Perception is NOT Reality: Misjudgement, Media, and Mischaracterisation

Introduction

The phrase “Perception is reality” is repeated so often that it risks being accepted as a universal truth. In politics, marketing, and public life, shaping perception is often treated as equivalent to shaping reality itself. Yet for those who have lived through public scandal, wrongful accusation, or media distortion, the opposite can be painfully true: perception is not reality.[1] When a narrative is created, whether through law enforcement summaries, court judgments, or media headlines, it can override the truth entirely.[2] Those who know better are often drowned out by the echo chamber of public opinion. Once a perception is set, reality becomes almost irrelevant to the masses. My own case, and the lessons I have drawn from others who have suffered similar fates, underlines this dangerous gap between what is believed and what is true. To understand the magnitude of this gulf, it is worth looking back at early experiences with injustice, tracing the technological and cultural shifts that have made perception so vulnerable to manipulation, and examining how one man’s story became a cautionary tale for anyone who thinks truth alone will prevail.

Early Lessons in Justice and Misjudgement

My first encounter with the legal system came at the age of 11. I found myself in an English courtroom testifying against a local rogue who had attempted to steal a swan’s egg from a protected nesting site. Swans were a treasured and legally protected species and interfering with their nests carried stiff penalties.[3] I never learned the exact punishment, but the retaliation I faced was swift and brutal: first, a lead pellet shot into my arm; second, months of bullying from his cousin at school. That early episode taught me an enduring truth: justice, even when you “win” in court, can have unintended and deeply personal consequences. The lesson hardened into cynicism in my twenties, when I heard off-duty police officers discuss over lunch the wrongful conviction of Arthur Allan Thomas for the Crewe murders.

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[1] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, New York: Vintage, 1992, p. 5.
[2] S. Cohen, ‘Moral Panics and Folk Concepts’, *Paedagogica Historica*, vol. 35, no. 3, 1999, pp. 587.
[3] Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, < https://www.legislation.gov.uk> [Accessed 19 August 2025].

They knew the evidence had been planted.[4] It took years—and an investigative journalist, not the police, to clear his name.[5] Lindy Chamberlain's conviction for the death of her daughter Azaria in Australia was another case where public opinion and prosecutorial zeal outweighed truth, and it took over three decades to correct the record.[6]

By the time I faced my own ordeal, I already knew that the justice system could be as capable of error and self-protection as any other human institution.

The Internet: From Megabytes to Mass Access

To understand my case, you must understand how internet culture has changed.

In the early 1990s, access was expensive and metered. Users bought time or data in small, costly blocks, encouraging them to download as much as possible before disconnecting.[7] Much of this material was freely available. No warnings, no takedown notices, no ominous disclaimers about legality. The ethos was one of openness, driven by the early internet's libertarian belief that "information wants to be free."[8]

By the 2000s, high-speed broadband and "unlimited" monthly access made this approach unnecessary. But the culture had changed again: intellectual property enforcement had become aggressive, peer-to-peer platforms were targeted, and users were monitored.[9] The same habit of "download now, read later" that had once been practical could now be grounds for prosecution.[10]

This selective criminalisation, targeting some individuals for old habits while ignoring others, created a dangerous environment. What was once normal could suddenly be illegal, and the transition was not evenly enforced.

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[4] David Yallop, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt,* London: Hutchinson, 1978, pp. 44–6.
[5] Chris Birt, *The Crewe Murders: Inside New Zealand's Most Infamous Cold Case*, Auckland: Reed, 2001, p. 203.
[6] John Bryson, *Evil Angels*, Ringwood: Penguin, 1985, pp. 19–21.
[7] Janet Abbate, *Inventing the Internet*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999, p. 102.
[8] Lawrence Lessig, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*, New York: Basic Books, 1999, pp. 23–4.
[9] Tim Wu, *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires*, New York: Knopf, 2010, p. 218.
[10] Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture*, New York: Penguin, 2004, p. 62.

The Incident

In 2017, I was rear-ended at a traffic light in Cairns by a large vehicle. The injury left me in chronic pain on my left side, but a more unexpected effect emerged within weeks: impotence. My wife and I had enjoyed a fulfilling sex life, but the accident brought intimacy to a halt.[11] We accepted this as part of ageing, but I still sought solutions, first medication, then the possibility of surgery, which I ultimately rejected.

As a last attempt, I did what many men (and 84% of Australian males) have done: I turned to pornography.[12] But during my searches, a pop-up led to child exploitation material (CEM). Far from arousing me, it disturbed me but piqued my curiosity for reasons unrelated to sexuality. I noticed repeated "actors" in different clothing and makeup, and background details like architecture, vegetation, and artefacts that could indicate location. Why, I wondered, had these sites not been used to track down and rescue the children? Why were the same images still online years later?[13]

I downloaded images briefly for analysis, stored them in a clearly marked folder, and deleted them after study. What I did not know was that deletion does not always erase data from a cache.[14] I also did not realise that having linked backup drives could create duplicates that would later inflate the number of "images" attributed to me. I never joined groups, paid for access, or sought further material. But in court, my nuanced explanation was condensed into a sexual motive, and my lack of technical sophistication was, ironically, recast as a "level of sophistication" in covering my tracks.[15]

The Psychologist's Report: A Study in Misrepresentation

The court relied heavily on a psychologist's report that, I know, misrepresented my words. The report stated I had sought CEM for arousal and failed. I had been

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[11] Mayo Clinic, 'Erectile Dysfunction', 2023, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/erectile-dysfunction/symptoms-causes/syc-20355776>, [Accessed 10 August 2025].
[12] Ingrid L. Laemmle-Ruff, Michelle Raggatt, Cassandra J. C. Wright, Elise R. Carrotte, Angela Davis, Rebecca Jenkinson and Megan S. C. Lim, 'Personal and reported partner pornography viewing by Australian women, and association with mental health and body image', *Sexual Health*, vol. 16, 2019, p. 75.
[13] Ethel Quayle and Max Taylor, *Child Pornography: An Internet Crime*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 94-100.
[14] Brian Carrier, *File System Forensic Analysis*, Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2005, pp. 77–8.

