Online reactions to institutional crises: BBC Online and the aftermath of Jimmy Savile

Rowan Aust, Royal Holloway, University of London

This case study underwent some evolution. My initial application to the project proposed an investigation into descriptions of 'heritage' in online forums, using television programmes as a way in to locating these discussion and descriptions. Preliminary investigations into this topic using various searches such as 'heritage AND television ~ 25' or 'tony robinson AND heritage ~ 25' revealed that due to the thousands of results returned I had given myself an unmanageable task within the allotted time frame.[1] After discussion with the project leaders I settled on a new topic, that of investigating the online reaction of the BBC to the revelation of Jimmy Savile as a paedophile and serial sex offender. This tallied with my research interests outside the project, specifically television history and televisual memories, and allowed me to use the archive of UK web space 1996–2013 as a supplementary source of data – an attempt to treat it as one might any other research tool. This set me apart from other case studies in an attempt to deliver a description of how a researcher might use the Web Archive within everyday work.

The context of this case study is as follows. In October 2011 the broadcaster Jimmy Savile died at age 84. His career had been both stellar and unique. In 1964 he was the first presenter of BBC1's flagship music programme, *Top of the Pops*; such was his association with the show that when it finished in 2006 the final shot was of Savile turning off the studio lights. In 1971 he fronted the road safety campaign *Clunk Click Every Trip*, which led to a BBC1 entertainment show, *Clunk Click*, from 1973 to 1975. From 1975 to 1994 he presented *Jim'll Fix It*, a BBC1 Saturday-night primetime entertainment show, returning for 2007's special *Jim'll Fix It Strikes Again*. Outside television, Savile appeared on radio and was famous for both his prolific charity work and his association with establishment figures such as Margaret Thatcher and the royal family. He was a national figure and he was at the centre of the BBC.

When he died, the then BBC Director General Mark Thompson commented 'From *Top of the Pops* to *Jim'll Fix It*, Jimmy's unique style entertained generations of BBC audiences. Like millions of viewers and listeners we shall miss him greatly'.[2] Multiple tributes were aired: *Sir*

Jimmy Savile: as it Happened[3] (BBC1, 11 November 2011); the Christmas specials *Sir Jimmy Savile: in his own Words* (BBC Radio 2, Christmas Day 2011) and the Boxing Day reimagining of *Jim'll Fix It* (BBC1), where the *EastEnders* actor Shane Richie stood in for the late Savile. Lines of popular entertainment converged within this show – of soap opera in the person of Richie, of BBC archive and history in the reiteration of *Jim'll Fix It* – and cultural memory, always so acute among the many rituals of Christmas, was eagerly prompted in the programming. Two days later, BBC2 broadcast an hour-long archive special, *Sir Jimmy Savile at the BBC* (28 December 2011). This laid additional claim that the BBC would remain as the repository for the televisual memories of this much-loved, recently passed figure.

The aftermath of Savile's death caused arguably the biggest crisis in the corporation's history. Immediately after he died, *Newsnight* commenced an investigation into allegations that Savile was a paedophile. In December, the resulting report was pulled shortly before the Christmas specials were aired; some months later, ITV broadcast the allegations and the BBC were accused of protecting their own. The ensuing panic on *Newsnight* allowed a second piece around paedophilia to be broadcast without the proper verifications. Various members of *Newsnight* and the BBC News management team lost their jobs; the Director General George Entwistle resigned in the wake of the crisis. The denial and obscuration by the BBC following the initial revelations is detailed by Chris Greer and Eugene McLaughlin in 'The Sir Jimmy Savile scandal: child sexual abuse and institutional denial at the BBC'.[4] More than three years on, Savile's offending is still being investigated although his guilt is fully recognised; in January 2013, Peter Watt of the NSPCC referred to Savile as 'without doubt one of the most prolific sex offenders we have ever come across'.[5] The Smith Report, which is investigating the BBC's potential culpability as a culture that enabled Savile's crimes, is yet to be published. Jimmy Savile lingers, unresolved, within the corporation.

