

# The perspective of victims/survivors on media coverage of child sexual abuse

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This chapter presents the results of an online survey ( $n = 103$ ) and 51 qualitative interviews with victims/survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA). First, it examines the question of how victims/survivors of CSA perceive media coverage. 2010 is identified as a turning point in German media coverage because of a new wave of reporting on cases in children's homes and boarding schools and because of the first big media campaign on CSA. Different perspectives on media reports are highlighted: the opportunity of media to change society and reach people on the one hand and demands to keep the topic permanently present on the other hand. Second, the experiences victims/survivors have when they themselves disclose CSA in the media are addressed. The empirical findings underline the relevance of media coverage for victims/survivors of CSA both on the level of personal involvement and the need for trauma-sensitive and evidence-based reporting to change society's perception of the issue.

*Keywords:* child sexual abuse, victim/survivor perspective, media coverage, qualitative analysis

Reports of current cases of child sexual abuse (CSA) are regularly in the media, mostly in daily newspapers or news broadcasts in the form of reports on police operations or criminal proceedings, and victims/survivors<sup>1</sup> are constantly confronted with them. At the same time the topic remains a social taboo and survivors are often not believed or experience stigmatization as a result of disclosure or seeking help (Kavemann et al., 2016).

Sexual violence in childhood and youth has been a topic in the media in Germany since the mid-1980s. First self-help groups of women had brought the topic to the public eye, with a focus on intrafamilial CSA. At the beginning of 2010, victims/survivors of CSA in Germany went public and made the previously hidden extent of CSA in boarding schools and children's homes in the 1940s to 1970s visible. Compared to the previous

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1 We use the terms victims/survivors to acknowledge a current debate in Germany about the proper naming of those individuals who have suffered from CSA. Many of them reject the label "victim". They do not want to be seen as victims and prefer instead to be referred to as having survived CSA or having been affected by CSA (German: "Betroffene"). Others find the reference to victim fitting and important.

discourse, new aspects were taken up: The focus was on (Catholic) elite institutions, the positively connoted concept of reform pedagogy was being challenged, and the topic was predominantly CSA of boys (Hoffmann, 2015). Previous attempts to bring the topic to the public had failed as they were not picked up by the media (Behnisch & Rose, 2011; Oelkers, 2017). A massive scandal was needed in Germany so that the topic of CSA could no longer be ignored (see Etzel et al. in this volume). It set off a new wave of media and scientific debate about CSA (Kavemann et al., 2016).

The broad media discussion developed quickly and led to changes in politics (Bange, 2018). First, the Federal Government responded by setting up a Round Table on Child Sexual Abuse, in which three ministries were involved, and by appointing the former Minister for Family Affairs, Dr Christine Bergmann, as the first Independent Commissioner for the Investigation of Child Sexual Abuse. Second, a media campaign was launched to encourage victims/survivors to share their stories and to convey their demands and messages to politicians (see Etzel et al. in this volume). The next important step followed in 2016: The “Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in Germany”<sup>2</sup> was appointed by the German parliament to investigate all forms of CSA in Germany, to raise public awareness, and to promote a better understanding of child protection on a societal level. For that, private sessions were and are still conducted to give victims/survivors the opportunity to tell their stories confidentially, but also public hearings to examine different key issues (like CSA in families, the churches, the German Democratic Republic, or sports). These activities are being evaluated and the stories told by victims/survivors are documented and published (Unabhängige Kommission zur Aufarbeitung sexuellen Missbrauchs, 2019). Additionally, various research projects are conducted in the framework of the Inquiry<sup>3</sup> as a contribution to updating and broadening publicly available knowledge about CSA based on the experiences of victims/survivors.

The current chapter aims to gain a deeper understanding of how victims/survivors of sexual violence in childhood and youth perceive and evaluate media coverage about CSA and what experiences they made when they themselves disclosed their experiences in media such as newspapers or television. For this purpose data of one of the research projects mentioned is reanalyzed (further information see Kavemann et al., 2019).

