

# Reporting on child sexual abuse: Personal insights into the workings, challenges, and opportunities in journalism

Nina Apin

With the "scandal year" 2010, CSA appeared prominently on the media agenda in Germany. Numerous cases of CSA in renowned institutions were uncovered. The media took on an essential exposing and educating role. Nina Apin, editor of a major German daily newspaper, has been dealing with the topic of CSA and the associated journalistic challenges for years. In the current chapter, she offers an insight into how journalism works in relation to CSA, including achievements and traps, and gives an outlook for future directions.

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## The press as an agent of the enlightenment – The “scandal year” 2010

Berlin, January 2010. I am attending a press conference as a local reporter for the Berlin editorial team at *taz*<sup>1</sup>. The scene takes place at the Canisius College on the edge of Berlin Tiergarten. The Jesuit high school is one of the most renowned educational institutions in the city; the upper-middle class has their children educated here. Numerous press representatives crowd into the auditorium, the institution's prestige contrasts sharply with the scandal's enormity. Subject of the press conference: Two Fathers are said to have committed sexual assault and violence against students in the 1970s and 1980s. The matter is not new: There had been internal rumors, also calls for help from affected students, even a self-report by one of the offenders. The Jesuit order had covered up the matter for 19 years. What had been tolerated and kept quiet for years becomes public only when old school students turn to media representatives and the school principal Klaus Mertes opens the school gates to the capital's press with a unique boldness.

The press conference at the Canisius College is my first encounter with the subject of child sexual abuse (CSA). My subsequently specializing in the subject is due to the fact that in 2010 what is called a topic boom in journalism emerges: The audience's attention for a subject – in this

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1 *taz die tageszeitung*: national German daily newspaper.

case: sexual violence against children – is aroused, and the journalistic industry delivers: background, further developments, new scandals. After the kick-off in the Canisius College, a series of abuse scandals hit almost all institutions in the country. Affected people who had been silent for years or decades now confided to media representatives what had been done to them as children in boarding schools, foster homes, and other institutions. And this time, the media and the public want to listen (Behnisch & Rose, 2011).

Differently back in 1999: The investigative journalist Jörg Schindler published research on the reform pedagogical Odenwald School in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (Schindler, 1999) that had what it took to be a scandal: Schindler had spoken to numerous old school students and contemporary witnesses who reported systematic and massive sexual violence by teachers. One of the main offenders: the headmaster himself, a star of German reform pedagogy. But this article had no noteworthy response, the school and those affected got caught up in fruitless internal disputes. It wasn't until eleven years later that Schindler's revelations hit a sensitized audience. The impact of this second report is enormous. Many other media are following suit and bring more and more new monstrosities to light. Public education and victim compensation are set into motion, and finally the closure of the Odenwald School follows the moral bankruptcy of this former model institution in 2015.

Both cases, Canisius college and Odenwaldschule, show that the media, as a powerful engine, can initiate and accelerate educational processes. The “fourth power”, as an uninvolved instance, can do what affected institutions are usually unwilling and unable to do: It can listen to those affected and – at best – ensure that their experiences are the subject of criminal and public investigations, that the offenders are identified and held accountable, that the institutions concerned take responsibility and provide compensation. At the same time, however, the media are never entirely free of self-interest: To report on sexualized violence, it is necessary to have as unambiguous a history as possible with guilty parties, victims, and confidants – an intensification that is opposed to the interest in reassurance and reconciliation. For press revelations to be sufficient, however, they must also meet with a social climate that accepts these stories: In 1999, German society was still heavily preoccupied with the consequences of reunification, and the West German intelligentsia struggled with its self-concept in the confrontation with East German traditions. Reports from former boarding school students who had been humiliated at a beacon institution of left-wing liberal intellectual life did not fit into the picture. In addition, I have come to know media companies as “tendency clubs”:

Quite a few editors who are ardent supporters of reform education, who themselves had attended the Odenwald School or sent their children there, worked for the major newspapers such as *Zeit*, *Spiegel*, and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (see von Dohnanyi, 2010). From my perspective, there was a correspondingly greater tendency to chase acts of abuse in church institutions than in their own milieu.

I had the same experience when the abuse revelations reached the left-wing alternative spectrum from which my newspaper originated: A colleague discovered a cross connection during research on the Odenwald School: Dietrich Willier, co-founder of the *taz*, who according to older colleagues was a charismatic and recognized political journalist of the early years, later went to the Odenwald School as an art teacher. There he abused at least nine boys between the ages of 12 and 14, including on trips to Greece organized by him; he is also said to have owned a collection of abuse films (Apin et al., 2011).

