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12. 'In Plain Sight': British Television Exposés of Savile, Brand, and Harris

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Abstract

The 2012 revelations that the late broadcaster Jimmy Savile was a serial sexual abuser became one of the biggest British media stories of the 21st century. Subsequent years saw further sexual assault and harassment allegations and exposés of celebrities from all sectors of entertainment. Television responded with numerous documentaries, dramas and reports into these scandals. This chapter focuses on three such accounts, all released within six months of each other in 2023: documentaries *Rolf Harris: Hiding in Plain Sight* (ITV) and *Dispatches – Russell Brand: In Plain Sight* (Channel 4) and drama *The Reckoning* (BBC One). These examples will be analyzed regarding their timing within a close period; their presence on public service broadcast networks where the stars had worked; and the repeated use of 'in plain sight' implying a level of cross-platform branding for this kind of scandal. Whilst it's a common phrase, it is no coincidence that the Brand and Harris documentaries used it after its long association with Savile. The transgressions of these stars represent a violation of the trust contract between TV and its audience. It is unsurprising that broadcasters attempt to win back that trust through programming such as this. However, by reinforcing the 'in Plain Sight' message, these shows serve as a slightly uncomfortably 'mea culpa'; one that is tempered with a message of 'they hoodwinked us too'.

In this chapter I discuss UK television's on-screen response to allegations of sexual abuse by three of its stars: Jimmy Savile, Russell Brand and Rolf Harris. I focus specifically on three 2023 TV shows: *The Reckoning* (BBC One, 2023), *Russell Brand: In Plain Sight* (Channel 4, 2023) and *Rolf Harris: Hidden In Plain Sight* (ITV1, 2023). I chose them partly because they were released within a few months of each other and, at the time of writing, were the most recent examples of their kind, but also because each of the presenters concerned had worked on the network broadcasting these programs.

Russell Brand: In Plain Sight is an investigative documentary putting forward new claims about the presenter using a combination of victim interviews, expert talking heads, archive footage and narration. *Rolf Harris: Hiding In Plain Sight* uses a similar format, although its focus is not on a new investigation, but on examining a historical case study as well as giving us the somewhat 'happy' ending of how Harris was investigated, charged and imprisoned for his crimes. *The Reckoning*, covering Jimmy Savile's career and scandals, is somewhat different - a hybrid form of drama and documentary, billed as a 'factual drama'. This TV format is distinct from other, similar, formats that fictionalize real events such as re-enactment or docudrama due to this hybridity. Re-enactment aims to recreate events 'as they happened' and docudrama (a term that tends to be used by academics more than program makers – see Hayes, 2024) tends to offer a fictionalized version of 'truth' using narrative storytelling. However, a 'fictional drama' blends dramatized scenes with archive clips, news reports, talking heads and victim accounts; the drama and documentary elements each speaking to, and contextualizing, the other.

These three programs are part of a bigger corpus of documentaries about celebrities accused of abuse (including Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, R Kelly and Gary Glitter, among others). Horeck (2024, 233) notes that such programs are often categorized as true crime, but there

are some stylistic key differences between what she calls a ‘#MeToo documentary’ and more traditional ‘true crime’ television, which usually focuses on murder:

the driving motivation of these documentaries is to investigate how male abusers misused their power... The structuring “mystery” of these series, such as it is, concerns not whether the men did it but how they got away with it. Second, where true crime blockbusters tend to concern murder cases in which the (female) victims are unable to offer their stories, in #MeToo documentaries the victim/survivors are on hand to testify.

Whilst true crime is generally not known for progressive gender politics, this particular sub-category differs to some extent in that ‘these documentaries function as victim advocacy pieces, privileging and corroborating victim-survivor testimonies and showing critical awareness of the structural underpinnings of gendered violence’ (Horeck and Negra, 2022, 1565).

There are challenges to using the voices of survivors in true crime formats, however. Anita Biressi notes that the genre ‘muddies the boundaries of private and public spheres’ (2004, 410) with its twin emphases on recounting private traumatic experience and providing public entertainment and information. Biressi and others (e.g. Boyle (2018b), Horeck (2020), Murley (2008)) have questioned the ethics of people reliving trauma for the camera. Although press releases for all three programs I discuss mention the importance of survivor testimony and take care to note their ethical practice, they are still asking people to publicly recount, often in explicit detail, experiences of assault.

Although survivors’ voices are central to celebrity abuse documentaries, the key selling point remains the celebrity perpetrators. Boyle notes that many contributors to Jimmy Savile documentaries have appeared repeatedly (and several reappear in *The Reckoning*). Whilst it may be convenient for producers to reuse willing participants, Boyle ponders ‘whether returning to the same victim/survivors keeps them perpetually trapped in Savile’s shadow’ (2018b, 398).

