

MEDIA ISSUES

Magazine Coverage of Child Sexual Abuse, 1992–2004

ROSS E. CHEIT, YAEL SHAVIT, and ZACHARY REISS-DAVIS
Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, USA

This article analyzes trends in the coverage of child sexual abuse in popular magazines since the early 1990s. The article employs systematic analysis to identify and analyze articles in four popular magazines. Articles are analyzed by subject, length, and publication. The results affirm established theories of newsworthiness related to the coverage of specific stories over time. However, interest in the subject waned in the past 10 years, with the brief and dramatic exception of coverage connected to the Catholic Church in 2002. The findings demonstrate systematic differences between the slants of the four magazines studied. The findings also suggest that child abuse professionals could improve the quality of coverage by agreeing to interviews in connection with articles about childhood sexual abuse.

KEYWORDS *child sexual abuse, media coverage, magazines, newsworthiness*

INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a serious societal problem that is often considered taboo and is subject to public misperceptions. Such misperceptions are especially troubling given the influence that public opinion can have on

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Address correspondence to Ross E. Cheit, Campus Box 1977, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912. E-mail: rc@brown.edu

related public policy and how society addresses this problem. As such, it is crucial that researchers seek to understand the manner in which information about CSA is conveyed to the public. One key impact on public perceptions of CSA is the manner in which this topic is portrayed by the media. These public perceptions may be skewed as a result of the disproportionate media attention given to unusual and extraordinary CSA stories. There has been little research performed to help understand such media coverage. This longitudinal study was undertaken to ascertain how CSA was covered in print newsmagazines during the period between 1992 and 2004. This study was designed to create a replicable methodology that will allow researchers to study CSA coverage by other media outlets and in future time periods.

There are two literatures relevant to analyzing media coverage of CSA: the basic crime reporting literature, which addresses the manner in which crimes are portrayed by news media, and the more recent "frame analysis" literature that specifically addresses the complex range of ways that CSA can be portrayed. The established crime reporting literature generates hypotheses about the sensational and unrepresentative nature of crime reporting. "Frame analysis" offers expanded possibilities for portraying CSA in ways that stand in contrast to the long-held view that it is a valence issue (a topic on which there is a widely held consensus opinion).

Crime Reporting Literature

Media coverage of CSA often focuses on criminality, so the literature on crime reporting may help predict and explain such coverage. Research on crime reporting has shown that specific newsworthiness factors determine both the types of crime that get reported and the extent of media coverage. Commonly identified newsworthiness factors include the seriousness of the crime, the presence of sentimental or dramatic elements, and the presence of whimsical circumstances (humor, irony, unusual situations) (Roshier, 1981; Surette, 1998). Chermak (1995) added the social standing of incident participants in the determination of newsworthiness. Prominent news exposure may increase based on the occupation of the parties involved, especially when they hold positions with a "high amount of responsibility to the public," such as police officers, clergy members, and teachers (Chermak, 1995, p. 25). The involvement of celebrities in a crime also contributes to its newsworthiness (Chibnall, 1977; Jerin & Field, 1994; Roshier, 1981). Additionally, personal attributes of the victim can impact whether a crime gets reported. "Victim cooperation and quality (photogenic and quotable) can occasionally provide the extra element to make an otherwise non-newsworthy crime newsworthy" (Surette, 1998, p. 69).

Previous studies have found these newsworthiness factors to be useful predictors of the reporting on CSA. While researching CSA in Britain in 1991, Skidmore (1995) found that CSA reports were influenced by the

general news values of “immediacy, drama, and often sensationalism” (p. 89). Skidmore concluded that “CSA stories are often produced within the framework of newsworthiness associated with the coverage of crime and deviance” (p. 90) and that CSA cases involving “stranger danger” and teacher/caregiver abuse were overreported relative to incest cases (Kitzinger & Skidmore, 1995; Skidmore, 1995). Similarly, a study of CSA reporting in tabloids and newspapers in Australia by Wilczynski and Sinclair (1999) found that reporting generally emphasized individual cases and instances of abuse, often taking the form of the child abuse horror story. Finally, Cheit (2003) found that cases involving first-degree charges, multiple counts, additional violence, or multiple victims were all more likely to receive coverage. Cheit also demonstrated that newspaper coverage overrepresented the rare instances of “stranger danger” while underrepresenting more common instances of intrafamilial abuse.

Frame Analysis

Beckett (1996) demonstrated how CSA, an issue widely considered to be a valence issue in the early 1980s (Nelson, 1984), could become contested and divisive. Beckett argued that there were distinct stages in media coverage of CSA from 1980 to 1994. In her longitudinal study, she identified three broad topics, or “issues packages,” that characterized CSA coverage between 1980 and 1994: positive pedophilia (the idea that not all adult-child sexual relations are exploitive), collective denial, and false accusation. She further identified “subpackages” that share the position and frame of their “parent package” but that identify different “root” problems and make different policy recommendations. Under the false accusation package, for example, Beckett identified two distinct subpackages: “official misconduct” and “false memories.” The former included articles about “the child abuse industry,” while the latter focused on “false memories” in adults (Beckett, 1996, pp. 58–63). Beckett’s article became widely known for the conclusion that the “false memory” frame dominated magazine coverage in the early 1990s (Stanton, 1997).