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2 [www.aufarbeitungskommission.de/english-information](http://www.aufarbeitungskommission.de/english-information)

3 <https://www.aufarbeitungskommission.de/kommission/projekte/>

## CSA in the media

In the research on which this chapter is based, it became evident that victims/survivors ascribe significance to media coverage for society's approach to the topic of CSA (Kavemann et al., 2019). Media reports influence public perception, and coverage of CSA contributes to raising awareness in society (Kitzinger, 2004). Media can push institutions to respond to cases of CSA in their own organizations (Donnelly & Inglis, 2010) and can provide encouragement to people to contact child protective services (Saint-Jacques et al., 2012).

While quality media are considered important by both scientific theory and practice, quality deficiencies in reporting are frequent (Döring & Walter, 2020). Weatherred (2015, p. 29) found a "very real lack of coverage about prevention of CSA and its effects on society, law, and future public policies." Rather a focus on sensational cases and the blame of individuals instead of structures were identified. Research highlighted that, while reports from national US media between 2002 and 2012 included societal causes of CSA, solutions were still addressed on an individual level, such as prosecution of individual perpetrators (Weatherred, 2017). News stories excluded societal conditions, policy solutions or prevention (Mejia et al., 2012) and did not sufficiently involve professionals and their expertise (Cheit et al., 2010).

Inadequate reporting can spread CSA myths and reproduce incorrect and stereotyped beliefs about victims/survivors and also perpetrators (Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010). By that it can have a direct negative impact on the lives of victims/survivors; for instance, people who accept these myths are less inclined to believe victims/survivors when they disclose CSA (Cromer & Freyd, 2007). Such news coverage then contributes to stigmatization, to which victims/survivors are repeatedly exposed (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Goffman, 1975; Kennedy & Prock, 2018). Shame and stigmatization can have long-term traumatic consequences for victims/survivors (Jones et al., 2010) and negatively influence the societal attitude towards victims/survivors (Collings, 2002). There are several risks in media coverage: Publicity about individual cases can not only increase the risk of shame and stigmatization for victims/survivors. Studies have also found that media reports in the U.S. frequently contained enough information to identify victims of CSA (Jones et al., 2010). Similar findings apply to adult victims of violent crime in Germany (Kunczik, 2016). Privacy rights are thereby violated.

The use of language and images convey a picture of CSA that is not congruent with empirical findings and social reality. German media reports

on CSA are frequently illustrated with problematic pictures: small children being threatened by big hands or overwhelming shadows, teddy bears stabbed with scissors, broken dolls, children crouching in a dark corner etc. (see Döring in this volume).

This also includes the terminology used to refer to victims/survivors. It plays an important role in the reception of reporting. The German press usually speaks of “victims”, while the self-description of those who experienced sexualized violence in childhood and youth varies between “victims”, “survivors”, and “Betroffene” (“person affected”). In a binational study, Papendick and Bohner (2017) examined the effects of the labels “victim” and “survivor” (and their German equivalents) for women who had been raped on the basis of case vignette with which participants were confronted. The research showed stereotypical and partially stigmatizing attributions to the labels. The use of different terminology affected the attribution of more positive characteristics to “survivor” and stigmatizing, more negative ones to “victim”. There were parallel effects for the English and German terms. At the same time “survivor” was associated with more severe forms of violence and only considered appropriate for these. For media reports the authors conclude that “the use of a particular label may have massive effects on the public’s perception of women who have experienced sexual violence and, more specifically, on the public’s intention to support these women and organizations caring for them.” (Papendick & Bohner, 2017, p. 19).

Victims/survivors are compelled to deal with the presence of the subject in the media. The literature at hand contains important insights into the societal impact of the reporting of CSA, but so far hardly any of the victims/survivors have been asked for their own views and experiences. In the 1980s and 1990s when media reports on CSA were just starting to appear, Kitzinger (2004) conducted interviews and focus groups with victims/survivors of CSA and relatives. She found that media reports were predominantly evaluated as positive and helpful. She describes them as a “catalyst for change at an intimate, private as well as public level” (Kitzinger, 2004, p. 44). A similar lack of literature applies to research on victims’/survivors’ personal experiences of participating in media. A recent study with victims/survivors who suffered CSA by perpetrators within the church and who have reported on it in different media illustrates a broad picture of experiences (Baugut & Neumann, 2020).

## This study

The research presented in this chapter puts a focus on the perspective of victims/survivors and aims to contribute to closing this particular gap in research by using recent data. Therefore we derived the following research questions: (1) How do victims/survivors perceive and evaluate media reporting from the perspective of the recipients? (2) What experiences have victims/survivors themselves with personal participation in media reports? To answer these question, qualitative and quantitative data was analyzed (further information, Kavemann et al., 2019).

