

This is the unedited version of the Media Bites column which appeared in Australian Doctor in September 1999. The published version may have had minor changes.

### **Media Bites: Madness, Mobs and Media**

The smell of fresh paint is in the air as the front door opens, and plasterers have also been at work. Three months after a mad crowd made a mess of Peter Trebilco's home, the damage has finally been repaired.

Trebilco's inner Sydney home was besieged by media and angry mobs in June, when he provided temporary shelter to John Lewthwaite, who had been released from prison after serving 25 years for murdering a young girl in 1974.

Trebilco estimates the crowd - which threw eggs, rocks, and put a hose through his front door - caused about \$900 damage. But the impact on his house was minor compared with that on its occupants.

"I have been burgled and robbed in the past - and it is exactly the same feeling of having been violated," says Trebilco, a lecturer in the University of NSW's School of Community Medicine and a community welfare lecturer at Sydney Institute of Technology.

"Unless you have experienced this, I don't know how you could ever realise what the impact could be."

Trebilco who has worked voluntarily with prisoners for more than 30 years, was recently nominated for a Public Health Association award, and colleagues also plan to nominate him for a human rights award. Trebilco, a gracious and courteous man, has few kind words for the media, believing their conduct directly incited the ugly scenes outside his house.

Lewthwaite was taken to Trebilco's house in a car boot late one Monday afternoon, after media scrutiny of his parents' place thwarted plans for his release there. Media cars arrived soon afterwards.

Trebilco says the street was calm when he left for work the following morning - close neighbours who had been told of the situation were supportive.

The frenzy began later that afternoon, after TV crews and journalists approached parents collecting children from a primary school over the road.

The school's principal, Sister Margaret Scroope, backs Trebilco's view that the media's behaviour incited hysteria in the parents. She says the media was intrusive, coming on to school grounds and in the nature of

its questioning. After the event, Scroope says parents involved in the fracas said they had been hyped up by the media.

But some journalists say they were simply doing their job, asking questions to gauge reaction to Lewthwaite's presence - although few outside the *Daily Telegraph* are willing to defend its publication of an aerial photograph identifying the location of Trebilco's house.

Harry Potter, the Ten Network's crime reporter, says the journalists' questions were legitimate, given Lewthwaite's proximity to a school despite a parole condition that he not have contact with children.

The irony, of course, is that Lewthwaite would not have been at Trebilco's house if not for the media stakeout of his parent's home.

The case raises many concerns, including privacy issues and the media's treatment of society's marginalised groups, such as prisoners.

Dr Jonathan Phillips, one of the psychiatrists who assessed Lewthwaite and held that his release posed very little risk, says the coverage was "almost encouraging vigilante activity" and was likely to interfere with the early rehabilitation process.

Many observers also see this case as an example of how the media can create news. But in a sense the very presence of the media changes the nature of all stories - otherwise politicians would not talk in short grabs.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* did not initially join the chase of Lewthwaite.

"To be a party to a process of encouraging lynch mobs is not journalism," says editor Paul McGeough. "I don't think it was a shining moment for the Australian media. Having said that...the media is very good at shining a light when it needs to be shone. In this case, it was shone but in the wrong place. It needed to be shone in the Parliament, the courts and on the process - not on an individual who according to the law was a free man."

But Lewthwaite was not the only one who felt the media's harsh light. Trebilco, his neighbours, and the nearby school were also burnt. The standing of the media has also suffered.