

Dermod Moore.

Dublin 8

Mr Stephen Rea
Editor
The Evening Herald
Independent House
27-32 Talbot St
Dublin 1

CC:

The Office of the Press Ombudsman, Clyde Lodge, 15 Clyde Road, Dublin 4
Thomas Mitchell, Chairman, Press Council of Ireland, Clyde Lodge, 15 Clyde Road, Dublin 4
National Lesbian and Gay Federation, 2 Scarlet Row, Temple Bar, Dublin 2
The Gay and Lesbian Equality Network, Tower 1, Fumbally Court, Fumbally Lane, Dublin 8
Editor, Gay Community News, Unit 2, Scarlet Row, Essex Street West, Dublin 8
Senator David Norris, Seanad Éireann, Dublin 2
<http://bonhom.ie>

25 July 2007

RE: "SCOUT LEADER FACING PAEDO RING CHARGES"
"GROOMING": Gardaí believe that married man should be charged
Evening Herald cover story, 11th July 2007.

Dear Mr Rea,

On 12th July, I wrote to herald-letters@independent.ie with a complaint about the above piece. I have not received a reply. In the event that the complaint was mislaid, I am sending it to you in print form. I am also including my complaint to the Press Ombudsman, which I hope will be dealt with when the office is filled. However, as I have been informed that this may not be till mid-Autumn, I have decided to publicize my complaint as much as possible. I enclose a copy of the article in question, my original email. I also enclose the Hot Press article that I wrote about the case.

Yours sincerely,

Dermod Moore

From: "Dermod Moore"

To: <herald.letters@independent.ie>

Subject: Complaint to the editor about front page story on 11th July 2007 in the Evening Herald

Date: Thu, 12 Jul 2007 12:43:58 +0100

Dear Mr Rea,

I wish to complain about the front page headline in yesterday's Evening Herald, and the selective and sensationalist manner in which the story of the (then) 14-year-old meeting men for sex via Gaydar was represented in your newspaper. Police have reportedly asserted in the past that there was no "paedophile ring". It was in large part the lad's misrepresentation of himself as being 18 that led to various men being interested in him - two men turned him down when they met him, thereby suggesting that he had lied to them beforehand about his age. The subtleties and details of the case, as to the precise level of accurate information that was imparted to each man before each sexual encounter, can only be established in court, and it is my belief you should indicate this in your reports. I am not interested in excusing those men who didn't turn him down, I am appalled at their behaviour, but that is a far cry from declaring that there was a group of men consciously dedicated to finding underage boys to exploit them, which is what a paedophile ring is. This is what your report is implying.

I cannot believe that your coverage of the story is anything other than prejudicial to any forthcoming court case(s), because you are implying a malicious premeditated interest on the part of those men caught up in the case, when from what I understand the police have stated this is not true.

I look forward to your response,

Dermod Moore
Dublin 8

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Dublin 8**

The Office of the Press Ombudsman
The Press Council of Ireland
c/o Clyde Lodge
15 Clyde Road
Dublin 4

25 July 2007

RE: "SCOUT LEADER FACING PAEDO RING CHARGES"
"GROOMING": Gardaí believe that married man should be charged
Evening Herald cover story, 11th July 2007.

Dear Sir/Madam,

I wish to complain about the following article. It appeared on the front page of the *Evening Herald* on the 11th July, and continued on page 2. It was written by Cormac Looney. I enclose a photocopy of the article. I emailed a letter of complaint on the following day, but I have not yet received a response. I enclose a copy of my email. I also enclose a copy of an article I wrote in *Hot Press* magazine, which I offer as a background to the story, in case you are not familiar with it.

I believe the article contravenes the **Press Council Code of Practice** on the following grounds. I shall list them in order of the Code of Practice itself, as listed at <http://www.presscouncil.ie/v1/codeofpractice.php>, referring to the relevant clauses.

1.1 I do not believe the article to be truthful or accurate. According to the information I have gleaned, here is no "paedo ring" or "pervert ring" in the sense it is commonly understood, ie a group of men deliberately conspiring together to exploit young children. The importance of being accurate in this story is of immense importance, because if and when the accused are brought to trial, the effect of this inaccurate reporting is to infer a deliberate intent to conspire to exploit children on the part of the accused. The sentence "The teenager has taken gardaí to a number of houses and car parks in north and west Dublin, where it is alleged that there was further sexual contact between the boy and adults" on page 2, is ambiguous, suggesting a group of adults was involved in the same incident. I understand this was not the case.

