Media Coverage of Child Sexual Abuse: A Framework of Issue-Specific Quality Criteria

Nicola Döring & Roberto Walter


To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2019.1675841

Published online: 07 Nov 2019.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 119

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Media Coverage of Child Sexual Abuse: A Framework of Issue-Specific Quality Criteria

Nicola Döring and Roberto Walter

Department of Economic Sciences and Media, Ilmenau University of Technology, Ilmenau, Germany

ABSTRACT

Sensationalist, stereotyping or otherwise biased media coverage of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) can harm survivors and is detrimental to rational, solution-oriented public debates on the issue. While the Public Interest Model (PIM) of normative media theory promotes generic quality dimensions, there currently is no framework of issue-specific media quality for reporting about CSA. This paper aims at developing such a framework, working deductively with PIM and inductively with different expert sources regarding quality criteria (QC) for CSA reporting. Our data collection covered four types of expert sources: journalistic guidelines, scientific publications, surveys with survivors and with counseling centers. All sources were content analyzed using reliable codebooks (κ = .79–1.00). Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were run. We present a framework comprised of 10 QC. Eight inductively generated QC for CSA media coverage are (1) thematic framing, (2) non-sensational reporting, (3) use of appropriate terms, (4) inclusion of stakeholders, (5) non-stereotypical reporting, (6) inclusion of prevention/intervention, (7) ethical treatment of survivors in interviews and (8) lawful reporting. Two deductively generated QC are (9) balance of survivors’ and alleged perpetrators’ interests and (10) disclosure and reflection of official sources. Limitations and implications for future media research and journalistic practice are discussed.

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a widespread societal issue. Recent meta-analytic findings state the global prevalence of CSA for girls to be 15% and for boys 8% of the population (Barth, Bermetz, Heim, Trelle, & Tonia, 2013). Changes in educational, legal and medical systems are necessary to better prevent and fight CSA and its severe consequences. The media system also plays an important role as media coverage of CSA can raise public and political awareness and foster countermeasures (Donnelly, 2016; Kitzinger, 2001, 2004).
Media coverage of CSA


However, not all media reporting on CSA is this meritorious. Communication research has demonstrated that media coverage of CSA is often severely flawed: Quality deficiencies of CSA reporting include sensationalism and voyeurism, the spreading of sexual abuse myths, the demonizing of perpetrators, the stereotyping of victims and neglect of prevention and therapy (Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010; Dorfman, Mejia, Cheyne, & Gonzalez, 2011; Görgen, Griemmert, & Fangerau, 2013). Critical analysis of CSA reporting in the scientific literature has been accompanied by more and more guidelines for journalists that provide tips and rules for better reporting on CSA. These practically phrased suggestions for CSA media coverage aim to give a helping hand to journalists when covering the issue. Such guidelines are published by different journalist associations, governmental agencies and NGOs (e.g., DART Centre for Journalism and Trauma, 2007; Frauennotruf Kiel, n.d.; National Human Rights Commission of India [NHRC], 2004). Furthermore, CSA survivors and counseling centers have criticized biased and harmful media reporting, including the disrespectful and unethical behavior of journalists toward survivors (survivors: Davies, 2014; counseling centers: Woywodt, 2007). A recent mixed-methods study from Germany shows that CSA survivors demand a more thorough societal inquiry on the issue and regard high-quality media reporting as crucial for this aim (Kavemann, Nagel, Doll, & Helfferich, 2019).

Quality criteria for media coverage of CSA

There is consensus, both in scientific theory and practice, that high-quality media reporting on CSA is important, and that quality deficiencies are
common. To date, however, no comprehensive framework of quality criteria for CSA media coverage exists. The current paper aims to close this research gap by analyzing and integrating quality criteria for media coverage of CSA from three different types of sources through three different methods. Quality criteria (QC) are hereby defined as factors that are assigned to quality dimensions and contribute to the construct of media quality (Jungnickel, 2011). In order to generate QC for CSA media coverage, the suggestions derived from the various sources are scientifically reflected, sharpened, rephrased and organized in a consistent framework.

The first inductive, data-driven approach to building an issue-specific framework of quality criteria for CSA media coverage comprised content analyses of CSA-related expert documents in terms of guidelines for journalists and scientific literature, which led to the following two research questions: RQ1: What QC for media coverage of CSA are postulated by CSA-related journalistic guidelines?; RQ2: What QC for media coverage of CSA are postulated by CSA-related scientific literature?

