdotes, illustrations, and quotations, the emotionally gripping narrative contradicts and probably overwhelms the brief factual statements. The article says that no one is to blame but shows that parents are to blame; says that greedy strangers in raincoats are not the main culprits but shows that the family is pure; says that men are the perpetrators and shows that women are. It takes hypothesized statistics and illustrates them as if they are fact; it ignores ambiguity in order to make an "eventful" story. This slippery incoherence reflects in part the organization of the national magazine institutions. They write by committee, each bureau offering its input, and then the pieces are stitched together stylistically.54

In a Newsweek article mentioned earlier, an official from the NCMEC declares that the fifty thousand figure came out of the sky. The rest of the article, however, warns us, as Senator Arlen Specter is cited claiming, that "millions of children remain at risk, vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and murder."55

The typical article in the mass press coyly retreats from a direct approach, so it repeatedly confuses the problems of child molestation at home and away from home, and posits contradictory or tautological solutions. The parents, articles often suggest, should protect the children from abuse and molestation. Practically in the same breath, the articles often declare that the parents usually perpetrate the abuse and molestation.

Judging "media effects" is often a futile enterprise, but it should come as no shock that public views of abuse correspond with the images presented in the media in some important ways. Finkelhor's survey discovered that parents were relatively well informed about a number of facts about child sexual abuse, but found that they were woefully unaware of the need to warn kids about abuse from closer quarters.56 They enthusiastically warn kids not to go into the woods or cars alone with strangers and do not talk to them about how to protect themselves from relatives, friends, or the parents themselves.

For Finkelhor, these inconsistencies emerged "despite all the media coverage they claim to have had (90 per cent saw something about it on TV, 85 per cent had also read something about it)."57 He says, "The problem, we guess, is not entirely one of misinformation. If the public had gotten other accurate information about sexual abuse it has certainly heard the truth that abusers are more likely to be intimates than strangers."58 He attributes the lack of knowledge to parents' psychological resistance. I think it is clear that rather than remaining in the dark despite the recent media binge, parents have been misled by the media as much as they have been deluding themselves. Most reporters are as "resistant" as the parents; many of the reporters are parents too, after all.

In sum, media empiricism prevents reporters from presenting conflicting theories coherently, yet the problem of home abuse is too widespread to be understood by simple common sense. Stories often simply state decontextualized random incidents without commenting on the fact that these are everyday occurrences; or they blend indigestible chunks of contradictory approaches together in a bewildering sauce of "common sense." This often neutralizes any particular ideas, especially those already foreign to the reader. The missing child/kiddie porn/day-care molesters emphasis fits much more neatly into a larger political picture, requiring none of the heavy theoretical baggage necessary to understand home abuse.

What do the articles do, then? This issue is "easy" for the politicians; it's "easy" for the papers. What does it do for the children? A few missing children seem to have been found, perhaps in part because of the ads displayed on numerous commodities. This is important, but an equivalent amount of attention paid to domestic abuse would have probably saved more lives. Many children are probably more afraid of strangers than before.

The photos' most pervasive effect has been an ironic one. Be-
cause of the day-care scandals of the past two years, day-care workers in many cities now must agree to be fingerprinted and allow the exposure of their criminal records. Hundreds of thousands of children have been voluntarily or mandatorily fingerprinted nationwide; many have had computerized dental records implanted in their teeth, to help identify them if they are kidnapped. Many people say they are afraid of being too friendly to children for fear of being accused of molesting them. Children and their caretakers are permanently coded, numbered, and computerized in the interests of preserving the sacred family’s privacy. The focus away from parental abuse pretends to be one away from regulation and interference from the state, while it imposes an even greater system of regulation. The Reaganoid fantasy of the welfare state—the nightmare of total administration of all aspects of life—is being realized in the era of the fingerprinted, computerized, untouchable child.

“The FBI can help you find your stolen car or refrigerator, but not your stolen child.” Your fridge or car has a serial number, and could be searched for nationally. Until the computerized missing children list was created, however, there was no nationally coordinated procedure for dealing with missing children. In most periodicals, several articles repeated the litany about the car and refrigerator, to demonstrate the “messed up” values of our society. The missing-children scare then seems an issue of reinstating human values.

Missing children’s faces appear on ads to sell drapes at J.C. Penney and a Maxi-Rower (to “Help You Lose Fat and Flab††”). Insurance companies capitalize on the scare by selling missing-child insurance. As corporations take advantage of the reassertion of non-instrumental values, they find there is a lot of money to be had in the missing-children plague. Dole Processed Foods even made a discount coupon campaign out of it, donating part of the extra profit to the NCMEC. One “Find the Children” campaign in Texas was shut down after it became known that the managers had intended to funnel donations to a group of Central American mercenaries.

