

# Media coverage about child sexual abuse – a qualitative survey from the journalists’ point of view

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Child sexual abuse (CSA) remains a social problem. Studies indicate that most people use media coverage to inform themselves about CSA. Thereby, journalists can educate society about the topic by reporting important information about CSA and thus take preventive action against it. Results of content analysis show that CSA is mainly mentioned in media when it comes to particularly severe cases of CSA. Reports on help or prevention offers are rare. Since media coverage impacts society’s understanding of CSA, it is crucial to understand how journalists deal with CSA. For this reason, we conducted 11 qualitative in-depth interviews with journalists who reported about CSA in German-language print media. In accordance with the state of research, our results show that journalists usually report about CSA when there is a specific case including spectacular aspects or elements. Moreover, our results reveal that journalists see both benefits and risks in media coverage of CSA – from increased awareness and public education to re-traumatization of victims and stigmatization of those affected. Based on our results, we will discuss basic conditions that need to be improved to report about CSA in a more beneficial way. *Keywords:* child sexual abuse, media coverage, qualitative study, stigmatization

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a global problem. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines CSA as “the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend and is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or else that violate the laws or social taboos of society” (World Health Organization, 1999, p. 15). The consequences of CSA can be devastating for those affected long-term as well as short-term (Barth et al., 2013) and are reflected in the victims’ psychological, physical, behavioral, and interpersonal well-being (Singh et al., 2014). Unfortunately, children who experience CSA face internal and external obstacles to communicate their burden, e.g., emotional dependency and ambivalent feelings towards the offender or a lack of understanding the sexual abuse as victimization due to developmental immaturity (Alaggia et al., 2019; Lemaigre et al., 2017). In most cases, the offender and victim know each other very well (e.g., Finkelhor et al., 2005), which increases the barrier for children to disclose themselves to reach help (Schaeffer et al., 2011).

Against this background, having a public that is sensitized and informed about CSA seems necessary to take informed and effective action against CSA. However, CSA is still a socially tabooed topic and rarely part

of the public discourse (e.g., Goldschmidt-Gjerløw, 2019; Nielsen, 2016). At the same time, media coverage is an important source for shaping the public discourse and personal opinions. It gives us access to topics that go beyond our everyday experience (Jackob, 2018), including tabooed topics. This important function comes along with great responsibility (Schultz et al., 2017). In case of CSA, it enables media to provide information, take preventive action against it, and exert pressure on political actors or institutions (e.g., Donnelly & Inglis, 2010; Goldman & Grimbeek, 2015). Unfortunately, research indicates that media coverage of CSA is often loaded with myths and stereotypes of the affected persons (victims/survivors as well as offenders; see Döring, see Popović, both in this volume). However, numerous determinants influence the production of media coverage. For instance, the audience, journalists' framework conditions, and journalists' knowledge and attitudes are factors that influence the tenor and degree of differentiation of publications (Scheufele & Engelmann, 2016). Until now, little is known about the journalists who report about CSA. For this reason, this chapter addresses how journalists deal with CSA in their daily work, how they generally perceive media coverage about CSA, and what potential they see in it to combat CSA.

### Media mechanisms and their impact on CSA reporting

Media coverage “shapes the audience’s perception of reality” (Eilders, 2016, p. 432; translated by authors). It serves as an important resource to help us form experience about issues that we do not directly experience ourselves (second-hand experience; Jackob, 2018; Meltzer, 2019; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2014). Established theories of communication science show that processes within media reporting have an influence on education, opinion building, and the associated public discourse (Eisenstein, 1994; Gertler, 2015). In the case of CSA, media coverage has a crucial role in informing and educating about this sensitive topic (e.g., Babatsikos, 2010; Goldman & Grimbeek, 2015; Kitzinger, 2004). However, media coverage is often characterized by misconceptions and knowledge gaps (e.g., see Döring, see Popović, both in this volume), which can be traced to the fact that media production is “not a one-to-one reduction of world events” (Eilders, 2016, p. 432) and therefore only partially coincides with scientific findings or evidence-based information.