The second inductive approach to building an issue-specific framework of quality criteria for CSA media coverage comprised surveys of CSA experts and main stakeholders in terms of CSA survivors and counseling centers, which led to the following two research questions: RQ3: What QC for media coverage of CSA are postulated by CSA survivors?; RQ4: What QC for media coverage of CSA are postulated by CSA counseling centers?

The third approach was deductive and theory-driven. Following normative media theory, and specifically, the Public Interest Model (PIM), news media are obliged to create and promote an active public discourse for socially relevant topics (McQuail, 1992, 2010) that ultimately helps to resolve these problems. Media professionals, according to PIM, carry a high level of accountability for how a serious issue like CSA is represented, and whether the media coverage is beneficial to the public interest. Journalism theory and research has provided a variety of models of generic issue-spanning quality criteria for ethical and responsible journalism that serve the public interest (e.g., Arnold, 2009; Wyss, 2002). A comparison and integration of those models reveals seven general journalistic quality dimensions (Jungnickel, 2011). With the aim of building an issue-specific framework of quality criteria for media coverage of CSA, this led to the fifth and final research question: RQ5: How can the QC for media coverage of CSA postulated by four different expert sources (RQ1-RQ4) be integrated into a comprehensive framework based on the seven core normative journalistic quality dimensions according to PIM?
Method

Analysis of CSA-related journalistic guidelines and scientific publications

Sampling of CSA-related journalistic guidelines and scientific publications
In order to find journalistic guidelines for CSA media coverage, a systematic online document search with the search engines google.de, google.com and bing.com was conducted using terms such as “child sexual abuse media coverage”, “sexualized violence media reporting”, “rape journalism guideline”, “sexual assault media report”, “sexual victimization media guideline” and respective German counterparts. Open Access German and English language PDF documents that clearly stated a serious authorship and were specifically aimed at improving the media coverage on sexual violence or CSA, were included in the sample.

To identify relevant scientific publications on the quality of media coverage of CSA, a systematic search was conducted using scientific databases (Web of Science, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, CMMC), publishers’ catalogs and the search engines google.de, google.com and bing.com. German and English search terms were used, which ensured both a reference to CSA (“child sexual abuse”, “sexual violence children”, “sexualized violence & children”, “sexual harassment children”) and to media (“media”, “media coverage”, “press”, “television”, “radio”).

Overall, we identified $N=22$ journalistic guidelines (published between 2004 to 2017) and $N=7$ out of 122 scientific publications (published between 2002 to 2016) that provided quality criteria for CSA media reporting and included practical tips for journalists on how to fulfill them. Sample descriptions and lists of included documents are available online at the Open Science Foundation server https://osf.io/6kdmq/.

Development of codebook
We conducted a content analysis of the 29 expert documents. Due to the lack of specific research on concrete suggestions for CSA media coverage, the codebook for this study was developed inductively using the available documents. During the coding process, the codebook was constantly adapted, refined and extended. In total, the codebook contained 10 formal and 54 inductively generated contentual categories addressing the quality of media reporting.

The formal categories contained information such as the name of the document, authors, or the publication date and were either nominal scale or free text variables. The binary contentual variables focused on suggestions for CSA media coverage. This means that a document either contained a certain suggestion (variable was coded “1”) or did not contain a certain suggestion (variable was coded “0”). This codebook included, for example, contentual categories concerning the avoidance of victim blaming, the
possible retraumatization of CSA survivors, or references to adherence to current laws. Existing enumerations or bullet point listings within the documents were individually analyzed for multiple suggestions in one coherent statement in order to harmonize the strongly varying level of abstraction within and between the sampled documents.

The intercoder reliability check using two independent coders revealed a high level of coding accuracy with satisfying results for percent agreement (ranging from 90.5% to 100.0%) and Cohen’s Kappa (ranging from .81 to 1.00).

After the content analysis, a summarizing qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) was conducted in order to compress the 54 contentual categories while at the same time retaining the essential findings. For example, a total of 27 contentual categories alone covered the preparation, conducting and debriefing of interviews with CSA survivors as well as related ethical suggestions. Compressing these 27 categories led to the overarching QC of ethical treatment of survivors in interviews. During the compression process (documented online at https://osf.io/6kdmq/), we reflected and sharpened the results and obtained eight quality criteria. In the following, these eight quality criteria for CSA media coverage are defined and illustrated using example quotations from the journalistic guidelines.

