



Media Coverage of the Michael Le Vell Trial - Headlines

Headlines in the Le Vell Trial

We have numerous concerns over the way the media has reported the Michael Le Vell trial. In this piece, we are looking at the way the headlines have supported a culture where “trial-by-media” and celebrity culture are more important than ensuring accurate representation of a trial or even ensuring that the trial itself is fair.

There are two important pieces of information to remember when reading this. Firstly, many people only read the headlines so salacious headlines, which are not accurate or involve victim-blaming serve only to perpetuate rape myths and misinformation. Secondly, headlines and standfirsts are generally written by sub-editors so don't always reflect the actual article and are rarely approved by the journalists themselves. While individual journalists do not necessarily have personal responsibility for the headlines, they are responsible for the rape myths within the articles that lead to victim-blaming headlines.

Everyone has seen the, frankly, [horrific headline](#) that the Sun ran after the verdict came in:

Le Vell's devil woman

Amazing truth behind Corrie star's Satan-obsessed accuser

It's easy to focus on this headline as evidence of misogyny because it is so salacious; however this is a mistake as it is so easy for people to dismiss it as hyperbolic and ridiculous. What are far more problematic are the subtler headlines in publications such as the Guardian and the Independent that imply that Le Vell was “innocent” before the verdict was in. Equally problematic are post-verdict headlines that fundamentally misunderstand our justice system.

The Sun headline is dreadful but it is the headlines that claim to be “fair and balanced” but which insinuate that rape myths are real that cause real harm. As with our previous piece, there are far too many examples to discuss them all. Instead, we are only going to list a few headlines that promote rape culture through subtle insinuations of the veracity of rape myths.

Pre-Verdict Headlines

Sky News ran [this piece](#) on Monday, Sept 9th. It is actually quite an innocuous headline due to the legal constraints on the media during rape trials.



Le Vell Rape Accuser Had 'Nothing To Gain'

Members of the jury are told they should find the Coronation Street actor guilty of sex abuse if they believe his alleged victim.

This headline and standfirst wouldn't attract any attention; certainly not in comparison with the Sun headline quoted above. In and of itself, the words are not problematic: if we did not live in a rape culture. But, we do live in a rape culture where victims of rape and sexual violence are either deemed liars or partly responsible for their rape. The moment the word "if" and "alleged" are used, the default for many is that the victim is lying. This isn't a conscious choice by either the writer or the reader but the constant messages within our culture about vindictive and malicious women lying for revenge changes how we interpret these sentences.

We don't read "if" and "alleged" as a legal requirement preventing the press from printing prejudicial material, which they technically are. The victim-blaming within rape culture makes us read these statements as evidence that the accused is innocent of all charges.

This headline for an article written by [Jonathan Brown in the Independent](#) on Thursday September 5th is more obviously problematic:

Michael Le Vell: Coronation Street star 'fighting for his life' during sex abuse trial

The actor denies 12 charges in all, including five counts of rape and three of indecent assault against one girl.

"Fighting for his life" is a statement taken directly from Le Vell's trial. It makes a great headline: it's short and punchy. It is also one of the most common rape myths: that being accused of rape is worse than being accused of any other crime, including murder, but also any thing that could possibly ever happen to a person: including being a victim of rape.

[This headline](#) appeared in the Herald Scotland on Thursday September 5th :

Le Vell rape case medical evidence 'neutral', says doctor

A DOCTOR who examined the girl allegedly raped by Coronation Street star Michael Le Vell agreed her findings did not prove child sex abuse had taken place.



As with the prior headlines, this statement is technically correct but it also obfuscates two important pieces of information: the first is that the girl “the girl was examined two years after the last alleged episode of abuse”. This piece of information appeared in the second to last paragraph. Secondly, and this is important for how we analyse how victim-blaming language when it’s very subtle, is that Dr. Louise O’Conner did not just say neutral. She actually said: “neutral and neither support or refute the allegations”. Whilst medical evidence showed no evidence of abuse, the headline implies that the child was not raped therefore Le Vell must be innocent.

Post-verdict headlines

Post-verdict headlines have tended to equate a not-guilty verdict with innocence. Several have gone as far as to conflate a not-guilty verdict with a false allegation. We have already addressed these issues in our first response but it is important to remember that our justice system does not equate a not guilty verdict with innocent. A not guilty verdict means that the jury did not find sufficient evidence to convict beyond a reasonable doubt.