Two of the most relevant media theories in communication studies are the news value theory and agenda setting. The so-called news value theory assumes that specific characteristics of an event make it more or less

newsworthy. In this context, factors such as proximity of the event, personalization, or negativity increase its likeability of being reported (Eilders, 2016; Østgaard, 1965). Therefore, media coverage about CSA often displays seven characteristics: (1) stranger-danger: The offender is an unknown person; (2) upstanding accused: a person is an upstanding member of the community like a politician; (3) extra violence: more violence than usual in CSA like a murder; (4) bizarre facts: especially strange or memorable facts like Satan worship, (5) multiple parties: more than one victim or more than one perpetrator; (6) celebrity status: offender or victim or both are celebrities; and (7) cover-up: institutional stories about scandalous accusations like cases within the church (Popović, 2018).

Moreover, besides reporting about specific events, the media set up an agenda (media agenda) which impacts the perceived relevance of a topic (audience agenda; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). In line with this theoretical approach, media coverage about CSA often occurs in the context of particular severe cases such as the trials regarding the abuse scandals of the Catholic Church (e.g., Görden & Fangerau, 2018; Weatherred, 2015). Furthermore, studies indicate that CSA is over-reported in relation to sexual violence against adults and that reporting on arrests and trials are the most common topic (e.g., Breen, 2007; Thakker & Durrant, 2006). Studies that have not explicitly based their research on agenda-setting theory come to similar conclusions (e.g., Cheit, 2003; Davies et al., 2017; Dowler, 2006; Ducat et al., 2009; Hove et al., 2013; Kitzinger & Skidmore, 1995; Lonne & Gillespie, 2014; Niner et al., 2013; Saewyc et al., 2013; Shavit et al., 2014; Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999; overview see: Popović, 2018). On the other hand, possible preventive measures are hardly reported on, and if they are, they tend to be on a short-term individual or on an unspecific level (e.g., Kitzinger, 2004; Mejia et al., 2012). Specific cases of CSA that generate increased reader attention due to their scandalousness do attract high media resonance, while the broader context and background information on CSA receive little attention (e.g., Mejia et al., 2012; Waller et al., 2020). This asymmetry leads to a narrow perspective on the problem of CSA and obstructs the view on preventive measures. Moreover, by focusing the media coverage on spectacular cases, media coverage perpetuates existing myths and spreads incorrect beliefs about the characteristics of victims and offenders (e.g., Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010). Additionally, it may reinforce stigmata (e.g., Jones et al., 2010) and cause distress through insensitive treatment of those affected (e.g., Jones et al., 2010; Maercker & Mehr, 2006). Therefore, it is not surprising that previous studies indicate a lack of quality in media coverage about CSA (e.g., Döring & Walter, 2020; furthermore see Döring

and also Popović in this volume). Thus, media coverage on CSA can best be described as a *double-edged sword*, which is torn between educating society and the perpetuation of existing stigmata.

### This study

The body of research demonstrated the importance of media coverage to society while also showing the consequences that result from inappropriate or undifferentiated media coverage. Of course, media production depends on various circumstances like journalists' working conditions (e.g., Loosen et al., 2020; Loosen & Schmidt, 2012). However, journalists are not neutral observers but play an essential role in selecting, producing and framing media coverage (Scheufele & Engelmann, 2016). Therefore, the way journalists deal with the topic of CSA is a crucial starting point to improve media coverage of CSA. For this reason, the current study aims to investigate how journalists deal with CSA while reporting. Based on the state of research, we derived the following research question:

Against the background of news value theory and the agenda-setting approach, the question arises as to which criteria must be met for journalists to report and how they generally perceive media coverage on CSA.

RQ1: What criteria must be fulfilled for journalists to report on CSA?

RQ2: How do journalists generally perceive media coverage on this topic?

Analogous to media coverage of suicides, the content and wording may pose certain risks but also benefits (World Health Organization, 2008). What risks and opportunities journalists see in media coverage of CSA may influence their reports. For this reason, we ask the following research question:

RQ3: What benefits and risks do journalists see in media coverage of the topic?

