



Journalist Fellowship Paper

How to report on sexual violence without scarring survivors or scaring readers

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Contents

Introduction	3
Why is sexual violence newsworthy?	6
It's all in the details	10
The new eventually becomes old and boring	12
A false reality	14

Introduction

In October 2019, Denmark's second most-read¹ daily newspaper, *Politiken*, announced it would no longer use the Danish term for “sex offender” (*sexdømt*) when reporting on people convicted of rape or other sexual assaults.

The decision was made after several complaints from the NGO Everyday Sexism Project, which argued that it was a factual misuse of the word “sex” and an insult to survivors of assault.

The message was: you are not convicted of having sex with someone – you are convicted of raping someone.

It wasn't the first time Everyday Sexism Project or similar organisations had complained about the language chosen by the media to report sexual crimes. But it was the first time a publication openly agreed to change their policies.

Editor-in-chief Anne Mette Svane said of *Politiken*'s decision²: “Words are absolutely vital when it comes to describing how extreme an assault such as rape is. Rape has nothing to do with sex [...] we have to be as precise as possible.”

Other news organisations in Denmark were not quick to follow *Politiken*'s editorial decision. The newspaper I work for – *Ekstra Bladet* – is a tabloid that, in its nature, must play with words to convey the news in a short, precise and enticing way. *Ekstra Bladet* labelled criticism from the Everyday Sexism Project (and *Politiken*'s response) as “nonsense”³.

“There is a never-ending number of opinions on how we should cover these cases and the exact words we should use,” said the editor-in-chief of *Ekstra Bladet* Poul Madsen when approached for comment by *Journalisten*, a publication run by the

¹ Data source: [Statista](#), Danish audience figures for H1 2019

² Cecilie Uhre, [Politiken dropper ordet 'sexdømt' om voldtægt – risikerer at krænke ofre igen](#), *Journalisten*, 11 October, 2019.

³ Ole Obitsø, [Ekstra Bladet får skarp kritik for at bruge 'sexdømt' om voldtægtsdømt](#), *Journalisten*, 9 October, 2019.

Danish Union of Journalists (Dansk Journalistforbund). “For me, the most important thing is that our readers understand exactly what the story is about. And by writing ‘sex offender’ I think we tell them exactly that.”

How we report sexual crimes in the media has been a topic of discussion for many years. In my newsroom, the discussion begins again every time we come across a new story of sexual abuse or assault.

Ever since the #MeToo movement swept the globe in 2017, it’s become evident that survivors of sexual violence and suppression have yearned to take back control of the way these cases are reported in the news.

In a speech at St. Cross College in Oxford about the #MeToo movement in late 2019, Douglas Wigdor, a US lawyer who represented six victims of alleged sexual abuse by Harvey Weinstein, said:

“Where it used to be that sexual victims should be protected and not come forward in the media, we now see that they more often are part of the story. I have clients who want to come forward and tell their own story – or even write a book.”

Although the movement started as an attempt to show the magnitude of sexual violence experienced by women daily around the world, it has left in its wake a mark on the way we communicate sexual violence. And it has become evident that the way the news media handles and listens to some of its most vulnerable sources should be improved.

But while the #MeToo movement was world-changing, it didn’t give voice to every demographic of sexual violence – particularly not to children.

And reporting on child sex abuse can be even more difficult for journalists. For starters, these stories are so horrible it can result in direct news avoidance from readers.

Secondly, there are risks in identifying and rescaring the survivor of the abuse by describing the perpetrator. This, because most molestation or trafficking can be traced back to family or friends of the victim.

As a journalist, you usually want to be as true as possible to the details and facts of a story, but when reporting on a societal problem like sexual assault and trafficking of children, you often have to leave out more facts than you put in the story.

There is no firm journalistic consensus regarding the correct way for sex crimes to be reported, or the proper way of handling its survivors. Instead, in the words of the author of *Sex Crime and the Media*⁴, Chris Greer: “competing values, interests and beliefs continually jostle for superiority.”