Beckett demonstrated that CSA was a much more complicated issue than it appeared to be in the 1970s. Dividing the 15 years that she analyzed into specific periods, Beckett identified three phases of media coverage, beginning with coverage dominated by the collective denial frame (1980–1984) and ending with coverage dominated by the false accusation frame and the “false memory” subpackage (1991–1994). The period in the middle (1985–1990) was characterized by the emergence of false accusation stories and the “official misconduct” subpackage. She attributed change over time to various factors, particularly “sponsor activities, media practices, and cultural themes and resources” (Beckett, 1996, p. 74). While Beckett’s analysis does not generate specific predictions about future coverage, the discussion

of “the media careers of [CSA] packages” (p. 66) implies that coverage will shift cyclically over time as it becomes contested. One might reasonably predict, based on such analysis, that media coverage of CSA would be dominated by different frames at different times, probably returning to old frames in a never-ending cycle of issue framing and contestation. Since Beckett’s study, there have been no longitudinal studies of CSA media coverage. More recent works on this topic have been focused on a single year of coverage (Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999) or single year of defendants (Cheit, 2003).

METHOD

This study was motivated by our desire to understand the manner in which CSA is covered by print newsmagazines. As such, we sought to test the applicability of the crime reporting literature to CSA reporting and to ascertain whether Beckett’s “frame analysis” can explain CSA coverage in a later time period. We chose to analyze CSA coverage in print newsmagazines between 1992 and 2004. Choosing this period provided us with both a substantial amount of data to work with and allowed us to examine trends over time. We initially considered attempting to use the methodology employed by Beckett but subsequently chose to design our own methodology that would best address our broader goal and that would create a replicable method to facilitate future studies of other media outlets. As such, the stories included in our study were analyzed and coded for three variables: subject, the presence or absence of newsworthiness factors, and the overall slant of quotes (which will be discussed individually in this section). CSA stories published in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *People Magazine* were identified and obtained using a five-term search for child abuse, incest, child molestation, false memory syndrome, and ritual abuse. The index and the full text of these publications were searched electronically for the designated search terms. These publications were chosen for the sake of comparison with Beckett’s study, which used the same four newsmagazines.

Full-text searching is necessarily overinclusive as it includes all articles containing a specific word regardless of the context. In contrast, indexing might be underinclusive since it depends on an editorial judgment that the index word describes the article in some significant respect. Full-text searching of the four publications yielded numerous nonnews items, such as editorials, which were immediately excluded. The remaining articles were coded for *relevancy* using an integer variable from 1 to 4. A score of 1 indicated that it was unclear why the full-text search identified the article; such articles were culled. A score of 2 was reserved for articles that mentioned CSA in a peripheral manner; articles in this category were also removed

from the data set before any analysis was conducted. Articles with a relevancy score of 3 were primarily about CSA, and articles with a score of 4 were exclusively about CSA. The relevancy analysis lowered the number of articles in the study from 202 to 172. Tests of interrater reliability found 95% agreement when judging whether or not to include an article.

The reviewers participating in coding were undergraduates at Brown University. Prior to evaluating the articles, these individuals were asked by the study's designers to review 20 control articles, which were used to normalize the ratings and ensure consistency. During this training process, any borderline cases were discussed to ensure that such cases were handled similarly by all reviewers. The reviewers were not blind to the newsmagazine from which each article was taken. However, all of the reviewers were previously unfamiliar with the subject of CSA and did not harbor any inherent biases regarding the manner in which these magazines might treat this subject.

The stories were coded for *subject* in order to determine which issues were most widely written about, whether different publications cover different subjects, and whether certain subjects were favored during specific years. In an initial effort to develop the broadest possible taxonomy, each article was assigned a single subject heading. New subject headings were created for articles that did not clearly fit under previous headings. This process resulted in 19 subject categories, including a miscellaneous category for the 16 articles (9.3%) that did not fit any of the other subjects. After a broad list of subject headings was compiled, clearly related subjects were merged and remaining subjects were grouped in a "miscellaneous" category. See Table 1 for a detailed breakdown of all subjects by year.

The stories were then coded for the presence of six specific *newsworthiness* factors: "upstanding accused," "extra violence," "bizarre facts," "multiple parties," "celebrity status," and "cover-up" (see Table 2). These six factors were chosen based on previous studies of crime reporting. *Upstanding accused* refers to stories in which the accused person is in a position of respect or power within the community, and it comes from Chermak's (1995) conclusion regarding the importance of the defendant's occupation accounting for the newsworthiness factor. Cheit (2003) identified four other factors that helped predict newsworthiness in CSA stories: extra violence, bizarre facts, multiple parties (victims or defendants), and celebrity status (victim or accused). The final factor, cover-up, was added because it was apparent that many institutional stories were more focused on the scandalous allegations of cover-up than on the underlying abuse. Bird (2003) found that news pieces about scandal consistently represent the most widely followed news coverage. These six newsworthiness factors were treated as binaries. If an article was judged to include a given newsworthiness characteristic, the article received a score of one for that characteristic; if it did not, it received a score of zero.