CSA can evoke emotional reactions even from those not directly involved, such as journalists, who, moreover, report particularly frequently on extreme cases of CSA. Thus, the question arises as to how they deal with the content and what influence this has on their emotional state. For this reason, we ask the following research question:

RQ4: How do journalists deal emotionally with this topic?

## Method

### Sample

We conducted 11 qualitative in-depth interviews with journalists who had published at least one article in a German-language print media focusing on CSA in the period from 1 January 2018 to 12 December 2018. The restriction to journalists who had written about the topic in the recent past was to ensure that all interviewees had dealt with the topic at least once and could report from their own, relatively recent experience. In selecting journalists, we focused on print media, as they are the most frequented media both in print and on their online platforms (Schultz et al., 2017).

The relevant articles were researched via the LexisNexis database, which offers full texts of international periodicals. In addition, the online platform of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* was searched, as it is a leading medium (German: Leitmedium) in German-speaking countries (LAE – Leseranalyse Entscheidungsträger e. V., 2018) but is not represented on LexisNexis. The search resulted in 101 articles, for which 100 authors could be identified – some with personal email contact (e.g., *firstname.surname@provider.de*), some with central email addresses (e.g., *info@newspaper.de*). A short description of the study and a request for a telephone interview were sent to all contacts, in the case of central email addresses with a request to forward to the respective journalists. Eleven journalists agreed to participate in this study. The participants consisted of seven men and four women, who were on average 46 years old ( $SD = 9.65$  years; range: 30–65 years) with an average working experience as journalists of 23.68 years ( $SD = 9.64$  years; range: 10–40 years). Their professional functions were editors ( $n = 4$ ), reporters with a focus on court/justice/crime ( $n = 3$ ), freelance journalists ( $n = 2$ ), correspondent ( $n = 1$ ), and columnist ( $n = 1$ ). They worked for four national and four regional print media as well as one online platform<sup>1</sup>. One medium was published in Austria, all others in Germany. Most of the represented media were published daily ( $n = 7$ ), the other two weekly. The online medium was updated weekly. Two print media were classified as lead media in Germany (LAE – Leseranalyse Entscheidungsträger e. V., 2018). Two participants worked for the same national, German, daily print medium, while two others worked for the same supra-regional, German, weekly leading medium. Based on the political spectrum and the

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1 The interviewee who worked for the online platform had published an article which was reprinted in an offline periodical.

self-representation of the media houses for which the interviewees worked, the journalistic orientation of the publishers can be assumed to be heterogeneous with a left-liberal bias. Six journalists worked for (tendentally) left-wing publishers, one for a non-partisan publisher and three for conservative publishers. For one publishing house, no information was found on its political orientation.

## Procedure

From 15 January 2019 to 4 February 2019, partially structured telephone interviews were conducted with all 11 journalists who had agreed to take part in this study. The interviews lasted between 33:39 and 1:18:35 (hours:minutes:seconds;  $x = 55:21$ ;  $SD = 16:41$ ). In their responses, the interviewees provided information about their individual media coverage, attitudes, and background knowledge on the subject of CSA and their related emotions.

## Process of coding and data analysis

The collected data were processed by means of qualitative content analysis following Mayring (2015), using the software *f4analyse* (version 2.5 for iOS; dr. dresing & pehl GmbH, Marburg, Germany). The aim of the analysis was to register statements about the interviewees' background knowledge, attitudes, and emotions regarding CSA. Also, statements on prevention concepts as well as risks and benefits of general reporting were to be extracted. The transcripts of the interviews served as source material. The text passages relevant to the research questions were systematically analyzed. Since some of the answers consisted of affirmations or denials, only one word was defined as the coding unit (smallest material component; Ramsenthaler, 2013), while the context unit was the statement which could consist of several coherent sentences.