#### Abuse and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Alliance 90/The Greens): The election campaign year 2013

What about CSA in the name of sexual liberation, as occurred in the left-wing milieu? I started searching the *taz* archive for clues. And I found some things there that make the hair of those born after the event stand on end: There was an article under the headline “Pedophilia — Crimes without victims” advertising for “consensual” sexual contacts between adults and children (Stüben, 1979). Other authors talked about “tender fucking” with boys on the threshold of puberty or bluntly demanded: “Away with the paragraphs 174–176!”<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the eighties even an activist of the pederast group within the “Homosexuelle Aktion Hamburg” (Homosexual action Hamburg) was responsible for a regularly appearing gay and lesbian page. Colleagues remember that he sometimes even brought a young companion to the editorial office. “Back then it was just a different time”, defended those who had already been there at the time. Pedosexual<sup>3</sup> positions had made it into the newspaper out

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2 Paragraphs 174–176 Strafgesetzbuch [German Criminal Code] penalize the sexual abuse of wards and children.

3 Pedosexuality is often confused with pedophilia. Pedophilia describes sexual interest in prepubescent children, independent of actual behavior. Sexually abusive behavior against children, on the other hand, is referred to as pedosexuality, which is not necessarily connected to pedophilia. Many acts of CSA are not motivated

of a misunderstood sympathy for minorities: The story that pedosexuals were the (suppressed) avant-garde of sexual liberation had been hoisted. Moreover, hardly anyone had been interested in these niche topics anyway. What had been important in terms of publicity was something else: RAF, NATO double decision or solidarity with Nicaragua.

As unsatisfactory as I personally thought some of the information provided by the founding generation of the *taz* was, and as strange as the collective amnesia was when it came to establishing the identity of an activist named Ulli-Dénise, who was a busy writer at the time: No one prevented me from publishing some texts that critically dealt with the *taz*'s own past. The *taz* seemed more able to deal with its own misconducts than institutions like the Kinderschutzbund (German Child Protection Association), where similar issues led to rifts, or the reform pedagogy scene, which still refused to see the Odenwaldschule as anything more than a regrettable slip.

This changed in 2013, probably not by chance in the middle of the election campaign, when accusations of abuse reached Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Alliance 90/The Greens; German green party). Especially the political opponents and media close to them reported with relish how the pedosexual lobby had made it into the committees and resolutions of the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen in the 1980s and 1990s. The more journalistic research and political instrumentalization blended together, the more the reporting of the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen pedosexual involvement became the subject of bitter discussions, including in the *taz*: Was it the intention of a left-wing alternative newspaper to take part in a witch-hunt – and allow reactionary forces to badmouth the achievements of the sexual revolution of 1968 under the disguise of unsparing clearing-up? As a newspaper originating from the same milieu, didn't one have to be more lenient with the Greens? After all, it had been all so long ago, and if there had been victims at all, no one had come forward so far.

Such views were held above all by older colleagues, who also felt attacked in their own biographies by the frenzy of clearing-up. Younger ones, on the other hand, like me, found that anyone who is not squeamish in the Catholic Church must also clear up the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen ruthlessly – even if the truth comes at the wrong time and could benefit the wrong political forces. A classic journalistic topic – researching, revealing, publishing – had suddenly turned into an open war of opinions.

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by pedophilia, and a significant number of those affected by pedophilia never commits CSA (Cantor & McPhail, 2016; Cohen et al., 2018; Jahnke, 2018).

The then *taz* Editor of Education Christian Füller wrote in a provocative opinion piece that the Greens as an organization were “permeated” by “pedophile ideology”<sup>4</sup> (original quote). The editor-in-chief personally stopped the publication and the editor left the newspaper in dispute.

### Empathy and hard facts: Journalistic challenges

The politically charged atmosphere before the Bundestag elections 2013 was an exceptional situation. But as it soon turned out, it was wrong to think that there had been no victims in the left-wing alternative milieu. The continuous reporting of abuse, which began in 2010 and resurfaced in 2013, led those affected to turn to journalists who seemed trustworthy to them. Books were written about abuse in educational shared flats and communities and films such as “Meine keine Familie” (My No-family) about sexual violence in the Otto Mühl sect were produced (Neumann & Robert, 2012). All of these products were based on the strong sympathy for those affected, often giving them the opportunity to make their voice heard for the first time. The press as the advocate of the victims – this role is also not entirely free of tension, for despite all sympathy for the concerns of those affected, accusations must also be provable. In 2015, a man contacted the *taz* newspaper who stated that he wanted to uncover abuse at a boarding school in Lower Saxony on behalf of his former classmates. He had even written a book about it that had been alienated as a novel. I met with him, he kept sending me new contact addresses and “material” – finally I drove to the boarding school and spoke with the current principal, former students, teachers, and a representative of the local police department. But since none of his accusations could be substantiated in the end, I refrained from publishing it. The man wrote an angry letter to the editor – he felt abandoned. The line between an empathic perspective and reporting on the victims is narrow, and sometimes the danger of being guided by feelings instead of facts can be great. But victims also have self-interests. And the offender side can also become unpleasant if you get too close to it: Since I interviewed one of the last openly acting pedophile lobbyists in 2014 (with the attempt to approach him with fairness, too; Apin, 2014), the man regularly has sent me “news” on the pedophile cause,