‘In Plain Sight’ as a brand

All three shows make use of the ‘in plain sight’ phrase which has become so closely associated with such accounts across UK media that it has become a form of branding – the Harris and Brand documentaries clearly adopt the phrase due to its ubiquity, and *The Reckoning* draws heavily from the book *In Plain Sight: The Life and Lies of Jimmy Savile*, by journalist Dan Davies (2012) who interviewed Savile extensively towards the end of his life. In documentaries and journalistic accounts dating back to the earliest Savile coverage in 2012 (Boyle, 2018a), this phrase repeatedly appears in coverage of scandals involving TV personalities in a way it doesn’t in comparable coverage of other accused celebrities such as Prince Andrew or Kevin Spacey:

- ‘He managed to get them all to look the other way, even though almost every one of them would have heard rumors. He was hiding in plain sight.’ (*Panorama: Jimmy Savile – What the BBC Knew*, BBC One, 2012)
- ‘Rolf Harris, Jimmy Savile and Stuart Hall... were serious sexual criminals, pedophiles hiding in plain sight.’ (*National Treasure, National Disgrace*, Channel 5, 2022)
- ‘Alleged rapist Russell Brand was hiding in plain sight – abusers often do’ (Spratt, *Refinery* 29, 2023)

This emphasis may be because TV is often regarded as an intimate medium, due to its location within the home, and the idea that audiences have a more familiar relationship with these personalities than with other celebrities. The phrase has become particularly synonymous with Savile due to the retrospective reframing of him as someone who was always ‘creepy’, and whose public presentation often included allusions to sordid secrets beneath his eccentric image.

The BBC’s reckoning with Jimmy Savile

Jimmy Savile was a TV personality, DJ, and charity fundraiser who became famous in the 1960s. His 2011 death was accompanied by a lavish funeral with extensive news coverage and public processions of the coffin. In January 2012, the *Sunday Mirror* (Owens, 2012) reported that the BBC had pulled a *Newsnight* investigation into Savile the previous year. However, it was in August 2012 that the story of Savile’s crimes really gained traction as the *Mirror* revealed ITV were making a documentary exposing him (Greer and McLaughlin, 2013, 2021). This documentary, *Exposure: The Other Side of Jimmy Savile*, revealed him to have been a serial sexual abuser, and featured several victims recalling being abused, many as children.

Subsequent investigations uncovered sexual abuse of women and children (and, according to some accounts, possibly even the dead) over the whole of his career. Savile has been frequently referred to as one of the most serious sexual abusers in the country’s history, with 450 known cases (Gray and Watt, 2013). This ITV documentary was followed by many more: on UK television alone, there have been at least twelve programs (both single episode documentaries and multi-part series) covering the Savile scandal, in addition to news bulletins, discussion shows, podcasts and countless print, online and academic articles.

There are several reasons why Savile has been repeatedly returned to: most obviously, the large number of cases (with the true figure likely more), but also because of his visibility, power and connections. He was a huge presence in the entertainment industry, beginning his career (and his abuses) on the club and pirate radio circuits, but was especially known for presenting BBC radio and TV shows from the 1960s to 1990s, most notably the youth-oriented *Jim’ll Fix It* and *Top of The Pops*. Many victims describe abuse taking place during his work for the BBC, including in his dressing rooms.

The BBC is not the only major institution he was associated with. He mixed with celebrities, politicians and royalty, including Margaret Thatcher and the then-Prince Charles. As a charity fundraiser, he had long-standing associations with hospitals, children’s homes, schools and the Catholic Church, and abused victims in those locations during his ‘charity work’.

Of the many TV programs dedicated to Savile since 2012, around half were shown on the BBC itself, in addition to coverage on its news, crime and current affairs programs such as *Crimewatch* and *Newsnight*.

The BBC positions itself as the ‘nation’s broadcaster’ and as such, its ‘social contract’ with its viewers was tarnished by Savile in a way from which it has never fully recovered (Clarke, 2012; Wheatley, 2020). The corporation’s first onscreen attempt to reckon with its failings came in a *Panorama* special, ‘What the BBC Knew’ (2012) four weeks after ITV’s exposé. Central to this documentary was the story that fellow BBC current affairs strand, *Newsnight*, was preparing a program exposing Savile in late 2011 but it was shelved.

The opening voiceover tells us that ‘No organization is under more fire than the one that made Jimmy Savile a star, the BBC. Jimmy Savile’s victims have faced years of pain. We

owe it to them and to our audiences to understand how this could have happened, and to make sure that everything we do ensures that nothing like this could ever happen again.’ There is a sense of ‘accountability’ proffered here: *we’re examining ourselves, identifying our failings, to the victims and to you, our viewers, and we will do better in the future*. This same ground is retread through subsequent BBC documentaries, however, what this ‘better’ might look like is never really explained.

