

Stelzmann | Ischebeck [Eds.]

Child Sexual Abuse and the Media



Nomos

Edition Reinhard Fischer

Daniela Stelzmann | Josephine Ischebeck [Eds.]

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Preface

For a long time, child sexual abuse (CSA)¹ received little attention in public reporting and was considered a taboo subject that neither the public nor journalists liked to address. Thanks to the persistence of many people who have repeatedly drawn attention to the issue, this attitude has changed. Above all, the strength and courage of those affected who have broken their silence in recent decades and spoken publicly about what was done to them have succeeded in bringing the topic to the public's attention. With the so-called "child sex abuse scandal 2010", in the course of which the mass abuse in renowned educational institutions (Canisius College, Ettal Monastery, Odenwald School) was exposed, the topic of CSA gained importance for the media in Germany and was reported more and, above all, in a more differentiated way. Now the general public and politicians were talking not only about tragic individual cases but also about structures of power and dependency that foster abuse and the supposedly trusted people that exploit the children's trust in institutions as well as in families. This view of CSA was a significant step forward in the way the media approached the topic. Nevertheless, reporting is still often characterized by misconceptions about sexual violence, adopts a victim-stigmatizing perspective, and sometimes exhibits a relatively low degree of professionalization.

I am therefore delighted that this volume compiles profound expertise on media coverage of sexual violence. In 2017, we commissioned the research project "Media coverage of child sexual abuse: A model of topic-specific quality criteria" from Professor Dr. Nicola Döring, Institute for Media and Communication Studies at Ilmenau University of Technology. It should serve to prepare larger-scale scientific studies on the quality, and the practical measures to improve the quality, of media coverage of CSA. We are pleased that this expertise has been incorporated into the present volume.

1 CSA in this context refers to sexual violence against both children and adolescents.

Bringing a topic out of the taboo

For me, as the Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues, media attention to the topic of CSA is, of course, essential. After all, it is part of my mandate to make sexual violence public, to bring the topic out of the taboo zone, to convey the views of those affected, and to sensitize politicians and the public so that more is invested in protection and help. For all of this, reporting is absolutely essential, helpful, and welcome. In addition, in recent years there has also been tremendous progress in terms of the quality of journalistic work. Increasingly, sexual violence is no longer located in obscure, dark corners of society but communicated as a problem for society as a whole. It is becoming increasingly clear that abuse occurs in all social layers and often over long periods. Journalists today are also asking questions about the responsibility of the so-called “bystanders”, who might have been able to prevent abuse, and are asking what needs to be done to better recognize and contain sexual violence.

All of these crucial issues were rarely part of the reporting ten years ago. In 2010, offers of help could not be found printed anywhere and no references to counseling services were given at the end of any article. A lot has happened there as well.

Exploiting sensational content in the media

However, the journalistic approach to the topic is still not always sufficient. Too often only the sensational content of the topic is exploited by the media, and scandalization is sought to satisfy a presumed voyeuristic public interest. The “child molester” still appears in headlines, any sexual violence against children is grossly simplified as pedophilia, and in many cases there is a misinterpretation of why children become victims of sexual violence and how they could be protected from it.

Thankfully, this book focuses both on the difficulties in communicating and the public perception of the issue; on how reporting influences the public’s perception of sexual violence against children and adolescents; how it is possible to bring a taboo subject into the public consciousness; how media presence can help those affected to articulate their concerns and promote their implementation; and how journalistic work can function in the area of conflict between the expectations of those affected, the need for balance and the public's interest in information.

After all, media attention is not always helpful in raising public awareness of the issue of sexual violence. As before, extreme cases, in particular,

attract attention. Staufen, Lügde, Bergisch Gladbach, and Münster have become synonyms for sexual abuse, and it is precisely this localization that is problematic. Focusing on a few cases that can be scandalized allows the public to continue to ignore the real dangers and, above all, the everyday nature of sexual abuse.

Narrative of the Singularity

That is why I remain ambivalent every time a new abuse scandal is made public: According to the laws of attention economics, media interest can be used to place the concerns of those affected, to raise sensitivity for the issue, to make political demands, and to appeal to society to do more to protect children and young people from sexual violence. On the other hand, every “scandal” simultaneously manifests the misleading narrative of the singularity of sexual violence: Case-fixated reporting continues to make CSA appear as an exception, a scandalous event that takes place somewhere on the outskirts but certainly not in the middle of society.