Savile can never be banished entirely from the BBC: given his longevity and prominence, he will always remain within the archive, and far beyond the generations who experienced his programmes as they happened. The need to fill hours in the wake of digital multiplication meant that Savile's life as a television personality outran his broadcasting career. This was most visible in the *Top of the Pops* repeats and the compilations of the show on *Top of the Pops 2.* The repeats and reversions of *Top of the Pops* are examples of the BBC's renewal of its cultural identity as a home to pop culture and its construction of specific cultural memories. Anyone who danced to *Top of the Pops* – and in the 70s, there were 19 million

viewers[6] – or who longed to be part of the audience or perhaps even made it on to the show, will retain and inhabit these cultural memories to which Savile was central. Astrid Erll states that cultural memory 'requires the continuation of meaning through established, stable forms of expression'[7] – Savile's posthumous transformation from eccentric national treasure to notorious paedophile utterly ruptures this stability and thereby the memories. Meanwhile, Amy Holdsworth enables us to understand the numerous iterations of *Top of the Pops* as 'an "experience" or an ontology of television as repeated process over time with its own rituals and routines', where the act and context of watching is an experience of 'simultaneous looping and unfolding in the patterns of everyday life and television'.[8] Television is not just what is on the screen, but the acts both present and past that envelop the viewing of that screen. The patterns of scandal behave in a similarly iterative way, looming repeatedly with each new revelation, enquiry and report, as well as in this case with allegations about other celebrities. Savile, therefore, represents a rupture of the safe iterative pattern to be replaced by something quite ghoulish: a recurring nightmare. But, the archive body that is *Top of the Pops* is too important to cease on the BBC altogether.[9] Repeats are still being shown in a fresh iteration, from which Savile has – mostly – been excised: when a clip of him presenting was shown in September 2014, the BBC duly apologised for its mistake.[10] Of course, Savile still regularly appears in news reports as the investigation continues.

While Savile may remain as a cultural and archival feature, his televisual appearances have therefore been bounded; however, his presence within bbc.co.uk is less easy to constrain. The BBC website functions primarily as two things: a news forum and a portal to BBC programmes, both current and archive. Shows of significant archival importance, such as *Top of the Pops*, will have pages within bbc.co.uk dedicated to them, which will contain clips, descriptions of the programme's history and viewer contributions.[11] Added to this and as described, Savile's career at the BBC bled outside his presenting of *Top of the Pops*. His presence could therefore be expected across varying elements of bbc.co.uk. How then is the BBC treating the online presence of Savile and how can the Web Archive be used to examine this? Because of the recent dating of the scandal and the fact the more recent archive crawls are not yet available, archive pages post-2011 – therefore post-scandal – could not be accessed during my period of research (although as will be shown below, the 'special collections' section of the Web Archive, which includes blogs, was functioning beyond this date). Therefore, my methodology was repeated searching for Savile using the suffix

bbc.co.uk through the various iterations of the Web Archive and then comparing to the live site to see what had been changed or had disappeared. The biggest obstacle I encountered was the number of results. The following table shows the various search terms, results returned and additional notes made at the time:

Date	Search term	Results returned
10.7.14	'jimmy savile'	Number not recorded but following notes made: Occurred in listing for Yorkshire Radio 'Savile's Travels' Occurred in mention of London Marathon (ran every year) Filtering by. 'co.uk' then sentiment using 'negative' returned 45 results, but pages were mostly from 'British Girls Adult Film Database Forum' (bgafd.co.uk), discussing a disputed decision from the BBFC. There was no mention of Savile on the pages I searched. Why so many returns from Vogue.co.uk?
23.7.14 (new BL interface)	'jimmy savile'	22,284 results. Filtered search to blogs only, returned 5,534 results. These peaked in 2012 with 4,122 results that year, as would be expected – that was the year the scandal broke. Filtering by year I went to 2013, which yielded 112 results, 42 of them from the same entry on this blog: http://billwaldenjones.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/dodgy.html Is this suggestive of repetition across results? How to know if this glitch is replicated across the archive? Also, Savile continued to be a huge news story throughout this year – how is the web archive functioning as an archive at all if this is not being recorded?
24.7.14	'jimmy saville'	After noticing the spelling of 'Saville' on the BBC site, I searched with different spelling and returned over 8,000 results. Filtering to .co.uk gave me 7,470 results, and then to 2008 (the year of last modification of the BBC 'I Love …' sites) took me to 866, and then some BBC sites were