**Quality criterion 1: Thematic framing**

Suggestion: Do not represent CSA only in terms of individual cases (episodic framing), but address it as a systemic problem and a societal issue instead (thematic framing). Quotation from journalistic guideline: “Use local, national and (where appropriate) international statistics on child sexual abuse to frame the story” (Our Watch, 2014, p. 2).

**Quality criterion 2: Non-sensational reporting**

Suggestion: Do not report about CSA in a sensationalizing way but stick to objective and fact-based reporting. Quotation from guideline: “Do not sensationalise or exaggerate events as this could further damage the victim” (National Human Rights Commission of India [NHRC], 2004, p. 21).

**Quality criterion 3: Use of appropriate terms**

Suggestion: Use appropriate terms for CSA perpetrators, acts, victims and consequences in media coverage. Avoid sexual vocabulary (e.g., “the teacher had sex with the child”) that distracts from the violent nature of the act but also avoid vague terms (e.g., “the teacher showed inappropriate behavior”) that neglect the sexualized nature of the abuse. Quotation from guideline:
In fact, in order to portray sexual violence accurately, it is important to use language that puts the burden of action on the reported perpetrator. It is also important for journalists to use the most accurate name(s) for the act(s), rather than using euphemisms (Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault [MECASA], 2016, p. 4).

**Quality criterion 4: Inclusion of stakeholders**

Suggestion: Give CSA survivors, CSA counseling centers and other experts and key stakeholders a chance to speak. Quotation from guideline: “As well as comments from health and social care professionals, informed views can be obtained from people representing children’s organisations, bodies representing professionals and experts in the field in academia” (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC], 2012, p. 5).

**Quality criterion 5: Non-stereotypical reporting**

Suggestion: Avoid affirming stereotypes and myths about sexual violence and CSA and try to actively dispel them instead. Quotation from guideline:

> Take the emphasis away from ‘stranger danger’. While incidents of child sexual assault by strangers tend to dominate the headlines, most victims are actually assaulted by an adult who they know and trust – and it’s important for you to underscore your reporting with that fact (Women’s Centre for Health Matters [WHM], 2014, p. 4).

**Quality criterion 6: Inclusion of prevention and intervention**

Suggestion: Present ways of CSA prevention and intervention by providing supportive resources (e.g., telephone hotlines) and counseling contacts. Quotation from guideline: “Provide information about local resources and where survivors can go for help” (Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence [MCADSV], 2004, p. 9).

**Quality criterion 7: Ethical treatment of survivors in interviews**

Suggestion: Treat CSA survivors respectfully and sensitively before, during, and after media interviews. Quotation from guideline:

> When a victim chooses to be interviewed, it is usually after a great deal of thought. Journalists should consider the difficulties in approaching a person who is likely to continue to suffer the lingering effects of trauma, anger and grief (Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence (MCADSV) (Ed.), 2004, p. 10).
Quality criterion 8: Lawful reporting

Suggestion: Be aware of and respect media laws concerning CSA reporting. Quotation from guideline: “Never name a survivor without that person’s explicit and informed consent. In many countries, it is now against the law to name a rape victim” (DART Centre for Journalism & Trauma, 2007, p. 8).

Data collection through content analysis and statistical analysis

Data collection through content analysis took place in February 2018. For statistical analysis, the coding results for the journalistic guidelines and scientific literature were merged into IBM SPSS 24 data sets. Descriptive analyses (percentage values) and inferential statistical analyses (Chi-square tests with an alpha level of .05 and Monte Carlo significance estimation based on \( n = 10,000 \) samples) were run.

Surveys of CSA survivors and CSA counseling centers

In order to integrate quality criteria from CSA survivors and CSA counseling centers, two surveys were conducted. A total of 142 CSA survivors in Germany were invited via a mailing list of the Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues of the German government, and \( N = 29 \) participated in the survey, resulting in a response rate of 20%. All current (as of early 2018) 360 CSA counseling centers in Germany were invited to participate in the survey, and \( N = 59 \) institutions returned the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 16% (see sample descriptions at https://osf.io/6kdmq/). Both surveys yielded respectable response rates for written surveys and indicate a high interest from these main stakeholders in the topic of media coverage of CSA.

Development of questionnaires

For both surveys, a questionnaire in the form of a digitally fillable PDF document was used. The questionnaires were developed based on previous research and in collaboration with CSA survivors. They were structured into three blocks containing a total of eight closed and three open-ended questions for CSA counseling centers and nine closed and 15 open-ended questions for CSA survivors. The surveys’ key issues were measuring the perceived reporting frequency, the perceived reporting quality, and suggestions for quality improvement of the current CSA media coverage (see both German language questionnaires at https://osf.io/6kdmq).