During the analysis, the transcripts of individual interviews were processed one after another. Passages relevant to the research questions were marked and paraphrased. In a further step, these paraphrases were reduced to categories, which in turn were iteratively revised on the basis of the material analyzed up to that point. If the categories were changed or expanded based on new material, the previously analyzed transcripts were

revisited. Table 1 shows an example of how the paraphrases and categories were formed.

Table 1

*Paraphrase formation and category system (example)*

Quote	Paraphrase	Reduction/Category
“I try to filter out of the countless court hearings that take place every day in [city] those which either describe particularly striking cases or show a particularly original aspect that might be of interest to the readers.”	There are many CSA cases of which I chose to report particularly interesting or sensational ones.	Own reporting – Criteria for reporting on CSA – Spectacular aspects (Refers to RQ1: What criteria must be fulfilled for journalists to report on CSA?)
“Unfortunately, the tabloids are incredibly voyeuristic about these issues.”	Parts of the media report about CSA in a voyeuristic way.	Perceived media coverage – Tone/tenor – Sensationalistic and voyeuristic (Refers to RQ2: How do journalists generally perceive media coverage on this topic?)

## Results

In the following, we present the results according to the identified categories.

## RQ1: Reporting criteria of CSA reflect commonly mentioned news values

Our first research question aimed to capture criteria that must be fulfilled to report about CSA from the interviewees’ perspective (RQ1: *What criteria must be fulfilled for journalists to report on CSA?*). For this, we asked the participants when they report on CSA and which criteria they consider to be important. In sum, based on the statements, we were able to identify six categories as reporting criteria. Five participants mentioned *spectacular aspects* to be a key criterion: They report about CSA cases “*which either describe particularly striking cases or show a particularly original aspect*”. Four participants described *occasion / current case of CSA* as a criterion: “*In journalistic terms, one always tends to report on the specific crime*” compared to

CSA in general (e.g., reporting results of prevalence studies or addressing long-term consequences for victims). Moreover, four journalists saw in reporting about CSA the opportunity to *transfer knowledge / add to the socio-political discourse* and therefore mentioned this chance as a reporting criterion (“*I think it is important to report on the topic if you have the opportunity to also provide knowledge*”). A few of our participants also considered *public interest* since it “*is always the be-all and end-all*” (3 out of 11) and *external encouragement* (“*that may be the case, then, that the reason for such a report is that someone has contacted me*”; also 3 out of 11). As the category with the fewest statements (2 out of 11), we could identify the criterion *proximity* since two participants had to cover events from specific areas (“*It must happen in [state] because I am here as a correspondent*”).

RQ2: Media coverage about CSA is perceived as mostly objective and appropriate

Besides their reporting criteria, we wanted to know how the interviewees perceive the media coverage of the topic regardless of their own work (RQ2: *How do journalists generally perceive media coverage on this topic?*). In principle, the participants described the media coverage about CSA diverse which ranged “*from tasteless and somehow distanceless or even (...) unappetizing reports to very good and distanced reports.*” In sum, we were able to derive four categories from their answers. The two categories most frequently mentioned by the journalists were torn between *objective and appropriate* reporting on one hand (“*I think the media coverage has become more diverse and more informed*”, 7 out of 11) and *sensationalistic and voyeuristic* coverage on the other hand since “*it gets more and more screaming, more and more smashing (...)*” from the participant’s point of view (5 out of 11). Moreover, a few criticized that “*we have been looking too much at the offenders or on the institutions to which the perpetrators belong (...) and too little at the victims.*” So, from their perspective, media coverage should focus more on the perspective of victims (4 out of 11). Besides, two participants acknowledged that “*the terms pedophilia and child molester are too often treated as equivalent*”, which they mentioned as problematic since not every person with pedophilia sexually acts out towards children and not every child sexual offender has this predisposition (Seto, 2009; also see Pedersen in this volume).



RQ3: Media coverage as benefit and risk – the content determines the course

With regard to the general reporting about CSA, we asked the participants what kind of benefits and risks they see in reporting about CSA (RQ3: *What benefits and risks do journalists see in media coverage of the topic?*). In sum, we identified 11 categories.