		highlighted at the top of my search results. Searching within these 800 or so results with '"top of the pops" AND Savile ~ 10' returned 168 results.
22.8.14	'"top of the pops" AND Savile ~ 10'	Returned 779 .co.uk results. Filtered by html (the BBC script) and got 733. Applied .co.uk again to get 720 results.
9.10.2014	'savile'	Familiarised self with new interface – much better although still can't search within searches. Need to find way of filtering rather than searching.
17.10.14	'top of the pops' AND BBC ~ 25 also 'jimmy savile' and 'louis theroux meets … Jimmy Savile'	Over 50,000 results with aim of finding pages talking about *TOTP* when it finished in 2006. Couldn't exclude pages via the suffix options. These searches were repeated while writing my paper. Once the suffix option was enabled I was able to return pages only from the bbc.co.uk site.
18.11.14	'Savile' filtered by the bbc.co.uk suffix	8,797 results for initial search. Then, 'Top of the Pops' and using the proximity tool, 'top of the pops' and 'savile' within 10 words, which returned 933 results.

The pattern demonstrated above, of intuitive alterations to the searches is how I worked throughout the case study. I made screen grabs of pages of interest, which form the body of the results below.

Bbc.co.uk, in its role as a news site, must continue to bear witness to Savile simply because of the importance of the story. As it might with any major, long-term story, the site has an in-depth examination titled 'Jimmy Savile Scandal'[12] which contains the page 'Painful Reminders', leading to 'Jimmy Savile: erasing the memory' which itself includes the statement 'The BBC has removed from its *Desert Island Discs* database a 1985 episode in which Savile says he got into running dance halls in order to get girls'.[13] This is the only example I came across on bbc.co.uk where an amendment was acknowledged. However, somewhat confusingly, Savile still appears within the *Desert Island Discs* archive pages with no mention of the scandal at all.[14] This variability in representation exemplifies how Savile appears within bbc.co.uk. The following examples demonstrate this.

1. An entirely uncritical profile of Savile from BBC Leeds:
   http://web.archive.org/web/20121007042621/http://www.bbc.co.uk/leeds/features/great_loiners/jimmy_savile.shtml-BBC-LeedsWeAreLeeds-SirJimmySavile%5D.[15]

2. Other examples include this report, made to mark the end of *Top of the Pops* in 2006 and showing Savile from the first episode:
   http://web.archive.org/web/20060719224830/http://news.bbc.co.uk:80/1/hi/in_pictures/5100314.stm%5D,[16] which also contains an image of Savile with his colleague Dave Lee Travis, taken in the 70s. In 2014 Travis received a suspended jail term for historic sexual crimes. Both images however demonstrate the primacy of the presenter within the concept of *Top of the Pops*: that as the music changed every week the presenter remained a familiar hub of the chart countdown.[17]

This comparative method swiftly revealed that bbc.co.uk is itself an archive of its online news coverage. For example, a search on the live site around *Top of the Pops* revealed a set of pages reporting on the re-launch of the show in 2001 which highlight Savile's centrality to the show and which remain on the live archive site.[18] The conclusion from these findings was that I was less interested in any archive results from news.bbc.co.uk as they would also be on the live site.

In its role as a programme archive, however, where does Savile sit within bbc.co.uk? Does Savile represent a cavity within the BBC archive and if so, how is this addressed on the website? Certainly, the following pages demonstrate my hypothesis that Savile was far more

to the BBC than just a presenter: he was a central figure of BBC entertainment. However, the additional overarching question remains of how – or if – the BBC is mediating the presence of Savile as it is on television. These questions were foremost when looking at the following results.

