
Digital Media Coverage of Child Sexual Abuse: Perspectives of CSA Survivors, Psychologists, and Media Representatives

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Abstract

Responsible journalism plays a crucial role in raising the public awareness and understanding of child sexual abuse (CSA). When handled ethically, media coverage can help to shed light on this issue, dispel misconceptions, and empower people to protect children. However, negligent or unethical reporting can worsen the situation, reinforce harmful stereotypes, and hurt victims. Many studies have analysed how English-language media reports on child sexual abuse are often influenced by dominant narratives and myths. Although no systematic analysis of Russian media coverage has been conducted on this topic, the problematic nature of reporting has been acknowledged. Further research is needed to understand how CSA is portrayed in the Russian digital media and how it impacts survivors and those who support them.

Through 12 expert interviews with representatives from the digital media, psychologists, and survivors of CSA, we explore how digital media influences the experiences of survivors and affects professionals who work to combat CSA. All participants in the study have been involved in media coverage of CSA, whether by preparing and publishing content about CSA, giving interviews, sharing personal stories, providing psychological support to child survivors of CSA who have been the subject of media attention, or offering expert commentary.

Our research findings indicate that media coverage has significant implications for victims, as even limited information can breach their privacy and cause emotional distress. At a societal

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level, unethical media reporting can discourage victims from seeking help and influence adults' willingness to take preventive measures. The language, tone, and context of media reports influence public perceptions and contribute to myths surrounding CSA. Professionals working to combat CSA face many challenges, including the manipulation of media to discredit victims and professionals supporting them, and to exonerate accused perpetrators. The study participants emphasized the significant potential of digital media in increasing public awareness of CSA. This is important for preventing violence and for providing better access to support for victims. However, finding a balance between the conflicting roles of media professionals, psychologists, and activists who work to prevent CSA and protect the well-being of survivors remains challenging.

Keywords: *child sexual abuse, media, coverage, ethics, Russia*

Introduction

The media shapes public opinion on social issues in addition to acting as a channel for information that is socially relevant. The language of news commentary serves as a representation system that constructs awareness of social policies, challenges, and inequalities [Iarskaia-Smirnova *et al.* 2016]. While the media can highlight certain issues, it can also silence others, influencing public discourse and perceptions. Information offered by the media can be perceived by the audience as a prevailing opinion or a universally accepted rule that is hard to challenge [Noelle-Neumann 1991].

Historically, traditional media coverage of child sexual abuse (CSA) was often limited, sensationalized, and focused on high-profile cases [Döring, Walter 2024]. Digital media expanded the scope of CSA coverage. Digital media is characterized by close interaction with the audience through rapid feedback (comments), emotional reactions (likes and dislikes), and the ability to share materials within communities. This interaction is how public opinion is formed today, allowing audiences to express their dissatisfaction or approval. The speed and reach of digital platforms can lead to the spread of misinformation or sensationalism and breaches of privacy which can harm the survivors of CSA. It is not surprising that ethical coverage of CSA in the media has become prominent at a time when digital media has gained massive reach and influence.

CSA in media narratives

CSA is a major public health problem and a grave violation of children's rights. It is estimated that 18% of girls and 8% of boys globally suffer from CSA [Stoltenborgh *et al.* 2011]. CSA is a serious crime with a significant impact on individuals and society as a whole. However, it often garners media coverage primarily because of its sensational potential.

News value theory [Eilders 2016] suggests that specific characteristics of an event determine its newsworthiness, such as proximity, personalization, and negativity. Consequently, media coverage of CSA often exhibits certain characteristics, including

portraying offenders as strangers or upstanding members of the community, emphasizing additional violence or bizarre facts, involving multiple parties or celebrities, and highlighting cover-ups, especially in institutional settings like churches. The way CSA is presented (or framed) in the media can influence how people perceive it [Scheufele, Tewksbury 2007].

Content analysis has been widely undertaken on English-language CSA media coverage (e.g. [Cromer, Goldsmith 2010; Weatherred 2017]). The portrayal of CSA in the media is often influenced by overarching narratives and myths about CSA. Research suggests, that media outlets have the power to influence the spread and perpetuation of these myths, which can further complicate efforts to address CSA. This can also lead to the stigmatization of victims, lower disclosure rates, and reduced reporting to law enforcement. Studies have shown that there is a concerning lack of ethical consideration in the way CSA is depicted in the media. This can have serious consequences for victims, who may be further traumatized by the negative portrayal.

The media also play a crucial role in raising awareness about CSA and preventing such crimes. In particular, it can disseminate information about the prevalence, signs, and consequences of CSA, educate the public about resources available for victims and encourage the reporting to the authorities. Media coverage can help destigmatize discussions surrounding CSA, making it easier for survivors to come forward and seek support. Recently, digital media has become an important platform for survivors of sexual abuse. It provides a space for them to share their experiences and find support when traditional channels fail to offer validation [Alaggia, Wang 2020]. This is also valid for Russian media, where the analysis of comments on the Russian tabloid “Spletnik” has revealed a strong sense of solidarity among readers towards victims of abuse and support for the women’s movement fighting against sexual assault [Erofeeva 2018].