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4 The *taz* archive version of the then not published text can be read in the archive of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, [https://verlag2.faz.net/dynamic/download/faz/Befreites\\_Menschenmaterial.pdf](https://verlag2.faz.net/dynamic/download/faz/Befreites_Menschenmaterial.pdf) (retrieved on August 28, 2020).

has corrected my articles continuously in his sense and sometimes even sent “pedophile Christmas greetings” to the editorial office.

For those affected, however, editorial offices increasingly became contact points for unprocessed requests: A man from Darmstadt in Hessen, Germany, asked the *taz* for support by letter to the editor: A teacher at a primary and secondary school had abused pupils for decades. To this day, the state school supervisory authority has not assumed any responsibility. A colleague and I joined forces, met several of those affected, got to know their families, looked through court records, interviewed contemporary witnesses, and read in the offender’s diaries. In the end, our research led to the state of Hessen setting up an independent commission and compensating the victims. When the Minister of Education and the spokesperson of the victims’ initiative thanked the *taz*, it was a small “spotlight” moment for my colleague and me. Only a small one, however – because we had not crushed the entire Catholic Church but only prevented a legacy that was unpleasant for the authorities from being shelved forever.

The resistance of the institutions was low in the Darmstadt case: The offender, a lone perpetrator, was dead and, moreover, his guilt had been established beyond doubt beforehand; he spent the last years of his life in prison. Our service consisted primarily of exerting pressure on the authorities to compensate the victims – and to make known the strategies of an offender who had systematically brought children from unstable families into his dependency and skillfully deceived his adult environment.

This was different in a case from Berlin. In the course of the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen investigation, the final report of the Göttingen Institute for Democracy Research recalled a remarkable case from Berlin: The authorities had set up foster homes with pedosexuals with criminal records – for boys from difficult social backgrounds who were to be raised to full members of society through the “loving” influence of the pedosexual foster fathers. The cases had never been investigated, no victims had come forward, and neither the Berlin Senate for Youth nor the then governing Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD; Social Democratic Party of Germany) had any interest in clearing up the matter. This did not change until 2013, when several media reported on the case. A scientific report was commissioned, whereupon two of the victims came forward. What they reported about growing up in one of these foster homes led to outraged media and political reactions. A further expert report attempted to clarify the political and structural responsibilities for this educational “experiment”. And while, supported by an unrelenting media interest in the case, the two known victims struggled with the Berlin authorities for compensation, a third victim contacted the researchers. This man, who

grew up in a comparable “foster home” outside of Berlin, gave evidence of a larger pedosexual network.

The case, which is also called the “Kentler Experiment” after the sexual scientist Helmut Kentler, spiritus rector of these “foster homes”, shows that the press can not only publicize grievances but also maintain interest in their clarification and investigation over a longer period of time: Without the constant inquiries and the articles that repeatedly raised the question of the extent to which the Berlin Senate intended to do justice to its responsibility for the abused foster children of the past, the case would probably have been closed with the first scientific report. The intensity of the investigation was also increased by the public interest expressed in the media: The foster children’s files, which in 2016 were still considered untraceable, turned up later. They show, among other things, that the controversial foster care relationships existed until at least 2003 – and that there were repeated attempts by pediatricians and social workers to intervene on behalf of the children, which were not followed up.

Apart from the obstacles that are put in the way of journalistic work by complicated records and by representatives of the authorities who are not particularly willing to provide information, there is also an ideological aggravation in this case that makes neutral reporting difficult: Time and again, right-wing groups try to exploit the Kentler scandal for their own purposes: For example, the German right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD; Alternative for Germany), both in the Berlin House of Representatives and at the federal level, tried to profile itself as an advocate for those affected by CSA and a champion against a “child molester scandal” for which the social democrats were responsible (to quote Thorsten Weiß, family policy spokesman for the AfD parliamentary group in the Berlin House of Representatives). The right-wing extremist alliance “Demo für alle” (“Demo for all”) also uses the Kentler scandal to campaign against sex education in day-care centers and schools, because in the eyes of the activists “gender mania” and “early sexualization” of children is a legacy of Kentler’s pedosexual ideas. I turned down a request to participate in a film by “Demo für alle” about the Kentler case, because I do not want to serve as a chief witness for a group that acts against sexual diversity.