Found on the live web, the following page demonstrates a possible amendment – if coincidental malfunctioning is discounted – as clicking on the presenter info image of Savile leads to an error page whereas the other links remain functioning: http://www.bbc.co.uk/totp/history/.[19] The revocation of presenter dominance within this page is echoed in the current bbc.co.uk representation of *Top of the Pops.* It is repositioned to focus on the musicians rather than the presenters, as evidenced by this image from the live web: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007bs5w.[20] In the prominence of the logo, the shot echoes that of Savile and Travis shown earlier, thereby retaining a visual reminder of series past while removing the unwanted connotations of disgraced ex-presenters.

The BBC's Genome database states that this programme was first transmitted in 2001 and was part of an evening dedicated to *Top of the Pops* and hosted by Savile.[21] There is no mention of the documentary's origination on the page. This described shift away from presenter emphasis is reiterated in the current *Top of the Pops* homepage, which omits all mention of presenters.[22]

Looking beyond *Top of the Pops* and in keeping with the hypothesis of Savile's wider cultural import to the BBC, I searched for evidence of Savile across the online archive of the corporation and found pages which indicate Savile's presence in the 'I love …' series of nostalgia programmes that were first broadcast in 2000. Clicking through to find the three subsequent images on the live web, I found Savile was prominent on them all: http://www.bbc.co.uk/cult/ilove/years,[23] http://www.bbc.co.uk/cult/ilove/years,[24] and http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01h0q9w.[25] These pages included a 'Send photo to a friend tool', which had been disabled at every time these pages were accessed or this research.

Over the course of the case study, all the pages evidenced by these last three screenshots were removed from bbc.co.uk. The page from which they linked, the first of the three,

instead now links to the below generic front page:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01h0q9w.[26]

Looking at *Jim'll Fix It* presents an even clearer indication that the BBC is amending content that mentions Savile. At http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/bigben/7512.shtml on the live web, a set of pages celebrating Big Ben contains a greyed-out box that previously linked to a clip of Savile presenting a segment of the show where an 11-year-old girl went behind the clock face. Unfortunately because of the dating of the Web Archive I was unable to ascertain exactly when the content was disabled.[27]

While it is clear that content containing mention of Savile is being removed from bbc.co.uk, there is little official clue as to how the BBC is handling this content. This is despite editorial guidelines titled *Removal of BBC Online Content* being published on bbc.co.uk in June 2014.[28] The following statements come from within the document:

- *Unless content is specifically made available only for a limited time period, there is a presumption that material published online will become part of a permanently accessible archive and will not normally be removed or we risk erasing the past and altering history.*
- *We should be transparent about revocations, revisions and corrections and explain the specific reasons behind them, unless there are legal or editorial reasons not to. This should be at point of play for on demand programmes or on the same page for text.*
- *We should publish online a short statement of our policy on the removal of BBC online content.*
- *A clear record of all removals and revocations, including the reasons, must be kept by Divisions to ensure a consistent approach. This information should be sent quarterly to Editorial Legal, which will maintain a central record.*

The above confirms the conclusion that the BBC Online News site is intended as a permanent archive. It indicates no specific policy towards Savile but states that any 'removals or revocations, including the reason, must be kept … this information should be sent quarterly to Editorial Legal, which will maintain a central record'. To investigate this practice, I wrote to David Jordan (BBC Controller of Editorial Policy) and requested

information on 'any kind of strategy or policy for bbc.co.uk and the content that contains mention of Savile'. I received the following reply:

> *There is no written Guideline or Guidance specific to the online appearances or rebroadcast of programmes 'featuring stars accused and/or convicted of sex crimes.' Such issues are considered on a case-by-case basis. We do not automatically remove these individuals from programmes or remove references online to the individuals concerned. Where we do remove or edit content we take in to account the circumstances of the appearance and in particular who the star is appearing with: ie is he in the company of those he might have abused or the type of person he might have abused and what is his behaviour toward them. In other words it all depends on the context.*

When I replied and requested to 'view records of [any] removals, amendments or revocations, I received no answer.[29]