The filming of a dramatized version of Savile’s career and crimes was announced in 2020, and was controversial from the start. Although there had previously been a controversy-attracting stage play (Jonathan Maitland’s *An Audience with Jimmy Savile*, 2015), this was nowhere near the scale of the nation’s biggest broadcaster investing in a multi-part TV series. Critics asked why a drama was needed when there were already multiple documentaries (Aitken, 2023; Mangan, 2023a). Many asked why the BBC were behind it when they had been heavily criticized in the wake of the scandal (Griffiths, 2020; Harrison, 2021), not only for apparently enabling (or at best turning a blind eye) to his activities, but also for blocking the *Newsnight* investigation:

It also feels insidiously callous and thoughtless that an organization that played a role in glorifying a sex offender and profiting from him, while covering up his actions for many decades, are once again capitalizing on his “brand” and the fascination that viewers have with monsters and true crime. (Agarwal, *The Independent*, 2021)

It is worth noting here that *The Reckoning* was commissioned by the BBC, but made by a third-party production company, ITV Studios (the commercial wing of its UK broadcasting ‘rival’). BBC executives explained the rationale for the commission in an accompanying press release:

Executive producer, Jeff Pope, says: “I think this is a story that has to be told. We must understand why a man like Jimmy Savile seemed to remain immune for so long to proper scrutiny and criminal investigation.”

Piers Wenger, Controller, BBC Drama, says: “The story of Jimmy Savile is one of the most emotive and troubling of our times. We do not intend to sensationalize these crimes but to give voice to his victims. We will work with survivors to ensure their stories are told with sensitivity and respect and to examine the institutions which Jimmy Savile was associated with and the circumstances in which these crimes took place. Drama has the ability to tackle sensitive real-life subjects and consider the impact of a crime on its survivors and what lessons can be learnt to stop this ever happening again.” (BBC Press release, 2020)

The drama experienced several production delays, attracting much press commentary, such as Mark Lawson’s speculation in *The Guardian* that ‘Perhaps no one involved in The Reckoning quite reckoned on how multiply problematic Savile’s return to BBC One might be’ (2023). *The Reckoning* was finally broadcast in autumn 2023. Much like other ‘factual dramas’ of its type, including the highly-lauded *Mr. Bates vs the Post Office* (2024), also from ITV Studios, it is a drama-documentary hybrid, where dramatized scenes from Savile’s life and career are interspersed with scenes of a fictionalized Dan Davies (Mark Stanley) interviewing elderly Savile (Steve Coogan), archive clips of the real Savile, and talking heads from real survivors.

Helen Wheatley notes, in an article predating *The Reckoning*, that:

Many documentaries... begin with news footage of Savile's funeral to remind us—and perhaps reassure us—of his death... The funeral also stands as a representative moment when masses of people, unaware of his crimes, gathered together to watch Savile “in the flesh” for one last time. In the posthumous documentary, however, this scene is the marker of a shift from public mourning to a kind of televisual trauma. (2020, p74)

<Figure 12.1 here>

Figure 12.1. *The Reckoning*, episode one (BBC One, 2023). Screenshot by the author.

This is precisely how *The Reckoning* opens, first with a black screen outlining the extent of his public influence (fig. 1), then archive news footage of the pomp and ceremony of his funeral, and the priest at his service reading out his associations with a large list of public institutions:

His memory is honored by the presence of the Lord Lieutenant of West Yorkshire, who today represents His Royal Highness Prince Charles. Also, the Mayor of Leeds and the Mayors of Scarborough and Otley with their civic dignitaries. Members of the Royal Marines and the BBC. It is impossible to list all the charitable causes which he supported and espoused, but representing them all in a special way are those for which he is most well-known. Stoke Mandeville Hospital, Leeds General Infirmary and Broadmoor, to name but a tiny few.

This list of accreditations might have been read at the time as confirmation of his status as a good citizen. Now we're invited to understand it as a list of organizations that failed in their duty of care – and the rest of the series shows us how.

After this footage, the screen fades to black with further text (fig 2) that highlights the ‘in plain sight’ nature of Savile's offending.

<Figure 12.2 here>

Figure 12.2. *The Reckoning*, episode one (BBC One, 2023). Screenshot by the author.

We then move to talking head accounts from several of his victims:

Susan: When I heard he'd died, you know what, I think I was actually pleased... On the other hand, I also thought, "He's got away with it."

Darien: It was...good riddance. But it's also that he got away with something that was...appalling.

The first dramatized scene has an elderly Savile meet Davies for the first time, welcoming him into his flat. Whilst real interviews between the two men took place over many years at multiple venues (Davies, 2012), the dramatized encounters all occur in Savile's living room. Davies' role is to hold Savile to ‘account’ for his crimes and to expose the ‘real’ man behind the public persona. In their first meeting, Savile asks Davies why he is interested in him:

Davies: You're a very famous and intriguing man.