TABLE 1 Article Subject, Cross-tabulated with Year, Compared to Number of Articles and Mean Slant

Subject	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Grand total	Mean slant
Bad Samaritan						3								3	-0.33
Catholic church	2	1	1									4	1	9	-0.44
Celebrities	3	6	1	1	2		1	1	2			2	3	24	-0.46
Cover-up in Catholic church											40	5		45	-0.76
Cult												1	1	2	0.00
Famous cases			2	4								1		7	0.14
Incest			1	1										2	1.00
Internet			1			1		1	2	3		1		9	-0.89
Media	1		1			1			1					4	-1.00
Michael Jackson		2											1	7	0.57
Minor consent						1	5						2	8	0.38
Misc.	2	3				1	1	1	3	2		2	2	16	-0.44
Parricide	1	5	1											7	-0.29
Policy solutions		1			3	2	1			1		2		9	-1.33
Psychology	1	3	1			2		1		1	1			10	0.00
Religion, not Catholic					1									1	1.00
School		1				1								2	0.50
Sex trade					1			1	1					3	-1.33
System failure	1				2	1								4	-1.00
Grand Total	11	22	9	6	9	11	11	4	7	9	41	22	10	172	-0.46
Mean Slant	-0.91	-0.05	0.00	0.33	-0.67	-0.82	0.09	-1.25	-0.71	0.00	-0.76	-0.50	-0.40		

TABLE 2 Newsworthiness Factors

Upstanding accused	The accused is an upstanding member of his or her community (e.g., a politician, teacher, or coach)
Extra violence	More violence than normal in child sexual abuse stories is present
Bizarre facts	There are especially strange or memorable facts in the story (e.g., Satan worship)
Multiple parties	There is more than one victim, accused, or both
Cover-up	There is an element of a cover-up to the story
Celebrity status	The victim, the accused, or both are celebrities for something other than the case (e.g., Michael Jackson)

Our method for rating the *slant* of an article was developed with the hopes of eliminating judgments involved in counting the number of items to code per article while capturing the complexity of articles containing multiple “frames.” In order to assess the overall slant of an article, information was coded for every quote in every article. In sum, we coded a total of 1,761 quotes. The following information was entered for each quote: actual text, quote length in words, number of the quotes within the article (the lead quote is first), speaker name, speaker identification, speaker group designation, and quote slant.

Quote slant, the most important variable, was assessed with an integer scale ranging from -2 to $+2$, with -2 being strongly pro-victim and $+2$ being strongly pro-accused. A slant of 0 was used for quotes that were neutral, and -1 and $+1$ were used for moderate slants. A sample slant scored as $+2$ is the quote, “I don’t believe any of the things people are saying about him” (Article 193). A sample $+1$: “We don’t know what to think. In my eyes, he is very kind” (Article 150). A sample 0 : “The question in everybody’s mind is, ‘Are they going to close the church?’” (Article 120). A sample -1 : “They were very strange people, very secretive” (Article 61). Finally, a sample -2 : “[the accused is] an evil, evil man” (Article 173). Interrater reliability was calculated by determining the percentage of quotes in a representative control sample (approximately 15% of the entire dataset) that were coded the same way by the reviewers and the creators of the methodology, and this resulted in an interrater reliability of 93%. To calculate the overall slant associated with each article, we calculated the *overall slant of quotes* by averaging the slants of every quote in the article. In so doing, we accounted for the extra significance of longer or more prominent quotes.

FINDINGS

There were 172 relevant articles published in the four magazines between 1992 and 2004. The annual change in number of articles is displayed in Figure 1. The results over time were marked by two spikes in the number of