Data collection through surveying and statistical analysis

Data collection through surveying took place in February and March 2018. Both, CSA survivors and CSA counseling centers, were invited via e-mail and
sent their completed questionnaires back to the Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues of the German government who forwarded them to us. Therefore, full anonymity of CSA survivor participants was ensured.

The answers to the open questions were content analyzed. It transpired that the quality suggestions mentioned by the stakeholders fitted the same eight quality criteria that were used to analyze the expert documents. The intercoder reliability check with two independent coders revealed a high level of coding accuracy with satisfying results for percent agreement (ranging from 85.7% to 100.0%) and Cohen’s Kappa (ranging from .79 to 1.00) for all eight quality criteria.

For statistical analysis, the coding results of both surveys were merged into IBM SPSS 24 data sets. Handwritten and subsequently scanned questionnaires were typed manually into the data set. Descriptive analyses (percentage values) and inferential statistical analyses (Chi-Square tests with alpha level of .05 and Monte Carlo significance estimation based on n = 10,000 samples) were run.

Results

Content analysis of CSA-related journalistic guidelines and scientific publications

A total of N = 22 journalistic guidelines concerning CSA media coverage were found. Institutions based in Austria, Australia, India, Germany, the UK and the USA published these documents with the intention of supporting journalists. The scope of the guidelines ranges from two to 83 pages and varies significantly between compact listings of advice and text-heavy, in-depth explanations. Accordingly, the guidelines contain between 13 and 42 concrete improvement suggestions for media coverage (on average 21 per document). To answer RQ1, concerning QC postulated by journalistic guidelines, the guidelines analyzed primarily emphasize treating CSA survivors sensitively in interviews, and demand objective and non-sensational reporting as well as the use of appropriate terms. All identified QC are postulated by at least half of the analyzed journalistic guidelines (see Table 1).

A screening process of the scientific literature for concrete QC of CSA media coverage resulted in a sample of N = 7 publications. Consistent with the current state of research, the most common suggestions in the scientific publications (see Table 1) are a thematic instead of an episodic framing of CSA (Davies, O’Leary, & Read, 2016; Weatherred, 2015) and the presentation of CSA prevention and intervention measures (Dorfman, Mejia, Gonzalez, & Cheyne, 2012; Woody, 2002). Only one monograph covers the ethical treatment of CSA survivors during interviews (Wildwasser e.V. Berlin, 2007). In addition, a range of meta tips for journalists is also given in the papers and book chapters, such as reflecting on the gradually deteriorating working
conditions of journalists or even informing themselves more thoroughly by consulting journalistic guidelines on the topic (Kitzinger, 2004).

A significant difference was revealed between scientific literature and journalistic guidelines using a Chi-Square-Test with Monte Carlo significance level estimation based on $n = 10,000$ samples ($\chi^2[15, N = 232] = 48.5, p < .001, \text{Cramér's } V = .46$). Big differences concern the QC Non-Sensational Reporting, Use of Appropriate Terms, and Ethical Treatment of Survivors in Interviews. While these QC are dominantly suggested by over 90% of journalistic guidelines, they are only considered by a few documents of the scientific literature.

In conclusion, all eight quality criteria for CSA media coverage were found in both journalistic guidelines and the scientific literature (see Table 1). Overall, there is a considerable consensus in both types of expert documents regarding key quality criteria, although the prevalence of the individual QC varies substantially between the two document types. Journalistic guidelines generally appear to be more fruitful for practically applicable and concrete quality criteria for CSA media coverage.

**Results of surveys of CSA survivors and CSA counseling centers**

At the beginning of each survey, participants were asked to state their opinion on CSA media coverage. The majority of CSA survivors and CSA counseling centers agree that the quantity of CSA media coverage is too low (55% of survivors, 63% of counseling centers) and that its quality is predominantly assessed as either low (57% of survivors) or average (64% of counseling centers).