Savile: I'm also a very boring man. There's no hidden depths to me.

The exchange continues with Davies winning over Savile by saying he had been a fan since childhood and had actively followed his career.

Savile: Why don't we give it a go? But it has to be the truth, or there's no point. | know no other way.

Davies: And I can ask anything? No no-go areas?

Savile: Ask away. I'm ready to tell all. Where do you want to start?

Davies: At the beginning, your childhood?

Savile: Didn't have one. Next question.

Throughout the four episodes Savile continually evades questioning whilst claiming to be an open book. As Davies asks him about his career, we are taken to different scenes, from being a club DJ in the 1960s, up to an appearance in *Celebrity Big Brother* UK (Channel 4, 2006). Alongside his entertainment career, we see Savile conducting 'charity work' and abusing victims in hospitals, schools and other public institutions, including a scene where he is left alone with a corpse, a nod to rumors of his necrophilia. These dramatic scenes are interspersed with accounts of the victims and multiple archive clips of Savile from television programs, adverts and other public appearances, giving the drama scenes credence in terms of showing the documentary 'evidence' of the kind of man he was and the fame he experienced.

What might this dramatization be trying to do that is different from all the existing documentaries? I believe there are three key factors. The first is to do with the accounts of the victims. Most are now in their 50s, 60s, and 70s and have featured in numerous documentaries. However, the dramatization uses younger actors, as if the viewer might find the stories more shocking when seen through the expressions of children 'in the moment' rather than being recounted by their middle-aged selves.

The second is by including several adult characters throughout who act as moral compasses and whom we are encouraged to empathize with as viewers. Whilst some characters are in thrall to Savile's celebrity (usually managers at the different organizations) there are others who see him for who he 'really' was and raise concerns (mainly 'ordinary' workers), only to have concerns dismissed or silenced due to the publicity and value Savile brought to their institution, a lack of clear 'evidence' and/or the worry of him taking legal action. This gives the impression that in most organizations, including the BBC, there were still 'good people' trying to do the 'right thing'. There are numerous reasons why these characters may have been included, but presumably one is to try and reassure viewers that these major institutions, including the BBC and NHS, were more naïve and in thrall to the cult of celebrity than wholly corrupt.

The final difference from the straight documentary tellings of the story is in the way the elderly Savile is portrayed as having to face a 'reckoning' in private, despite him never receiving one publicly. Coogan's Savile is shown unravelling, particularly in the final episode, where he is shown begging for absolution from God. One of his final exchanges with Davies shows the journalist acting as prosecutor, presenting Savile with damning evidence as well as reminding us all how his behavior was conducted 'in plain sight':

Davies: When I sit and I go through everything you've written or said, it's like you're constantly giving hints that there's a dark side.

Savile: Please elaborate.

Davies: You did a game show with David Frost wearing a sweatshirt with "I'm an animal" on the front, and when he asked why, you said to, "Give victims fair warning." You spoke about being feared in every girls' school in Britain and about

using wrestling holds on girls in the back of cars. And when Frost asked you what you were going to do next, you replied, "Anyone I can lay my hands on." You were basically advertising to the world that you're a sexual predator. I mean, the truth is pretty well staring us in the face if only we'd look.

Savile: What's the point of committing the perfect crime...If nobody knows you've done it?

There is a form of catharsis, and possible reassurance for the viewer: he may not have faced criminal charges but, in private he was tormented. The title *The Reckoning* operates on multiple levels: a reckoning for Savile of the kind he didn't receive in life; a form of possible justice for his victims in having their stories told, but also a reckoning for the institutions and individuals that supported him in life. However, this 'reckoning' is also clearly where the fictionalization is most apparent. In an interview about the series, Dan Davies, whilst praising much of its 'accuracy,' admits that this scene was unlikely to have ever happened in reality:

There was never a sense that he was going to reveal all to me... no way he would have. His epitaph on his tombstone was 'It was good while it lasted'. He wanted to get to his grave, that was his end goal. Surely, he knew that it was going to come out afterward... He is the only one that doesn't have to reckon with it. (in Ford, 2023)

Savile is one of the most notorious examples of a celebrity sexual offender, and, like Harvey Weinstein, is often portrayed as a monstrous figure. Whilst the emphasis on Savile and Weinstein as the 'worst of the worst' is partly due to the scale of their alleged crimes and the power they wielded, Boyle argues that their physical unattractiveness also plays a role: 'they, though unquestionably powerful media figures, never embodied certain norms of their industry, including physically and aesthetically' (2018b, 389-90). Savile's monstrousness casts him, according to Helen Wheatley, 'as a traumatizing television specter extraordinaire: not just traumatizing to his victims and to the wider audience but to the institution [of TV] itself' (2020, 72) and as we will see, his specter looms large over the other two programs discussed in this chapter, as if he were the arch-predator in whose stead the others followed.