This means journalists stand in front of a series of dilemmas and decisions when handling these cases: How do we report on sexual violence without scarring survivors and scaring off readers?

⁴ Chris Greer, *Sex Crime and the Media* by Chris Greer, Routledge, Oxford, 2011, p10.

Why is sexual violence newsworthy?

Why do we continue to report stories of sexual assault and child molestation when the risk of retraumatizing those abused is so high?

In an international survey by the World Health Organization (WHO), the number of women who reported experiencing forced sex by an intimate partner or former intimate partner was between 6% (Japan, Serbia) and 59% (Ethiopia) in a 2005 survey⁵, with most sites falling between 10% and 50%.⁶

The trafficking of women and children for prostitution is the largest subset of human trafficking according to the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018⁷, and becoming one of the fastest growing areas of international criminal activity⁸.

While the U.S. has recorded an 8% decline in victims of serious violent crime *not reporting* their assault, sex assault still remains one of the most under-reported crimes (65% not reporting), according to the U.S. Department of Justice⁹.

And child sex abuse, which had previously been trending downwards according to the Crimes Against Children Research Centre, has shown a marked increase for the first time in over 15 years – up 6% from 2017¹⁰.

⁵ Survey conducted at 15 sites in 10 countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, Japan, Peru, Namibia, Samoa, Serbia and Montenegro, Thailand and the United Republic of Tanzania

⁶ Claudia García-Moreno and others, 'WHO Multi-Country Study On Women's Health And Domestic Violence Against Women' (World Health Organization 2005)

<<https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/violence/9241593512/en/>> accessed 30 July 2020.

⁷ 'Global Report On Trafficking In Persons 2018' (Unodc.org, 2018)

<https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTiP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf> accessed 30 July 2020.

⁸ Hodge, D. R., & Lietz, C. A. (2007). *The International Sexual Trafficking of Women and Children: A Review of the Literature*. *Affilia*, 22(2), 163–174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109907299055>

⁹ Lynn Langton, 'Victimizations Not Reported To The Police, 2006-2010' (Bjs.gov, 2012)

<<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/vnrp0610.pdf>> accessed 31 July 2020.

¹⁰ David Finkelhor, Kei Saito and Lisa Jones, 'Updated Trends In Child Maltreatment' (Unh.edu, 2020)

<http://unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV203%20-%20Updated%20trends%202018_ks_df.pdf> accessed 31 July 2020.

The economic toll of this abuse – the healthcare costs, productivity lost, welfare costs – is in the millions, with the average total lifetime cost per female victim of non-fatal child sexual abuse estimated to be \$282,734.¹¹

Sexual violence is an issue that we should all share an interest in reducing.

Elitism, scale, and personalisation

From a journalistic point of view, the news value of sex-crimes stories has always been relatively high – with some exceptions.

A study of crime reporting over a period of six months in four British newspapers showed the media devoted 65% of their crime coverage to violent crimes such as sexual assaults¹².

But there is a catch: if there is nothing unusual about the sexual assault, it probably won't make it into the news. Study author Bronwyn Naylor says she found that in order for a sexual assault to be considered newsworthy, it had to be paired with the involvement of elite persons or nations, or the negative consequences had to be clear and of scale, or had to be personalised to the audience.

The newsworthiness of the story, she says, depends on how many of these criteria the story can tick.

Spatial and cultural proximity

Personalisation of a story on sexual violence often concerns the spatial and cultural proximity of the content. The spatial proximity is, as it sounds, how near to the reader event happened: the nearer it happens to the reader, the bigger news value.

The cultural proximity lies in the 'nearness' of an event to the reader/audience in cultural terms: does it resonate within the readers' existing framework of values, interests, beliefs and concerns?

¹¹ Letourneau EJ, Brown DS, Fang X, Hassan A, Mercy JA. *The economic burden of child sexual abuse in the United States*. *Child Abuse Negl.* 2018;79:413-422. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.02.020

¹² Bronwyn Naylor, 'Reporting Violence In The British Print Media: Gendered Stories' (2001) 40 *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*.