The photos sell products and they bring fast moral images—not morality itself, but a reasonable facsimile of it—to the market. They seem to fight against the social structure which ravages private life, using it for instrumental ends. At the same time, the ads boost sales and inspire new faith in the commodity form and in the morality of capitalism.

What Is Old and What Is New about Missing Children

LONG AGO, Europeans thought gypsies and Jews were stealing their children. When “child saving” first began in the United States in the 1870s, Italians were supposed to be the bad parents, with their poverty and their foreign ways. State and upper-class intervention was necessary. Now we have mythical strangers and demonized gays.

This new scare can be seen as a continuation of the interpenetration of public and private, coupled, in American tradition, with a deification of the overemphatically defined private. Americans are proud to be “independent” thinkers, yet large institutions—state, market, media—can so manipulate home life in part because of the lack of community engendered by such “independence.” Such privatized relativism calls for a more subtle manipulation than was needed when people did not generally think they were “doing their own thing.”

The missing-children scare can be seen as a handy reassurance that those impersonal systems are in fact moral. By usurping some of the attention that should go to domestic abuse, the missing-children issue reassures us that the privacy of the nuclear family is a haven, not a site of more regulation. The missing-children issue is a means of avoiding public debate on the theoretical and political implications of the ubiquity of domestic abuse. “Missing children” allow us to continue without a public sphere; but public debate on the real dangers this society poses to children is what we need. “Missing children” is a symptom; lack of truly public discussion of morality and of the changing nuclear family is the disease. The fears surrounding women’s changing roles are new in degree, but, as discussed earlier, not in kind. Women are now, more than in the recent past, giving cause for the fears, but the fears have been at work even when the women have been at home.

The invocation of moral spectacles by public figures deepens this tradition. In the past, church officials raised these spectacles; now politicians do. Perhaps some politicians were even as unable to distinguish images of morality from the real thing as our president is.
Perhaps what is genuinely new is the velocity of the issue's circulation, or, more generally, the relation between this issue and the media that carry it to our homes. Past moral spectacles did not circulate at the same velocity with which the contemporary ones move. Things "get old" fast in media-land; we need a new issue each month to maintain our interest.

We expect, to some extent, that our problems will fit into a media format. A missing child's parent says, "I grew up watching The F.B.I. Story with Efrem Zimbalist Jr. blazing across the screen as he solved all these kidnappings... it was hard for us to realize we wouldn't get an answer soon." Stanley Patz, the father of the famed Etan, says with sad surprise, "This is no movie where you can cut to another scene." This missing child "set the stage" for others to follow. The setting of Etan's assumed abduction was easy for media consumption: "On the northeast corner is Food, a restaurant in which a scene from An Unmarried Woman was shot... on the other corner is Dean and DeLuca, a food store in which a scene from Starting Over was shot."

In the past, religion provided more of the formats for circulating, structuring, and interpreting moral life. Media may not be any more pervasive or controlling than, for example, religion, but, as I have shown, the means by which an issue circulates do affect the nature of the issue itself. It is not necessarily "more" or "less," just different.

Morality has always been a prickly problem in this privatized society. The velocity of media circulation only aggravates the problem of morality. In earlier times, a monolithic religion allowed a dogmatic, constant faith in some seemingly universal standards; such standards are hard to come by in a world that redefines "what is important" so speedily. Jameson's simulacrum world has absorbed this American common sense anxiety over morality, and re-presented it to the "public" as yet another fashion in the simulacrum scene.

Yet the simulacrum is profoundly amoral, deeply shallow, and so the anxiety over our lack of deep, true standards only increases through this simulacrum vision of morality. We wonder if we are only following a trend rather than acting out of genuine loving kindness, thus exacerbating the lack of faith we already have in our moral integrity. Morality is day-to-day, messy, and deep. It is not instant. In some cases, the issues may actually be important; leftists may not even be exempt from this moral trendiness.

Stay tuned for more mediated morality: we have already witnessed Hands Across America, Anita Bryant's "Save the Children," the California Briggs Initiative, Nancy Reagan's "Say No To Drugs," Mothers Against Drunk Driving, "Crack Down on Krak," Expect also new simulacrum issues which will "wrap up" our anxieties about women, family, and morality. We see in late May, 1986, for example, in nearly every popular publication — from the Wall Street Journal to Newsweek, results of a yet unpublished study showing that women who delay marriage are getting their just desserts. Focusing on a career to the exclusion of marriage in the early twenties greatly diminishes a woman's chances of marriage. Too bad; such a woman may never have the opportunity to sport a "Baby on Board" sticker on her car. Without this bumper-sticker to quicken the morals of the driver at her tail, the uncaring driver will surely bash her car in from behind.

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