There has been a growing concern in recent years in response to the emergent problem of inaccurate media coverage of CSA, leading to the development of quality criteria for reporting on CSA [Döring, Walter 2020] and media guidelines addressing CSA [Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse 2023]. The terminology used to describe CSA has been identified as a significant concern by survivors and professionals globally and initiatives have been undertaken to promote the use of appropriate language [Greijer, Doek 2016].

Covering CSA in the Russian media

The number of reported CSA crimes in Russia has seen a rise in recent years, attributed to various factors, including increased public awareness and the adoption of child-friendly investigation methods [Rusakova, Odinkova 2020]. In particular, legislative changes have been implemented to provide psychological and legal support for children involved in CSA investigations. Assistance for children survivors of CSA is available through governmental organizations as well as non-profit organizations dedicated to combating violence against women and children. This has led to the greater involvement of professionals in identifying and reporting crimes and in providing assistance to children. A significant catalyst for raising awareness about CSA has been the emergence and growing utilisation of digital media by non-profit organisations and activists. This platform enabled them to educate followers, garner support for their initiatives, and conduct fundraising efforts.

Russia has a vast digital media audience. According to the latest Global Digital research, by 2021 the number of Internet users in Russia reached 124 million people, or 85% of the country's population¹. The key law regulating the media sector in Russia is the law "On Mass Media". The legislation prohibits the dissemination of information about minor victims of crimes, including their names, photos, addresses, and other identifying details in the media and IT networks [Vartanova 2024]. This restriction applies to both official media outlets and digital publications in general. The legality of publications is monitored by the state (Roskomnadzor, Investigative Committee, and the police) and by Internet users who may report dangerous and unlawful content to social media platforms or directly to Roskomnadzor or law enforcement agencies. Social networks are required to independently identify and block information prohibited in Russia².

There has been no systematic content analysis conducted on CSA media reporting in Russian. However, the problematic coverage has already garnered attention. For example, in 2020 a news article from Moskovsky Komsomolets, a major Russian media outlet, used the headline: "12-year-old Moscow schoolgirl seduces stepfather in defiance of strict mother." The article stated that a girl "decided to become her stepfather's lover as a way to repay him for his attention, care, and treats." This publication has attracted significant criticism from child protection advocates, leading to the editorial team changing the title [Not to Shift Blame onto the Victim 2020]. Most publications using similar tone and language, however, go unnoticed and can be found in the news.

Russian media rarely provide contextual information about sexual abuse as a systemic problem, focusing instead on individual cases. Information for parents or professionals on child protection measures and support for survivors of sexual abuse is almost universally absent in media coverage. The Code of Professional Ethics of Russian Journalists does not address ethical covering of child abuse or sexual violence [The Code of Professional Ethics 1994]. In response to the problem of unethical CSA media coverage some Russian non-profit organisations, fighting sexual abuse, have developed their own recommendations for journalists on how to cover this topic (e.g. [Recommendations for Preparing Media Materials 2024; Odinokova et al. 2022]). While most research on CSA media coverage has been conducted through content analysis of texts, there has been a lack of exploration into the views and experiences of those directly impacted by this media coverage. This includes not only members of the general public, but also survivors of CSA and professionals who work to combat CSA, such as psychologists and children's rights activists. Understanding these individuals' perceptions regarding CSA reporting and its impact on them is essential for identifying additional dimensions of the media coverage of CSA.

Research Methodology and Methods

This paper investigates the impact of media representations of CSA on media professionals, psychologists specialising in child sexual abuse victims, and adult survivors of CSA.

¹ Tishina Yu. (2021) "The Owner of the fence Is Responsible for What Is Written on It" The Head of Roskomnadzor Andrey Lipov on the Methods of Forcing Foreign IT Companies to Cooperate. *The Kommersant*, May 25, 2021. Available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4826455>, accessed 19.04.2024 (in Russian).

² Tishina Yu. (2021) "The Owner of the fence Is Responsible for What Is Written on It" The Head of Roskomnadzor Andrey Lipov on the Methods of Forcing Foreign IT Companies to Cooperate. *The Kommersant*, May 25, 2021. Available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4826455>, accessed 19.04.2024 (in Russian).

Specifically, it explores how these groups perceive the media coverage of CSA and their experiences with media participation.

To address this we conducted a series of 12 expert interviews. The interviewees were two digital media representatives: one journalist from a prominent official media outlet specializing in crime coverage, and one blogger with over 100k followers, specializing in social issues like HIV and violence; eight psychologists specializing in offering psychological support to victims of CSA representing child protection professionals: four were affiliated with non-governmental organizations, and four with governmental institutions, three of them had personal experience of CSA; survivors of CSA/activists were represented by two adults working in various fields but dedicating significant amounts of time to advocating for and protecting children from CSA. All participants in the study were recruited through the social networks of the first author, who is an active member of the professional community of psychologists and other professionals working against CSA. The selection criterion was that all of them were involved in the digital media coverage of CSA.

The interviewees involved in the study were all females, aged between 22 and 45, working in different regions of Russia, including Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Sverdlovskaya Region. Interviews were conducted from October to November 2021 and from August to September 2023. Although data collection was interrupted, during this interruption there were no notable legislative or practical changes that would have impacted the media coverage of CSA or the perspectives of the interviewees. Interviews were conducted online and ranged in duration from 60 to 90 minutes. Before the study began, all participants provided voluntary verbal informed consent to be interviewed. The data were processed by means of deductive and inductive content analysis [Bernard, Ryan 2010] using the software Atlas.TI.

