

HEADLINERS

Would you put Ridings on your CV?

Pupils at one of Britain's most notorious schools explain how the media story took on a life of its own when journalists trained their cameras on the kids.

The Ridings dominated headlines for a couple of weeks in November 1996 after a crew from BBC's Panorama portrayed the school as out of control. It was besieged by reporters and cameramen. Then an Office for Standards in Education team declared the Halifax school, which had been dubbed "the worst in Britain", a threat to public order and closed it for a week.

Eighteen months later, Children's Express reporters talked to pupils at the school about being caught in the media spotlight.

"The headlines were the worst thing - The School From Hell. Every time it was in the news, it was just a headline", said Michelle Foster, 18. "That was the only thing it covered. It wasn't our story. They had no evidence whether it was the worst school in Britain or not. They just kept using the same headlines over and over again."

"The Guardian and The Times got to the root of the problem, whereas The Sun and The Mirror were just School from hell - this and that! Nothing to do with why it was like that. Just that headline." Eleanor Graham, 16, said, "At one time The Sun was putting in pictures of us with skinheads, beer cans and big cigarettes. It was pathetic because its nothing like that."

Michelle agreed: "They portrayed it like it was a war zone, like it was really, really bad".

"The press always said, 'Oh well put exactly what you say and trust us'. You tell them and then you see it in the paper - totally different", said Gareth Nibbs, 16.

Louise Roscoe, 18, added, "One reporter came into the sixth form centre and asked what exam results we'd got. We all went through and Michelle said she got an A-star in PE. The reporter said, well we won't bother putting that in. Michelle said, yeah, you will, because I worked damn hard to get that. We all got As, Bs and Cs, but they didnt put any of the grades in."

"They didnt want to see the good side of the school." Michelle confirmed, "We told them things and they just twisted it and everyone read it and thought we were really bad."

"They let a few children represent the whole of the school and they got ones showing off because they wanted to be on TV," said Stacey Murray, 17.

"Of course kids think its funny to lie and then see it in the paper." Mary Burns, 15 added, "At the end of the day, if you get money slapped in your hands for slugging off your teachers then theyre going to do it aren't you?"

"Newspapers werent interested in portraying us as a good school," commented Michelle. "Some were, but there was nowhere near as much interest as when we were the so-called school from hell. The local papers are showing that were doing good. They haven't been putting us down, but other papers aren't bothered. Its like, they're doing all right now - bye! They're old news."

"Scandal sells and if something bad is in the paper, people will say, oh did you read that in the paper?. They don't tend to say it if its something really good, but thats society. If newspapers were printing that Riding School is now rosy, people wouldnt be interested. Its not going to change."

"They were saying it on national news, like it was the only school in the country that this had happened to, but it wasnt. When it goes national, people believe it. Local papers can say it but when its on the news its like, oh it must be happening, its on the news. It shouldnt have got to that level. It should have stayed local." Stacey observed, "Everyone I met was talking about it saying Im not sending my kids there. I think it was the main worry about getting kids to come in at First Year."

"Journalists just didnt leave us alone. Theyd approach us with, can we have a word with you, and youd get talked into doing all sorts. They were coming round your area going door-to-door," explained Gareth.

"They weren't rude to you but the camera would be in your face. Dont take a picture, then click. Youre just walking down the road and they're filming you", said Eleanor.

Michelle said, "You just didnt want to go outside the front of the school. We used to get home another way. At one point theyd hired a crane and there were two camera men up there with telephoto lenses looking into the school". "We had to close the curtains in some classrooms", added Eleanor.

"I gave my number to the Mirror, and said can you not ring at so-and-so times? They said, its okay, we wont ring you, we'll ring the school. I'd get home and theyd have rung. You'd specifically say dont come to my house, and they'd be there. No respect at all," explained Michelle. "Once you get involved, theyre werent going to stop. They were always there. They're always want more off you."

Gareth commented, "A car pulled up and these journalists said, what school are you from lad?. I said I was from the Ridings. They took loads of shots of us, just walking up and down the road and messing about. There were three of us and I think we got paid £10 each."

"When someone tells you something all the time, you tend to think, well am I?" said Michelle. "You were constantly getting told Ridings is rubbish - what are you there for? You wont learn anything. And it gets to you. At first youre like, no Im not, no Im not, but it does get to you. When it happened, we were going to be leaving soon. I thought oh no, imagine putting the Ridings on your CV."

"I lied once or twice. Youre talking to someone and they'll say, oh what school are you from? and youd say another school because if you say the Riding School when all the media were here, it was like oh, no. It was as bad as that. You didnt want to tell them." Eleanor admitted, "I wanted to leave, but my mum said there was no point. I couldnt do with all the hassle at school. I'd just started my GCSEs courses and I didnt want to get off to a bad start, so I really did want to leave, though Im glad I didn't in the end."

"Before when you read a paper you'd look at it and think, oh, my God!. Now, because you've actually been in, you look at the papers go, God, that can't be true. If youve had experience of the media you know what to believe and what not to believe," said Louise.

"I used to read the papers and think if its in the paper, it must have happened. But being on this side of it, you think well Ive seen now, Ive been part of it. I've said things to people and they printed something completely different. You look at them now in a completely different light," agreed Michelle.

About the team

Interviews conducted by editors Amy Wood, 14, Steven Boyle, 15, and Julia Press, 18, and reporters Gemma McFadyen, 12, and Chris Fletcher, 12. This article was published in the [Times Educational Supplement](#).

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