1.2 Time is of the essence to correct this distorted picture of the accused man or men involved in this case, before the case goes to trial. A correction is necessary as soon as possible, which is to be given due prominence, and with an undertaking to avoid such distortions in reporting the trial(s).

1.3 A retraction of the phrases "paedo ring" and "pervert ring" and clarification of the complex issues involved should be made as soon as possible.

2.1 Reports that the Gardaí are to proceed with charges against at least one man are fair comment in this sorry affair; but I find it difficult to believe that the particular charge of "procuring children for a paedophile ring" is the one that will be applied, considering the known facts of the

case. To state in the headline that the Scout Leader is “Facing Peodo Ring Charges” is to present the tip-off from garda “sources” as fact. I am sceptical that this will turn out to be the case. Only time will tell who is right on this one - but the importance of accuracy in this matter cannot be overestimated.

2.2 The best judgment of the editor in this case was, I believe, unduly influenced by the desire to stir up sensationalist scaremongering notions of a paedophile ring to increase sales, when it is my understanding there was no such conspiracy among the men who responded to this boy’s personal ad looking for sex.

3.1 The inference of conspiracy to exploit children is highly unfair to the accused man or men, and it is dishonest to state it as fact that their involvement was the result of membership of a “paedo” or “pervert” ring. They were members of a gay dating site, looking for sex.

3.2 It cannot be said that to imply a conspiracy to exploit children on the actions of the accused is in the public interest, if the public interest is deemed to be fair and accurate reporting of a complex case in which there are only losers.

4 If everyone is entitled constitutionally to the protection of their good name, this scout leader and the other men involved have been tarred with the same brush in this article: that they were part of a conspiracy to exploit children, in a “paedo” or “pervert” ring. They were, it seems, men who responded to a 14-year-old’s ad, in which he was purporting to be 18. This difference is crucial in terms of whether a man’s name is “good” or tarnished - a man who has consensual sex with a 17 year old is entitled to his good name, for he has done nothing wrong. However in this case it appears it was obvious he was underage, so my interest is not in defending them in any way - but it is really important in evaluating the degree of wrong that has been done to make a clear distinction between someone who actively seeks 14 year old youths to have sex with, and someone who agrees to meet someone who says he’s 18 and then discovers that the youth has been lying. The degree to which this is the case can only be established in court by careful analysis of the text messages exchanged, but it is highly prejudicial to someone’s good name to assert that his motivation was a deliberate desire to have sex with underage boys.

5.2 The privacy of the (so far, unnamed) “Scout Leader” has been undoubtedly invaded, and if it is true that he had sex with this boy then undoubtedly it is a matter of public interest that this should happen. However, the way that this has been done in this article is to tar him with the brush of a deliberate, conspiratorial paedophile. Because he has had access to children in the past he is rightly the subject of scrutiny if he had sex with a 14-year-old boy; but the level of hysteria that accompanies the phrases “paedo ring” and “pervert ring” could ensure that the complex reality of this particular case, that the 14-year-old sought allegedly sought and had sex with older men, is ignored.

5.3 Sympathy is not deserved for men who have sex with 14-year-old boys. But even those men have my sympathy if they have been accused of being members of a paedophile ring, which in this day and age is the worst that someone can be accused of. Their intention, surely, is key here.

7 Court reporting should be fair and accurate, as should the stories published by the press leading up to a court case, *including* what the guards leak about impending charges. The same rules of fairness should apply.

8 The implication that these men were *de facto* members of a paedophile ring because they

answered an ad in a gay dating website from someone purporting to be 18 years old, is something which I believe causes grave offence to gay men who use this site, including myself. I could have answered this boy's ad, indeed I could have called or texted him, but that certainly does not make me a paedophile or a pervert. (The serious crime, it should be remembered, was committed by those who, having met the lad, then proceeded to have sex with him, ignoring his apparently obvious youth.) In the days after the breaking of this story I asked many users of the relevant website what they thought, and none believed that there was a paedophile ring at work, but many feared that the publicity would incite hatred towards them, as the association would be made inaccurately between paedophilia and homosexuality. The fact that the young lad was the one who allegedly sought sex from older men should not be forgotten here. It is on these grounds that I claim that this prejudicial, inaccurate article directly affects me, as a gay man, and they are the grounds on which I primarily make this complaint.