Research findings

All participants in the study had some involvement with media coverage of CSA, which can be categorized into several main roles: preparing and publishing media content on CSA as journalists, giving interviews or sharing personal stories about CSA, providing professional psychological support to child victims and their families whose cases were reported in the media, offering expert commentary on CSA at the request of the media, or appearing in the media as a psychologist supporting victims during investigations. These experiences defined the three major themes of the interviews: the legal and psychological impact of digital media coverage on survivors of CSA, the societal implications of CSA digital media coverage, and the effects of CSA digital media coverage on the work of professionals engaged in addressing CSA.

The psychological impact of media coverage on CSA survivors

When discussing the media coverage of CSA cases, our respondents first of all referred to the quality of CSA coverage in news commentary about crime reports, court

hearings, or verdicts. This information is typically presented in a brief format, providing details about the age and gender of the child victim, and the key circumstances of the crime. Sometimes, this material is accompanied by comments from law enforcement representatives. As reported by the journalist interviewee, newsrooms in major media outlets typically have established protocols for handling sensitive material like CSA.

Normally, such stories in our team are covered by a very few people who understand the redlines [...]. They should have enough empathy to avoid a tabloid style. [...] The material then is examined by the editor; and if there are doubts or concern, we involve our legal counsel (R1, Journalist).

The identity of children affected by crime in Russia is legally protected, and in particular, it is prohibited to publish any identifying information about them. However, even prominent media outlets occasionally reveal details that could potentially identify the child. Such disclosures can have a traumatic impact on the child and their family, exacerbating the trauma and impeding the rehabilitation process.

You probably know such brief news bulletins: there was no personal information about the child, but there was the place of residence, the address. Not the flat, but the building [number]. And the mother's profession was also there. Of course, the mother [of a child victim] was anxious she could be identified (R3, psychologist).

Even without disclosing personal data, media coverage of a CSA crime can still traumatise survivors, reawakening feelings of fear, shame, and vulnerability:

[My child client told me] "I feel as if everybody is looking at me, everybody has read the story". The person inside the situation believes people must have been discussing them (R7, psychologist).

In large media outlets, news about child abuse competes for attention with other events and may get lost, while in local media, abuse becomes a significant local event, attracting increased attention and discussion. In another instance recounted by a psychologist interviewee, personal details of a child survivor were leaked to a local media outlet in a town and became the subject of speculation for months:

The mother [of the child victim] was very stressed, she was constantly calling me and crying. [...] They moved to another city because of all the pressure (R10, psychologist).

Tabloid press and social media platforms do not seem to adhere to any policies when reporting on CSA. They tend to prioritize sensationalism, emphasizing explicit

details, and disclosing personal information about victims. Information leaks to the media result in additional work for professionals, who must then write complaints requesting the editing or removal of such information.

A family we are supporting made a statement to the police [about the CSA crime]. The media got hold of this information, and it was published by multiple news sites. And now [name of the lawyer the organisation] and the mother are writing requests to the editorial boards and the prosecutor's office, asking for the removal of the information. (R7, psychologist).

Interviewees stated that the impact of the leakage of personal information and explicit details about the crime extends beyond individual consequences. Detailed reporting and unrestricted commenting on CSA in the media discourage reporting of CSA to the authorities by making children fearful of breaches of confidentiality, victim-blaming, and cyberbullying.

One of the recurring themes regarding the impact of the media on survivors was interviewing of survivors of CSA. This refers to a completely different type of material, which may be issued as a text or video interview sharing a personal story. Preparing and conducting these interviews requires careful consideration of the ethical implications of involving individuals who have been through traumatic experiences.

Normally, [survivors of CSA] start speaking after a long time, after they have been through it. I believe it is good practice, it shows that these things do happen in life. And then the person speaks out and receives support [...]. There are many children, unfortunately, who remain silent. When they are twenty years old, they understand that they were abused in their childhood, but as time has passed, nothing can be proven any longer. So I think these experiences need to be made clear (R7, psychologist).

The publication of a personal story typically garners many views and the reactions from the audience range from support to victim-blaming.

I remember when I wrote [my story], I felt nauseous. For me, it was like throwing out the whole thing, even though I had been working to overcome this abuse in my childhood with a psychologist and psychiatrist for eight years [...]. And I saw readers' comments like 'it is as if you described my life', or 'it is as if I myself have been through all that' (R2, blogger).

An important factor in considering whether to publish a personal story voluntarily is the legal age of the survivor. Being a minor can create additional risks that may outweigh the potential benefits of publication, according to those interviewed. Psychologists confirm that it is crucial to explicitly discuss the matter with the person, who wants to publicise the personal story of abuse, and prepare them for the potential implications so that they can make an informed decision.

There was a time when we would frequently be contacted by adult clients who wanted to share their story of CSA via social or traditional media. We can't disallow or encourage that, but in every case, we discussed the consequences that may follow [...]. Often, there is a lot of hope that they will change something. But it may not change anything (R6, psychologist).

The psychologists we interviewed emphasise that it is crucial to ensure that the person is fully capable of sharing their story voluntarily. Confidentiality and safety must be guaranteed, and if possible, it is advisable to avoid videos. The individual should have the opportunity to review the text before publication, to make corrections, or to withdraw their story. Given the potential for readers' comments, the survivor should be prepared to handle negative comments and requests for help from other victims.