During the surveys, CSA survivors and CSA counseling centers were asked to provide their subjective quality criteria regarding CSA media coverage. Interestingly, all suggestions were reflected in the quality criteria we had derived from the document analysis (see Table 2). This answers RQ4 and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QC for media coverage of CSA</th>
<th>Scientific literature</th>
<th>Journalistic guidelines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thematic Framing</td>
<td>$n = 4$</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Sensational Reporting</td>
<td>$n = 2$</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Appropriate Terms</td>
<td>$n = 2$</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of Stakeholders</td>
<td>$n = 3$</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Stereotypical Reporting</td>
<td>$n = 3$</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of Prevention and Intervention</td>
<td>$n = 4$</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Treatment of Survivors in Interviews</td>
<td>$n = 1$</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawful Reporting</td>
<td>$n = 2$</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Number of documents from each sample providing the respective quality criteria for CSA media coverage.*
RQ5, which investigated the QC for CSA media coverage postulated by CSA survivors and counseling centers. As can be seen in Table 2, the most important QC stated by both stakeholder groups is a non-sensational, but rather objective and fact-based reporting.

Looking at the frequencies in Table 2, CSA survivors and CSA counseling centers do not appear to differ much in their perspectives. As with the comparison between scientific literature and journalistic guidelines, inferential statistics were applied to examine this assumption. No statistically significant difference between CSA survivors and CSA counseling centers was found using a Chi-Square-Test with Monte Carlo significance level estimation based on $n = 10,000$ samples ($\chi^2[15, N = 672] = 12.32, p = .663$, Cramér’s $V = .14$). This seems to confirm that two essential stakeholder groups ultimately speak with “one voice” about QC for CSA media coverage and assess their importance similarly. Lower percentages, however, do not mean that the respective quality criteria are not considered important by the respondents, but only that they were mentioned less frequently in response to the open question in the questionnaire.

To illustrate the experts’ views, two translated quotes from the surveys are presented. One survivor gave the following assessment of CSA media coverage that addresses four quality criteria (QC1: thematic framing; QC6: inclusion of prevention and intervention; QC4: inclusion of stakeholders; QC2: non-sensational reporting):

The frequency [of CSA] is insufficiently presented. The effects [of CSA] are inadequately described. The possibilities for help are insufficiently or too rarely presented. Interested persons from [CSA-related] self-help groups have no/not enough contact or contact possibilities to the media. The presentation of CSA, e.g. in films, is sensationalistic, i.e. by no means helpful for those affected.

One of the surveyed counseling centers provided the following evaluation of CSA media reporting that addresses four quality criteria (QC2: non-sensational reporting):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QC for media coverage of CSA</th>
<th>CSA survivors</th>
<th></th>
<th>CSA counseling centers</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thematic Framing</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Sensational Reporting</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Appropriate Terms</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of Stakeholders</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Stereotypical Reporting</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of Prevention and Intervention</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Treatment of Survivors in Interviews</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawful Reporting</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of survivors/centers from each sample providing the respective quality criteria for CSA media coverage.
The very widespread formation of myths about sexualized violence should be counteracted by objective media reporting. Correct use of technical terms is important (inappropriate and misleading terms are “family drama”, “sex maniac”, “monster”). Journalists should approach the issue sensitively and respect data protection and privacy.

**Issue-based framework building for CSA media coverage**

In the first step, we worked out inductively using content analyses what quality criteria for the CSA media coverage are postulated by journalistic guidelines (RQ1) and the scientific literature (RQ2) (see Table 1). Subsequently, we also worked out inductively using surveys what quality criteria CSA survivors (RQ3) and CSA counseling centers (RQ4) recommend for CSA media coverage (see Table 2). All four information sources name suggestions that can be compressed into eight key quality criteria.

In a third and final step, the inductive findings are deductively tested and further developed using the Public Interest Model (PIM), originating from the field of normative media theory, as a theoretical framework to answer RQ5. So-called normative media theories reflect upon the role of journalism in democratic societies (Christians, McQuail, Nordenstreng, White, & Glasser, 2009). According to the originator of this approach, communication researcher Denis McQuail, four different models of normative media theory must be distinguished (2010):

1. The liberal-pluralist or market model accentuates the freedom of the press, the individual’s needs and an orientation toward market success and profit.
2. The professional model assigns to the journalists themselves the definition of journalistic roles for society, meaning quality standards are self-defined.
3. The alternative media model proposes a participatory counterweight as opposition to industry and governmental power, e.g., through grassroots media organizations and quality criteria that emphasize critical reporting on the ruling class.
4. The public interest model asserts the media’s responsibility to service the public beyond its own self-interest; quality criteria hence include high reporting standards, a social purpose and accountability toward society.

To theoretically ground the framework of quality criteria for CSA media coverage, we chose the public interest model because CSA is a societal issue of
high public interest. Operating within PIM, one can draw upon the seven
generic journalistic quality dimensions that are used in many different models
(Jungnickel, 2011): (1) Relevance, (2) Communication, (3) Diversity, (4)
Appropriateness, (5) Legitimacy, (6) Impartiality, (7) Transparency. In Table
3, each dimension is introduced and explained.

