

## **1.4. Prevention through media coverage**



# Guidelines for media reporting on child sexual abuse

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The main goal of this paper is to define the guidelines for media reporting on child sexual abuse (CSA). Guidelines are necessary since the media are the key source of information on CSA to the general public and history has shown that the media can play a positive role by reporting on CSA. However, media messages might also be the reason why unrecognized victims do not disclose abuse to the authorities especially if they violate victim's right to privacy and dignity, textually victimize the survivor, create moral panic, offer instructions for abusers or sexually explicit material, and support CSA myths. The paper explains the importance of the journalist's role while reporting on CSA, defines guidelines on how to report on CSA, and offers brief advice for preparing and writing a story and short tips on the language that should and should not be used while writing a CSA story.

*Keywords:* media guidelines, media reporting, child sexual abuse

## Why do we need guidelines for media reporting on child sexual abuse?<sup>1</sup>

1. History has shown that the media can play a **positive role** by reporting on child sexual abuse (CSA), but only if they do not victimize the directly involved parties and do no harm to passive recipients of media content. Recipients of media content include unrecognized victims and others in the environment of the child and/or perpetrator who could play a key role in detecting, identifying, reporting, and providing assistance.
2. The media are a **key source of information** on child sexual abuse for the general public because of their power to inform the masses about this social issue, but they can only be judged as a relevant source of information when they report factually and accurately about a particular event, when they serve primary prevention, and when presenting this serious social problem is not supported by the myths of child sexual abuse, victims, and perpetrators.
3. Child sexual abuse is a serious social problem; however, the statistics of the authorities responsible for the treatment show that **most cases are**

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1 The detailed version of this chapter can be found in the preface of the dissertation "Testing the model of media coverage and presentation of child sexual abuse content" (Popović, 2019, p. 2).

**not reported.** Moreover, most victims do not disclose the experience of sexual abuse to anyone in their environment, and since people in their surroundings usually lack knowledge and recognition skills, they cannot be adequately supported. Messages that unrecognized victims receive about CSA directly from the media or indirectly from people around them interpreting media content may be the reason why victims do not disclose abuse to close persons or authorities.

4. International and national recommendations for reporting on sexual violence and violence against children have emerged from the experience of experts in working with victims and from recognizing the power of the media to inform the general public and to do harm. However, **no evidence-based guidelines** addressing specific issues so far existed nor recommendations on how to communicate with media professionals about this problem (Popović, 2019, p. 2).

### Why is the role of journalists important?

Journalists play a key role in informing the public about child sexual abuse because research shows that the general public receives information about child sexual abuse through the media (Babatsikos, 2010; Goldman & Grimbeek, 2015). In this way, the media can have a strong influence on public attitudes and knowledge about this problem and on understanding the causes and solutions.

### The positive role of journalists

There are several reasons why the media should report on CSA:

#### 1. *Prevention of CSA*

The media have an irreplaceable role in the primary prevention of child sexual abuse and can be used for secondary and tertiary prevention of CSA (Popović, 2018). Media space can be used to inform and educate the public, parents, and children, but also stakeholders who play a key role in formulating public policies to combat and prevent this problem.

## *2. Development of awareness, public debate, and public policies*

The media have the power to construct child sexual abuse as a social problem, which can stimulate the development of public policies and the investment of funds for their implementation and the work of child protection services (Cheit et al., 2010). It is the media that has played a key role in defining child sexual abuse as a public issue and a serious social problem. Prior to the 1970s, the general public perception was that CSA was a rare occurrence and skepticism about the existence of CSA resulted in the perception that prevalence was low, which led to the labelling of children as “lying” and “perverse” (Bonnet, 2000). The perception of child sexual abuse as a social problem began in the United States (USA) only in the late 1970s after the first retrospective population studies found it to be much more widespread than previously thought (Harrison & Morris, 1996). The first media reports on the results of these studies and the problem of non-reporting played a key role in alarming the public and policymakers (Painter as cited in Beckett, 1996). The shift in media attention to the most brutal instances in the institutions during the 1980s has caused increased public concern, resulting in new laws that oblige teachers, doctors, and other professionals to report suspected child sexual abuse (Beckett, 1996).