CSA as a problem for society as a whole, a problem on a scale that makes it statistically likely that everyone knows someone who has been exposed to sexual violence (and presumably perpetrators as well) – all of this is rarely reflected in the narratives of reporting. That the cases that attract attention are only the tip of the iceberg, that the everyday abuse which goes unnoticed and everywhere is the real monstrosity; however, for the public this hardly gets comprehensible through the predominantly case-centered reporting.

Authentic perspectives

I am therefore very grateful that, against this background, this book has decided to focus on the perspective of those affected by the topic of “media and child sexual abuse”. After all, reporting on and dealing with those damaged is still often problematic in everyday journalistic life. Media professionals often look for people affected by sexual violence for their reporting in order to be able to include authentic perspectives. This is perfectly understandable: a “personal” narrative conveys closeness to the audience and awakens a willingness to engage with a topic. For many of those affected, however, it is challenging to talk about experiences of violence. All too often they feel themselves exploited, especially if the

finished report presents their personal story in a truncated way from their point of view or merely uses it as an illustrative example to shed light on a more prominent topic.

“Trauma-sensitive interviewing” is the keyword here, yet, unfortunately, journalists are not prepared for it, neither in their daily work nor in their training. This may have to do with the fact that journalistic distance and independence are rightfully given a very high priority. However, as I understand it, this part of journalistic professionalism should not exclude a certain empathy for those who willingly answer questions on a personally difficult topic. On the contrary, journalists should bear in mind that insensitive behavior can sometimes trigger re-traumatization in interviewees. Trauma-sensitive interaction with those affected should be part of the tools of the trade for journalists who may encounter traumatized interviewees in this field or other contexts. Just as sports reporters know the rules of the game in various sports or court reporters are familiar with the basic rules of a trial, journalists should also acquire and apply specialist knowledge in the field of sexual violence.

It should not be forgotten at this point that the increased media interest can have positive effects for those affected. Those affected can be strengthened as they learn that they are not alone in what they have experienced. Besides, the media sometimes provide them with information on where and how to find help. Some are encouraged by reporting to seek help, and many specialized counseling centers register increased interest with greater media attention.

Socially relevant education

In this context, it is also important to take a closer look at the focus of many reports on CSA. The course of events is reconstructed, details are described in elaboration, and there are speculations about the presumed motives of the perpetrators. Persons affected are often portrayed only in their status as victims and reporting that goes beyond a case-by-case analysis is still the exception. But I am sure that the public is also interested in how children can be protected from sexual violence and how affected persons can integrate experiences of violence into their lives. A deeper media engagement with the question of what can be done against sexual violence against children and young people would therefore not only be a great support for the commitment of many people dedicated to prevention, protection, help, research, and education; it would also be socially relevant in the best educational sense.

I am therefore very grateful that this publication draws attention to the status quo. The international and interdisciplinary orientation of the book is worth emphasizing: From the perspectives of the affected groups to possible risks and opportunities of media coverage to ideas for improvement, the topic of “Child Sexual Abuse and the Media” is examined in great variety.

Also noteworthy is the consideration of the question of how aspects of the topic of CSA are taken up and dealt with in the so-called “new media”. Given the current atomization of the media world and the fragmentation into an infinite number of communication channels, the approaches outlined here, which attempt to deal with a topic of great sensitivity in social media, are of great interest for a further examination of the question of what perspectives and risks the internet offers as a communication space.

With its comprehensive examination of the topic, a volume is now available that leads the way in the current discussion about how CSA should be addressed in the media. The book points out difficulties but also gives suggestions on how the media could deal with the topic of CSA. In this respect, this publication can also be read as a guidebook for journalistic work.

The intensive engagement of many authors with the topic of CSA, whose contributions are now collected in this volume, makes me hopeful that it may be possible to anchor the media discussion of sexual violence as a permanent topic beyond isolated reporting and to evoke public interest without the case-fixated scandalization. This book is an important contribution to an urgently needed social debate that can raise awareness of sexual violence taking place in our midst and not hidden away.

Johannes-Wilhelm Rörig

Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues (2011-2022),
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