Finally, a note on Louis Theroux's *When Louis met Jimmy*. This documentary was broadcast in April 2000 and I looked to locate reporting around its transmission date to gauge its reception both on the BBC and across the web. This was unsuccessful as the date system on the new interface wasn't yet functioning. However, using the advanced search interface under the search term 'jimmy savile' then 'Jimmy', 'Louis' proximity 25 gave me 108 results to search through, including this Q&A page, with the highlighted comment from Theroux: http://web.archive.org/web/20051025123059/http://www.bbc.co.uk/communicate/archive/louis_theroux/page1.shtml[30] and http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01h0q9w.[31]

> *From Georgina, Sandy: If you had to swap your life with any of the people that you are lucky enough to meet whilst making your programmes, who would it be?*
>
> *Louis Theroux: Oh man! That's a tough one. If I swapped would I be them or would I be me in their situation? The lifestyle ... I think I would go Jimmy Savile. I know it may seem odd. Maybe it's because he's the one I keep in closest contact with. I spoke to him today. He genuinely seems to be someone, by lifestyle, who has evolved a mode of living which completely suits his personality. So many people are in conflict with themselves in some way. Paul and Debbie have a wonderful relationship, for*

example, they are in love, they have money, but with Paul you sometimes get the
sense that he's bitter about something. Jimmy's someone you feel has found some
profound peace with the world. Whatever you think of Jimmy, he's just happy being
him.

When I searched for this on the live BBC site or on Theroux's pages, it had disappeared. In an additional request to David Jordan, requesting the record of this specific removal as per 2014's online guidelines 'Removal of BBC Online Content', I received the following reply:

This article appears to be very old and may have been removed some years ago. Do
you have any idea when that may have been? The Guidance to which you refer is
relatively recent and the protocols it set up were only put in to place last year.

Again, I replied stating that the latest records I could find of the page were from 2008; I received no further response.[32]

Jordan's statement has wider implications than the 'case by case' response to the previous, more general query. It suggests that the BBC had no procedural guidelines for removal or amendment of online content until 2014; that is, some 17 years after BBC News Online became a key part of the BBC's broadcast network: as described by the first head of the service, Bob Eggington, 'to extend our public service remit to the Web'.[33] This lack of procedural guidelines itself contravenes a key statement of the BBC's 2014 Guidance as referred to by David Jordan, that 'Unless content is specifically made available only for a limited time period, there is a presumption that material published online will become part of a permanently accessible archive and will not normally be removed or we risk erasing the past and altering history' (see above). My findings demonstrated this 'presumption' is not held across the board; according to David Jordan, perhaps not held at all until 2014. How much of the online archive has been removed or altered with no record or admission made?

In wider conclusion, I would suggest my findings demonstrate an attempt by the BBC to control the online narrative around Savile; however the scale of BBC Online makes it very difficult to ascertain if there is a specific policy or if pages are being amended and/or removed on an ad hoc basis. The clear withdrawal of the clip from *Jim'll Fix It* indicates an understandable and important urgency felt by the BBC to prevent any broadcast of footage

where Savile is interacting with children, itself indicative of the 'case by case' policy described by David Jordan. However, the variability of revocation around Savile across bbc.co.uk suggests the issues inherent in the Savile case – of maintaining the archive, admitting culpability, boundaries of taste and responsibility to victims – have not yet been surmounted. Certainly, the findings indicate no historic policy, no coherent corporation wide policy and no systematic recording and publication of removals, amendments or revocations.

[1] Tony Robinson is the presenter associated with the long-running archaeological-series *Time Team* (Channel 4, 1994–2013) and numerous heritage television projects; the initial investigation pursued the idea that he might have been the subject of online discussion during the period covered by the Web Archive (1996–2013).

[2] 'Jimmy Savile: Tributes flood in', 30 October 2011) http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-15507826 [accessed 19 June 2015].

[3] Jimmy Savile was posthumously stripped of his knighthood.

[4] C. Greer and E. McLaughlin, 'The Sir Jimmy Savile scandal: child sexual abuse and institutional denial at the BBC', *Crime, Media, Culture*, 9 (2013), 243–63.

[5] 'Jimmy Savile scandal: Report reveals decades of abuse', 11 January 2013 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20981611 [accessed 19 June 2015].