Yours sincerely

Dermod Moore

An article that I wrote which appeared in Hot Press magazine on the matter shortly after the story hit the headlines:

The Truth Behind Gaydar

Trying to piece together what really happened in the case of the 14 year old who had sex with men he met from the internet is an impossible task at the moment, and the full story will only become clear when the case goes to trial. Media reports have been wildly conflicting and sensationalised. At the moment, however, all that is clear is that he joined the Gaydar website sometime last year. To do this, he would have to claim to be 18, although there is no proof of age required. At some stage, perhaps more than once, he posted his number publicly, I would guess in the chatroom, and it seems about 12 men wrote it down in the past few months, and started texting him. At the time of going to press, it appears two men have had sex with him, and the rest sent sexually charged texts back and forth with him. Money has been reported to have exchanged hands. The word rape has been used because it is statutory rape, ie with a minor, but there appears not to have been any violence involved, as the lad was apparently willing. The Gardaí are methodically going through the text messages over the past few months, that he sent and received, and slowly piecing together what happened. A cross-section of Irish men, from all walks of life, married and gay, from their twenties to their forties, have been revealed to have shown an interest in this lad. So far, it appears that they are fairly representative of the men who are Gaydar members. To make my position clear from the outset: those who have sex with a 14 year old, no matter how precocious or knowing he is, have committed an offence, morally and in the eyes of the law. I find it repugnant that a man would lose his sense of humanity, his compassion for the turbulence of adolescence, his respect for the dignity of a child, by giving into his own sexual cravings in the face of such obvious youthfulness, no matter how precocious or cocky the invitation. There can be no defence of “honest mistake” in such a case - 14 year old male youths are inescapably, obviously young, and unlike girls who can appear much older than they are, it is the nature of things that most boys look their age. I can't conceive, however, even if I had believed that someone I had been texting was 17 or 18, and I had arranged a sexy rendezvous with him, that I would carry through with my intentions once I met the kid face-to-face. It's like that wonderful storyline in the film American Beauty when Kevin Spacey's character, so infatuated with a young girl, finally gets the opportunity to seduce her - but balks when he listens to her childish view of the world, her innocence, and is reminded of his own humanity.

When I began mentioning in my own Gaydar profile that I was looking for information and opinions on the case with a view to this column, I was met initially with outrage. Before it had been confirmed (on RTÉ's Prime Time) that it was indeed the Gaydar site where it all started, I had some hysterical responses. I was apparently linking paedophilia with being gay, and giving Gaydar a bad name. Paedophiles were mostly heterosexual, and it was disgraceful that I should even ask the questions I was asking. I also bore the brunt of many people's suspicion of the media, and had to face some tough questioning before it was acknowledged (but not by all) that it would be better I wrote from the perspective of being a Gaydar member, and that I did it openly, without being undercover or underhand. However, most of the men I talked to online were thoughtful and concerned.

Their suspicion of the media is justified. The coverage has been woefully hysterical and conflicting. Central to the popular press's discourse is that this was a “paedophile ring” that groomed this young lad; a conspiracy of conscious deliberation and intent, to seek out children and exploit them. There has been no understanding of the way men can meet each other, online

and off, for sex. On the Late Late Show discussion on Friday night, the gay male sexual perspective was completely absent, although one contributor had earlier been advertising for sex himself on Gaydar. The nature of cruising online needs to be understood in order to put this case in perspective.

There is an atmosphere sometimes of the stockroom trading floor in Gaydar chatrooms - men making bids for sexual encounters, displaying their wares, buying or selling different flavours of contact. It's capitalism run riot, but it's sexual not financial capital, displaying men's capacity to commodify and market themselves, exploit each other, for the pursuit of pleasure. No money exchanges hands, as a rule, although there are a few prostitutes openly advertising their services, in defiance of Irish law, as well as men soliciting for paid sex, on a daily basis. But in the main, this is a free market in all senses of the word; it's a heady, often frenzied, search for hook-ups. Some have more chance of success, those in major urban areas who are sexually a top and with good photographs; others, living in rural areas, middle-aged married men with little or no chance of instant gratification, spending their time in a fantasy world, toying with the unattainable. But this is not a "gay community" - this is a men-only sexualised environment. Many members do not identify with being gay - some are married, some keep their private lives to themselves and never enter a gay bar, some are "bi-curious" and flirting with exploring "no strings" sex, the preoccupation of many men, of all orientations. Many, however, are friends who go on the gay scene regularly, and it is a forum for catching up and bitching about last night at The George or hearing about new gay pubs or clubs in towns across the country. The fact that in the Irish chatroom some intelligent and funny conversation happens is a tribute I think to the Irish character, for it is not so in other national chatrooms. Perhaps because there is only one Gaydar chatroom for all of Ireland, and it is the busiest of its kind in Ireland, with often hundreds of men online at any one time, it is possible for some interesting things to happen. Many enlightening discussions are held, regularly, about HIV and sexual health, about coming out, about all sorts of things about life in Ireland. There are some very funny entertaining characters, some wise old souls, some obviously disturbed individuals, and some provocative little shits who enjoy stirring things up. There are Polish and Asian and Russian men, men of all ages and body types, fetishes and obsessions. Cross-dressers to bears, "lads" to "daddies", "skinheads" to "chubbies". But even the most sensible and serious conversations in the chatroom are constantly interspersed with appeals for sex in all its variety and complexity. A "cumslut" will repeatedly ask for all takers to fuck him bareback in his apartment. An elderly cross-dresser in West Cork will appeal for young men to have phonesex with him. And so it goes on, ad infinitum, ad nauseam. The fact that any sensible chat happens at all is a miracle, given the atmosphere of sexual anarchy that prevails. And yet, in spite of this, friendships develop, relationships can start, enjoyable sex can be had, and sensible advice and information can be found.