## *3. Alarming the public and pressure on institutions*

The media can alarm the public and pressure institutions in cases of violations of victims’ rights (Popović, 2018). On the one hand, the media may alert the public in cases when they are searching for a perpetrator or seek public assistance in the search for either the perpetrator or the abducted child. On the other hand, the media can put pressure on institutions when victims’ rights are violated, and sometimes victims themselves report to the media when they feel helpless or frustrated by the system. Finally, when the media themselves determine institutional responsibility in cases of sexual harassment, thematic reporting can put pressure on institutions, which can cause institutional change.

#### 4. *Encouraging victims to disclose and increase of CSA reports*

Certain media reports may encourage victims to disclose sexual abuse to trusted persons or competent institutions (Popović, 2018). For example, victims may first learn from the media that what is happening to them is sexual abuse and may turn to an adult for help. Also victims can learn from the media about certain changes to the legislation, which can trigger a report (e.g., repealing statute of limitations in cases of CSA). Intensive reporting on CSA can encourage adult victims to disclose what happened to them in childhood due to a feeling of not being alone, empowerment, or confidence that the perpetrator will be prosecuted.

#### The negative role of journalists

On the other hand, the role of the media can be negative, as reporting can do additional harm to victims, suspected perpetrators, their families, and the general public.

##### 1. *Violation of the child's right to privacy, dignity and re-victimization*

The media can violate a child's right to privacy by directly or indirectly disclosing the victim's identity. The importance of protecting victims' identities is best reflected in the most famous cases of intrafamilial sexual abuse, where victims and their families have had to completely change their identities in order to continue their private lives (e.g., Elisabeth Fritzl case) or have been forced to live as publicly exposed persons, such as is the case with the so-called "girl from the cellar". The dignity of the victim is most often violated by the description of the details of the abusive event, regardless of whether the details are accurate or not. Journalists sometimes do not understand that they harm a child every time they describe in detail the manner and circumstances of the abuse, even when they do not disclose the child's identity and even when it is unlikely that the child will see and understand the media reports. This further victimizes the victim by revealing details to the people in her/his surrounding who are likely to know that the child has experienced some kind of violence (Flego, 2011, p. 71). When it comes to violating dignity with the disclosure of a victim's identity, the media really does harm to the survivors because they victimize.

## *2. Textual victimization of victims*

The media can victimize textually victims through the use of inappropriate language, especially consensual words (e.g., “make love”, “satisfy”, “relationship”, “affair”, “sex / oral sex”, etc.) to describe a proven CSA (Popović, 2017). The language used by journalists should reflect the undesirable nature of sexual abuse, regardless of the method by which it was committed. In the preliminary survey for the purposes of drafting these guidelines, it was found that consensual words on one Croatian portal in 2015 were used in as many as 36.8 % of the news in which CSA was proven in court (Popović, 2017). The odds that consensual words would be used in reporting child sexual abuse were 11.5 times higher when using a detailed description of an abusive event and 8.5 times higher in cases where the victim was a male child (Popović, 2017).

## *3. Creating moral panic*

The media can create moral panic if they use premature conclusions or generalizations (Popović, 2018). Such situations usually occur when, on the basis of one CSA case, which is usually extreme, all sexual abuse cases are sought to be described. Such reporting can create the impression of danger from, for example, specific categories of perpetrators who in reality constitute only a minority of CSA perpetrators. The most famous example of encouraging moral panic is the “stranger danger”, which refers to the warning that all strangers may be potentially dangerous to a child. Sexual violence prevention has therefore focused on risk reduction strategies (e.g., self-defense) that suggest that an individual can prevent the attack himself if prepared. This campaign, originally created in the United States in the 1980s and subsequently transmitted to other parts of the world, has been criticized for confusing children because it gives the impression that children are safe when accompanied by people they know and are responsible when fail to escape or defend against abuse.