In terms of the benefits of reporting on CSA, it became clear that our interviewees saw the potential of reporting on CSA in raising *awareness for prevention services for potential offenders* (6 out of 11) since “*someone who is now playing with such thoughts may pause and then seek help.*” Moreover, five participants each stated that media coverage of CSA also raises *awareness for CSA within society* and positively *impacts social education* by “*encouraging through knowledge transfer, inspiring thoughts, enabling people to handle this topic better than they were before.*” A few journalists considered reporting about CSA benefits if it *impacts the public discourse, promotes help services* in general and *deters potential offenders* by clarifying “*that such things do not go unpunished and that years later you can serve a long prison sentence*” (2 out of 11 each).

However, next to the benefits of reporting about CSA, our participants mentioned several risks which were reduced to five categories. Four journalists were concerned that, “*for those affected, insensitive reporting carries the risk of re-traumatization*”. On the other hand, four interviewees enumerated the risk of *triggering potential offenders to commit CSA* because “*it doesn't scare them off, it's more of an incentive.*” The conflation of pedophilia and CSA was described as a problem by four participants as it maintains and/or perpetuates the *public stigma towards persons with pedophilia* and therefore “*could lead to one or the other not getting any help because he does not dare to reveal himself to anyone at all.*” Moreover, some stated the risk of *secondary victimization of victims* while reporting about CSA (3 out of 11) or the risk of *generating hysterization* since it may “*wake up fears that are not reasonable*” (2 out of 11).

RQ4: Emotions reported when dealing with the topic of CSA – anger vs. professionalism

Since being exposed to the topic of CSA may evoke uncomfortable emotions and may affect journalists' work, we wanted to know how our participants emotionally deal with reporting on CSA (RQ4: *How do journalists deal emotionally with this topic?*). In sum, their response can be reduced to

seven categories. Four out of 11 interviewees stated that they feel *disgust* against the perpetrator when they are confronted with CSA as a crime (“*Revulsion and disgust when it comes to crime*”). Just as many participants reported feelings of *anger* (“*Of course one is (...) emotionally agitated, angry, will feel rage*”). Both anger and disgust were mostly reported by journalists whose field of work did *not* focus on court/justice/crime (for each of the two categories one journalist working on court/justice/crime vs. three journalists from other fields of work). Three journalists mentioned *compassion*, mainly towards offenders, because the interviewees “*do not want to be in his [the offender’s] shoes with this predisposition. That’s horrible.*” Apart from these emotions, two participants expressed a *lack of understanding* towards offenders, while two others spoke about a *professional interest*. Four interviewees claimed to have no emotions at all when dealing with the topic of CSA, including all three journalists working mainly with focus on court/justice/crime (although two of those four interviewees did report emotions in other parts of the interview). Three interviewees described the expectation for themselves to maintain a *professional distance* in reporting on CSA (“*that you somehow get a structure, somehow get some objectivity into the text in order to simply (...) transport information or evaluations and insights and not just the emotion itself*”), all of them did *not* work with focus on court/justice/crime. Three interviewees described that dealing with the topic of CSA in their work can be a *stressful experience*: “*This is a topic that gets under your skin, both as a journalist and as a human being, of course.*”

## Discussion

Our study used a qualitative method to gain a deeper understanding of how journalists deal with CSA in their daily working routine. To this end, we addressed four research questions and interviewed 11 journalists about their reporting criteria (RQ1), their perception of the current CSA media coverage (RQ2), the benefits and risk of reporting about CSA (RQ3), and how dealing with CSA in their daily work impacts their emotion (RQ4).