This text focuses on experiences with and expectations of “traditional” media, namely newspapers and TV, in which the stories of victims/survivors are published by others. Not included are self-initiated and self-determined forms of publishing (like blog posts or books). The formats differ greatly in the degree of control that victims/survivors have over the reports: Are the stories published in a self-determined way, for example by writing a biography or publishing something online, or does someone else have control over the narrative?

## Methods

### Online survey

As part of the research project two online surveys were carried out. The results presented here are taken from the second questionnaire ( $n = 103$ ). The online survey was distributed to a wide range of people: through contacts that the research team had already gained from the first online survey, through a mailing list of specialized counselling centers and organizations of victims/survivors, through the website of the research project and the website of the Independent Inquiry, and through a snowball system in which the link to the questionnaire was passed on in the private networks of victims/survivors. It was online for eight weeks in 2018 and was filled out by 103 respondents. The topic was mainly the Inquiry’s public relations work and the perceptions of victims/survivors of the media coverage of CSA as well as their expectations of it.

The data was analyzed using SPSS (version 24.0); open questions were categorized (using qualitative text analysis by means of Kuckartz, 2018). The survey mainly reached women (over 80 %), respondents were to a large extent between the ages of 31 and 60 (ca. 80 %), and the majority currently lived in West Germany (over 80 %). Nearly 90 % stated that CSA

had taken place in the Federal Republic of Germany (both before 1990 in West Germany and after 1990 in the whole Federal Republic), while for 11 % CSA had taken place in the German Democratic Republic. Three quarters of all respondents had experienced sexual violence in the family.

### Qualitative interviews

As part of the research project, 51 qualitative, semi-narrative interviews (with 44 women and nine men, all between 26 and 68 years old at the time of the interview, most of them over 40) were conducted. Interviewees were found in three different ways: (1) Participants of the first online survey were offered at the end of the survey to participate in the qualitative interviews if they were interested. In addition, (2) the interviews were announced on the website of the research project and via various mailing lists. Later on, (3) we also received inquiries from people who had learned about the interviews from other interviewees.

The interviews gave the interviewees room to tell their own story. Furthermore there was a focus on subjective views and theories about topics and concepts like “justice” or “recognition”. The interviews were analyzed by creating case-specific scripts, working out central motives and identifying dense text passages to analyze. After that cross-case, analyses were carried out.

For this article, a secondary analysis (Medjedović, 2014) of the interview passages with the broad topics “media” and “the public sphere” was carried out. The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015) by means of Kuckartz’s methodology (Kuckartz, 2018, 2019). Categories were inductively developed from the corresponding text passages; they are presented below.

## Results

Perception and evaluation of media coverage from the participants’ point of view

### *The media coverage in 2010 as a turning point*

The wave of reporting in 2010 was described by interviewees as a turning point. It could trigger developments in different directions: relief, because

disclosure was possible, or the beginning of a crisis, because there was no escape from the omnipresence of the topic anymore. The following passages show how different reactions of victims/survivors can be when previously undisclosed and/or traumatic experiences suddenly become a public topic.

### *Media reception enabled/triggered disclosure*

For a part of the interviewees the perception of media coverage marked a point in time when they began, as a reaction, to address their own history in different ways. One response to the reporting was a great need for conversation. At the same time, the public presence of the topic also opened opportunities to start to talk about it. An interviewee described: *“When the cases of abuse in the Catholic Church went through the press, I said to a colleague, well, let’s see how things continue. I have decided not to press charges. And he thought for a minute and then was like ... wait a minute! And that’s how it happened. At that time, I needed to talk a lot, like a valve to the outside.”*

The media reception could lead to activity. 2010 then marked both the beginning of speaking about CSA and the beginning of researching it – on the one hand because *“I could feel it was starting to build up again inside me”*, as one interviewee said, on the other hand because the reporting caused the victims/survivors to understand the violence as violence. That in turn then triggered disclosure. One interviewee described the process as follows: *“When the whole scandal really boiled over, I realized for the first time that I was a victim, too. Before, I did not perceive it that way. (...) Until that day, I thought I did something wrong as a kid. I would have kept quiet if it hadn’t been for the newspaper article; I would have always thought that it was only the others and that it doesn’t concern me.”*