The Daily Mail can always be counted on to produce poorly written and misogynistic articles on rape and other forms of sexual violence. [This article](#) by Jaya Narain, Louise Eccles and Martine Robinson is no exception:

Self-confessed alcoholic Coronation Street star Michael Le Vell celebrates after he is found NOT GUILTY of all child rape charges

Actor denied 12 sex offences against a young girl, including five of rape

Jury at Manchester Crown Court took 5 hours to clear him of all charges

'I am delighted obviously, it is a weight off everyone's shoulders,' he said

Star, who has played Kevin Webster for 30 years, is set to go back to Corrie

ITV admit they are planning to meet with soap stalwart 'to discuss return'

Actor's supporters say CPS shouldn't have pursued 'vindictive' case

48-year-old was forced to admit he was an alcoholic and serial adulterer

On-screen wife Sally Dynevor among cast congratulating actor



Including accusations of vindictive CPS with ITV's discussions of Le Vell's return to the soap really are quite disgraceful. This was a case of child rape that the police investigated and the CPS decided to prosecute. Labelling any prosecution of a rape case as "vindictive" makes it more difficult for rape victims to come forward. This may be what Le Vell's supporters are claiming but it is hardly a new tactic by supporters of those being tried in criminal court. The question is why is it newsworthy in this instance? The answer is obvious: because Le Vell is a celebrity and we don't want to acknowledge just how ingrained rape culture actually is; instead it's much easier to blame lying victims and vindictive prosecutors.

Le Vell was found not guilty. A not guilty verdict, as we have said many times, does not equal innocent nor is it evidence that the CPS pursued a "vindictive" prosecution. These are rape myths.

[Jane Merrick's article](#) in the Independent goes for the "poor men" who are stigmatised by rape allegations story:

The Michael Le Vell verdict is in, but all the lessons are still to learn

Le Vell will live with the stigma for the rest of his life, but this provides no justification to change the law around anonymity in rape and sexual assault cases

Now, obviously, being arrested for child rape is a crime that has a serious stigma attached, however the focus on the perpetrator in these stories inevitably erases the victim from the narrative: at the heart of this case is not just a famous actor, there is a child. Men found not guilty of rape [and the legal definition of rape in England/ Wales requires the insertion of a penis without consent] do face certain post-verdict stigmas, as do all victims of sexual violence including those whose rapists were found guilty. The question is why we only discuss the stigma facing men found not guilty and never the stigma attached to being a victim of sexual violence in a culture that presumes most rape allegations are false?

But, there is more going on in this headline. The juxtaposition between the statements "there are lessons to be learned" with "no justification to change the law" is odd. The headline implies the opposite: that we should actually be looking at anonymity for the accused in sexual violence cases because it would be "fairer" for them and that we should just ignore the lack of legal justification. This juxtaposition isn't just evident in the headline. It is an accurate reflection of the inherent problems within the article too.

The article ends with this statement:



There are no happy outcomes from the Le Vell case. But after the apparent eagerness to prosecute post-Savile, one day a guilty man may walk free.

This is a somewhat odd statement to make since our judicial system is based on the premise of reasonable doubt so we know guilty men walk free of crimes every day. Juries can only convict if they reasonably believe the accused was guilty. The preponderance of rape myths and victim blaming means that rape victims are rarely believed. Merrick's article actually includes the statistics of false allegations but she still falls for the belief that a not guilty verdict equals a false allegation.

Lucy Manning, in the Mirror, has also equated a [not guilty verdict with a false allegation](#). The Mirror, like the Daily Mail, has a tendency to use women journalists to write articles that blame women for being victims of sexual violence. The headline to the article makes it very clear what the message within the article will be:

Le Vell was put through hell, but women who complain about sex assaults are being taken more seriously

After Jimmy Savile, those investigating alleged assaults are encouraged to be more open-minded and less dismissive

Supposedly, this article is about praising the CPS for taking rape allegations seriously [and actually bothering to prosecute] but at the same time we should feel sorry for men who have been accused of rape because they were "put through hell". Yet again, the headline, and the article itself, erases the victim from her own life. The phrase "women who complain about sex assaults" minimises the reality of sexual violence. Legally, we may use the word complaint but in the context of this headline it reads as though they are suggesting women whine too much about sexual assault.

How can we expect juries to make judgments free of rape myths when the press itself perpetrates and perpetuates rape myths? These six examples are only a snapshot of the headlines we have read over the past 3 weeks that blame the victim even before a verdict was announced. Post-verdict headlines have been equally wrong. If the press can't understand that a not guilty verdict does not equal innocent, how are we supposed to expect juries to render fair and impartial verdicts in subsequent trials? How can we increase the number of women, men and children reporting their experiences to the police if all they read, day in and day out, are articles that blame them for being victims?



We need the press commission to start taking their responsibilities seriously and actually acting on the cases brought forward. We also need to change the process of who can report inaccurate or malicious journalism to the press commission. Our organisation tried to report the Sun for their “devil woman” headline, but was told we could not because it must be the person named in the article who brings forth the complaint. So a victim of sexual violence effectively has to revoke their anonymity to ensure that the press do not slander them? How is this a fair process?

We have started a discussion [here](#) on ways the CPS can respond to the prejudicial language used by the prosecution in the Neil Wilson case. Both the CPS and the Press Commission need an overhaul in order to ensure that neither organisation perpetuates rape myths.