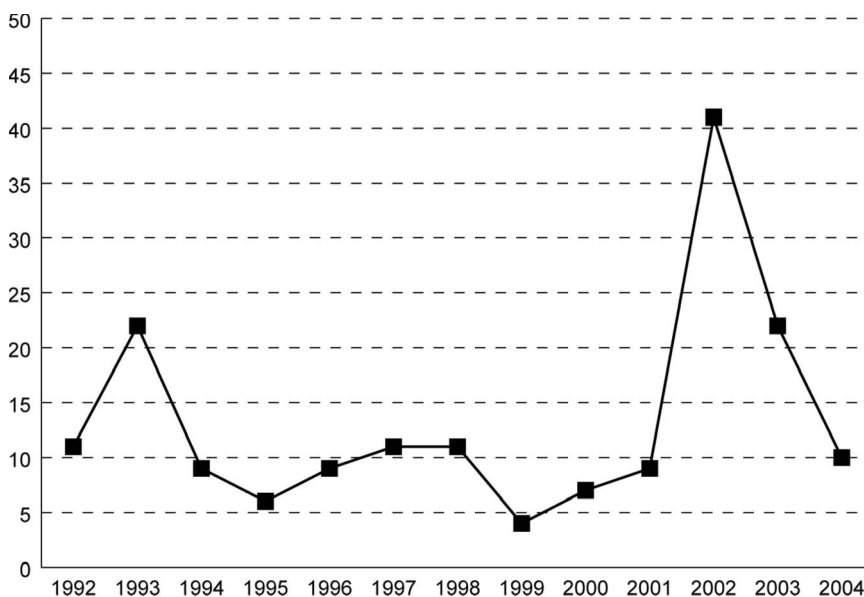


FIGURE 1 Total number of articles per year about CSA, four magazines studied.

CSA articles: a moderate spike in 1993 and a large one in 2002. Most years during the 13-year span had minimal coverage of CSA; there were only three years (1993, 2002, 2003) with more than 11 articles in the four publications combined. The articles in 1993 were at the height of the false accusation and “false memory” era noted by Beckett (1996). The articles in 2002–2003 were almost entirely about the cover-up of abuse by priests in the Catholic Church. There was no relevant pattern in article length over the 13 years.

The articles were divided fairly evenly between the four magazines, with *U.S. News and World Report* publishing 30 articles (17% of the dataset), followed by *Time* with 39 articles (23%), *People* with 51 articles, and *Newsweek* with 52 articles (30% each). Overall, the length of the articles had a fairly regular bell curve distribution with a longer right-hand tail, centered around a bin of between 1,025 and 1,430 words. *U.S. News and World Report* stories were on average slightly shorter (988 words) than stories in the other three publications, which both had an average word count close to 1,236 words.

Subject

The articles had a wide range of subjects, which were *not* evenly distributed across the duration of the study. The Catholic Church cover-up subject accounted for the most articles ($n = 45$) solely due to coverage in 2002 and 2003. Stories about celebrities (i.e., cases where the victim or accused was

famous because of something unrelated to CSA) comprised the second largest category in the dataset ($n = 31$). The third largest category, psychology, was a distant third ($n = 10$).

Articles on a given subject tended to cluster as they became the focus of media attention, and then they appeared less frequently in subsequent years. For example, there were eight articles about minor consent in the entire 13 year period; five of them were in 1998. Also notable was the spike involving three “notorious” cases (McMartin, Kelly Michaels, and Wenatchee) in 1994 and 1995. Wenatchee was unfolding, Kelly Michaels was ending on appeal, and the McMartin case was appearing in movie form as *Indictment* (Stone & Jackson, 1995). Several broader, more inclusive subjects, such as psychology (articles on the general psychology behind CSA) or policy solutions, received more evenly distributed but minimal attention.

Newsworthiness and Sources

As the crime reporting literature would predict, all but four articles included at least one newsworthiness factor. Figure 2 shows the frequency distribution of the number of newsworthiness factors contained in each article. The four articles that had none were broad concept articles about the overall phenomena of CSA and pedophilia: two were about psychology, one was about system failure, and one was about policy solutions. At the other end, three articles contained five newsworthiness factors.

Articles in each of the four magazines relied heavily on nonstate sources (people not affiliated with state agencies or law enforcement, such as academics, advocacy groups, and people involved in the crime, with quotes from such sources representing 89% of all quotes in the data set.

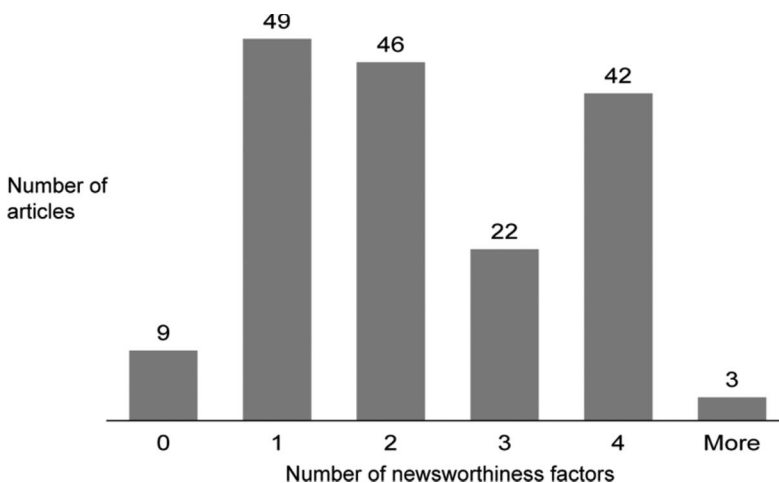


FIGURE 2 Number of newsworthiness factors per article, frequency distribution.