The sense of control is key; the victim should have it; they should understand the consequences of the publication, as far as possible. What will happen if we make the story anonymous, what if we don't. We should warn [the survivor] that if the story is made public, and their name is there, some other victims may try to contact them and share their stories (R11, survivor).

The interviewees who were psychologists and survivors emphasised that it is equally important to portray the abuser, informing the audience that abuse always involves an abuser. This approach helps to contextualise the issue and bring attention to the responsibility of the perpetrator. It is also important to caution the survivor that publishing the name of the perpetrator could have legal consequences, both for the perpetrator (for example, law enforcement may initiate criminal proceedings based on media materials) and for the survivor (for instance, the perpetrator may accuse them of defamation).

Stories of CSA can be found in the media, not only through interviews with survivors, but also through comments sections and news reposts in social media.

I am always touched by how people start sharing their stories in comments to such publications [personal stories of CSA]. [...] Journalists prepare their materials, and now people add their stories, and all this brings to light the very scale of the problem. I shiver every time I see it (R9, psychologist).

Managing readers' comments on publications is another aspect mentioned by interviewees. Negative comments, often including victim-blaming and offensive language, can cause distress to survivors who may read them. Interviewees propose several strategies to manage readers' comments, including blocking them, close moderation to remove harmful content, and publishing warnings for readers.

In general, the interviewees acknowledge a positive trend towards more informative and thoughtful journalism concerning CSA in Russian digital media. They noted a shift from simplistic coverage to more in-depth storytelling. This evolution suggests an increase in the quantity and quality of publications addressing CSA.

The societal implications of CSA media coverage

One of the common themes that emerged from interviews with psychologists and victims of CSA was the myths surrounding CSA in the media. For professionals these myths and misconceptions present additional challenges. Clients may internalise negative stereotypes or feel further stigmatised by sensationalised reporting. This can significantly affect survivors' willingness to seek help, report their experiences to law enforcement agencies, or participate in therapeutic interventions.

Often these publications and accompanying comments reinforce the myth that a child's testimony is untruthful, a product of childish fantasies. With older children or their parents, there are allegations that they may fabricate abuse accusations for personal gain, such as seeking benefits. Parents, often mothers, are often blamed and accused of either negligence or exploiting the situation.

They start speculating that a child could have invented all that, although this is simply impossible at that age. A child is unable to convincingly testify about sexual abuse if they haven't experienced it (R10, psychologist).

The language used in reporting can influence public perceptions and attitudes towards CSA and survivors. All the interviewees noted a problem with the terminology used in reporting the incidents. The publication may employ various euphemisms to describe sexual violence, using expressions such as "had sex," "engaged in intimate relations," "decided to become a lover," or "decided to start adult relations." As reported by psychologists, such wording serves to justify the abuser and shift the responsibility to the victim, perpetuating the myth that consensual sexual activities between an adult and a child are possible and do not constitute abuse, or that such incidents are insignificant.

Even good journalists in high-quality media would now and then mention something [inadequate] about "paedophiles", "victims", "sex", or some "petting". Conceptually, the material can be okay, but on the level of the vocabulary and the details, one has to be more careful (R4, psychologist).

Unofficial digital media have no red lines when depicting instances of CSA.

Sometimes they come up with headlines, like "the first time" when writing about the rape of a young girl. And they seem not to even notice it (R11, survivor).

Most psychologists and survivors mention the term 'paedophile' as a widespread example of incorrect terminology used in official media that should be avoided. "They like calling it 'paedophilia', but this is an infrequent occurrence" (R5, psychologist).

Most sexual abusers do not fit the criteria for a diagnosis of paedophilia. The use of this term perpetuates the stereotype of the ‘dirty paedophile’, portraying abusers as violent psychopaths rather than individuals whom nobody would suspect of being capable of committing CSA.

Children may often be described using words that evoke an overwhelming sense of pity (e.g. “victim”), rather than genuine empathy or empowerment. Psychologists and survivors alike emphasize the importance of avoiding diminutive language in such contexts and recognising the strength and resilience of survivors.

When we write: ‘a life destroyed’, ‘violated’, ‘ruined’ — these are all emotionally charged words with negative connotations. [...] I don’t like it when people use endearing diminutive wording, this way they shift the accent immediately to feeling sorry for those people, as they are poor things, and all their lives are now completely and forever destroyed (R12, survivor).

One common technique used by journalists is to rephrase set phrases in order to create a more attention-grabbing headline (e.g. “Taught a lesson: a sports trainer is suspected of raping a school girl”). Psychologists emphasise that headlines with ironic undertones or wordplay are offensive to victims, violate ethical norms, and perpetuate myths.

These headlines only reinforce harmful myths. As journalists, with the power to influence and access to experts, why would you contribute to myths instead of debunking them? Whose side are you on? [...] Metaphors and flowery language can distort the truth (R8, psychologist).

Interviewers argue that major media outlets typically adhere to legal terminology. However, they may deviate from legal wording if the case is high-profile or emotionally impactful for the journalist themselves. As our interviewee journalist expressed it:

When the public reads about [something described as] ‘non-consensual sexual activities’ they may fail to fully grasp how dangerous and appalling that is for the child (R1, journalist).

The texts may also be supplemented with additional details to enhance the emotional impact, with the intention not to relish in the details but to amplify the effect of the story.