A good example of a newsworthy story of abuse is the story of the Rotherham sex scandal. It was first brought to the public by journalist Andrew Norfolk at *The Times*, who took an interest in the systematic and organised abuse of several children within one typical small town in England¹³.

The story had scale since it eventually revealed that more than 1,400 Rotherham children had suffered abuse from the late 1980s until 2010, when the first perpetrators were convicted.

Most of the children were groomed by older peers who then threatened the children into silence. The newsworthiness became greater when some of the survivors stepped forward and explained their abuse had taken place in front of authorities who failed to do their job.

As the reporting continued it was clear that the elite – in this story, authorities including the police and council workers who we all want to trust and count on – had made massive errors. Additionally, a lot of adults in the town – including cab drivers, fathers and mothers – knew of the abuse but turned a blind eye.

Stranger danger

In my own analysis of stories on sexual crime, I find an additional interest sparked by crimes involving what may be considered the stranger, the outsider.

The vast majority of the sexual crimes, statistics show¹⁴, are committed by a person close to the victim and often within the home. The stories that make more headlines, conversely, are those involving a stranger who preys on women or children.

This is again demonstrated in the coverage of the Rotherham case, which became centred on the issues of race, class and fear of racism that seemed to play a significant role in the continuation of the abuse.

¹³ Jane Martinson, *Rotherham child sex scandal: Andrew Norfolk on how he broke the story*, *The Guardian* (28 Sep 2014). <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/sep/28/rotherham-child-sex-scandal-andrew-norfolk>

¹⁴ Lucy Adams, *Sex attack victims usually know attacker, says new study*, BBC (1 March 2018). <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-43128350>

The reports told a narrative of mostly white children of working class families falling victim to gangs or families of foreign origin, thus playing with both spatial and cultural proximity of the readers. Girls that could have been the reader's own daughters were being abused by 'strangers' who had different values and cultures.

According to Naylor, such stranger-violence stories sometimes also include graphic descriptions of the violence endured, and "permit highly sexualised and individualised representation, with reporting in some cases paralleling violent and/or pornographic voyeuristic representations."

While the Rotheram case was important, and mostly reported with diligence, our tendency to report more on stranger-attacks means future victims have a distorted image of sexual violence and where it is most likely to occur.

"It infers that the public sphere is unsafe, the private is safe; that women (and children) need only fear 'Stranger Danger'," says Naylor, "which according to statistics of crime is the opposite of reality".

In her book *Gender and the agenda: News reporting of child sexual abuse*¹⁵, Paula Skidmore undertakes content analysis of coverage of child sexual abuse. She analyses a detailed sample of all press and television from 1991, 1986 and an overview of more than 10 years of articles from *The Times*, and finds that coverage tends to focus on specific incidents or sets of related allegations, and not on areas of general concern.

A single case or incident, she says, will get a lot more coverage than stories about prevention or general trends or problems in the area of abuse. In short, the media is more likely to report disproportionately on rare instances of stranger danger than the more frequent occurring act of sexual violence or trafficking by family or friends.

Moreover, the media will seek to report more on the incident itself than on what could have been done to prevent it or detect it.

¹⁵ Skidmore, Paula. "Gender and the agenda: news reporting of child sexual abuse." *News, gender and power*. Routledge, 2002. 216-230.

It's all in the details

The editorial change at *Politiken* and their coverage of sex crimes is very much a product of the post #MeToo era. More than ever, journalists are forced to think about their choice of words when reporting on cases of sexual trafficking and abuse.

According to Former CEO of the Thomson Reuters Foundation and Founder of TrustLaw, Monique Villa, one reason for this battle over words may lie in the differences of agenda between the journalists and the survivors.

In her book *Slaves Among Us*¹⁶ she lists this as one of the biggest challenges to effective communication between the two parties: the journalist wants the story (the details); the survivor wants change (the chance to prevent this from happening ever again).

In an interview with me she elaborated on how words can rescar or anger a source in a story of sexual trafficking and abuse:

“Survivors absolutely detest being called victims or sex slaves. This is a word that is good for the headlines but awful for the survivor.”