But the truth is it's largely a fantasy world - many men enjoy chatting about meeting for sex but are only using it for masturbatory purposes and have no intention of meeting anyone else. Many men use fake photos, and most profiles in Ireland have no photos at all - a feature I think of the Irish need for privacy, not necessarily evidence that everyone is in the closet. But if ever you needed evidence about the prevalence of bisexuality in this country, and the number of married men getting it off with other men, Gaydar is the place to find it.

It is in this milieu that this young lad apparently signed up, pretending to be 18. I imagine he watched and learned for a while - and indeed sometimes youngsters can learn a lot of useful things from being online. One of the surprising things for me now, at 44, is that I get approached by young men looking for older men, a relationship dynamic that is as old as the Greeks. Quite often I have referred them to the youth group, at belongto.org, believing passionately in the principle of gay youth groups, for I still have friends from that time, nearly 30 years later. It is

in youth groups that kids can really explore who they are and make necessary friends, in a safe, non-exploitative way. However, this lad found himself in this meat market, and quickly found that his youth was appealing to a certain kind of man, and, perhaps, something he could exploit, if the reports of him asking for money are true. Was he too young to make this decision? Probably, I would say. But people mature at different ages. What will he think of it all when he's 17? One man wrote passionately to me deploring the fact that he would now be immersed in counselling, being encouraged to see himself as a "victim" when he may have been totally in control and very confident about what he wanted. But my hunch is that this young sexual man won't lose his penchant for sex, and is on his way to being one of those who enjoy it in all its exciting variety. A mother may wish him to settle down and find a nice boyfriend, once she gets over the shock of realising he likes men - but in my experience, and from what other men have told me, such early experience of sex will lead him to want to explore it more. To a large degree, the law is understandably biased towards the values of parenting and protection of children. But in terms of the natural justice for this lad, in terms of his future development, unless he manages to find someone with whom he can talk honestly about sex with men, and figure it out for himself in a reflective way, perhaps with peers in a youth group, he may find that the legal actions, and the attention this case has provoked, may cause much more damage than good in his life.

I've had conversations with many men during the course of researching this article, who have told me they were sexually active at 14 or 15. Some faked Gaydar profiles just like this lad did, and some had sex, just like he did. If the internet was around when I was 14 (or perhaps, being honest, 15 for me) I feel sure I would have had a Gaydar profile myself. Many older men like me have said the same, but before the Internet it was the back pages of Hot Press that were the obvious route to making first sexual contact. One 19 year old told me he had indicated he was under 18 in his Gaydar profile text, when he was 14, and never got into trouble. He made an informed decision who to choose to have sex with, and did it, and has no regrets. And he's not the only one by any means. Another man said he had been treated well when he was 14 when he had sex with older men; he believes it's impossible to have an intelligent debate about underage sex, and that there is a big difference between consensual and forced sex. Another man told me he'd have "killed" to have had sex at 14. Someone else said to me that that lad was "a little shit" for fucking up so many people's lives.

Another young man told me that he was reported to Gaydar when he was online at 16, and his profile was deleted. He now says he is grateful to the person who did it. He had been sexually assaulted before and the guy responsible recognized and harassed him when he rejoined, when he was legal; although he reported it to the Gardaí, they told him there was nothing they could do. He was "shocked" by what had happened to this 14-year-old; but felt it was bound to happen.

Another man told me that, about a year ago, he had been approached by a young lad in his rural town claiming to be 19, and they were going to meet. For about 3 weeks they exchanged very explicit texts. However a friend tipped him off that the lad was in fact only 15, so he immediately terminated the contact. But the teenager continually harassed him, and the fact that the man was a teacher made his position extremely vulnerable. Eventually he had to change his phone number. He made the point that there is no provision in law for younger lads "grooming" older men. His experience frightened him.