In contrast, psychologists raised concerns about the tendency to emphasise details that provoke fear, aggression, or anxiety among readers. This deliberate attempt to evoke emotions is seen as excessive and misplaced, offering little assistance in addressing the issue. Instead of having a constructive conversation about ways to protect children from abuse and help victims, such material incites aggression and fear in the comments, reinforces existing myths, and spreads them to a new audience.

Discussing [abuse stories] isn't like discussing dry topics such as economics or metalworking. It's inherently emotional for people. There's no need to intentionally provoke them. The real challenge lies in adopting a calm and rational approach, altering the tone and style of such publications. I understand that each newspaper has its own headline style, but it's worth considering: what purpose does it serve, and what do we gain from it? (R4, psychologist).

With regard to the visual framing of the material, the interviewees note the frequent use of clichés. This is due to the urge to find a direct way to the reader's emotions, as well as a lack of time in preparing the publication. In most cases, stock photos are used.

As a rule, the illustrations are added at the very last moment, after the text has been finalised and is ready for print. Usually it is a child, a knife above him or her, or a scary figure looming. [...] We are a daily media outlet, so things are often done on the go, and I think many media are run the same way (R1, journalist).

As reported by psychologists, the choice of such visuals further supports myths: the victim is a small child, always crying; abuse includes beating, and the abuser is a stranger, etc.

In some cases, journalists try to create a visual to illustrate a particular story, but they also do it in a stereotyped way, even when there is an opportunity to depict it differently.

[In our organisation], offices are just like other psychologists' offices. But they [journalists] want a picture with parents coming, children crying. [...] They would ask us every time, 'Can we get a child here so that they would play with toys? Not necessarily a child who experienced abuse, just anybody.' I always say, 'but that child would be put into the context [of the abuse]' (R4, psychologist).

As an alternative to clichéd pictures, psychologists suggest using abstract photographs or illustrations that can be associated with an emotion but not with an act of abuse.

The last issue regarding the societal impact of CSA reporting that psychologists and survivors discussed was the lack of context. Most media materials on CSA focus on specific incidents or legal proceedings, presenting them as isolated stories without addressing the broader issue of sexual abuse as a societal problem. This approach perpetuates the misconception that CSA is rare and isolated, when in fact it is a widespread issue. Psychologists stress the importance of providing context for cases of CSA within a broader framework. This includes sharing statistics, expert commentary, and avoiding sensationalized details in media coverage. It is also important to include information about relevant legal frameworks such as specific articles of the criminal code. Sharing resources for further information, such as contacts for authorities and NGOs, is crucial for raising awareness about CSA and empowering survivors to apply for help.

*The impact of media coverage
on the work of professionals engaged in combating CSA*

The effects of media coverage on professionals engaged in combating CSA can be multifaceted, ranging from positive opportunities for advocacy and awareness-raising to significant challenges and ethical dilemmas. One recurring issue highlighted in the interviews is the manipulation of the media to exonerate the alleged perpetrator and discredit the victim and their supporters. An example comes from a psychologist we interviewed, who became involved in a high-profile regional-level case as a witness. She faced intense personal pressure from supporters of the alleged perpetrator, who attempted to coerce her into altering her testimony. When the psychologist stood firm and refused to comply, the opposing party resorted to disseminating false information across social media platforms and regional news outlets to undermine her credibility. These actions inflicted severe emotional and professional consequence for her.

My clients started calling me, asking if I knew what people were saying about me, my reputation, what kind of psychologist I was, that I wanted to put a person in prison unlawfully (R10, psychologist).

When supporters of the alleged perpetrator collaborate with the media, myths about CSA are often used to support their case. The media portrayed the alleged perpetrator as a respectable person with many achievements, reinforcing the myth that only a certain type of person commits CSA. Consequently, the voices of child victims are often marginalised in such publications.

The accused likes using the media as an influence tool, they are more visible [than the victims and their parents]. Moreover, the victim cannot and doesn't want to make public the information, and the investigative authority has no right to comment. As a result, we have an information bias towards clearing the abuser (R9, psychologist).

The most problematic situations involving the media's influence on professionals assisting in such cases occur when the media aligns with the interests of the alleged perpetrator, especially if they are highly prominent or influential figures. One psychologist's narrative vividly depicted this scenario, detailing a media campaign aimed at discrediting a mother of a child victim of CSA.

They started writing these articles, several texts, one after another. They were repeating a fabricated story that the mother had some financial interest in those [child abuse accusations]. There were a lot of lies. They trashed my work and the work of the investigator (R8, psychologist).

Some international guidelines on the ethical reporting of abuse recommend keeping a balance when covering such cases, taking into consideration the rights of both the victims and suspects. However, the psychologists we interviewed spoke against it and requested media be more sensitive to the children who experienced CSA. The position of a child who has experienced CSA and the person who abused them should not be set against each other, because that creates a strong imbalance of power in the publication, similar to that during the abuse. Psychologists, as well as survivors, believe it is important to consistently remain on the side of the child, as false allegations are extremely rare. As one of the interviewed survivors put it:

I am in favour of always believing people when they say they experienced abuse in their childhood. Because there is no profit in it for a person who says that. There can be no hype there. If somebody thinks otherwise, they've obviously never been in that situation (R11, survivor).