### *The reporting closed off protective strategies*

The intensity and frequency of the media reports was not only perceived as positive. 2010 also represents a turning point when the confrontation with traumatic experiences deprived victims/survivors of the shelter and protective strategies that were previously in place. One interviewee described her coping strategy *“like a light switch”*. She was able to repress memories of her past if she needed to: *“It was never completely gone, like electricity is always on the line, but if I didn’t want it, I pushed it away and it was*

good.” That coping mechanism only worked as long as CSA as a subject was not present in her everyday life; thus in 2010 it stopped working and the “switch” was “turned off by the massive reporting about the abuse in the Catholic Church. That was very merciless and took away a lot of protection.”

The forced confrontation was perceived as relentless and as a time where one could not escape the subject. In this case the media presence did not provide the opportunity for personal coping but rather took it away: To deal with her own history, the interviewee would have been dependent on her existing safety strategies. The time when the memories were repressed was described as “easier”, while the time after was called “burdensome” as it could cause a spiral of negative effects.

### *Perspectives on media coverage*

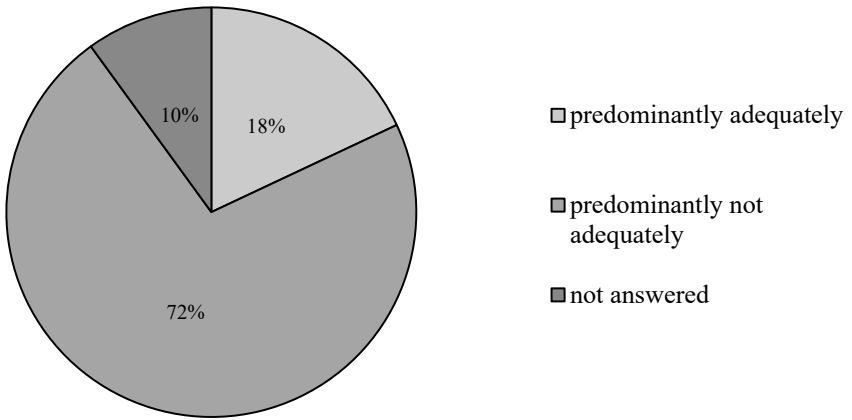
The survey asked 103 victims/survivors about their opinions on media coverage of CSA: How did they perceive and evaluate it? The results showed that the portrayal of victims/survivors in the media was viewed very critically by a large majority. Only a narrow range of respondents believed that the representation of victims/survivors in the media was mainly adequate, saying that “at least an attempt is made” to present the topic in its entirety. By contrast, 72 percent of the respondents thought that victims/survivors were not adequately represented in the media. The insufficient public presence of the topic was criticized here and in other parts of the questionnaire. CSA was still seen as a taboo subject that is “difficult to access” or “played down”.

The answers were not only about frequency but rather about quality: They criticized too big a focus on perpetrators on the one hand, but the media coverage was also perceived as stigmatizing with not enough recognition and a lack of understanding for victims/survivors on the other hand. It was described as “superficial and lurid”, long-term consequences of CSA in particular were not seen as presented in their complexity.

When asked about the type of reporting that would be best to bring the interests of victims/survivors into the public eye, two were highlighted as suitable by over 80 %: personal interviews and reports that address the issue of CSA in a factual manner. A third of the respondents spoke in favor of emotionally evocative coverage. “The question is not necessarily whether victims/survivors get a say, but how.”



Figure 1  
(Adequate) presentation of victims/survivors in the media



Note. Questionnaire;  $n = 103$ . Source: Quantitative survey, see Nagel & Kavemann, 2018, p. 9.

There was a strong desire that the interests of victims/survivors are proactively represented in the media coverage. It was of particular importance for the respondents that the consequences of CSA and the resulting need for therapy and support were in the focus of the reporting. This is related to the fact that they experienced support from the state as insufficient and access to therapy as difficult. They wanted this to be made public. The main focus was on providing information about the difficulties victims/survivors have to face in life, less about specific reports on perpetrators or institutions where CSA occurred.