Experts on issues relating to CSA were quoted infrequently. Academics accounted for 7.6% of all quotations in the data set, while clinical psychologists accounted for 4.0% and advocacy groups accounted for 4.7%. *U.S. News and World Report* and *Time* used academic sources for 15.9% and 14.2% of their quotes respectively, while only 0.9% percent of quotes in *People* came from an academic source. Articles in *People* relied far more heavily on quotes from victims, accused offenders, and their families (74.5% of all quotes) than any of the other magazines (27.4% of all quotes). Meanwhile, 10.8% of all quotes in the data set came from a church leader (consistent with the prevalence of Catholic Church cover-up articles.)

Quotes from the victim represented 16.0% of all quotes, while quotes from the accused were slightly less common (11.0%). Another 9.2% of quotes were from friends or relatives of the victim, and 11.5% of the quotes were from friends and relatives of the accused, resulting in a total of 25.2% of quotes given by the victim's side and 22.5% of quotes by the accused's side. Quotes from prosecutors and defense attorneys accounted for 4.5% and 4.1% of all quotes, respectively.

In articles with a pro-accused slant (+2 and +1), quotes from the accused were used more frequently than quotes from the victim, while in articles with a pro-victim slant (-2 and -1), quotes from the victim were used more frequently than quotes from the accused. Victims and their friends and family represented 54.1% of quotes in articles with a slant of -2 and only 14.1% of the quotes in articles with a slant of +2. Similarly, the accused and their friends and family represented 14.8% of the quotes in -2 slant articles and 28.9% of quotes in +2 articles. Finally, articles with a neutral slant (0) averaged 3.0 fewer quotes per article than articles with any other slant.

Slant

The average slant of the entire data set (the mean of the slant variable) was -0.46, a slightly pro-victim slant. No correlation of any significance was found between the year of publication and the slant of the article. This was tested using a single-variable regression with date and slant as well as a regression using year and slant. In addition, slant versus date was analyzed, and no trend line could be fitted with a relevant R-squared value.

The mean average and distribution of slant for stories in the four publications varied widely. *U.S. News and World Report* and *Newsweek* had normal distributions, while *Time* and *People* did not. The mean slant for *Newsweek* was -0.44, for *People* -0.41, for *Time* -0.28, and for *U.S. News and World Report* -0.80. This means that, while every publication had a somewhat pro-victim slant, relative to one another, *U.S. News and World Report* articles were the most pro-victim, *Time* articles were the most pro-accused, and the other two publications were more moderate. *Time* and *People*'s lack of a

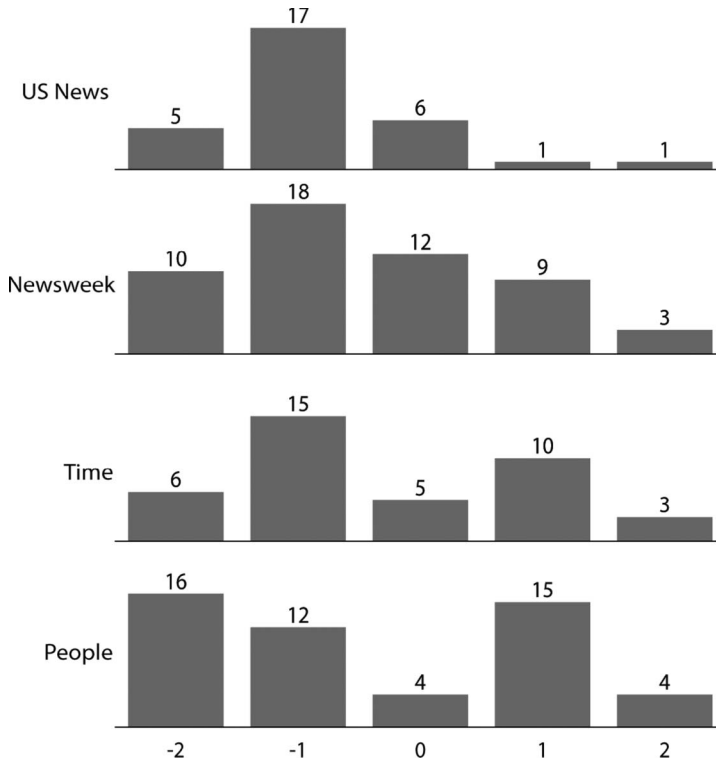


FIGURE 3 Histogram of publication versus article slant.

normal distribution indicates that they published comparatively more articles with slants of -2 and $+2$ rather than moderate articles. The distribution of slant for each publication is shown in Figure 3.

The data exhibited a strong correlation between article subject and slant. The Catholic Church cover-up stories had a mean slant of -0.76 (0.3 lower than overall average). This represents a strong pro-victim slant. Other subjects with a slant lower than average include media, policy solutions, sex trade (sex trafficking of minors), and system failure (CSA was reported but not acted on, leading to continued abuse and/or additional problems). Subjects with a strong positive slant (meaning pro-accused), compared to the data set average of -0.46 , include famous cases (0.14), minor consent (0.38), and Michael Jackson (0.57). The stories covering these subjects tended to portray the perspective of the accused as more sympathetic or believable than that of the victim. The miscellaneous category was not examined in detail. A detailed breakdown of the number of articles and the mean slant of each subject is provided in Table 1.