Professionals may encounter ethical dilemmas when the media is used for the public disclosure of CSA stories. For example, the child's parents may try to use the media to publicise the story in order to attract the attention of the authorities. The perception of psychologists about the impact of such media materials are mixed. They agree that publication may help to prevent the suppression of a crime, but publication can lead to complex ethical and legal consequences, hence, public disclosure of CSA stories, even if the information is made public with the parents' consent, is not always desirable.

The story [an interview about the sexual abuse of her child] was told by the mother. She had the right to do so, but at the same time, I knew that for the child it was a very uncomfortable situation (R5, psychologist).

The positive impact of the media is evident, for example, when journalists and bloggers invite psychologists to provide expert commentary. Psychologists see this opportunity as a chance to educate public about CSA, dispel myths, and provide information about ways to help victims.

We [as an organisation supporting people who experienced CSA] at some point decided to always be open to requests for comments. It is very rare that we refuse to provide a comment to the media or a journalist. The status of the media outlet doesn't matter to us, be it trendy, popular, or sharing our values. I would be saying very much the same things [to any media] (R4, psychologist).

A problem may arise when journalists invite psychologists and psychiatrists who lack relevant expertise in CSA. As a result, the expert comments provided may

inadvertently perpetuate myths and misperceptions surrounding the topic. Challenges in communication may also arise from the editing process. Psychologists emphasise the importance of validating material before publication, a practice rarely followed by journalists.

Psychologists report that journalists are turning to them more and more. One common journalistic technique is talking about a problem through a personal story, but they do not fully recognise the ethical implications of this approach.

So they contacted us [non-governmental hotline helping victims of sexual violence], asking to find people who faced the problem. It is difficult to explain to them that it would be impossible from an ethical point of view for a psychologist or a helping organisation to provide them with contacts of such people. They would ask, 'Why wouldn't you? We are doing it for you!' (R4, psychologist).

Sometimes, after careful work on the material with the participation of a psychologist who specialises in CSA, a final product which satisfies the journalist and the psychologist may be rejected by the editor. There can be a wide range of reasons for the rejection – the material can be called anything from ‘too trashy’ to ‘too soft’.

Another frequently recurring issue in interviews with all respondents is the use of the media for public advocacy. Journalists doing their professional work can contribute to the protection of children from CSA, namely by raising public awareness of the problem, prevention, and available help. All interviewees believe it is possible to help protect children if journalists revisit their approach to reporting on such cases, shifting from sensational coverage, to awareness-raising. Specialists working with victims, and journalists, however, differ in their understanding of the design of media materials. For psychologists and survivors, it primarily means providing information about CSA as a societal problem and prevention opportunities.

If the text reports a problem along with at least some ways out, for example, if it contains contacts of [helping] organisations, guides for parents [on how to protect children], advice for people, or a helpline. It important not to simply say 'look what has happened', but to explain what can be done about it, whom the victims can address, and how to live on with that (R11, survivor).

On the other hand, media professionals believe that all means are justified when it comes to drawing attention to CSA. They see their social mission as an obligation to warn about the danger, but they may perceive the danger through the myths they embody, such as that perpetrators of abuse are dangerous strangers.

We warn people that there is a person who tries to engage with children at a playground, at a road crossing (we had such a case once). And the parents who have read it can make some effort to protect their child from meeting that person (R1, journalist).

Media platforms can help spread information about support services provided by organizations, potentially reaching individuals in need of assistance.

They learn about us [an organisation supporting people who have experienced sexual abuse] from some bloggers. Those people can often be inaccurate in what they are saying and say something wrong, but they get a lot of feedback as many people watch them. We had a real inflow of requests. That helped us, but not in terms of fundraising, but rather in terms of finding new clients who got to know [about the opportunity to contact us for help] (R3, psychologist).

Discussion

This research is the first to explore how media coverage of CSA in Russia is perceived by media representatives, psychologists who work with victims of child sexual abuse, and adult survivors of CSA. It also explores their experiences with media participation.

The research confirms that media professionals consider the topic of CSA to have sensational potential. Each media outlet individually decides whether to exploit this potential. Through the use of inaccurate terminology, euphemisms, misleading visual representations of abuse, and lack of context, the media reinforces myths about CSA and re-traumatizes survivors. Interviewees say that survivors and their families continue to experience fear of public disclosure, increasing stress and trauma, and setbacks in their recovery. In contrast, the voluntarily sharing of CSA stories, which allows survivors to consent to and control what details are disclosed, may empower them by giving the narrative back to them and using it for purposes such as raising awareness or seeking support. It is important to follow ethical standards to ensure legal consent and an understanding of the potential consequences of sharing information.

Professionals involved in combating CSA face manipulation of the media by the alleged perpetrators, personal attacks, and attempts to undermine their credibility. They also experience biased coverage that favors the alleged perpetrator and marginalizes survivors. Despite these challenges, our interviewees noted a positive trend towards more informative and thoughtful journalism on CSA in digital media in Russia. Media platforms provides an opportunity for professionals to advocate and raise awareness. Media coverage can help spread information about support services and potentially reach people in need.