The framework of these seven core journalistic quality dimensions is based
on the current state of research and the predominant consensus within the
scientific community concerning the research field of normative media
quality. By connecting this framework (Jungnickel, 2011) to the public
interest model suggested by McQuail (1992, 2010), the overarching journal-
istic responsibility to promote public discourse about CSA attains a structure
and becomes operationalizable.

Table 3. Framework of normative quality dimensions and associated sub-dimensions for media
reporting (Jungnickel, 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality dimension</th>
<th>Sub-dimensions</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Relevance      | External Relevance:  
- Temporal (topicality)  
- Societal (number of affected people, effects for society)  
- Collective (news factors)  
- Individual (individual relevance)  
- Internal Relevance:  
Analytic Quality | Journalists focus on topics relevant for society (external relevance) while analyzing their causes, circumstances, and consequences (internal relevance) in their media coverage. |
| 2. Communication  | Comprehensibility  
Style | Journalists use unambiguous, easily comprehensible language and an appropriate style of writing in their media coverage. |
| 3. Diversity      | Diversity of Actors  
Diversity of Opinions  
Diversity of Topics | Journalists embed various actors, opinions and (sub-)topics in their media coverage to present different perspectives and a multifaceted picture. |
| 4. Appropriateness| Correctness  
Accuracy  
Completeness | Journalists give a factually correct, accurate, and complete picture of the reality in their media coverage. |
| 5. Legitimacy      | Compliance with Human Dignity  
Compliance with Personality Rights | Journalists are aware of ethical boundaries and respect the personality rights of all actors according to the law in their media coverage. |
| 6. Impartiality    | Independence  
Neutrality  
Balance | Journalists remain independent from advertisements and keep a neutral, non-judgmental attitude in their media coverage. |
| 7. Transparency    | Disclosure of Sources  
Reflection/Critique on Sources  
Circumstances of Statements | Journalists transparently state and reflect the sources used in the production process for their media coverage. |
To build our issue-based framework of quality criteria for media coverage of CSA, we combined an inductive with a deductive approach: The eight quality criteria that were found inductively through content analyses of CSA-related journalistic guidelines and scientific literature, as well as through surveys of CSA survivors and CSA counseling centers, were integrated in the framework of seven normative quality dimensions (see Table 4). It transpired that the inductively generated issue-based quality criteria can be assigned to the five generic quality dimensions Relevance, Communication, Diversity, Appropriateness, and Legitimacy, but the two dimensions Impartiality and Transparency are not addressed.

In order to present a complete framework for CSA media coverage, the missing quality criteria were therefore supplemented deductively based on related scientific literature from the fields of law, psychology and communication science.

**Inclusion of the generic quality dimension Impartiality**

Against the backdrop of historic silence and silencing around CSA, responsible journalists operating in the public interest should actively support survivors and give them voice. However, according to general quality standards, journalism should never equal partisanship or advocacy but must ensure impartiality. This means that journalists should not disseminate CSA rumors, suspicions or allegations without sufficient fact-checking. They should stay neutral until enough evidence is available. The QC of impartiality includes the problematic step of questioning and challenging CSA survivors’ claims. As CSA has too often been denied and neglected in both private communications and in the public sphere, it can be re-traumatizing for CSA survivors to find journalists not believing them or questioning their stories.

Responsible journalism, however, needs to inquire about all relevant sides and stakeholders of the story and must acknowledge the alleged perpetrators’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generic journalistic quality dimensions</th>
<th>Issue-specific quality criteria for CSA media coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Relevance</td>
<td>QC 1: Thematic Framing$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Communication</td>
<td>QC 2: Non-Sensational Reporting$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>QC 3: Use of Appropriate Terms$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Diversity</td>
<td>QC 4: Inclusion of Stakeholders$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Appropriateness</td>
<td>QC 5: Non-Stereotypical Reporting$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>QC 6: Inclusion of Prevention and Intervention$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Legitimacy</td>
<td>QC 7: Ethical Treatment of Survivors in Interviews$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>QC 8: Lawful Reporting$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Impartiality</td>
<td>QC 9: Balance of Survivors’ and Alleged Perpetrators’ Interests$^b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Transparency</td>
<td>QC 10: Disclosure and Reflection of Official Sources$^b$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$Quality criterion was derived inductively from document analyses and surveys.