### What responsible journalism can achieve

In addition to exposing injustice, accelerating and intensifying the coping processes, and asserting the interests of those affected, another task of the media is to disseminate knowledge about the extent, prevalence, and con-

sequences of CSA. While spectacular cases still dominate the reporting – after the Odenwald School and the Greens comes Lügde, comes Bergisch-Gladbach, comes Münster –, it seems that the social knowledge about CSA is greater than ten years ago (e.g., about trauma long-term consequences, the difference between a pedophilic preference and acted out pedosexuality, about abuse in children’s homes and problematic structures in the church). People are more aware that children are at risk in their immediate family, not only from stranger danger. Nevertheless, a lack of knowledge within society remains.

From my perspective, the quality of reporting on CSA has unquestionably improved over the past ten years. Voyeuristic horror reporting à la “The Incest Monster Josef Fritzl” has become less frequent, which is certainly due to the fact that the victims’ perspective has become more in focus. Abuse-trivializing titles such as in the weekly news magazine *Spiegel*, which in 1977 featured the eleven-year-old Eva Ionesco naked on the cover in addition to the headline “Sold Lolitas” (*Spiegel*, 1977), are no longer thinkable today. And also the tendency of the tabloids to stir up against “child molesters” with striking punishment fantasies has clearly decreased. On the other hand, there is an overall fair reporting about prevention offers for people with pedophilia such as “Kein Täter werden” (“Don’t offend”), and even feature films from the perspective of the perpetrator such as “Head Burst” (Reich et al., 2019) are discussed in a differentiated manner. This suggests that the media narrative framework in which the topic of CSA is framed has become more diverse and multi-perspective and that some taboos, from the needs of people with pedophilia to the question of women as perpetrators, have begun to break. Finally, it is the task of responsible journalism to constantly expand society’s knowledge about CSA and to keep it up to date based on the latest scientific research.

### Traps and blind spots

Nevertheless, there are still deficits and omissions in journalistic work on the topic of CSA (see Popović in this edition). Since sexualized violence against children is an emotionally charged topic, reporting on it constantly runs the risk of falling into one of the three biggest “traps”:

1. Sensationalism: The scandal, the monstrous crime, the pedosexual offender as a danger to the general public – such material, prepared and embellished in great detail, sells well. Sensationalism and voyeurism offer the audience a framework in which the crime of CSA can be so-



cially understood: The banal normality of what the neighbor does with his daughter is ultimately far more disturbing than revelations about highly criminal child pornography networks. However, the focus on spectacular evil instead of the “normal” abuse in everyday life obstructs the view of the actual structures that promote abuse and therefore hinders prevention in various ways.

2. The victim bias: A general empathy for victims of CSA can help to even out the structural power gap between offenders and powerful offender institutions on the one side and often marginalized victims on the other. However, if the reports are too one-sided from the perspective of the victims, the analysis remains on the subjective level: Structural connections are ignored just as much as the potential or necessity of government action. Similarly, reporting runs the risk of remaining stuck in a law-and-order approach: Calls for ever tougher laws, higher sentencing ranges, and more powers for law enforcement agencies, however, obscure the fact that offenders also have rights, for example as parents, as employees, or to reintegrate into society after serving a prison sentence.
3. The fixation on institutions: From my view, media reporting generally focuses too much on institutions such as churches and clubs and thereby neglects cases in which the abuse was committed in immediate family environment by “normal” (step)fathers, uncles and aunts, or neighbors, which results in a one-sided picture of CSA.

### Future directions

Even today there are still topics that have been neglected by the media: CSA cases in families, the large Christian churches, and institutions of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) have been covered in the media. Now also mass and professional sports clubs are increasingly coming into the focus of investigations and media reports, thanks to the work of the Independent Commission in Germany, which systematically investigates the extent of CSA in all areas of society. And through new research projects, but also through reports from those affected to counseling centers and help hotlines, a public debate is slowly beginning about the fact that more women are perpetrators than previously assumed. What is still little known about, partly because it concerns particularly weak and vulnerable victim groups, is ritual sexualized violence within the framework of sects and occult or right-wing extremist communities. Here the particular severity of the subject, i.e. the intolerable fact that children are tormented and

tortured, makes it difficult for journalists to deal with it: The risk for reporters to research in a criminal and violent milieu is high, the facts are difficult to ascertain – and even if the research is successful, it is unclear whether such a dark and unappetizing “story” will even find buyers. The same applies to the organized sexual exploitation of children on the internet: Individual successful searches, as in the case of the Bergisch-Gladbach network (Germany), are accompanied by media coverage. We learn about criminalistic methods and criminal structures in darknet, but research on who the many customers are who buy the abusive material is hardly ever read.