This research aligns with findings from studies conducted in other countries. Specifically, survivors and specialists' perceptions align with the findings of textual media analyses. Media content analyses demonstrated that a significant amount of reporting on CSA lacks journalistic quality, sensationalises the topic, does not give a voice to survivors and experts, identifies victims, or omits relevant information on prevention and intervention [Cromer, Goldsmith 2010; Doring, Walter 2024; Jones et al. 2010; Weatherred 2017; Wolak et al. 2008]. This is confirmed by research conducted by Stelzmann and Ischebeck among German journalists, who perceive that sensational cases of CSA tend to attract significant reader attention, while the broader context and background information on CSA receive less emphasis [Stelzmann, Ischebeck 2022]. Research among survivors of abuse presents a nuanced perception of the media, ranging

from appreciation for awareness-raising to criticism for privacy invasion [Baugut, Neumann 2020] and highlights the potential to increase social awareness and facilitate access to support services for survivors [Nagel, Kavemann 2022].

One of the most cited works in the field by Döring and Walter presents a framework of quality criteria for media reporting on CSA, drawing from various expert sources, including survey data from survivors and experts [Döring, Walter 2020]. These criteria encompass thematic framing, non-sensational reporting, the use of appropriate terms, the inclusion of stakeholders, non-stereotypical reporting, the inclusion of prevention and intervention information, the ethical treatment of survivors in interviews, lawful reporting, a balance of survivors' and alleged perpetrators' interests, and the disclosure and response of official sources. Consistent with this research, almost all quality criteria were relevant to our interviewees, underscoring their importance in media reporting on CSA in Russia. However, it is notable that while Döring and Walter emphasize the criterion of balancing survivors' and alleged perpetrators' interests, participants in our research strongly disagreed, highlighting the risk of marginalizing and silencing survivors [Döring, Walter 2020]. This difference could indicate differing societal attitudes towards prioritizing the rights and well-being of survivors, especially in the Russian context, where CSA survivors often encounter stigma and disbelief. In contrast, in Germany, advocacy and awareness-raising efforts have a longer history and a more significant impact. Participants in our research may therefore feel a stronger imperative to address the marginalization and silencing of survivors in media reporting. Additionally, it is possible that participants in our research have witnessed or experienced first-hand the negative consequences of CSA media coverage where power dynamics were skewed in favour of perpetrators. This could lead participants to emphasise the importance of centring survivors' voices and experiences in media reporting to counteract these harmful dynamics.

Our research also highlights a difference in the perspectives of media professionals from psychologists and survivors. Media professionals typically aim to attract attention to the issue and provoke discussion. However, in pursuit of these objectives, they may sometimes prioritize sensationalism or overlook the potential harm to survivors. Psychologists and survivors tend to prioritize caution and risk assessment when discussing or sharing information about CSA. They are concerned about protecting the well-being and privacy of survivors, minimising the risk of retraumatization, and ensuring that information about prevention is disseminated. The differing perspectives between these two groups can lead to complementary and conflicting approaches to addressing CSA in the media. Recognising and understanding these divergent perspectives is essential for fostering collaboration and ensuring that media coverage of CSA is impactful and ethically sound.

Overall, our study confirms the ambivalent impact of digital media on survivors and professionals involved in addressing CSA. Following Stelzmann and Ischebeck we can characterise media coverage of CSA as a “double-edged sword, torn between educating society and perpetuating existing stigmas” [Stelzmann, Ischebeck 2022].

Conclusion

Our research acknowledges the benefits and risks associated with media coverage of CSA, ranging from increased awareness and public education to the potential

for the re-traumatisation of victims and the stigmatisation of those affected. For journalistic practices to improve, journalists should report on CSA less sensationally, focus on finding solutions, contextualize abuse cases, and better protect victims' privacy. Introducing ethical guidelines and collaborating with survivors and professionals can lead to quality, ethical, and impactful reporting on CSA. These recommendations are in line with those put forward by researchers, suggesting that the issue of media coverage is a significant concern, despite differences in media regulation and control between countries [Döring, Walter 2024].

Tasks that remain unaddressed in our current study, but requiring further investigation, include analysing how CSA is portrayed in Russian digital media. This can be done through content analysis to understand themes, narratives, and representations of CSA in the media. It is also important to explore the media literacy of parents, child protection professionals, and their ability to recognize low-quality coverage of CSA and myths in the media. This information could potentially help us learn more about the impact of media on the protection measures taken by parents and on the professional response to CSA.

There are some limitations of the study. The sample size is relatively small and biased towards the personal and professional networks of the authors, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, while significant legislative or practical changes did not occur during the interruption in data collection, there may still be external factors influencing the perceptions of interviewees that were not accounted for in the study. Nevertheless, the authors hope that the results of this qualitative analysis will serve as a foundation for further research aimed at promoting evidence-based and ethical reporting on CSA in Russia and globally.

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Освещение сексуального насилия над детьми в цифровых медиа с точки зрения людей, переживших насилие, журналистов и психологов

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Аннотация

Ответственная журналистика играет ключевую роль в формировании общественного понимания проблемы сексуального насилия над детьми (СНД). При этичном подходе к освещению СНД в медиа можно пролить свет на проблему, опровергнуть мифы и уведомить читателей о мерах предотвращения насилия; и напротив, небрежное или неэтичное освещение может усугубить ситуацию, мифологизировать проблему и причинить вред людям, пережившим насилие. В настоящее время опубликовано достаточно большое количество исследований и обзоров о том, как СНД представлено в медиа. В то же время мы можем отметить дефицит исследований, сосредоточенных на взглядах и опыте прямых участников медийного освещения.