[15] Gisli H. Gudjonsson, *The Psychology of Interrogations and Confessions*, Chichester: Wiley, 2003, p. 401.

seeking arousal from adult material when CEM appeared unexpectedly, killing any arousal and instead triggering analytical curiosity. The report also suggested my primary concern was the loss of reputation. In truth, my greatest worry was that my students and professional peers would doubt my integrity after decades of training thousands of divers, many of them young people, without a single incident of misconduct.[16] These distortions mattered because they fed into the judge's emotional delivery of the sentence; words spoken not as a neutral pronouncement but as a venom-laced rebuke. Here, perception was shaped not by the facts but by the flavour of the language.[17]

Media Amplification and Public Backlash

The media's treatment was predictably sensational. A few paragraphs in a newspaper can undo a lifetime's reputation.[18] Headlines and short summaries encourage readers to fill in gaps with their own prejudices. In my case, this resulted in nearly 200 hate messages sent to my wife, threats of violence, bank accounts closed after 53 years, the cancellation of a 39-year professional membership, and the silent withdrawal of acquaintances who once called themselves friends.[19] This is the Tall Poppy Syndrome at its ugliest, where the fall of a respected figure becomes a public spectacle to be enjoyed, regardless of truth.[20]

The Ethical Debate on Using Abuse Material

An important dimension is the broader debate on the use of child sexual abuse material for legitimate purposes. Victim-survivors themselves are divided. Many see value in allowing police, courts, researchers, and technology companies to retain and use such material for crime prevention, so long as their consent is sought, and they are informed of how it will be used.[21] Yet most would prefer the material to be destroyed if possible.[22] My own questions about the persistence of certain images

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[16] Gisli H. Gudjonsson, *The Psychology of Interrogations and Confessions*, p. 404.
[17] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, p.210.
[18] Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, p. 25.
[19] Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework*, Council of Europe Report, 2017, pp. 43-44.
[20] R. Peeters, 'Tall Poppy Syndrome: Aggression Towards Successful People in Australia', *Psychological Reports*, vol. 95, 2004, pp. 443–6.
[21] Ethel Quayle and Max Taylor, *Child Pornography: An Internet Crime*, pp. 142–3.
[22] Interpol, 'Crimes Against Children', 2022, https://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Crimes-against-children, [accessed 10 August 2025].

online starts with why they are not removed if their locations can be identified; echoing concerns raised by survivors.[23] There is an ethical tension between using this material to catch offenders and the risk of retraumatising victims by its continued circulation.

Perception, Stigma, and Sexuality

Compounding the problem is society's fraught relationship with sexuality. High libido is a normal variation in human sexual desire, distinct from pathological hypersexuality.[24] But in conservative or moralistic contexts, high sexual interest is often pathologised or equated with deviance.[25] In cases involving sexual material, public perception tends to default to the most salacious interpretation of motive. This cultural bias means that even when evidence points to a non-sexual motivation, as in my case, many will assume the worst. Once that perception takes hold, rebuttal becomes almost impossible.

Broader Patterns: How Perceptions Become 'Reality'

The transformation of perception into "reality" follows a predictable path:

1. **Authority Bias** – People trust police, psychologists, and judges to be objective.[26]
2. **Confirmation Bias** – Once an accusation is made, evidence is interpreted to fit the narrative.[27]
3. **Media Amplification** – Repetition across outlets makes a story feel more certain.[28]
4. **Social Contagion** – In the age of social media, moral panic spreads rapidly.[29]

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[23] Quayle and Taylor, *Child Pornography: An Internet Crime*, p. 146.
[24] Martin P. Kafka, 'What is Hypersexual Disorder?', *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, vol.39, 2010, pp. 377–400.
[25] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon, 1978, p. 43.

[26] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, London: Penguin, 2011, p. 81.
[27] Raymond S. Nickerson, 'Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises', *Review of General Psychology*, vol.2, 1998, pp. 175–220.
[28] Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, p. 27.
[29] Wardle and Derakhshan, *Information Disorder*, p. 41.

The result is a self-reinforcing loop. In my case, the perception of guilt, sexual guilt specifically, was established early and amplified at every stage. The actual reality, however convoluted, was too counter-intuitive to break through.

Conclusion

I committed a crime by downloading prohibited images, and I accept responsibility for that. But the reason I did so, and the absence of any sexual gratification, was ignored in favour of a simpler, more salacious story. That story, repeated by authorities and media, became the "reality" in the public mind. The damage is permanent. I will never recover the reputation I built over decades. And yet, my case is far from unique. From Thomas and Chamberlain to countless lesser-known victims of misjudgement, the lesson is the same: once perception solidifies, reality becomes almost irrelevant.[30] We live in an age where social media outrage can be weaponised, where the line between legitimate law enforcement and public spectacle is thin, and where complexity is sacrificed for narrative impact. If there is any hope for justice, real justice, it lies in resisting the urge to accept the first version of a story, in demanding evidence over assumption, and in remembering that perception is not reality.

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[30] Bryson, *Evil Angels*, pp. 325–6.

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