A Brand in crisis? *Dispatches* from Channel 4.

Whilst Savile's crimes were only widely acknowledged after his death, the next example concerns a living celebrity who actively denies the claims made against him and (at the time of writing) is yet to be charged with a criminal offence. (In Nov 2023, a civil lawsuit was brought against him by an extra who worked on the film *Arthur*, but at the time of writing, there has been no formal outcome). Russell Brand is a former comedian, presenter, and actor who became famous in the early 2000s, largely as a host on MTV and Channel 4/E4. During the 2020s, he pivoted to podcasts, social media, YouTube and the talking circuit, where he presents himself as an 'activist', particularly speaking out against 'mainstream media'.

Russell Brand: In Plain Sight was a special episode of Channel 4's investigative series *Dispatches*. It featured several anonymized women accusing him of sexual assault. Unusually, this was a 90-minute episode shown on a Saturday night as opposed to the usual weeknight 60 minutes. It was billed in listings simply as a '*Dispatches* Special Investigation' until the day of broadcast. The secrecy, wasn't, according to Channel 4 executive Louisa Compton (speaking at Sheffield DocFest, 2024), to cause hype, but because the legal compliance team were working right up to the moment of broadcast 'We took a decision early on just to bill it as a [generic] *Dispatches*... I was genuinely worried that no-one would care... none of us expected there would be so much speculation'. The mysterious billing led

to constant rumors and speculation in the press and online as to what the subject matter would be. Closer to transmission, a lot of these rumors indicated it might be a #MeToo exposé for comedy. Amongst such rumors, Brand's name frequently circulated and the night before *Dispatches*' showing, Brand released a video across his social media platforms revealing he was the subject and denying all allegations (Brand, 2023).

The documentary - produced in conjunction with Hardcash productions and newspaper *The Times*, who also printed their own coverage that morning (Urwin, Wace and Morgan-Bentley, 2023) - features interviews with victims and former colleagues as well as archive footage of his career, to create a picture of Brand as a serial misogynist and alleged abuser. Archive footage highlights numerous examples of misogynistic or sexually explicit material from Brand's career including his presenting, stand-up routines and books. Often these are juxtaposed with the accounts of his accusers, including in the striking opening section where an excerpt from his stand-up is interspersed with a survivor's testimony:

Brand: it is quite nice them blow jobs, what you get sometimes. Never suggest it, you know, if the girl does it but you haven't suggested it. I like them blowjobs, right, where it goes in their neck... where it goes... Ungh! Ungh! Ungh! Nice! I wouldn't suggest it. Be wrong to suggest it. Ungh! Ungh! Ungh!

Survivor: ...He forced his penis down my throat, and I couldn't breathe, he was just choking me. I was crying and he said, "Oh, I only wanted to see your mascara run, anyway."

Brand: Ungh! Ungh! Ungh! Them blowjobs where the mascara runs! Ungh! Ungh!

To cement how egregious and 'in plain sight' Brand's behaviour was, a clip of him featuring Jimmy Savile on his BBC radio show is included:

Brand: It would be very nice to meet you one day Mr. Jimmy Savile.

Savile: Well if you've got a sister, you could meet me by bringing her along... I don't usually meet fellas, but if you've got a sister, that's OK.

Brand: I've got an assistant... part of her job description is that anyone I demand she meets, greets, massages, she has to do it. She's very attractive Jimmy.

Although at the time Savile did not have the public image he now does, this is retrospectively framed as damning evidence against Brand, not only for the misogynistic joking, but for associating with TV's biggest monster.

Many clips in this documentary (but not all) are taken from Channel 4 and E4 shows, as the TV company that platformed him more than any other, in much the same way as the BBC programs about Savile consider the failings that took place on 'their watch'. Discussion of the institutional culture at Channel 4 and production company Endemol, as well as BBC radio, the comedy circuit and on film sets, is very similar to the way that different institutions are portrayed in *The Reckoning* - some 'good' people were 'uncomfortable' and tried to raise the alarms about Brand, but nothing was done, again, partly due to the thrall of celebrity and ratings, partly due to fear of litigation, and, possibly, because victims are rarely believed.

Speaking at Sheffield's DocFest (2024), the production team said that the archive felt like watching Savile in terms of the clues all being there as to his character and behaviors, yet, they noted, Savile is now seen as a product of a bygone era and he has long since passed away. They were instead making claims about recent instances involving a living person who had not (yet) been convicted of any crime:

This wasn't from a [far] bygone age, this isn't like looking at Savile... but in 2023, would you want to be putting this out? You were thinking "did this actually go on air?" (Esella Hawkey, Exec. Producer and Creative director, Hardcash)

They also spoke about the difficulty they had getting people to speak on the record from any of the sectors he worked in, be it television, radio, comedy or film. This is despite Brand reinventing himself as a fringe figure and a right-wing Christian – perhaps pre-empting this scandal emerging at some point - who regularly rallies against mainstream media on his social platforms, thus making him a potentially easier target for investigation than others who are still actively working in the fields.