Moreover, little is known about the prevalence of sexual violence against disabled and sick children, for example by caregivers and hospital staff. Individual cases such as that of the doctor who abused small patients for years in the Saarland University Hospital have been reported (e.g., Martens & Müller, 2019). Further reports, for example on the prevention in German clinics, was sparse, and the topic did not seem worthwhile to most of the editors. A real blind spot in the public perception and also in the reporting is finally the lack of protection of homeless children and of children in refugee housing: Since the great rush of refugees to Germany in 2015, sexual assaults on women and children in hostels and other collective accommodation have become known time and again. The lack of space and possibilities for retreat, but also the isolation and vulnerability of the children in these shelters pose a great risk of abuse. Several times the Independent Commissioner of the Federal Government in Germany, Johannes Wilhelm Rörig, drew attention to the lack of child protection in the refugee facilities, but his warnings found little resonance not only in politics but also in the media. The protection of refugee children simply does not seem to be an urgent issue at a time when the right refugee policy and immigration are being debated.

Writing about CSA responsibly also involves illuminating niches and looking at aspects that you suspect might be important but would prefer not to investigate further. Consider the foster child system, which has been under suspicion not only since the so-called Kentler Experiment: Around 100,000 children and adolescents live in German foster care facilities and families – and the number is rising. The question of the responsibility of the state youth welfare service is a recurring theme in reports on cases of abuse: Why was a foster child assigned to the pedosexual long-term camper of Lügde, Germany (e.g., Wiegand & Hell, 2020)? Why was the main offender in Münster, who was convicted several times for possession and distribution of abuse images, able to live together with the 10-year-old son of his partner, although the family was under observation by the youth

welfare office (WDR, 2020)? Investigating the structural conditions that make such cases possible in the first place, critically examining the role of youth welfare services and juvenile courts and the expert witnesses who are so important for court proceedings – these would be worthwhile tasks for a journalism that focuses not only on individual acts but also on the systemic factors behind them.

More reports about the benefits of prevention would be educational in the best sense, because they would provide knowledge: What can individuals do to prevent, detect, and stop CSA? Why is it necessary to thoroughly investigate past incidents so that prevention measures can be implemented in institutions? And why is comprehensive sexual education in schools at least as important as setting up a confidential mailbox or the open-door rule for one-on-one conversations? There is still a lot to be done for a journalist who wants to contribute to the fight against CSA in a serious way. An intensive and systematic exchange between journalists and the scientific community would certainly be helpful at this point.

However, although the number of journalists in Germany who regularly deal with the topic of CSA has grown, and although many editorial offices consider continuous work in this area of reporting to be relevant and important, it is still not very prestigious to write about CSA. Most journalists, myself included, do not cover this area “full-time” but in addition to their regular work as society reporters, political editors, or correspondents. The time and financial resources for research are therefore limited. Often, there is no time in the daily editorial routine to familiarize oneself with scientific background material “on the side”. The statements made at the press conference or the preparation of current studies and expert reports offered to the press by bodies such as the Independent Commissioner of the Federal Government for Questions of Sexual Child Abuse in Germany have to suffice. The reading of more complex scientific studies or specialist literature then takes place “privately” after work, and long conversations with those affected, which are too confidential for the open-plan office, are moved to the lunch break. As a result, the journalistic preoccupation with sexual violence against children eats into private everyday life. The dramatic personal fates and the nature of the crimes committed weigh heavily; the question of unresolved responsibility, the search for offenders, or the often scandalous treatment of victims by the authorities can cause sleepless nights. It would be desirable for all journalists who regularly cover the topic of CSA to have access to psychological support. At my newspaper, a psychological on-call service for colleagues was recently established. Although I have not yet used this support service, I am reassured that it exists. It’s not only important for my own mental health – if consternation,

disgust, and anger get out of hand, they will eventually be reflected in the reporting. But that is something we must avoid. Because if there's one thing I've learned in ten years of dealing with CSA, it's that the worse the crimes we report on, the more professionally we have to act.

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