## *4. Instructions for abusers*

When reporting on child sexual abuse, the media can become a guide for abusers (Popović, 2018). This usually happens when journalists or sources of information by describing the details of an abusive event unknowingly

describe the method by which the perpetrator approached the victim, lured her/him, and assured her/him not to tell anyone. For example, when reporting child abductions and rapes, they describe in detail how the perpetrator built a dungeon in the basement of the house that other family members did not know, what material made it soundproof, how the victim was abducted so that no one noticed him/her, etc. However, instructions for perpetrators can also be found in problem articles about CSA, where sources of information, including experts, in order to alert parents unintentionally offer detailed instructions to the perpetrator on how to approach the victim.

### *5. Sexually explicit material*

Media reports can even become sexually explicit material (SEM) that serves the perpetrator for sexual purposes (Popović, 2018). This happens when the media presents sexually explicit details/language of the abusive event, photographs of the child in explicit poses or underwear, illustrations of the abusive event, forensic statements, or drawings of the respective child at court. Although the media may consider that in this case they are only accurately informing the public, they do provide material that can serve the sexual gratification of offenders or adolescents who have sexual preferences for children but have not yet committed a crime.

### *6. Violation of the privacy rights of suspects who may not be the perpetrators*

Since there is a widespread belief that revealing the identity of CSA perpetrators is the best protection measure (Popović, 2017), it is not surprising that the media is rushing to disclose the identities of arrested, suspected, and accused persons for sexual abuse. Although there are certainly those who are later convicted, such practices can lead to the lifelong stigmatization of potentially innocent persons and significantly impair the quality of life of the innocent person and his/her family members. Even when they disclose the identity of a convicted person, the media can harm members of the perpetrator's family who are not responsible for the perpetrator's behavior.



## *7. Supporting the CSA myths*

Finally, the media can support the myths about child sexual abuse. They are usually defined as incorrect beliefs regarding sexual abuse, victims, and perpetrators (Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010). Supporting myths creates an unfavorable environment for the detection and reporting of sexual abuse (Popović, 2017).

### How to report on child sexual abuse?

#### Media reporting frame and information sources

Child sexual abuse should be reported as a serious social problem, using a thematic frame and including a larger number of sources dealing with CSA at a professional or scientific level and with experience in dealing with sexually abused children and perpetrators. In doing so, thematic reporting should be avoided within only one institution and applied when reporting on all social institutions, including the child's family. Avoid superficial interviews with persons who have allegedly testified or allegedly referred to the case (e.g., neighbors). When reporting on individual cases, a combined (episodic and thematic) approach should be used, and it should be reported more frequently on cases that are more everyday cases of CSA. The whole story needs to be told without focusing on incidents by placing events in the broader social context within which the CSA takes place.

#### Protection of the victim's identity

Disclosing a child's identity is associated with shifting responsibility for abuse to the victim and describing the victim as permanently damaged. The identity of the victim should always be protected irrespective of the type and form of the CSA, with particular care in CSA family cases so that the identity of the perpetrator or the non-abusive parent is not disclosed. Do not provide any identifying information about the victim regardless of the victim's age or about problems with the victim's or perpetrator's behavior. Do not provide background information about the victim and perpetrator regardless of gender. Always make sure that the identity of the victim is not indirectly disclosed. Do not use the blurry character of the victim, since they can also be identified by the clothing or interview room.

Always consider the well-being and the safety of the victim when posting news. Consult with experts as parents may not always be aware of the harmful effects of publicity. Check with the experts about the possible consequences of participating in the news for the victim, and generally inquire about the impact and causes of child sexual abuse and the local conditions and circumstances in which the CSA is occurring and, if necessary, seek psychological help yourself. If an adult who has experienced childhood sexual abuse wishes to be identified, provide psychological support. The only situation where identity disclosure is justified is when the child has disappeared; however, after the child has been found, media coverage of the case should cease. Also do not make premature conclusions that the child is a victim of pedosexual chains while the investigation is going on.

### CSA dynamics

Explain to the public the dynamics with which CSA usually takes place, without stereotyping the victims and perpetrators of CSA and without detailing the method used by the perpetrators to reach the victims. The description of the perpetrator's method is associated with the use of consensual words to describe the abuse, the transfer of responsibility for abuse to the victim, and the description of the victim as permanently damaged (Popović, 2019). Consult with experts who can refer to indicators on how to identify a CSA perpetrator; advice on how to protect against CSA, without giving ideas to a potential perpetrator. Deny a source of information that offers a detailed description of the perpetrator's method or ask him/her to rephrase it so that it cannot be used by other (potential) perpetrators.