His 'outsider' status may have meant the media finally felt comfortable to accuse him, but it has also allowed him to gain support from his audience, as he frames the accusations as a conspiracy, thanking supporters for 'warning him':

I'm aware that you guys have been saying in the comments for a while, "watch out Russell, they're coming for you, you're getting too close to the truth"... it's been clear to me, or at least it feels to me, like there's a serious and concerted agenda to control these kind of spaces, and these kind of voices, and I mean my voice along with your voice. (Brand, 2023)

Brand has been modelling himself as a cultural commentator and 'activist' for several years, often using populist rhetoric such as positioning himself as a 'man of the people' (Watts, 2020; Milburn 2019; Brassett, 2016; Arthurs and Shaw, 2016). Mills, Patterson, and Quinn (2015) note that his self-positioning as a 'rebel' against mainstream culture escalated following a news scandal in which he and fellow presenter Jonathan Ross had made a prank call to actor Andrew Sachs where Brand boasted about sexual relations with Sachs' granddaughter on his Radio 2 show. Brand lost this show but retained his stardom, presenting himself both as a 'naughty' celebrity whose cheek was part of his brand, while in his memoirs and comedy he also claimed to struggle with 'sex addiction' adding a layer of vulnerability to this counter-culture persona.

Initially his political content took a more left-wing stance, but in recent years he has been courting the right-wing American audience, not only on his own social platforms but by conversing with other high-profile names in that space, such as Alex Jones and Matt Walsh. One key turning point came during the Covid pandemic, where his content started to move towards anti-vaccination and conspiracy theory. Topinka posits that: 'Brand may have adapted his focus to the ideological interests of his commenters, who displayed an interest in Covid skepticism before Brand shifted to producing Covid-sceptic content' (2024, 1), noting that this content shift led to increased viewership and comments. Whether cynical or genuine, this move has offered him a (presumably lucrative) way to connect with this audience. Flegenheimer argues that, rather than the accusations proving a true reckoning from Brand, 'His example has become a repentance-free case study in a very 2023 template for public survival, a post-post-#MeToo lesson in the spoils and fortifications available to those who are thought to be scorned by the right people'(2023).

Can you see what he is yet? Catching Rolf Harris with ITV

The final example concerns the only one of the three men who was convicted of any crimes. Rolf Harris was an Australian TV personality, painter and musician, who presented many entertainment programs in both Australia and the UK from the 1950s onwards, and was convicted and jailed for sexual offences as part of the post-Savile Operation Yewtree

investigation into sexual abuse in the entertainment industry. Harris died in 2023, just days before the two-part series, *Rolf Harris: Hiding in Plain Sight* (ITV, 2023) aired.

The documentary was announced with a press release stating that

the films will document Harris' public persona of a non-threatening eccentric who was devoted to his wife whilst revealing that actually, within the industry, Harris was increasingly known as a creep... "There are few stories as shocking as Rolf Harris. These films give a voice to Harris' accusers, and will reveal just how the seemingly wholesome 'national treasure' was able to molest and abuse his victims in plain sight." (ITV Press Centre, 2022).

The two-part documentary opens with a sequence featuring Harris on BBC One's *Jim'll Fix It* (fig. 3), where a young girl has written in asking to meet him:

<Figure 12.3 here>

Figure 12.3. Rolf Harris and Jimmy Savile on *Jim'll Fix It*, from *Rolf Harris: Hiding in Plain Sight*, ITV, 2013. Screengrab by the author.

Footage from the archive TV episode is interspersed with voiceovers from different survivors and other talking heads who will feature in the documentary:

Savile: Now, you see this young lady, sir? She wishes that she could help you with one of your paintings. Do you think I may leave her in your charge?

Harris: In my capable hands here. Right.

Voiceover 1: He just seemed completely safe, completely kind. Fascinating, creative, talented.

Harris: Give them a big smile. Cos they only see the back of your head otherwise, you see.

VO2: Rolf was a star. He was pure unadulterated, safe family viewing.

VO3: I can remember watching Rolf on TV when I was a kid. He was a charismatic, harmless-looking figure, and he touched millions of hearts.

Harris: She's anxious to rush away.

Savile: She is. I've got fast hold of her. Stay here and enjoy it, girl.

VO4: He said to me, you're irresistible... I was 16. He was 48... He knew that he could get away with it. He knew he could do whatever he wanted. He was given the green light to have fun with me.

