

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

**Quality of reporting on child sexual abuse at the Odenwaldschule
in Germany: An empirical comparison
between quality and tabloid press**

**Qualität der Berichterstattung über sexuellen Kindesmissbrauch
an der Odenwaldschule: Ein empirischer Vergleich
zwischen Qualitäts- und Boulevardpresse**

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1. Introduction

In Germany, about 13 percent of adults retrospectively report having been sexually abused as a child (Häuser et al., 2011). In the literature on child sexual abuse (CSA), there is a consensus that CSA is not only widespread but often has serious and long-term consequences and thus represents a major social problem that should be appropriately addressed in media coverage (Kavemann et al., 2019; Kitzinger, 2004).

The latter demand by experts in the field of *sexual violence research* coincides with the claims of *media quality research* (Christians et al., 2009). This is because here, too, the literature, for example based on the *public interest model of normative media theory* (McQuail, 1992, 2010), demands that socially relevant topics, of which CSA is one, be placed on the media agenda with sufficient frequency and quality to promote social solutions.

What constitutes quality media reporting from a normative-scientific perspective has been set out in various generic models of media quality. Seven central quality dimensions that appear in different quality models are (1) relevance, (2) communication, (3) diversity, (4) appropriateness, (5) legitimacy, (6) impartiality and (7) transparency (summarized according to Jungnickel, 2011). High quality CSA reporting would have to meet these general quality dimensions in a subject-specific way. The *model of CSA reporting quality* (Döring & Walter, 2020), which takes up the seven general quality dimensions and underpins them with ten subject-specific quality criteria on the basis of different sources of expertise, shows how this would look in detail.

2. State of research and objectives

To date, several dozen content analyses have been conducted, primarily of English-language child sexual abuse coverage (see research reviews by Popović, 2018; Weatherred, 2015). These look primarily at what types of abuse occur, which victims and perpetrators are involved, and the extent to which CSA is portrayed in the media as a single criminal case or as a problem in society as a whole. However, dedicated quality analyses based on a multidimensional quality model are lacking so far.

This study aims to fill this research gap with regard to German-language press coverage. For this purpose, the most prominent case of institutional sexual abuse in Germany was selected, namely the abuse at the Odenwaldschule Ober-Hambach (OSO), a reform-pedagogical boarding school that existed from 1910 to 2015. In the 1970s and 1980s, systematic sexual abuse of children and adolescents was committed by the former principal Gerold Becker as the main perpetrator, as well as by other teachers at the OSO, and covered up for decades. Scientific studies and

victim associations such as Glasbrechen e. V. assume 500 to 900 victims (Keupp et al., 2019).

After its disclosure in the press (Schindler, 1999, 2010), the case triggered very large media resonance in Germany from 2010 onwards (Görge & Fangerau, 2018). Since the case has now been very well elucidated by several independent studies (Keupp et al., 2019), it is possible to make a fact-based decision in the course of a quality analysis whether a specific media report is correct in terms of content or not. This is crucial as core quality criteria of good CSA reporting such as communication and appropriateness are based on factual accuracy.

The present quality analysis of the press reporting on the sexual abuse at the Odenwaldschule differentiates between *quality press* and *tabloid press* in the tradition of communication science and is based on the theoretically and empirically founded model of the seven quality dimensions and ten quality criteria for CSA reporting introduced above (Döring & Walter, 2020). This leads to two research questions (RQ):

RQ1: Which of the ten quality criteria and seven quality dimensions of CSA reporting are met or violated in press articles about CSA at the Odenwaldschule?

RQ2: Which differences in the fulfillment of the ten quality criteria and seven quality dimensions of CSA reporting are found in press articles about CSA at the Odenwaldschule published in the quality press versus the tabloid press?

3. Method

A two-stage purposive sample of $N = 325$ German newspaper articles about CSA at the Odenwaldschule (2010-2022; 23 print and online newspapers, 52.3% quality press, 47.7% tabloid press) was subjected to a quality analysis using a codebook.

The sample size required for sufficient statistical power was determined using G*Power. Newspapers in Germany (1st selection stage) were selected on the basis of their circulation figures and quota according to quality and tabloid press as well as regional and national press. Newspaper articles (2nd selection stage) were selected based on the search term “Odenwaldschule”. Included were articles that dealt with sexual abuse at the Odenwaldschule as the main topic. Excluded were press agency reports without journalistic contribution, articles without focus on sexual abuse at the Odenwaldschule, duplicates and very short press articles (less than 80 words).

The codebook operationalizes the ten quality criteria and seven quality dimensions of the CSA reporting quality model (Döring & Walter, 2020). The codebook was developed deductively and refined inductively. It consists of 12 formal and 20 contentual categories and showed high reliability (Gwet's AC1: 0.82 – 1.00).

Coding was performed by a trained coder. Data analysis using descriptive and inferential statistics (2 x 2 chi-square tests) was carried out with the R software.

The study is pre-registered and all data, analysis scripts, and supplementary materials are publicly available on OSF (<https://osf.io/j5wcn>). Ethical approval was not required as the newspaper articles analyzed are considered to be in the public domain.