### CSA details

The description of the details of the CSA event is associated with the transfer of responsibility to the victim and the description of the victim as permanently damaged (Popović, 2019). Do not give details that describe the CSA event, especially when it comes to contact CSA, since the victim is being victimized even when no identity is revealed. Also excessive details can upset other victims and trigger memories for those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and they can also be stimulating for other (potential) perpetrators. Do not disclose information about how the

CSA happened, especially when the perpetrator is a known person to the child. Do not disclose other background information about the victim and perpetrator, no matter how problematic the perpetrator's or the victim's behavior may be. Particular care should be taken not to disclose details that are not known to the victim's family and acquaintances so as not to be heard from the media. While writing, think about the potential impact of news publishing. Sharing too much information can jeopardize a potential investigation.

### Responsibility for abuse

Do not shift individual responsibility for abuse from the perpetrator to the victim, the non-abusive parent, competent professionals, and institutions or other related persons. Educate the public on the universal social responsibility of protecting children from sexual abuse and the need to report any suspected child abuse. Social responsibility for the protection of children should also be emphasized in the news of individual cases, of intrafamilial CSA, when it comes to one child, when the children are female, and when the perpetrator is unknown to the child. When the victim is male and the perpetrator is female, make sure that no consensual words are used and that the abusive event is accurately reported. Do not make premature conclusions about what the child wanted or thought to want because children cannot give informed consent to having sex with an adult. Inaccurate or manipulative reporting can cause victims to appear in the media as unreliable.

### Presentation of the perpetrator

Present the perpetrators as human beings, not as monsters, as this separates them from the rest of society and may discourage the reporting of suspicion on the person that does not fit the description. This can prevent the victims from discovering the abuse for fear that they will not be trusted. When a perpetrator is demonized, the public shies away from the fact that they may know the perpetrator personally and that a good person can do bad things. Do not emphasize the profession of the perpetrator, whether it is a reputable or low-skilled profession, because the perpetrators cannot be identified based on the profession they are engaged in. Do not prematurely suspect institutions where the perpetrator is employed or which are

attended by the child victim. In general, do not pay special attention to the perpetrator.

### Institutional responsibility

When a system failure occurs in which the media can play a key role in protecting children, be careful not to use generalizations and premature conclusions. Balanced reporting of failures and system successes to protect children is needed. Do not shift the responsibility for not disclosing details and not disclosing the identity of the perpetrator to the institutions. Educate the public that protecting identity and details is necessary for the best interests of the child victim. Justifying that the public does not understand the seriousness of the crime if it is not familiar with the details is not a valid argument, because details can traumatize victims and support stereotypes about perpetrators.

### Judicial proceedings

If a police investigation is ongoing, consult with a competent police officer and do not share too much information that may harm the judicial process. Do not make assumptions about guilt or interfere in other ways with the judicial process. Do not disclose the identity of the suspected perpetrator, especially if he/she is a family member or a person known to the child, so as not to indirectly disclose the identity of the victim. Only in cases where the indictment is confirmed or in consultation with the judicial authorities if there is a suspicion that the suspected person is a serial abuser, consider disclosing the identity of the perpetrator, which might encourage other victims to report the CSA. Do not offer rewards to the victim that could be interpreted as mentoring or influencing the accuracy and authenticity of the evidence.

### Research results and official statistics

When reporting on research results and official statistics on CSA, explain to the public that these are different sources of information that are incomparable and that may underestimate the actual prevalence of CSA. When reporting on intergenerational transmission of abuse, explain the gaps in

the respective research. Consult with scientists in the field about the results of epidemiological surveys on nationally representative samples in order to present as accurately as possible the prevalence of this serious social problem.