Narrowing down the reporting criteria of our interviewees, it turned out that the majority of the identified categories mirror commonly news values like actuality or harm (Eilders, 2016; Kepplinger, 2011). In detail, those criteria were mentioned in the context of reporting about CSA in particular if it is a *current case* or *spectacular aspects* of CSA. Those identified reporting criteria are also in line with previous studies which demonstrated by using content analyses that media coverage of CSA primarily focuses on spectacular cases rather than prevention (Kitzinger, 2004; Kitzinger &

Skidmore, 1995; Mejia et al., 2012; Weatherred, 2015). By relying mainly on those criteria, journalists generate a picture of CSA which is limited and thereby misses the actual heterogeneity of CSA. Our results indicate that the topic is rather framed episodically than thematically since both the reporting criteria and the perceived media coverage of CSA demonstrate a focus on specific cases rather than a continuous reporting about CSA in general (see Döring in this volume). Therefore, it can be assumed that complex contexts and expert viewpoints play a subordinate role since these characteristics are usually covered by thematical reporting (e.g., Ruhrmann & Woelke, 2003). Furthermore, exemplification or case studies show that linking a topic to a case creates a much stronger impact on the recipients than factual reporting and thus, under certain circumstances, also creates a distorted perception of the topic (e.g., Krämer, 2015). At the same time, such reports on individual cases may trigger distress among affected groups (e.g., Jones et al., 2010; Maercker & Mehr, 2006) and lead to this topic being even more taboo because the factual reference is missing (e.g., Goldschmidt-Gjerløw, 2019; Nielsen, 2016).

Against the background that media coverage serves as a central source for the public (Babatsikos, 2010; Kitzinger, 2004), it is even more important that media coverage frames the topic in a balanced way to point out the true heterogeneity of CSA. The over-representative portrayal of individual, particularly sensational cases fail to address CSA as a social problem in all strata of society and can thus lead to a false sense of security: If CSA only happens on the fringes of society, it is not necessary to be attentive in one's own environment. This narrowed idea of how and where CSA happens makes it difficult for victims to disclose, especially if their own circumstances differ from the common stereotypes.

Balanced reporting should include information about preventive programs, similar to the sensitized media coverage about suicides. This could mean info boxes with services for victims and potential offenders or contact points where further information about CSA in general can be obtained (e.g., Stelzmann et al., 2020).

Participants also mentioned *transfer knowledge* and *public interest* as reporting criteria. Therefore, it seems essential to increase the quality of CSA news by supporting journalists in the translation of those complex "information into content that can be understood by a layperson" (Friedman et al., 2014, p. 379; Logan et al., 1991). We believe that low-threshold training opportunities can initiate change at this point, for example in the form of online or in-app workshops to (a) make the complex and heterogeneous topic of CSA more comprehensible to journalists and (b) to emphasize the understanding of journalists as a central communicator

for society and thus encourage journalists to report on CSA more in a thematical framed way to raise social awareness of CSA as a public health problem. Easily accessible and reliable services could also address their limited time resources. Moreover, such low-threshold training gives the opportunity to support them in dealing with possible emotional stress which can be evoked through reporting about CSA. Even though the psychological stress caused by CSA reporting was not very pronounced in our sample in contrast to the public reactions (Jackob, 2018; Jahnke, 2018), it seems to be important to learn how to deal with these emotions and to be able to correctly assess when they can become a long-term burden, especially against the background of long-lasting process reporting. Strong emotions such as *anger* or *disgust* were mainly reported by interviewees who did not work mainly in the court/justice/crime field. Almost all court/justice/crime-focused journalists in our sample reported no emotional reaction when confronted with CSA. It seems that these journalists manage to compartmentalize their own emotionality with regard to CSA, possibly as a result of their many years of professional experience in the field of court/justice/crime.

In contrast, three interviewees who did not work with a focus on court/justice/crime said that they tried to maintain their *professional distance*. We could interpret this as an indication that it is not a matter of course for journalists who have little or no work experience in this field to maintain this distance and that it takes effort for them not to include their own emotionality in their reporting. If we follow this interpretation, it highlights the usefulness of support for journalists, both in terms of content and emotion. Future studies should therefore investigate to which extent journalists would accept such offers and to which extent this support would contribute to higher-quality media reporting. In this context, it will also be necessary to look at the working conditions under which journalists work. Media bias can be attributed to, among other things, lack of time and pressure to publish (Jackob, 2018; Schultz et al., 2017). It is up to the publishers to support their employees in being able to research in depth and to make use of training opportunities, and they also have to offer adequate support in emotionally demanding work situations.