Цель данного исследования заключается в выявлении влияния освещения СНД на работников СМИ, психологов, специализирующихся на помощи детям, которые пережили сексуальное насилие, а также на поддержке взрослых, переживших сексуальное насилие в детстве. Для достижения этой цели мы провели серию из двенадцати экспертных интервью. Среди интервьюируемых – два представителя цифровых медиа, восемь психо-

Сбор данных частично проводился в рамках проекта «Преступления сексуального насилия над детьми (СНД) в медийном освещении: обеспечение экспертизы для устойчивой медиа-поддержки жертв», поддержанного Советом стран Балтийского моря (CBSS PSF) в 2021–2022 гг. Дополнительный сбор данных был осуществлен вне проекта по личной инициативе авторов. Авторы выражают благодарность Татьяне Зименковой, Еве Марии Хинтерхубер и Симоне Элмаа за их вклад в исследование.

Статья поступила в редакцию в мае 2024 г.

логов и двое активистов, переживших СНД. Все участники исследования имели опыт, связанный с освещением сексуального насилия над детьми в медиа. В частности, представители СМИ публиковали статьи и интервью об СНД, люди, пережившие насилие, давали интервью о своем травматическом опыте, психологи обеспечивали экспертные комментарии для медиа либо профессионально сопровождали случаи СНД, которые получили значительное освещение в медиа. Интервью проводились в два этапа – с октября по ноябрь 2021 года и с августа по сентябрь 2023 года в онлайн-формате – и продолжались от 60 до 90 минут. Перед началом исследования все участники дали устное добровольное информированное согласие на участие в интервью. Данные обрабатывались с помощью дедуктивного и индуктивного качественного анализа.

В статье констатируется, что цифровые медиа часто нарушают этические нормы с серьезными последствиями для пострадавших. Несмотря на законодательство, защищающее персональные данные, публикации часто дают возможность идентифицировать переживших насилие, вызывая серьезные эмоциональные последствия. По мнению опрошенных, пережившие СНД и их семьи могут постоянно испытывать страх перед освещением преступления в медиа, что приводит к усилению стресса и симптомов психической травмы, препятствует процессу реабилитации.

Участники исследования считают, что освещение СНД в средствах массовой информации играет важную роль в формировании общественного мнения по этой проблеме. Публикации часто создают мифы о СНД из-за использования некорректной терминологии, эвфемизмов и отсутствия контекста. Интервью с пережившими СНД, напротив, помогают преодолеть мифы, поддержать переживших насилие и повысить осведомленность общества об этом преступлении. Участники подчеркивают важность соблюдения этических требований, связанных с интервьюированием переживших СНД. Важно убедиться, что они достигли совершеннолетия и что приняты меры по защите их конфиденциальности. Также необходимо уважать их добровольное решение поделиться своей историей и обсудить возможные последствия этого решения, такие как стигматизирующие комментарии и обращения других людей, также переживших насилие. Психологи, сопровождающие переживших СНД в ходе расследования, также сталкиваются с серьезными последствиями освещения преступлений в медиа, такими как манипуляции с целью оправдания подозреваемого и предвзятое освещение, которое благоприятствует подозреваемому и маргинализует опыт пострадавших.

Несмотря на сложности, собеседники отмечают положительную тенденцию к появлению более информативной и продуманной журналистики, освещающей проблему СНД в цифровых медиа в России, что отражается как на количестве, так и на качестве публикаций.

Одним из важных выводов исследования является констатация различия во взглядах между представителями медиа, с одной стороны, и психологами, а также людьми, пережившими СНД, с другой: их различающиеся цели и мотивации могут как дополнять, так и противоречить друг другу. В то время как первые стремятся привлечь внимание к проблеме СНД любыми средствами, вторые склонны уделять большее внимание оценке рисков и последствий медиопубликаций для людей, переживших СНД, в частности и общества в целом.

Обсуждая результаты исследования, авторы статьи отмечают, что взгляды участников на проблему освещения СНД в СМИ во многом совпадают с критериями качества медийных публикаций о СНД, предложенными Н. Доринг и Р. Уолтером [Döring, Walter 2020]. Однако следует отметить, что в то время как Н. Доринг и Р. Уолтер подчеркивают важность сбалансированного учета точек зрения жертвы преступления и подозреваемого, участники нашего исследования категорически не согласны с этим критерием, отмечая риск усиления маргинализации жертв и призывая к отказу от противопоставления голосов пострадавшего ребенка и подозреваемого в насилии.

В заключении авторы статьи предлагают несколько рекомендаций для медиапрофессионалов. Журналистам следует стремиться к менее сенсационному освещению и более эффективной защите конфиденциальности жертв. Использование корректной терминологии и тона поможет избежать создания мифов при освещении СНД. Помещение случаев СНД в контекст с использованием статистики, законодательства и экспертных комментариев, а также привлечение внимания к вопросам профилактики способствуют более позитивному подходу к решению этой проблемы. Введение этических принципов относительно освещения СНД необходимо для предотвращения неэтичной и предвзятой публикации и защиты прав участников публикаций. Подготовка публикаций в сотрудничестве с людьми, пережившими СНД, и профессионалами может способствовать созданию качественных, этических и значимых медиаматериалов.

Ключевые слова: *сексуальное насилие над детьми, медиа, освещение, этика, Россия*

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