4. Results

In response to RQ1, it could be stated that the coverage of CSA at the Odenwaldschule in the German press fulfills the majority of quality criteria and quality dimensions of the CSA reporting quality model (Döring & Walter, 2020), but neglects others to a greater or lesser extent. The relative frequencies in the “Total” column in Table 1 show that of the nine applicable quality criteria (QC), a total of six were met by the vast majority of articles in the sample (> 75%): QC 1, QC 4, QC 5, QC 8, QC 9, and QC 10. On the other hand, three quality criteria were met only to a moderate or even very low degree: QC 2 (36.3%), QC 3 (55.4%), and QC 6 (2.5%).

In response to RQ2, Table 1 shows the fulfillment or violation of the nine applicable quality criteria in the columns “quality press” and “tabloid press” using percentage values. Differences between quality and tabloid press were tested with chi-square tests. Although the descriptive statistics showed a slight tendency toward greater fulfillment of the quality criteria in the quality press, there was no evidence of a statistically significant difference in quality for any of the quality criteria or related quality dimensions.

5. Conclusion

The reporting on child sexual abuse at the German boarding school Odenwaldschule examined in this paper showed in the overall view that most press articles fulfilled the majority of the quality criteria of the applied CSA reporting quality model (Döring & Walter, 2020). At the same time, the findings regarding RQ1 showed that some quality criteria were disregarded: Extremely rarely (2.5% of the $N = 325$ articles examined) did the CSA reporting examined refer to possibilities of intervention or prevention by publishing contact addresses or telephone hotlines for affected persons, relatives or potential perpetrators. Against the background of the public interest model of normative media theory (McQuail, 1992, 2010), this quality deficit weighs heavily, since a practical contribution to problem solving in the sense of information about prevention and help offers is expected from quality media reporting. Further quality deficits were shown with regard to sensational reporting and the use of inappropriate terms.

As far as the comparison of CSA reporting quality between the quality press and the tabloid press is concerned (RQ2), interestingly, no significant differences were found at the quantitative level of fulfilled quality criteria. This is most likely due to the fact that many articles in the tabloid press as well as in the quality press adopted text passages from press agency reports. In the prominent case of sexual abuse at the Odenwaldschule that was covered heavily by press agencies, this led to an equalization of quality between the tabloid and quality press.

Table 1. Fulfillment of quality criteria in the press coverage of CSA at the Odenwaldschule

Quality criteria (QC) and related quality dimensions	Total % (N = 325)	Quality press % (n = 170)	Tabloid press % (n = 155)	$\chi^2(1)$	p	V
Quality dimension 1: Relevance						
QC 1: Thematic framing	97.2	98.8	95.5	2.23	.092 ^a	0.10
Quality dimension 2: Communication						
QC 2: Non-sensational reporting	36.3	40.6	31.6	2.45	.118	0.09
QC 3: Use of appropriate terms	55.4	59.4	51.0	2.01	.156	0.08
Quality dimension 3: Diversity						
QC 4: Inclusion of stakeholders	87.7	87.6	87.7	< 0.01	1.000	< 0.01
Quality dimension 4: Appropriateness						
QC 5: Non-stereotypical reporting	87.4	86.5	88.4	0.12	.725	0.03
QC 6: Inclusion of prevention and intervention ^a	2.5	4.1	0.6	2.75	.069 ^a	0.11
Quality dimension 5: Legitimacy						
QC 7: Ethical treatment of survivors in interviews ^b	-	-	-	-	-	-
QC 8: Lawful reporting	97.8	97.1	98.7	0.41	.452 ^a	0.06
Quality dimension 6: Impartiality						
QC 9: Balance of survivors' and alleged perpetrators' interests	78.5	74.1	83.2	11.37	.063	0.11
Quality dimension 7: Transparency						
QC 10: Disclosure and reflection of official sources ^c	100.0	100.0	100.0	-	-	-

Notes.

^aDue to very low cell counts, Fisher's exact test was calculated.

^bThis quality criterion cannot be examined as part of a content analytic quality analysis of press articles.

^cBecause this quality criterion showed no variance for the two subsamples, inferential statistical analysis was not possible.

Limitations of the current study relate to the focus on institutional abuse at the Odenwaldschule and on German-language press coverage. To get a more comprehensive picture of the quality of CSA reporting, further abuse cases (e.g., in families, in sports organizations) and cross-national comparative studies would have to be conducted. Furthermore, in addition to press articles, other media formats such as social media posts or stock photos should be included in critical quality analyses (Döring, 2022).

For journalistic practice, there is a need for improvement in the three identified quality deficiencies: Journalists should report less sensationalistically and instead work towards a solution-oriented social debate with a factual reporting style. The use of appropriate terms can help to avoid misunderstandings and inaccuracies in reporting on CSA. Making prevention and intervention a topic of discussion helps to draw the media audience's attention to central points of contact such as national sexual abuse help lines. This important quality improvement in particular is very easy to implement editorially by adding a standardized information block with contact points for victims, relatives and potential perpetrators to each CSA article. In practice, such recommendations are likely to meet with a positive response, as journalists dealing with CSA also often strive for quality improvements in CSA reporting (e.g., Apin, 2022; Stelzmann & Ischebeck, 2022).

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