Most of the correspondence I have had over the past few days has been full of concern for the young lad, and his family. But many expressed sympathy for those who had been caught up in it, if they hadn't known he was 14. It is this crucial detail that I imagine will only come out in the trial(s).

No one sensible I have spoken to online about this believes that this was a paedophile “ring”. “It’s not the way gay sex happens” wrote one man. It’s opportunistic, it’s random, it’s chaotic. If someone is hot and looking for hook-ups, their details are passed on to others. It is anarchic, in the sense that the law is ignored, especially in the chatrooms in relation to the laws of prostitution. Personally, I have an aversion to the law when it comes to the realm of personal sexual morality, because when I was a teenager/in my twenties, I believed I was doomed to a life of criminality for being sexual in this country. Happily, it is now being acknowledged that whereas three men went through and had sex with the lad, two others met him and sent him home, proving that not everyone involved in the case is the monster the media would like them to be. Crucially, we may never see it being understood by the media that there is a big difference between sending sexual texts and actually having sex. Motive is all - and the truth of the matter is that when it comes to internet sex chats, most exchanges never manifest in actual sex - no matter what age the correspondents are. Anyone who has ever cruised online will have had the experience of falling for extremely plausible invitations, detailed and chatty exchanges, with the guy simply not turning up at the time and place arranged. No matter how persuasive or convincing or lurid the conversations beforehand with this lad, they all should be taken with a pinch of salt. But the demonization of the texters involved (the “sick paodos”) may not allow for that reality to be understood. I fervently hope that there is a gay man on the jury or juries who can appreciate that distinction, if charges are brought against the men who never met the lad.

As for Gaydar itself - it’s one of the most successful internet sites for men looking for sex on this planet. It has no age verification system in place, and so it is likely that many other 14- and 15-year-olds are using the site at the present time, and no doubt will continue to do so. Were age-verification to be introduced, which normally involves using a credit card, Gaydar would lose a lot of members, and no doubt gay teenagers will find other sites. Gaydar probably won’t change unless it is forced to by law, and apparently so few people in Ireland bother to pay for membership they aren’t really interested in the Irish market commercially, so they may just withdraw from Ireland.

Ideally, boys should be taught about the good sites, the youth group, community-orientated chatrooms and other supportive environments, but that would have to mean that the education system in this country takes seriously the needs and sexual drives of teenagers, which is, sadly, a long way away. Until we realise the importance that many men place on sex outside of relationship, on recreational sex, we are not going to be able to communicate with lads such as this 14-year-old in a language they understand.

In the meantime, gay people are going to be suspect in this country for a while, because in this instance, I believe it is a function of the way men have recreational sex with each other that has allowed these sad events to unfold. I may be proven wrong, but Gaydar is not the obvious place to look for children, so I doubt that the men caught up in this case are paedophiles in the generally accepted sense of the term, in that they find pre-pubescent children sexually attractive. I imagine they find sexually mature teenagers attractive, and in a sense, if they are legal and sound, their beauty can be extremely intoxicating, even to me, whose tastes are generally for people my own age, or maybe from their twenties up. When a young lad offers himself for gay sex online, it is vastly different to a case where a child is befriended by an adult in a non-sexual chatroom in disguise, and “groomed” for coercive sex.

As I write these words, a 19-year-old is talking online in the public chatroom about how he’d love to have his “fresh hole abused” by someone older. Another young guy is telling the room that he’s just been having camsex (video chat) with another young lad, both of them wanking away, when the other guy’s sister walks into shot and waves at him. This is in the nature of sex,

and the way the young generation are having sex. Not everyone, of course, by any means, but a significant minority, and we still haven't come to terms with it in our culture. It is unstoppable, it is not going to go away, and the internet has transformed the way Irish people have sex forever. There is so much deeper thinking needed about this than is evident at the moment.

In the end, in spite of all this sexual freedom and license, this era of infinite possibilities and dangers, it boils down to individual responsibility and morality. I can't forgive the men who had sex with that lad. But also for the sake of his own development and maturity, I hope the young lad doesn't get persuaded to see himself as a rape victim, or buy into the apparently universal media consensus that he fell into a consciously pre-meditated trap, designed by perverts. He knows what he has done, and has to acknowledge his own part in it, for his own sanity, to ensure his own later growth into a sexually confident and responsible man.

Dermod Moore Hot Press magazine #31.05 March 2007