Interestingly, we also identified the category *external encouragement* as reporting criteria. However, in cases where affected persons turn to journalists, it should always be critically examined to what extent the experiences described correspond to the truth (see Apin, in this volume). Even though it is an issue that requires, above all, dignified treatment of the victims, there are always cases in which the allegations of CSA are not confirmed. Since the mere suspicion of a sexual offense may cause long-term harm

to the suspect, who may subsequently turn out to be innocent, journalists should always examine the accusation critically. A warning example of this is Jörg Kachelmann, Swiss television presenter, who was arrested in 2010 on charges of raping a former lover. The associated court proceedings were intensively covered by the media. The reporting was characterized by prejudgments as well as the deliberate playing up and down of incriminating or exculpating circumstantial evidence. A public battle of interpretation about the guilt or innocence of the accused flared up over months. Kachelmann was acquitted due to lack of evidence, later due to proven innocence. However, the accusation of rape stuck in people's minds (Rückert & Sentker, 2021, 57:00). This illustrates that the media has a special responsibility – both for the person of the suspect and for the victim (Jackob, 2018).

Furthermore, in the view of some interviewees, too much focus is placed on the offenders. Previous content analyses have shown that offenders are often represented as “stranger danger” in media, who had no previous relationship with the victims (see Döring, see Popović, both in this volume; Weatherred, 2015). It can be assumed that these are often spectacular CSA cases, which are therefore reported on particularly frequently. In contrast, studies of CSA offender characteristics demonstrate that in a vast part of cases the offenders and victims know each other very well (e.g., Finkelhor et al., 2005). Unfortunately, those existing relationships enhance the barrier for affected children and adolescents to open up to someone (Schaeffer et al., 2011). For instance, in Germany around 16,000 cases of CSA were registered by the police in 2019 (Deutscher Kinderverein, 2020). Comparing the prevalence (approx. 13.9%; Witt et al., 2017), it becomes clear that there is a tremendous discrepancy between prevalence and reported cases. This can be attributed to social and individual barriers to disclosure, including the relationship between perpetrator and victim. Accordingly, it seems essential to report on the offenders but in a diverse way and thereby reducing existing myths as this can serve as a central path to creating awareness of potentially dangerous situations. In addition, reporting on the legal consequences for offenders can help deter potential offenders and therefore prevent CSA, which was also mentioned as an advantage by some of the respondents (*deterrence of potential offenders*) and confirmed in previous studies (e.g., Stelzmann et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, it is also important to focus on the victims' perspective, too. Especially communicating the possible consequences of CSA can help potential offenders to understand what they do to children with their actions (e.g., Stelzmann et al., 2018). Thereby, special care should be taken in dealing with the affected victim in particular and CSA victims in

general to suppress a re-traumatizing effect since some still suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) years after abuse (Briggs & Joyce, 1997; Filipas & Ullman, 2006; Rowan & Foy, 1993). *Re-traumatization* was mentioned by journalists as a risk of media coverage, too. To minimize this risk, journalists should critically reflect on what kind of information is necessary to report (see Popović, in this volume).

The journalists in our sample seemed to be aware that for comprehensive prevention it is not enough to offer support only to (potential) victims. We must also give potential offenders the opportunity to deal with their predisposition. As the follow-up studies of the German prevention network “Don’t Offend” (German: „Kein Täter Werden“; Beier et al., 2015) show, this is active CSA prevention. Some of the interviewees feared that media coverage of CSA could have an incentive effect on potential offenders. What effect media coverage ultimately has may be a question of the specific content. Here, the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO, 2008) on reporting on suicides can be transferred to a large extent, e.g., “Avoid explicit description of the method used” should protect against imitation. Risks such as re-traumatization of victims or stigmatization of affected groups are also a question of precise wording and selection of content. Moreover, studies indicate that people with pedophilia depend on media coverage to learn about such support services (Stelzmann et al., 2020; Stelzmann, 2018). Nevertheless, it is important to mention that in a large number of cases the offender does not have a pedophilic preference (Seto, 2008, 2009, 2017), and it can be assumed that a considerable part of persons with pedophilia do not sexually act out towards children (Cantor & McPhail, 2016). Therefore, further prevention projects are necessary which address other predisposition besides pedophilia to support potential offenders dealing with their disposition and thereby prevent CSA on the long run.