For individual newsworthiness factors, slant was influenced in a manner consistent with our predictions. For example, if an article had the “extra violence” characteristic, then it was likely not favorable for the accused.

This is reflected in an average slant of -0.92 for articles containing extra violence. Other newsworthiness factors associated with a strong negative article slant included “stranger danger,” “celebrity victim,” and “cover-up.” The “celebrity accused” characteristic was associated with a strong positive article slant as were articles with bizarre facts (likely as a result of reporters’ use of bizarre facts to make alleged abuse appear incredible and impossible). Articles with multiple plaintiffs or multiple defendants (often one article has both markings) had a weaker negative slant.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study affirm established theories of newsworthiness relating to the coverage of specific stories, extent of coverage, and change in coverage over time. As anticipated, almost every article contained at least one newsworthiness factor, while most articles contained more. Certain newsworthiness factors, such as the upstanding social status of the accused person and celebrity involvement, were especially prevalent.

The data indicated the presence of specific subject “clusters” during certain years, such as “minor consent” in 1998 and “cover-up in Catholic Church” in 2002. This trend may support the idea that stories are chosen based on “consonance” or “salience” factors and that stories that fit well with prior news themes tend to be reported more often (Chermak, 1995; Surette, 1998). The presence of such subject “clusters” may also be explained by the magazines’ need to expand the definition of CSA in order to respond to the trend by which issues that have gained familiarity lose popularity. Once a new CSA subject has reached a saturation point, its coverage decreases and different subjects become more popular.

The CSA stories in this data set primarily quoted nonstate sources. The finding directly contradicts crime reporting literature, which emphasizes the news media’s reliance on state sources, like police officers, in stories about violent crime (Surette, 1998). One possible explanation for these findings is that state sources are relatively less likely to disclose information about CSA incidents. Chermak (1995) explained that police officers often avoid discussing child victims. Additionally, there is a documented trend in crime reporting in which news stories that are allotted the most attention and resources employ more nonstate sources (Chermak, 1995). As CSA stories tend to be particularly newsworthy, this trend may apply broadly to CSA coverage.

In her 1991 study of CSA coverage in Britain, Skidmore (1995) found that CSA coverage relied less on typical official sources than did other crime coverage. Skidmore’s study suggested that in CSA coverage, typical official sources were substituted by other official sources such as social services and voluntary organizations. She also noted that CSA stories tended to include academic, interest group, and expert sources. In our findings,

however, no official sources were prevalent, and experts on issues relating to CSA, including academics, psychologists, and advocacy groups, were also quoted infrequently.

Within the nonstate source category, quotes from the victim were slightly more common than quotes from the accused. This finding is in keeping with the theory that the victim's perspective is more likely to be presented than the defendants, in part due to the inaccessibility of incarcerated defendants awaiting trial (Chermak, 1995). However, the finding that articles with a pro-accused slant used quotes from the accused more frequently while articles with a pro-victim slant used quotes from the victim more frequently may indicate that the chosen slant of a specific article influences the reporter's choice of sources. Alternatively, the availability of specific sources may affect the article's slant. Surette (1998) gave credence to the latter hypothesis, noting that the availability of a cooperative and quotable victim increases a story's newsworthiness. Unfortunately, the sample size was too small to yield meaningful results for an analysis of quote sources by slant and by publication simultaneously.

The findings in this study indicate that there are systematic differences between the average slant of each publication. While no statistical differences by newsworthiness factors were ascertained, clear differences existed in types of sources relied on by each publication. *U.S. News and World Report* and *Time* put more weight on academic sources, while less than 1% of quotes in *People* came from an academic source. Articles in *People* relied more heavily than any other magazines on quotes from victims, accused offenders, and their families.

Slant and Cycles

Although there is disagreement in crime reporting literature regarding the source of bias in crime coverage, it is widely agreed that news stories are often slanted in their representation of crime. However, Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1991) found that while specific stories tend to have explicit ideological slants, the overall slant of news outlets' coverage of a specific issue is generally more evenhanded. Our study provides support for both of these theories. While the individual articles in the data set tend to have strong slants in one direction or the other, the slant distribution of each magazine tends to be relatively evenhanded.