The way this clip has been coupled with the voices of survivors potentially implies that Savile is pimping out the girl concerned for Harris. And yet, the girl in the clip is not one of the victims interviewed, nor is there any evidence that she was a victim of either man at all. It appears to have been chosen predominantly because of Savile's presence, although perhaps also because there are fewer controversial examples of Harris's on-air treatment of women and girls than there are of Savile or Brand.

Indeed, despite the program title, Harris appears not to have operated 'in plain sight' at all. Many commentators at the time of his arrest noted the shock value of the revelations:

There can be few people who, when the outpouring of allegations of historic child sexual abuse against the late Jimmy Savile began in 2012, did not at least acknowledge that there had always been something unsettling about the man... But Rolf Harris was different. When he was arrested in 2013 ... there was genuine shock and disbelief. Nobody saw it coming, I don't think. (Mangan, *The Guardian*, 2023b)

the widely expressed shock at Harris's arrest and conviction can be understood in terms of the cognitive dissonance that occurs when the public encounters celebrities 'out of face'... In much media surrounding the case, this dissonance was presented as so extreme it could only be explained in terms of a split identity. This construction insists the cultural affection for Harris was the result of an error; in other words, the public was fooled by Harris's pretend innocence before the more sinister truth was revealed'. (Serisier, 2020)

Savile was, apparently, obviously a monster, and Brand always overt about his sexual behaviors, but Harris was, in contrast, a cuddly, loveable figure whose public image, along with his role as a husband and father, implied trustworthiness. To try and reinforce the 'in plain sight' angle, within the series, victims of sexual harassment from the TV industry discuss how it was an open secret that he was a lech towards women. However, this wasn't widely known by the public, whereas rumors about both Savile and Brand had circulated for many years before the revelations.

All three programs discussed cover the scope of the presenters' careers and the different arenas in which they operated. However, the Savile and Brand programs are much more open about the association they had with the channels broadcasting these shows, whilst the work Harris did for ITV is only present through a few archive clips that aren't discussed at length. Both the BBC and Australia's Channel 7 are mentioned repeatedly in the series as sites where Harris worked, and Channel 7 in particular is highlighted as a workplace where female staff experienced harassment. What is especially curious about this documentary, however, is that even though Harris worked on several ITV shows, and some clips from these are used, the channel (and its regional subsidiaries) is never namechecked. This is even more curious, given that extensive time is given to the story of a victim who was abused as a teenager during the filming of *Star Games*, made by Thames Television and broadcast on the national ITV network. Clips from this show are used in both episodes, yet Thames/ITV are never mentioned in relation to it, as if ITV is somehow absolving itself of any complicity by this omission.

Harris's conviction means this documentary has more in common with traditional true crime documentaries than the other two. True crime serials often conclude with an episode about a perpetrator being caught and convicted, as well as examining the police investigation into the crimes. Whilst the police aren't involved in the Brand program due to it not (yet) being related to a criminal investigation, and in *The Reckoning* they are represented as yet another institution who failed Savile's victims by dismissing claims, in the Harris documentary the second episode's key focus is on the investigation, arrest and trial of Harris, highlighting the importance and validity of victim testimony, and the importance of the television archive (it is said that *Star Games* footage was used as evidence proving Harris's location at the time of the abuse).

TV's reckoning with its problematic personalities

Whilst these programs do give space to the stories of survivors, they are also about something more: the television industry grappling with its own failings and how to deal with the legacy of these huge personalities. There has been much discussion about how we deal with the

cultural legacy of problematic public figures (Greer and McLaughlin, 2013; Mortensen and Kristensen, 2020). There are different approaches taken, from editing them out of footage, to removing their creative works from archives and streaming platforms. In the wake of the Brand allegations, Channel 4 removed episodes of some of its most popular programs, including *Big Fat Quiz* and *The Great Celebrity Bake-Off* from its online repository. Likewise, the BBC removed many examples of Jimmy Savile from its own public archives (Furedi, 2013; Aust and Holdsworth, 2017). In some cases, removing the presence of predators has gone beyond deleting their creative works from public repositories; there has been physical removal of evidence of their presence, such as the destruction of Savile's headstone (Davies, 2012).

When I started writing this chapter, in 2023, two other high-profile presenters were forced to resign: ITV's Philip Schofield resigned after an inappropriate relationship with a young member of production staff, and senior BBC newsreader Huw Evans left his post following revelations he'd been sexually messaging with a young man. As I was finishing it in summer 2024, Evans was charged in relation to accessing images of child sexual abuse. This has left the BBC once again in a difficult situation regarding its archive. It might be simple to remove episodes of *Top of the Pops* or panel shows, especially where many other episodes exist, but Evans was a respected news anchor who broke major stories such as the death of Queen Elizabeth II. Deleting footage cannot rewrite the visibility and fame these men had, nor can organizations who worked with them deny their association. Therefore, much of the work organizations have undertaken, including showing the programs discussed in this chapter, has been to show a sense of repentance for their sins.