Even though media coverage about CSA has the potential to serve as a place where information about prevention offers is in the first place, our results rather indicate that reports about prevention offers – on the part of potential victims as well as offenders – play a rather subordinate role, even if the interviewed journalists name reporting about prevention as a benefit. Thus, our study is in line with a large number of other studies that criticize the focus on individual CSA cases and the infrequent reporting of prevention (e.g., Kitzinger, 2004; Kitzinger & Skidmore, 1995; Mejia et al., 2012; Weatherred, 2015). However, media coverage also depends on an appropriate audience. The agendas of the media and the recipients condition and reinforce each other (Couldry, 2011; Maurer, 2016). Nevertheless, we believe that media coverage is a point where this dynamic can be broken.

When the media do their part to educate society, they also preventively combat CSA. However, the question remains how to capture the interest of an audience that – considering media theories such as agenda theory and relating this to the prevailing media coverage – values mostly easy to consume reports with sensationalist elements. For this reason, future research should investigate how articles about CSA must be designed in order to arouse the interest of recipients, even if these articles address prevention services, and not to create a rejection of this taboo topic.

### Limitations

At this point, we do not wish to conceal the fact that the study presented has its limitations. Due to the qualitative design of the study, it is a small, non-representative, German, self-selected sample of 11 journalists. For instance, journalists who worked for tabloid newspapers were missing. The interviewees worked for media houses whose political orientation was heterogeneous but with a left-liberal bias. For these reasons, a generalization of the results is not possible. Moreover, because of our search strategy, only journalists who published in 2018 were included. This can indeed be problematic since media coverage about CSA is often focused on extreme cases and thus tied to a specific time period. Furthermore, we did not interview journalists who had not reported on CSA – so their reasons for not reporting remain speculation. Although this explorative approach offers valuable insights, we were not able to use content analysis to determine how their statements were reflected in the published article. However, most of the identified categories were confirmed by previous content analysis studies. The results of this qualitative analysis should be seen as a starting point from which further work can be done to understand journalistic practice in the context of media mechanisms and to support interested journalists in taking a further step towards evidence-based and differentiated media reporting.

### Conclusion

Our results show that journalists assess the media coverage about CSA to be diverse, ranging from objective and appropriate to sensationalistic and voyeuristic (RQ2). However, our interviewed journalists stated that they usually report about CSA when there is a specific case including spectacu-

lar aspects or elements (RQ1). With these identified categories, we are in line with the current state of research (see Popović, 2018). As plausible as this reporting procedure may be, it leads to a media coverage which overrepresents “stranger danger” and misses the fact that CSA is a problem which occurs in all social classes (Barth et al., 2013) and mostly in settings where children trust and love adults, like families (Finkelhor et al., 2005). Our interviewees saw both benefits and risks in media coverage of CSA – from increased awareness and public education to re-traumatization of victims and stigmatization of those affected (RQ3). Which effects of media coverage are actually realized may be a question of the content and tone of the reports. At this point, professionalism and profound background knowledge are indispensable. At the same time, CSA is a topic that can evoke emotions such as anger and disgust, in our sample especially among journalists who do not focus on court/justice/crime (RQ4). Keeping a professional distance and not letting the topic become a burden can be a challenge.

Media coverage that educates society and helps to take preventive action against CSA needs an adequate balance between exemplification and embedding in a fact-based thematic context. The presentation of the complex social context is essential to realize the potential of media coverage on this issue: to provide a platform for affected persons and to put pressure on politicians and institutions to implement measures to protect children (see Apin, in this volume; Donnelly & Inglis, 2010).

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