$^b$Quality criterion was derived deductively from related literature.
perspectives and rights. Ignoring these rights might cause “witch-hunt” scenarios which have the potential to destroy a life, through dismissal by an employer, losing friends and family, and societal contempt (Chet, 2016). There are well-documented and tragic examples of well-meaning journalists creating considerable harm by neglecting impartiality, sympathizing with a self-declared survivor of sexual violence, ceasing to ask questions, becoming their advocates and not being scrutinized sufficiently by the media outlet’s fact-checking department. Famously, the magazine Rolling Stone retracted its 2014 article “A rape on Campus” that had reported about multiple sexual assaults of “Jackie” during a fraternity party on the campus of the University of Virginia. A scientific analysis of this case later revealed that both the journalist and the fact-checking department of Rolling Stone had failed to verify the self-declared victim’s story (Coronel, Coll, & Kravitz, 2015). Sensitivity to survivors of sexual violence is crucial for journalists but should not lead to neglect of the demands of verification. Accordingly, balanced reporting considering both the interests and rights of CSA survivors but also the rights of alleged perpetrators is necessary to produce high-quality journalism.

Quality criterion 9: Balance of survivors’ and alleged perpetrators’ interests.
Suggestion: Find a balance between unreasonable allegations toward potential perpetrators (“air of accusation”) and a general denial of abuse claims by CSA survivors (“air of denial and indifference”). Quotation from literature: “In short, although the witch-hunt narrative is built around the idea that an “air of accusation” has led to countless false accusations, this account overlooks powerful countervailing social forces that often create an air of denial and indifference” (Chet, 2016, p. 181–182).

Inclusion of the generic quality dimension Transparency
The main reason for transparency not being addressed as a QC of CSA media reporting by our four types of expert sources might be victim protection. Some media sources might wish to remain anonymous in order to protect their identity and security. The quality dimension transparency also contains the sub-dimension critique on sources and hence a reflective selection or rejection of sources when in doubt (Jungnickel, 2011). As with the impartiality criterion, the transparency criterion demands that journalists find the right balance. They should protect their sources, especially survivors, but they can and should reveal and critically scrutinize other sources they are using, e.g., official statements issued by public or governmental institutions such as the police or the judicial system. The so-called production transparency should therefore be considered by journalists to fulfill this quality dimension, because it is crucial for the credibility of presented information (Groenhart & Bardoel, 2012).
**Quality criterion 10: Disclosure and reflection of official sources.** Suggestion: Disclose and reflect upon official sources to make your work traceable, but at the same time protect CSA survivor identity. Quotation from literature: “The most prominent idea about production transparency is that it enhances credibility. Showing what has been done increases insight regarding the quality of the work and its confirmable elements” (Groenhart & Bardoel, 2012, p. 8).

In **Table 4**, we present the complete framework of 10 quality criteria for CSA media coverage based upon inductive data-driven and deductive theory-driven approaches. Concerning RQ5, the seven generic journalistic quality dimensions introduced by the PIM of normative media theory were partially fulfilled with the inductive approach but required an additional deductive approach to generate a complete framework. Overall, the PIM proved itself a useful tool to structure the framework of QC for CSA media coverage.

**Discussion**

Over the course of three steps, we have developed a framework with 10 issue-specific quality criteria for media coverage of CSA. As ensured by the inductive approach, these quality criteria are in line with expert documents and expert opinions. Inferential statistics revealed differences concerning how frequently QC are mentioned only between scientific publications and journalistic guidelines, but not between CSA survivors and counseling centers. In addition, the QC are also in line with generic quality models of the public interest model (PIM) of normative media theory as verified in the deductive approach of this study.

Eight inductively generated QC of CSA media coverage were obtained by the data-driven approaches. However, the generic quality dimensions impartiality and transparency were neither covered by the analysis of scientific literature and journalistic guidelines nor the surveys of the two most important stakeholder groups. Therefore, an analysis of related specialist literature was conducted to fill this gap. This led to two additional deductive QC.

**Limitations of study**

In this paper, we aimed to create a complete issue-specific framework for CSA media coverage focusing on traditional mass media. In online journalism and social media reporting, there are further problems to be tackled to ensure responsible media coverage of CSA: The coverage of CSA and rape in online news articles and in social media, such as YouTube videos or Twitter posts, is known to elicit very problematic reactions, namely hateful and sexist audience comments (Döring, 2018; Gardiner, 2018). The responsible handling of audience comments and other social media-related tasks to ensure high media quality were beyond the scope of this study. It was also beyond
the scope of this paper to differentiate between and address quality problems linked to specific media types (e.g., print, radio, TV) or to specific journalistic genres that might cover CSA in different ways and based on differing resources and journalistic qualifications (e.g., political journalism, sports journalism, celebrity journalism, investigative journalism).