Table 1  
*What topics should be in the focus of the reporting?*

	Absolute	Percentage
The consequences CSA can have	90	87.4 %
The need for support and appropriate therapy/trauma therapy	72	69.9 %
The failure of state support (e.g., problems with applications to the compensation law, with the judiciary, with the newly established compensation fund)	55	53.4 %
The different forms of CSA (e.g., touching, rape, ritual abuse, organized exploitation)	50	48.5 %
Access to treatment and therapy financing	43	41.7 %
The injustice that CSA causes	43	41.7 %
The possibilities of protection and prevention for children and adolescents	42	40.8 %
Who the perpetrators are	38	36.9 %
The failure of institutions (e.g., church, school, residential care)	26	25.2 %
The possibilities of self-help and the organization of victims/survivors	16	15.5 %
Other	16	15.5 %

*Note.* Questionnaire;  $n = 103$ . Selection of a maximum of 5 from a list of 10 answers. Source: Quantitative survey, see Nagel & Kavemann, 2018, p. 12.

The passages in the qualitative interviews were analyzed according to what media coverage could achieve from the point of view of victims/survivors. Interviewees expressed ideas but not necessarily specific strategies for their implementation: *“It would be good if not everyone became instantly defensive. Reaching people would be good, but don’t ask me how that would work.”* The implementation would be the responsibility of rather abstract others like *“the society”*, *“politics”*, or *“those up there”*.

*The opportunity to change society and reach people*

Many interviewees saw potential in media reports to raise social awareness about CSA: *“That it happens in all possible contexts and in all possible forms and that victims/survivors often have to deal with it throughout their lives.”* The goal should be to reach as many people as possible and to spread

knowledge, so that this responsibility does not fall on victims/survivors, but rather that they can refer to it and are more likely to meet with understanding. That would be a contribution to destigmatization and the removal of taboos. *“That I can tell people and they know about it. That it is no longer a taboo subject.”*

It was assumed that such knowledge would have a major impact: *“A topic that is perceived very differently by society is also treated differently in the therapeutic context.”* Media would *“not have to function politically”*, but it was expected that a corresponding stance in the media would have positive effects on society as a whole. The media were ascribed a responsibility that they did not always live up to: *“I do believe that the media and especially advertising have a massive share in this. Advertising should be more controlled, so that sexuality is not always linked to objectification and violence.”*

Reporting that explicitly provides information for victims/survivors can make help possible on multiple levels: (1) It could mean more support for children and adolescents who are being abused if their environment was well informed: *“If people paid better attention.”* (2) It could encourage adult victims/survivors to seek out therapy or counselling. One interviewee described how important it was for him to see CSA discussed in the media and that he gained access to support in that way. Comparisons to other health campaigns were drawn: Media could make it known where and how support can be found and thus facilitate access: *“Motivate to seek therapeutic help as early as possible.”* And (3) reporting could enable disclosure for victims/survivors. On the one hand, it could create opportunities: *“If it is talked about, then the people who experienced it also dare to do so.”* On the other hand, media reception can give victims/survivors language to talk about CSA. One interviewee described how important it was for her to read books that dealt with sexualized violence. Discussions within her group of friends about this literature enabled her to address her own experiences.

Correspondingly, it was perceived as destructive when consequences of CSA that affect the lives of victims/survivors are used by the media to shock people, as was the case, for example, with dissociative identity disorder. An important part of the expectations was that media reports should use their reach to actively counteract victim stereotypes and to convey that victims/survivors *“are not totally damaged but have experienced and survived something very difficult.”*

### *Demands to keep the topic permanently present*

To reach as many people as possible, a large part of the interviewees considered it necessary that the topic of CSA has a permanent place in media reporting. The presence would have to be continuous and constantly kept up. *“It should be shown in the evening before the crime series, during commercial breaks, everywhere. It should be whacked into people’s heads. With all kinds of information: what is that, where do you go with it, what do I do if, the whole range.”*

It would have to go beyond *“scandalous reports”* or *“a brief outcry”* and be permanently anchored. For this the focus should be not only on reporting *what* happened but on going deeper than that, for example in case of CSA in institutions by analyzing the structures that contributed to CSA and monitor what consequences were drawn. *“More continuity”* was wished for: *“not that it is always temporarily discussed until people are sick of it and then not at all.”* That could be a contribution to social reconciliation. But there was also an emphasis on the need for high quality reporting. It should not just be a *“media bonanza”* for people to get to hear stories about victims/survivors.