### Moral panic

Do not foster moral panic (fear and danger messages) around individual cases that do not represent the majority of cases or specific types of CSA; do not rely on multiple news value factors as CSA with contact or female victims (Popović, 2019). Do not use fear messages around specific categories of perpetrators and victims; resist generalizations and premature conclusions. Do not use moral panic in thematic news either. When editing a headline about CSA, make sure that it accurately reflects the text, avoiding exaggeration and taking the headline out of context. Avoid using victims and perpetrators to express emotions (anger/empathy).

### Sexually explicit material

The use of sexually explicit material (SEM) is associated with the use of consensual words to describe confirmed abuse and the shift of responsibility for abuse to the victim (Popović, 2019). Do not provide sexually explicit material to illustrate the story of abuse, especially not material in which the child acts as a voluntary participant or material in which the child involuntarily participates in the CSA, because the first victims are shown as responsible and the other may provide satisfaction to a perpetrator and further traumatize the victim. In particular do not use SEM in episodic news, regardless of the territorial orientation of the news, the duration of the abuse, and the number of victims (Popović, 2019). If the source of information provides SEM (e.g., forensic drawings of the child), refuse to publish it. Do not use sexually explicit photos of teenage girls to illustrate news on material in which children are sexually exploited.

### Assistance information

Always provide detailed information on where a person can seek help in case of CSA, as the news may re-traumatize victims. Provide assistance

information in any news regardless of the CSA type, gender, age and number of victims, and other background information about the victim (Popović, 2019). This can give the impression that a specific event can happen to anyone and that there is a place in the community where help can be received. Include information on what assistance is provided to help victims get structure or knowledge on what happens next after they seek help.

### Protection information

Always offer protection information or information on how to protect oneself against CSA; offer social solutions especially in episodic news which use only one source of information and in which the victim is a teenager (Popović, 2019). Include information on how to protect oneself, how to respond to CSA without contact, and who to contact when a perpetrator is a person known to the child.

### Online comments

Consider banning online commenting on child sexual abuse news if there is no control over the content, since they support stereotypes about perpetrators, victims, and CSA myths, provide free space for hate speech, and can be a source of additional traumatization for victims (Popović, 2017).

Brief advice for preparing and writing a story

WHO?	WHAT?	WHEN?	WHERE?	WHY?
Be sure that the privacy of involved parties is protected in the text and on the photos (use gender and age of the perpetrator and the term “child” to describe the victim). Avoid using photos of the perpetrators and victims even when their faces are blurred. Present the perpetrators as human beings, not monsters and do not pay special attention to them. Respect the right of the source of information (especially the victim) to say no. Include multiple sources, especially sources that play a key role in preventing CSA. Counsel with a local expert or organization.	Use the correct language and check terminology (use, e.g., “child sexual abuse” or “child exploitation material” when describing abuse). Make a good decision about how many details to include and avoid using them if they can re-traumatize victims. When describing an attack, it is not necessary to use background information on the victim or perpetrator. When editing the headline, make sure that it accurately reflects the text. Include national and local resources, such as helplines. Discuss prevention options and give specific examples of programs, policies, and other measures.	Describe when the abuse happened and how long it lasted. Describe when the prevention program is taking place. When reporting on research results and official statistics, make sure that you accurately describe the time period of the prevalence research.	Use more general regions or the country where the abuse happened (name of the city in case of the big cities, name of the region in case of small cities). Avoid using the exact location of the abuse (in text and on the photos). Describe exactly where the prevention program is taking place.	Focus on the CSA as a social problem and not just as specific incidents; emphasize social responsibility. Avoid making premature conclusions and generalizations. Avoid using consensual words when describing abuse and avoid making assumptions about guilt or interfering in other ways with the judicial process. Investigate judicial and civil protection systems before writing. Describe the consequences of CSA for victims, families, perpetrators, and the community, as well as the resilience of CSA survivors. Explore rehabilitation and reintegration opportunities for CSA perpetrators.