Villa recalled an incident with a Reuters journalist who interviewed a woman who had survived sexual violence while being trafficked. “She was furious because our journalist told her story with a headline where she was called a sex slave. The survivor did not recognise herself in this word. And you understand why, but at the same time you can't fight the fact that headlines have to be short and concise. It's an incredibly difficult balance.”

Sources who have survived sexual violence are among some of the most vulnerable sources – even more so if they are children. This means that when interacting with them, journalists should take a singular interest in earning and preserving the trust.

¹⁶ Villa, Monique. *Slaves among Us : The Hidden World of Human Trafficking*. Lanham, 2019. Print.

But this can be a steep challenge, given most of them have had their trust betrayed by people who were initially very nice to them.

As Villa puts it: “Their abusers have often been seemingly caring relatives or strangers that helped them off the streets. But the kindness came with a very severe price tag that they would have to repay through sex work or abuse.”

And while more survivors now wish to tell their stories, as Wigdor said, this access comes with a greater responsibility. Since many of the survivors are still at an early stage of overcoming their trauma, there is a risk of them not fully understanding the consequences of stepping forward.

We should be wary of any line of questioning that encourages survivors to provide details of the abuse that don’t contribute to the story but rather parallel violent and/or pornographic voyeuristic representation that Naylor described.

The new eventually becomes old and boring

Most studies on newsworthiness have explicitly (or more often implicitly) indicated that “seriousness” and “novelty” – or some combination thereof – are the cardinal determinants of what we should report on.

But novelty is, in many ways, also the nemesis of a news story. In the 1970s and throughout most of the 80s, rape dominated the sex crime news, according to criminologist Greer¹⁷. But this topic was then surpassed by coverage of child sex abuse in the mid-80s until, according to the theory of professor Jenny Kitzinger from The School of Journalism in Cardiff, it too reached its novelty lifespan by the mid-90s.

Kitzinger and Skidmore coined a name for the waning interest in reporting of child abuse that they observed in the mid-90s: “child abuse fatigue”¹⁸.

As a crime reporter I’ve had first-hand experience of this fatigue: I am not blind to the low response I get from readers when I write about child exploitation. But having met several victims of child abuse, I can’t help but feel we must keep reporting – make it a recurring, prime subject for our readers and continue to drive political awareness.

In *Gender and the Agenda*, Skidmore tells of her struggle to get stories about incest and abuse within the home and immediate family circle in print. She said journalists have to battle an “internal child abuse fatigue in the newsroom”, and go against the usual news criteria to get the stories out and also get the attention of readers who have had enough.

The “dominance of ‘male values’ in coverage of child sexual abuse” (Kitzinger & Skidmore, 1995) means it often falls to female journalists to fight for more news

¹⁷ Greer, Chris. *Sex Crime and the Media : Sex Offending and the Press in a Divided Society*. London, [England] ; New York, New York, 2011. Ebook Central. Web.

¹⁸ Kitzinger, Jenny, and Paula Skidmore. “Playing Safe: Media Coverage of Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Strategies.” *Child Abuse Review* 4.1 (1995): 47-56. Web.

items on child sexual abuse, convince editors who are wary of the low audience interest, and find ways to present the stories that will engage fatigued audiences.

With the advent of more data feedback, newsrooms today are more focused than ever on how they think readers or viewers will react. Greer calls this “short and shock-factor thinking”, which a news editor he interviewed calls the “F-me factor”.

“It’s about the individual merits of the story: it needs to astound people,” the editor told Greer. “Not all stories are going to have it, but every single story – certainly since I have been working on the news desk – is treated on how we *think* it will be received.”

This fear of not fulfilling the “F-me factor” creates an agenda bias, where editors follow the notion that if the readers don’t find it interesting anymore, we shouldn't focus on it.

I’ve seen the effect in my own newsroom, where it has become more difficult to justify spending time and research on stories of this nature. The pressures are threefold: firstly because the response we get from readers is minimal, secondly because the stories take time to craft to ensure we do not risk identification nor give or cut too many details, and thirdly the burden of legal risk if we do not meet a high standard of accuracy and caution.