At the same time, it was feared that powerful institutions (such as the church) could silence critical media. *“You can see how the Catholic Church is dealing with this. It is swept under the carpet. Sometimes, by mistake, another article comes into some tabloid, but that will be killed with money very fast.”*

Another wish expressed by a small number of interviewees was that the media should take different approaches to achieve different goals. Social media was mentioned, *“so that young people also know that this exists”*, but also a well-edited handling of the topic of sexual violence in films and documentaries in order to reach a broad audience. To that end it is not only important *that* the topic is processed, but also *how*. *“Like a feature film, but not depressed”*, *“the strength of the people”* should be made visible. *“High visibility, but not lurid.”* Wording should be *“simple, not littered with technical terms”*, and one interviewee even suggested to *“improve the marketing”* of the topic.

### Experiences with and ideas about direct contact with media

#### *Personal appearance(s) in the media*

Different expectations result from personal experiences with the media and from hypothetical thinking about speaking out publicly. This refers

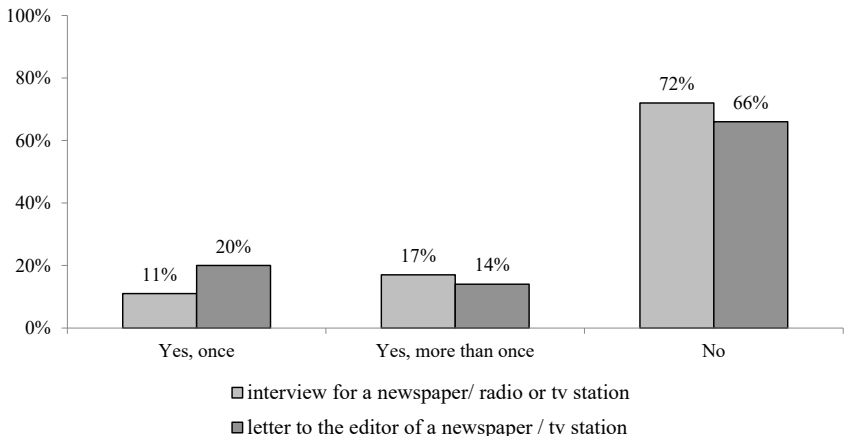
both to considerations as to whether public speaking in the media seems imaginable – or rather, reasons why this is not the case – and to personal experiences already made. Interviewees also talked about experiences outside “conventional media”, such as writing their own books, websites, etc.; the focus here lies on processes not determined by interviewees themselves.

Seventy-six percent of the respondents of the survey found that there are still far too few opportunities for victims/survivors to speak out publicly. The existing coverage was described as “*superficial and tearful*”, and at the same time respondents saw explanations within the willingness of victims/survivors to talk about their individual experience of sexual violence; public disclosure is still a big step and can have consequences in personal and/or professional life. Disclosure continues to be seen as prevented by stigmatization and taboos around the topic.

Almost a third of respondents already made own experiences of activity in the media.

Figure 2

*Have you ever given an interview on the subject of CSA for a newspaper or radio/TV station or written a letter to an editor?*



Note. Questionnaire;  $n = 103$ . Source: Quantitative survey, see Nagel & Kavemann, 2018, p. 12.

*Reflections on speaking out publicly*

What was perceived as “public” differed considerably. On the one hand, it was clearly linked to media reports; on the other hand, it could also be associated with a more “personal public”. One interviewee expressed the following thoughts: *“It depends on what you mean by ‘public’. I don’t have to write it in the newspaper, but I have no problem talking about it with someone I have a good relationship with.”*

The willingness to speak publicly was very varied. It could be seen as a part of personal coping: *“Through public speaking, I am processing this for myself.”* The distance to own experiences was then perceived as helpful. At the same time interviewees clearly saw risks of stigmatization. The concern about possible reactions kept them from public disclosure. *“People whispering, I would never do that to myself.”* The possibility for victims/survivors to speak publicly was considered important, but personal involvement was mostly met with skepticism: *“Not necessarily by me. I would think twice about that. Because I would be suspicious that I would be stigmatized and discriminated against because of it.”*

An anonymous public appearance was considered a possible compromise until societal changes ensured that victims/survivors would not have to fear consequences. *“Not with my name online. Although I would wish that one day there would be a world where that was not a problem.”*