The content analyzed samples of scientific publications and journalistic guidelines and the samples of surveyed CSA survivors and CSA counseling centers were limited in size and scope. Regarding the quality of CSA media coverage, further stakeholder groups exist that could not be investigated in the course if this study, e.g., stakeholder groups on the institutional level (schools and teachers), on the social level (children and parents), on the therapeutic level (physicians, therapists) and on the media level (journalists, broader audience).

Despite its limitations, the study draws strength from the fact that it addresses an important issue that has not previously been systematically investigated from both an inductive and deductive approach.

**Outlook on future research and practice**

Further research is required in order to augment the framework of quality criteria for CSA media coverage, for instance, by surveying further stakeholder groups, in particular, journalists themselves. Also, the QC should be specified for the various fields of journalism such as print, online, grassroots and citizen journalism (e.g., bloggers).

The developed normative framework now enables researchers to evaluate the quality of CSA media coverage and determine the actual prevalence of quality deficiencies within local or national media samples in a systematic way. A long-term monitoring of the coverage allows for the tracking of quality improvements or degradations over time.

Future practical implications concern the sensitization and professional development of journalists concerning the topic of CSA. To overcome quality deficiency, problems need to be tackled on different system levels of journalism:

1. On a personal level, journalists’ knowledge gaps regarding sexual violence, CSA and rape myths conflict with the quality criterion of fact-based reporting and lead to reinforcement of common prejudices within society, hindering effective prevention (Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010).
2. On a procedural level, severe time constraints create a journalistic “stopwatch culture” focused on maximizing reach and attention, e.g., when media outlets feel the pressure to be first in the fast-moving realm of social media and fail to verify information sufficiently before posting online (Reich & Godler, 2014).
(3) On an organizational level, newsroom supervisors and higher editors restrict the competences of journalists and therefore disagreements between journalists and superiors might cause quality deficiencies concerning storytelling, style, or content (Hanitzsch et al., 2010).

(4) On an economic level, profit orientation and limited financial resources create fierce market competition that might foster sensationalism and other questionable techniques in order to outperform competitors and gain the audience’s attention (Hanitzsch et al., 2010).

Quality reporting about CSA requires high self-defined standards and extensive background knowledge. These challenges should be addressed in professional training and workshops on responsible media coverage of CSA. Promising examples of excellent CSA-related news reporting, as cited in the introduction, already exist and should become more routine. It can be very rewarding for journalists to contribute professionally to the societal fight against child sexual abuse and promote prevention and awareness.

Acknowledgments

This study was made possible by the funding of the Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues of the German government during the project “Qualität der medialen Berichterstattung über sexuellen Kindesmissbrauch: Beurteilungskriterien für Forschung und Praxis” [“Quality of Media Coverage of Child Sexual Abuse: Evaluation Criteria for Research and Practice”], conducted 10/02/17 – 03/31/18 (Grant Number Z2/21.31.10/P/17). Furthermore, we would like to thank all CSA survivors and CSA counseling centers for their participation in the surveys.

Disclosure of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethical standards and informed consent

All procedures of the present study, in particular, the surveys of CSA survivors and CSA counseling centers, were conducted in accordance with the 2017 APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association [APA], 2017), the 2007 WHO ethical and safety recommendations for researching, documenting and monitoring sexual violence in emergencies and the 2015 Bonn Ethics Declaration for Research on Sexual Violence (https://www.bmbf.de/files/Ethikerklarung(1).pdf). Informed consent was obtained from all participants of the surveys. The analyzed documents are all publicly accessible and hence do not require further ethical considerations.
Funding

The study was supported by a grant from the Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues of the German government (Z2/21.31.10/P/17) to Nicola Döring, project leader.

Notes on contributors

Nicola Döring, Ph.D., is head of the research group Media Psychology and Media Design at the Institute of Media and Communication Science at Ilmenau University of Technology, Ilmenau, Thuringia, Germany.

Roberto Walter, M.A., is currently a research fellow and second year doctoral student at the research group Media Psychology and Media Design at the Institute of Media and Communication Science at Ilmenau University of Technology, Ilmenau, Thuringia, Germany.

References