A false reality

It is not unusual for a news topic to become dull in the eyes of reporters or the public, nor is it unique to sexual abuse crimes.

Even murder became a dull topic, according to a 1994 paper by Philip Schlesinger and Howard Tumber.¹⁹ And domestic abuse suffers the same paradox: the more prevalent a crime is the less it will be reported (Meyers, 1997²⁰).

For years, NGOs and experts in the prevention of child molestation have called for more reporting to drive awareness. Awareness, they know, drives political action. And political action and awareness makes it safer for victims to come forward and report their abusers.

Yet I can't help but feel that the media has created their own quota for how many cases we bring forward to the public. This way of handling information should be reconsidered.

Since revenue and engagement have become two of the most important metrics for journalists today, we can't fully ignore the wishes of our readers. We can't deny the news avoidance and fatigue that surrounds stories of sexual violence. Nor should we. But we can improve how we report on these cases, to make it possible to report more of them.

I have gathered the questions I believe that we journalists should be asking when reporting on sexual violence.

Why should we report this?

If readers are tired of single-case stories of horrible abuse, remind them *why* these stories are important to tell. What are the statistics – what is the impact on society, and to them?

¹⁹ Schlesinger, Philip, and Howard. Tumber. *Reporting Crime : The Media Politics of Criminal Justice*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1994. Print. Clarendon Studies in Criminology.

²⁰ Meyers, M. (1997). *News coverage of violence against women: engendering blame*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

How can we report this?

In some cases you have to tell the story through anonymous sources – think about how you can make the best impact and immediate connection. If you have an interview, audio of the survivor can be a great way to maintain their anonymity while still compelling the audience.

How can the reader help?

Where a story is emotionally difficult to digest, give your readers a way to feel empowered: what can they do to identify and prevent sexual abuse? Failing that, can they donate somewhere? This makes the readers more invested in the stories.

When dealing with stories of abuse, a journalist should consider the following:

1. **Identification:** Coordinate with others reporting on this story. What has been out there already about the case? Make sure the source can't be identified by jigsaw identification.
2. **Words and language:** Headlines should be effective and enticing, but not at the expense of the trust your source has offered by telling you their story. Talk to the victim about the headline: explain why you chose what you did. Tell them about the constraints of space you are contending with. Tell them about reach and how words can enhance this.
3. **Details:** “The more, the merrier” does not apply when reporting on sexual violence. If the source provides a lot of details make sure the source understands what this means: Your abuse will be memorialised in writing forever. You don't have to tell the readers everything when half will do.
4. **Expect factual ‘black holes’:** Your source has experienced trauma and is likely to be hypersensitive. PTSD can create faulty or incomplete memories. Expect as much, and be prepared to double-source where possible. Did they

tell their story to someone else following the incident who can help to corroborate?

5. **Be transparent about your work:** This will give survivors a sense of control over their own stories. For instance, talk with them about the story's angle, and when you are hoping to publish. Tell them your newsroom's guidelines when reporting on sexual abuse, and give them updates on how the work with the story is going. Tell them in advance of the interview whether you plan to contact the accused perpetrator.

6. **Choose the interviewee wisely:** Find the right source to convey your story. Has this person had time to process their trauma, and will the interview re-traumatise?

The editorial changes at *Politiken* tell us that times are changing. In a post #MeToo world, even certain words have become off-limits. I am not sure if I agree with removing the vocabulary we need to tell stories in as precise and informative a way as possible.

But there is something to be said for changing how and what we report on. In my own newsroom we are certainly guilty of over-reporting “stranger danger” stories.

There is an easy defence for it: these cases are easier to report than domestic abuse because of the risk of identifying victims through jigsaw-identification. But as journalists we shouldn't refrain from reporting a case just because it's challenging to retell.

Instead we should continue our discussions in the newsroom and keep challenging the criteria of what we *think* our readers want to read.