Interviewees who were willing to be in the public eye gave specific thoughts about what kind of media outlet they would consider and in which they would not tell their stories: *“If a proper magazine would look for someone, I think I would do it.”*

Personal experiences with media appearances

In addition to theoretical considerations, a part of the interviewees reported various experiences with their own participation in the media. In these narratives, two dimensions can be distinguished: (1) active choices to tell something personal in a public way and (2) unwanted reporting. In the first dimension, public speaking was preceded by a conscious decision. Positively mentioned were possibilities of being in the center of attention not as a victim/survivor but with a different expertise that was nevertheless connected to the topic, for example, as a therapist with a client for whom it is possible *“to go public with the issue, but not with yourself.”* The second one included coverage of the court case of one interviewee. *“There was a lot of press. The cameras had to go, and I remember the judge saying, ‘moderate*

reporting, right?’ But it was still very detailed in the local newspaper. And everyone knew it was me.” These reports were regarded extremely critically. Even if what had happened had already been known in the community, it was not a self-determined disclosure.

The experiences with interviews reported in the second questionnaire varied: Most of the respondents felt well informed about the process and the majority felt treated with respect. However, they had only limited influence on the course of the interviews. Twenty-nine out of 103 had given an interview at least once (see figure 2), but only three of them were compensated. Most of them would be willing to give another interview for a newspaper or a TV/radio station.

In some cases, respondents stated that they would not give an interview again or that it would depend on the topic. Their interviews had not been published, sometimes because they were withdrawn by the interviewee themselves, another time the TV station decided against publication. One person wrote that after a long interview she did not have any influence on “*which two sentences*” were selected for publication and that she therefore now decides “*very carefully*” who she talks to in the future.

In the considerations about public speaking as a victim/survivor, different fears were a major issue for interviewees. On the one hand, they feared that they simply would not be believed, and on the other hand they also feared legal consequences, especially if they dared to talk about CSA in powerful institutions. The possibility of anonymous participation in media reports was considered helpful.

Speaking out in the media could also help reduce stigmatization. One interviewee, who had experienced physical and emotional violence as well as CSA in a “Jugendwerkhof”<sup>4</sup>, was confronted with stigmatization in her hometown; she was “*the one from prison*”. Appearances in the media were helpful to create understanding: “*Someone I knew came up to me and said, ‘I saw you on TV. I didn’t know things like these happened.’ Many people have taken a closer look at it because of what I do. I can now walk through my city with my head held high.*”

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4 “Jugendwerkhöfe” were institutions in the system of specialized homes for children and adolescents in the GDR, into which young people who were considered difficult to discipline were admitted.

## Discussion and conclusion

The findings of our empirical study clearly show the relevance of media reporting if it is done with participation, and in the interest, of victims/survivors. Although several decades have passed between the times of data collection in most cases and although the focus of media reports about CSA has changed significantly (Weathered, 2015), resemblances to the results of Kitzinger's study (2004) can be found. The author shows how a shift towards increased media coverage in Great Britain had an impact on public knowledge about CSA, but also on an individual level. Interviewees in our study described media coverage as helpful for making sense of CSA and providing them with a framework for thinking and talking about what happened to them. The results of our analysis show that these issues are still important today. One major difference is that, in the past, mass media were often the only way to get this information, while today the internet offers a variety of sources and alternatives but also risks, thus raising issues for further research.

Additional research is also needed in the area of self-determined publication. While this analysis focused on the perspectives of victims/survivors on "traditional" media, the data showed that 30 % of the respondents in the survey have shared their own life story in this way. Digital platforms were also very important for the exchange with other victims/survivors that played a major role in the perception of the public discussion.

It is important to include the perspective and expertise of victims/survivors in research and reporting. Döring und Walter (2020), for example, have developed a framework of quality criteria for media reporting in a study that included, among other sources, survey data from victims/survivors. This framework is largely confirmed and supported by the results presented here, which show that these are important issues for victims/survivors. They are mentioned while interviewees were talking about their experiences and their life story, so they came up as relevant even if the interviews were not specifically about media and media reporting. This is an important result and, at the same time, a limitation: The data on this topic were not systematically collected. Furthermore, as is generally the case in such studies, the sample consists of interviewees who were actively engaged with the topic and their life history or who were willing to do so. Victims/survivors who were not (yet) able or willing to talk about it could not be reached.