The findings regarding slant over time were most surprising. Crime reporting theories generally maintain that the slant of a specific issue's coverage tends to shift once the issue has become familiar and new claims makers have had time to organize and expound their views (Best 1990). Based on this theory, one would expect overall article slant to shift in a cyclical nature between pro-victim to pro-accused. Beckett (1996) pointed to the rise in false memory and false accusation cases in the early 1990s as a

sign that this trend holds in CSA coverage. No such shift in overall slant was found in this analysis. There was a slight pro-victim bias throughout the 13 year period, but there were no strong fluctuations in either direction. Most surprising, the earliest years were not significantly different than other years in the data set in statistical terms, although Beckett labeled those early years as a distinct group. Beckett did not perform statistical analysis on the time periods; rather, she divided the 15 years into three subgroups and provided detailed descriptive statistics by time period. While that fine-grained analysis certainly brings a level of detailed understanding to the nature of coverage that is absent in the simplest efforts to code content by slant, our findings suggest these groupings might inflate the significance of difference by time period. The final time period in Beckett's analysis (1991–1994) was not quite as slanted by our reckoning with the final three years of overlap (1992–1994). It is possible that the method of determining the extent of news coverage by using annual volume of news stories underemphasizes the public attention given to specific news stories. Despite the low volume of “false memory” stories in the early 1990s, such coverage may have received greater than average attention because of its novelty; this recognition would not be captured by our statistics.

Not only does the data fail to provide evidence of a pro-accused slant in the early 1990s, but there were, in fact, only two years in which the data indicated an overall pro-accused slant and two years for which the overall slant was neutral. These positive and neutral years occurred episodically, often sandwiched between years with strong negative (pro-victim) slants. The period between 1992 and 1995 seemed to indicate a slow shift toward a positive slant, but the fact that 1995 was the only year in this period exhibiting a positive slant, coupled with the strong negative slant in 1996, makes it hard to consider this a significant shift. Moreover, the small number of CSA articles published in 1995 call into question the statistical significance of the apparent change in slant. Additionally, the overall slant in 2002 was significantly lower than the slightly negative overall slants in 2001 and 2003. The negative slant in 2002 was almost identical to the average slant of the Catholic Church cover-up subject, which dominated CSA coverage that year with 40 of the 41 total CSA stories.

Two important findings may explain the absence of this anticipated shift in slant: the episodic nature of specific subject coverage and the inconsistent frequency of CSA coverage in general. The data indicate that changes in subject occur in a largely episodic fashion. This finding contradicts Beckett's (1996) explanation of changes in CSA representation as “wave[s] in claims-making” (p. 72) The most prominent example occurred in 2002, when stories with the subject “cover-up in Catholic Church” rose to 40 from 0 in each of the previous 10 years. Following this dramatic spike, coverage of this subject dropped again. In 2003, there were only five “cover-up in Catholic Church” stories, and in 2004 the subject received no coverage.

A similar, though less pronounced trend can be seen in other subject clusters, such as “minor consent” and “parricide” (the killing of a parent).

The importance of the episodic nature of subject coverage rests in the relationship between subject and slant. These findings indicate that there is a strong correlation between an article’s subject and its slant and that there is no shift in slant per subject over time. This relationship accounts for the stark and brief changes in overall slant observed during years in which a new subject episode is at its height. For instance, in 1998 when the “minor consent” subject (which has a strong positive slant) was widely covered, the average overall slant for CSA stories was .091, while 1997 and 1999 both had negative overall slants. Similarly, in 2002 when “cover-up in Catholic Church” (which has a strong negative slant) was a popular subject, the overall slant was -0.756 , as compared with a low positive slant in 2003 and a slightly negative slant in 2001.

Press coverage of the Catholic Church cover-up took on a scope and intensity that was unparalleled in the reporting of other CSA trends. In fact, this scandal was selected as the third most important story of 2002 by the readers of the Associated Press, was on the front page of the *New York Times* for 41 consecutive days, and earned the *Boston Globe* (which spearheaded this coverage) a Pulitzer Prize (Dokecki, 2004; Plante, 2004). Explanations of this story’s popularity point to a convergence of standard newsworthiness criteria. William Powers (2002) of *The Atlantic* described this media attention as almost inevitable, as the elements of cover-up, corruption, and exploitation of the weak made this issue an international epic story. Timothy Lytton (2007) noted that the moral issues inherent to this scandal, in addition to the reliability of legal documents and the constant flow of new information arising from the tort litigation, encouraged media attention. According to Lytton, the resultant media coverage and the rise of new litigation were mutually reinforcing and coverage fit an “institutional failure” frame.

The frequency with which CSA is discussed may also account for the absence of a shift in article slant. The data in this study indicate that CSA coverage goes through lulls in certain years and that the frequency of CSA coverage may shift in a cyclical manner. The low number of CSA articles during lulls artificially overemphasizes changes in slant during such years. The appearance of cycles in the volume of CSA coverage is consistent with crime reporting theories that suggest that once an issue has gained familiarity, its media attention diminishes. Best (1990) described this phenomenon and notes that due to such diminishing attention, claims makers must expand an issue’s definition in order to increase its newsworthiness. Skidmore (1995) found evidence of such a trend in her study of CSA reporting in Britain, noting the phenomenon of “Child Abuse Fatigue” when media temporarily loses interest in CSA stories due to oversaturation. The data demonstrate notable lulls in CSA reporting, namely in 1995 when only

6 stories were covered (down from 22 stories in 1993 and 9 stories in 1994) and in 1999 when only 4 stories were covered (down from 11 stories in each of the two years prior). Both years had outlying overall slants, .33 in 1995 and -1.25 in 1999. In each case, the direction of slant (pro-victim, pro-accused, or neutral) differed from the previous year's slant. It is likely that the low volume of CSA stories overemphasized the slant in these years and makes it impossible to deduce any overall shifts in slant from the data. In sum, it appears that slant is determined by episodic changes in subject and the saliency of CSA in general during a specific time period. It is possible that the presence of subjects with specific slants is not in itself random, as certain claims makers may be more vocal in reaction to the slant of previous subjects. However, it is the newsworthiness of specific subjects, and not the slant, that ultimately determines the extent of coverage.

