

Why was I the only reporter? On the sentencing of the Rotherham grooming gang

Charlie Peters of GB News writing in [The Critic](#)

I go to a lot of sentencings in my job as national reporter at GB News. In decaying court buildings across the country, lawyers make mitigating pleas to “Your Honour” before the judge retires to prepare their final remarks.

Courts are not glamorous places, but I snap up any opportunity to be assigned to a trial. Media bosses tend to see them as news deserts – prone to delays or suffocating press restrictions – but short of being in the middle of a major protest or coming under rocket fire, I’ve found them to be amongst the most dramatic locations for broadcasting.

I’m usually only sent to major cases, and typically I expect to find myself squeezed for space in the court, with the press free to attend but rarely welcomed with any warmth by clerks and their associates.



I anticipated a similarly busy press gallery when I arrived at Sheffield Crown Court this September for the sentencing of seven men guilty of child sexual abuse offences committed during the height of the Rotherham grooming gangs scandal in the 2000s. Like many of

the sentencings I'd attended this year – for murderers, terrorists and students who have chucked soup at paintings – I thought I'd be in a tight scrum of scribes, our elbows bashing as we fattened our copy with colour from the courtroom.

But I was sitting alone in Courtroom 10 for the sentencing of seven men convicted as a result of Operation Stovewood, the National Crime Agency's (NCA) investigation into non-familial child sexual exploitation in Rotherham from 1997 to 2013, the same period as covered by the Jay Report (carried out by Professor Alexis Jay and published in 2014) that exposed the sheer depravity of what happened in the town.

...defence barristers looked confused that I was present. . .
“And where are you from?” they enquired. “GB News,” was met with a raised eyebrow, a solemn nod and small steps backwards.

Most reporters are delighted to be the sole trader on a good story, every word being wrapped up in the parcel of journalistic exclusivity, but what transpired in Sheffield on that crisp autumn morning needed to be heard by as many people as possible. One of the two victims of the seven defendants awaiting sentence had decided to give her victim impact statement. In person. In front of them. To them. I was the only journalist there to report it, and I felt a sense of duty to ensure I accurately transcribed every line she levelled at them.

For the next eight-and-a-half minutes, I barely raised my eyes from my desk, capturing every word. . . been abused from the age of 11, first targeted in her primary school playground. She was raped at 13.

“I was only 11, you made me do a test to see if I was still a virgin or not. At that moment, my abuse started. You made it sound like it was a crime to be a virgin. You made me feel ashamed of being a virgin. That same day you sent me off and forced me to commit a sexual act. My innocence was stolen . .

. You started to pass me around as if I was a fresh piece of meat, man to man, city to city. All five of you played a massive part in exploiting me

"I was 12, in the back of a taxi. To you it didn't last long, to me it lasted like a lifetime. I was scared. When you raped me, you made sure you did it properly. I've never felt pain like that before in my life. You made me bleed. I was so scared to even go to the toilet. You made sure my abuse went to the next level. You made sure it was a free-for-all. . .

"22 years ago, you first started grooming me, and 10 years ago I started my justice fight ... You stole my childhood, now I'm taking your freedom. I am your karma."

It was an extraordinary thing to witness, and I felt a great sense of responsibility bringing the information to the public as the only reporter who had been in court for both days. I was joined on the second day of the sentencing by an excellent local radio reporter, but otherwise it was just GB News. Just a handful of reporters covered the story at the height of the scandal, despite thousands of girls enduring abuse so brutal that some investigators described it as torture.

I've tried to do my part at GB News. . . But on that day in Sheffield, I was distressed to find myself reporting alone as those seven abusers were sent down. Our coverage had a tremendous impact. Millions saw it online. Author J.K. Rowling engaged with the victim impact statement, which, as she is a Harry Potter fan, delighted the survivor who had addressed her abusers from the witness stand.

An even more important effect of our coverage was its influence on other outlets, in making them realise that it was a mistake to ignore the sentencing.

Since that day last month, I have been able to show that the same survivor who gave her moving testimony in court had also been blocked from calling for her abusers to be deported,

because the judge deemed it inappropriate. I also revealed that two victims missed the sentencing of their rapist because of a NCA "officer error". After waiting decades to see justice, they were absent during the moment when he was jailed. I wish I had been jostling with other hacks to get this information in the public domain.

Through the countless testimonies that I've heard, I'm convinced that the national grooming gangs story was a race hate scandal, perpetrated mostly by Pakistani men who saw white children as legitimate and "easy" targets for abuse. They got away with it for decades because the authorities deliberately looked the other way rather than face the appalling truth. The police and council workers feared accusations of racism. They let it happen. This scandal dwarfs so many others, yet it receives a fraction of the continued coverage it deserves.

The state-endorsed narrative is that the grooming gangs scandal is a right-wing myth propagated by extremists. A 2020 Home Office report released under Priti Patel's leadership facilitated much of that narrative. I'm writing this after reporting on air that the Wikipedia article on the grooming gangs has been maliciously edited to describe it as a "moral panic" propagated by the "far right".

Remarkably, Wikipedia has given extended protection to this false narrative to prevent it being factually corrected. By such means are politicians and the public misled about what happened and what needs to be done.

The full, true story of the criminal networks and their backgrounds has yet to be told. Justice for thousands of victims has not been handed down. There is much more to be done and I intend to stay on the case, with a camera and a microphone, asking questions to make sure that it is done.