An analysis of the discourse in the print media after 2010 in Germany showed that the focus of media coverage had changed (Hoffmann, 2015). While CSA of girls in families had been the main subject since the 1980s,



the debate now focused on boys who had experienced sexual violence in – mostly Catholic – boarding schools. Hoffmann identified five key lines of discourse: (1) The authoritarian-populist discourse blamed only individual perpetrators and their so-called “perverse desires”. It was represented only by one medium of the tabloid press. (2) The freedom-critical discourse identifies primarily the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the associated change in values as the cause of CSA. Here, too, the focus is on individual perpetrator, not on institutional or societal structures. (3) The power-critical discourse addresses relationships of power in institutions that create opportunities, which then are exploited. Structural reforms are therefore called for here. (4) The integrative discourse assumes that the causes of sexual violence against children and young people in institutions are to be found both in the system of the institution and in the person of the perpetrators. (5) In the expert discourse very heterogeneous views are represented. None of these discourse lines could be described as dominant or (except 1) assigned to individual media. These findings show that reporting in the interest of victims/survivors exists. However, only some of these discourse lines meet the valid expectations, wishes, and demands of victims/survivors.

The current public interest in the topic of CSA is (not only in Germany) due to the public efforts and activities of victims/survivors. If they had not been willing and courageous enough to tell their stories in newspapers or television broadcasts – whether recognizable or with a concealed identity –, the debate and the legal and social reforms associated with it would not have reached its current form. A number of active and committed victims/survivors have gone public and expanded their own options for action and those of all victims/survivors.

Personal activity and speaking publicly about CSA were seen very differently in the interviews. For some it can contribute to personal coping processes and be a part of their coping strategies. Similar results were found in a recent study, where victims/survivors who participated in media reports were interviewed (Baugut & Neumann, 2020). Personal participation in media reports was assessed very differently. On the one hand, severe distress was evident when journalists ignored victims’ concerns, and their behavior was perceived as disrespectful. On the other hand, victims/survivors assumed that media coverage had the potential to help them come to terms and support that their voices were heard and taken seriously. Mosser (2020) explored what inspired victims/survivors to publicly express themselves in this position. The decision to publicly speak out as victims/survivors can be understood as a form of personal coping. The self-determined movement in, and the active shaping of, public spaces

can counteract the experiences of powerlessness in childhood and youth. But the willingness of victims/survivors to do this is not enough. It is not a question of “whether victims/survivors speak but (...) whether they are heard” (Mosser, 2020, p. 337). At the same time the author emphasizes the close connection between individual and societal awareness of CSA as a political issue. As was evident in the interviews that were analyzed here, this form of public visibility is far from being available to, or even desired by, all victims/survivors for various reasons.

Our empirical findings underline the relevance of media coverage for victims/survivors of CSA both on the level of personal involvement and for meeting the need for trauma-sensitive and evidence-based reporting for society’s perception of the issue. It is evident that public education can be helpful for individuals and can provide recognition at a societal level (Doll & Nagel, 2019; Honneth, 1992) by confirming the existence of CSA and by presenting it as an injustice. Reporting on the topic of CSA is important for public awareness, and appropriate coverage could be considered part of the educational mandate for all media that have such a public duty.

Reporting was recognized and named as an important concern by victims/survivors and professionals at an early state of public discourse. Initiatives were taken to convince journalists to write about victims/survivors in a professional and respectful manner (see, for example, bff: Frauen gegen Gewalt e. V.; Pütter, 1999; Wildwasser e. V. Berlin, 2007), and there are terminology guidelines for the use of adequate language (Terminology and Semantics Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, 2016). It is important to note the risks of stigmatization and re-victimization. For reporting, especially on vulnerable children and adolescents, there are ethical guidelines by the German Press Council for their protection, to which media have committed themselves (German Press Council, 2017). The ethical requirements of reporting on serious acts of violence and the responsibility of journalists have also been addressed by research (see, for example, Kunczik, 2016; Kepplinger, 2016; Robertz & Kahr, 2016). These ethical criteria must also be observed when interviewing or reporting about adult victims/survivors to ensure respectful and non-harmful media coverage. This is especially important when victims/survivors decide to tell their story in public and thus contribute to vital societal processes.

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