[6] 'Top of the Pops through the decades' 29 November 2004 http://www.theguardian.com/music/2004/nov/29/popandrock.television [accessed 19 June 2015].

[7] A. Erll, *Memory in Culture* (New York, 2011).

[8] A. Holdsworth, 'Television iterations: comedy, autobiography and memory', in *Mediated Pasts: Visual Cultures and Collective Memory* (Leicester, 2014).

[9] In 2011 Richard Klein, then Controller of BBC4, the channel on which *Top of the Pops* was most shown, said repeats would continue on a 'case-by-case' basis (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-20969876 [accessed 19 June 2015]). The programme continues to be shown on BBC4, with a Christmas special on BBC1.

[10] 'BBC apologises for airing Jimmy Savile appearance', 22 Sept. 2014 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-29308337 [accessed 19 June 2015].

[11] The pages for *Top of the Pops* can be found here: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00704hg [accessed 19 June 2015].

[12] 'Jimmy Savile Scandal', 27 June 2014 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20026910 [accessed 19 June 2015].

[13] 'Jimmy Savile: Erasing the Memory', 1 November 2012
http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20165466 [accessed 19 June 2015].

[14] 'Jimmy Savile', undated [15 January 2015] http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/desert-island-discs/castaway/93ade3b5 [accessed 19 June 2015].

[15] 'Profile: Sir Jimmy Savile'
http://web.archive.org/web/20121007042621/http://www.bbc.co.uk/leeds/features/great_loiners/jimmy_savile.shtml [Internet Archive, site captured 7 October 2012]; also available from http://www.bbc.co.uk/leeds/features/great_loiners/jimmy_savile.shtml [accessed 19 June 2015].

[16] 'In pictures: TOTP through the years'
http://web.archive.org/web/20060719224830/http://news.bbc.co.uk:80/1/hi/in_pictures/5100314.stm [Internet Archive, site captured 19 July 2006]; also available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_pictures/5100314.stm [accessed 19 June 2015.

[17] Ibid.

[18] 'Sir Jimmy back for TOTP Special'
http://web.archive.org/web/20011218023440/http://news.bbc.co.uk:80/low/english/entertainment/music/newsid_1608000/1608065.stm [Internet Archive, captured 18 December 2001]; also available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/1608065.stm [accessed 19 June 2015].

[19] 'TOTP 1964–2006' http://www.bbc.co.uk/totp/history/ [accessed 18 November 2014].

[20] 'TOTP 1964–2006' http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007bs5w [accessed 18 November 2014].

[21] 'I love Top of the Pops', 8 December 2001
http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/b409b8941dfa4d31b254f1a6eafd5568 [accessed 16 October 2014].

[22] 'Top of the Pops BBC homepage' http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00704hg [accessed 16 October 2014].

[23] 'I love ...' http://www.bbc.co.uk/cult/ilove/years [accessed summer 2014].

[24] 'I love ...', via http://bbc.co.uk/cult/ilove/years but no longer present on bbc.co.uk [accessed summer 2014].

[25] Ibid.

[26] 'I love the 1970s' http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01h0q9w [accessed 2 December 2014].

[27] 'Big Ben | Celebrating the world-famous clock tower'
http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/bigben/7512.shtml [accessed 19 November 2014].

[28] 'Removal of BBC Online Content', 17 June 2014
http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/page/guidance-removal-bbconline-content [accessed 19 June 2015].

[29] Email from Rowan Aust to Kieran Clifton (BBC Controller, Digital Strategy, Future Media) forwarded to David Jordan (BBC Director of Editorial Policy and Standards).

[30] 'Ask Louis Theroux', 26 Nov. 2002 http://web.archive.org/web/20051025123059/http://www.bbc.co.uk/communicate/archive/louis_theroux/page1.shtml [Internet Archive, captured 25 October 2005]. The Q&A (2002) long pre-dates any revelations about Savile.

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] Email from Rowan Aust to David Jordan (BBC Director of Editorial Policy and Standards).

[33] S. Allan and E. Thorsen, 'Journalism, public service and BBC News Online', in *News Online: Transformation and Continuities.*, ed. G. Meikle and G. Redden (New York, 2010), p. 23.