Language<sup>2</sup>

Don't use	Use	Why?
"Victim"*	"Survivor"	In order to acknowledge that the experience of the CSA does not determine the victims.
"Innocent victim"	"Survivor"	All victims of CSA are innocent.
"Allegedly"*	"Police/perpetrator says"	There is a suspicion in an event. Use sources of information and indicate who claims something happened.
"Victim admits"*	"Victim says"	In this way, the victim engages in violence and this implies responsibility and shame on the victim's side.
"Pedophile"	"Perpetrator"	Most CSA perpetrators are not people with pedophilia, and naming the perpetrator pedophile reduces the likelihood of being identified in the environment.
"Engaged in sexual relationship"**	"Was forced"	The victim is described as an active participant, and consensual words make it difficult for readers to understand the unwanted nature of the CSA.
"Violent attack"	"Sexual abuse"	CSA is always violence, irrespective of the dynamics that took place and regardless of whether the victim suffered physical injuries.
"Sexual activity or relationship"*	"Sexual abuse"	It says nothing about the violence committed or how to feel about the unwanted harm, or whether the authorities' responses were appropriate to what happened. It blurs the line between voluntary sexual intercourse and crime. The use of consensual words should always be avoided when there is a difference in age and power.
"To fondle"*	"Unwanted sexual contact or manual abuse"	It implies that touching a child is done with love, which maintains the idea that CSA is comfortable, which can prevent the audience from perceiving unwanted sexual activity as harmful.



Don't use	Use	Why?
"Oral sex, anal sex" <sup>**</sup>	"Forced oral/anal contact"	It puts the victim in the role of the perpetrator and portrays the perpetrator as a passive recipient. The CSA is placed in the context of daily, enjoyable human activities and ignores the range of negative emotions the victim has experienced.
"Sex scandal" <sup>**</sup>	"Sexual abuse"	Sexual scandal sensationalizes crime and blurs the line between normal voluntary activity and violence.
"Child pornography"	"Material in which children are sexually exploited" or "child exploitation material"	To avoid comparison with adult pornography and to avoid the idea that children can give informed consent to having sex with an adult.
"Child prostitution"	"Sexual exploitation of children"	Otherwise, children are stigmatized and blamed instead of acknowledging their exploitation by adults.
"Relationship/affair"	"Sexual exploitation of children"	In order not to shift the responsibility for the abuse to the victim.
"Kiss"	"Forcibly placed a mouth on the mouth of a child"	In order not to shift the responsibility for the abuse to the victim.
"Incest"	"Intrafamilial child sexual abuse"	Incest also refers to voluntary sexual intercourse between adult family members.
"The victim did not suffer serious physical injuries."	–	It implies that there is physical evidence in cases of CSA, yet in most cases it is missing.
"No weapons were used during the attack."	–	It implies that the CSA is being conducted under threat of weapons and the severity of other cases of CSA is diminished.
"The victim was young, but she was not a child."	–	It implies that older victims are responsible for the abuse.
"The victim voluntarily met with the perpetrator."	–	The responsibility for the CSA is transferred from the perpetrator to the victim.
"Where was the girl's mother? Did the mother know?"	–	The responsibility for the CSA is shifted from the perpetrator to the non-abusive mother.
"How could they only let the child out in the evening?"	–	There is a shift of responsibility for the CSA from the perpetrator to the non-abusive parent(s).

- 2 <sup>\*</sup>A Media Toolkit for Local and National Journalists to Better Cover Media Coverage. <http://www.chitaskforce.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Chicago-Taskforce-Media-Toolkit.pdf> (04.02.2020.); <sup>\*\*</sup>Reporting on Sexual Violence. A Media Guide for Maine Journalists. [https://www.mecasa.org/uploads/1/0/1/7/101776612/mecasa\\_media\\_guide\\_2019.pdf](https://www.mecasa.org/uploads/1/0/1/7/101776612/mecasa_media_guide_2019.pdf) (04.02.2020.)

Don't use	Use	Why?
"The victim was found unharmed." <sup>8</sup>	–	This implies that the CSA is always physical and that there must be physical traces of abuse, while the psychological nature of the violence and the traumatic impact on the child is ignored.
Remove all descriptions leading to blaming the victim from the news: private life, child's habits, dressing, child's age, child's sexual behavior, behavioral problems and physical appearance.	–	Such descriptions can lead to blaming the victim and create a false sense that others are not at risk if they do not behave as described.

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