While all of the publications were generally evenhanded in their reporting of articles with different slants, the specific article slant distribution differed by magazine, possibly due to different editorial processes. *People* and *Time* displayed a polarized but evenhanded distribution, in which they published both strongly pro-victim and pro-accused articles and only a few moderate articles. Meanwhile, *Newsweek* took a more moderate approach in achieving evenhandedness, exhibiting a normal distribution for slants. *U.S. News and World Report* was the outlier in our data, displaying a strong pro-victim average.

Limitations

The results are subject to several limitations. First, the four selected magazines are not representative of all magazines; rather, they represent the three most popular news magazines, plus one with a strong entertainment focus. Future studies should take full advantage of digital searching and widen the scope of magazines examined. A second limitation stems from the decreasing importance of print media as a news source. Magazines have decreased in relative importance since the initial years covered analyzed in this study, owing in part to the rise of television and Internet news sources (Surette, 1998). Future studies should examine those media, preferably in terms that allow a comparison to existing knowledge about print sources.

A third limitation is that while the method we developed to assess the slant of coverage had the advantage that results were consistent across researchers, it undoubtedly oversimplified an important variable. Reducing the analysis of slant to a simple scale (strongly pro-victim to strongly pro-accused) misses any detail about the complexity of stories that present multiple frames. The scale developed in this study might also overinterpret stories into criminal justice terms, where the dichotomous labels (pro-victim/pro-accused) fit the best.

Conclusion

The manner in which CSA is covered by the news media impacts the way in which the public views this issue. As a result, skewed coverage of CSA-related issues may lead to incorrect public perceptions about the problem. Such misinformation may have tangible impacts on people's lives. It has been conjectured that media coverage of CSA has affected the outcomes of appeals proceedings in CSA-related cases. Recognizing the potential impacts of CSA coverage, this study sought to shed light on the manner in which CSA is covered by news magazines and to determine whether standard crime reporting theories apply to CSA coverage.

Our findings regarding the importance of the presence of newsworthiness factors in determining coverage of specific CSA issues affirm the theory that more sensational CSA occurrences are overrepresented relative to more common cases of incest. This may give readers the perception that CSA generally occurs in remarkable and bizarre contexts at the hands of strangers rather than at the hands of relatives or close acquaintances. The data also showed a surprising degree of overall balance in the slant of coverage. While articles varied considerably, and publications as a whole less so, there was an overall balance in coverage that suggests that the media has internalized the idea that sexual abuse has (at least) two sides and no longer treats it as a valence issue. However, the representation of CSA stories as having one of two extreme slants may lend credence to the view that CSA is a simple "black and white" issue and ignore complexities involved in the CSA cases.

These findings bear out traditional assessments of crime reporting, indicating that CSA tends to be covered in largely the same way that the press covers other crime. The importance of scandal, uniqueness, and celebrity involvement in the determination of newsworthiness drives which CSA stories the press chooses to cover. Additionally, the findings indicate that the slant of CSA coverage shifted episodically based on the CSA subjects receiving media attention at the time. The relative infrequency of stories that take on issues of psychology or more systemic issues demonstrates the propensity of the media to represent the criminal aspects of CSA. This leads to an absence of stories that address other important issues, such as the impact of CSA on children, the manner in which people involved may seek help, or larger societal trends. Moreover, the findings of this study indicate that CSA coverage contains minimal use of experts. Such skewed coverage leaves people underinformed about important CSA-related issues. CSA experts and professionals are in a position to put individual stories in a broader context, and there is an obvious need for more expert sources in these stories. As such, these findings may suggest that professionals in the field should consider being more proactive and more willing to talk to the press.

These findings are not encouraging for the hope of a more realistic view of CSA sources and its consequences. Those aspiring to see the media provide useful information about CSA will have to envision coverage quite different from the trends of the last 25 years. The type of longitudinal analysis undertaken in this study can provide a useful method for gaining greater insight into the way CSA is covered by other media outlets and to help determine whether the way in which CSA is covered changes in the future.

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AUTHOR NOTE

Ross E. Cheit is an associate professor of political science and public policy at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Yael Shavit received her bachelor of arts degree in public policy and economics with honors from Brown University in 2008. She is currently a senior research assistant at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston's New England Public Policy Center.

Zachary Reiss-Davis graduated from Brown University in 2008 and is currently a senior research associate at Forrester Research, conducting research to help technology companies succeed.

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