In the past, the BBC iPlayer archive had all traces of Savile removed. At the time of writing, searching for his name reveals three results: *The Reckoning* and two Louis Theroux documentaries: *When Louis Met Jimmy* (2000), often cited as one of the most obvious examples of Savile's 'hiding in plain sight', due to Theroux questioning him directly about allegations he likes young girls; and *Louis Theroux: Savile* (2016), in which the documentary maker comes to terms with his own relationship with Savile.

A key part of the response to these scandals has been to retrospectively reconfigure the images of these men not as beloved or trusted entertainers but as monsters and predators. Sexist jokes made on comedy panel shows are now rendered not as funny but as haunting, especially when accompanied by the voice of a victim and some chilling incidental music. Promotional shots of Savile beaming or Brand's wild hair no longer represent humorous, personable eccentrics, they are reinterpreted as the sinister faces of evil.

There is clearly something uncomfortable about the media's reckoning with these scandals. Of the three programs discussed, none focus solely on the broadcaster showing them but expand the scope to the wider contexts in which they operated: other broadcasters, film and TV production companies, the comedy and club circuits, charities, the NHS, the Catholic church and various other spheres of public and private life.

Of course, it's perfectly reasonable to point out that these were serial offenders and therefore the scope of their crimes should be paid attention to; that they raise serious questions about safeguarding and failings across so many sectors which can't be ignored. That does not, however, detract from the sense that the broadcasters are trying to portray themselves as, if not quite victims of these predators, then at least only as gullible, naïve or incompetent as everyone else, including the public at large. These men apparently had a capacity to corrupt that was somehow beyond the ability of the wider entertainment industry - or even wider society - to contain. In the initial press release announcing *The Reckoning* it mentions how

Savile, an eccentric showman... used his involvement in multiple organizations, such as hospitals, prisons, charities and the BBC, to legitimize himself. The drama will explore the way he used smoke and mirrors to conceal his wrongdoings. (BBC Press Office, 2020).

One repeated refrain in coverage of Savile is that he ‘groomed a nation’ – it’s a phrase used by one of his survivors in *The Reckoning*, directly leading into the first dramatized scene. This idea that everyone was somehow responsible for being duped by these men is only re-emphasized by Harris and Savile repeatedly being referred to in the media as ‘national treasures’ (Greer and McLaughlin, 2013; 2020) – people we ‘all’ elevated as a society when we shouldn’t have. Interestingly this phrase is used both in media coverage criticizing such men (such as Channel 5’s *National Treasure*, *National Disgrace* (2020) about Harris, Savile and Stuart Hall and Channel 4’s *National Treasure*, a drama about a fictional celebrity who is accused of sexual offences) and in coverage rebuking the public hounding of men who were then not found guilty (e.g. Channel 4’s *The Accused: National Treasures on Trial*, the title of which implies there is some level of disgrace in accusing celebrities so beloved). Even the ‘in plain sight’ phrasing and use of archive footage potentially implicates the audience: after all, someone had to be watching their TV programs, purchasing their books and attending their live shows. If the clues were all in there, then the audience should have spotted them, too.

In the light of Savile’s exposing, much was made of the entertainment industry, and other sectors, taking measures to understand what happened and, we were assured, to ensure such acts would never be repeated. The Smith report (2012), emerging out of the Savile scandal, made a number of recommendations for the BBC, which can be summarized as: present a formal response, launch an independent audit, break down barriers to collaboration between different parts of the organization, create a culture of respect, not fear, and have zero tolerance on bullying stars (Kanter and Gannage-Stewart, 2016). Whilst recommendations to present a formal response and engage with independent audits were taken up, it is less clear exactly how the remaining recommendations were implemented, particularly as numerous scandals involving alleged bullying by high-profile stars such as Jeremy Clarkson and *Strictly Come Dancing* professionals have continually plagued the organization. It is not only the BBC, of course, that is culpable of creating working environments of fear, bullying and lack of transparency, as the reports into Brand’s conduct, the case of Philp Schofield, or the numerous international examples of similar presenter scandals demonstrate.

Reports from Channel 4 and production company Banijay (who purchased Endemol) into their handling of accusations around Brand mostly exonerated the companies, disputing the claims made in the *Dispatches* documentary, although acknowledging neither company had reported concerns by staff in the way they should have (Davies, 2024; Channel 4; 2024).

It remains to be seen if these programs are genuine attempts by broadcasters to give voice to victims and apologize to their viewers, if they represent any meaningful changes to institutions and their working practices, or if they are little more than a very public performance of accountability.

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