



Credit: Artur Rutkowski

Covering Child Sexual Abuse

By Jeanny Gering

Journalists Alex Renton, Katharine Quarmby and Olly Lambert spoke with the Dart Center about the challenges of reporting on child abuse, and trauma experts Sarah Heke and Shelagh Beckett shared tactics for interviewing victims of childhood trauma.

Children deserve special consideration when they wind up in the news. So, too, do victims and survivors of child abuse. According to a recent study, just one in eight victims of child sexual abuse in England is brought to the attention of authorities. Over a two-year period, 50,000 cases of child sexual abuse were recorded, yet it is widely held that as many as half a million children were abused over that same period.

The study found that only about 15% of young people who were sexually abused received any sort of treatment or help. Over the past few years, adults who were abused as children have started coming forward, and in the UK, historic cases of child abuse have been exposed and widely reported on. And the journalists covering these distressing stories have faced unique challenges.

The Dart Centre's Jeanny Gering spoke with journalists Alex Renton, Katharine Quarmby and Olly Lambert, and trauma experts Sarah Heke and Shelagh Beckett, about how to establish clear boundaries with sources, tactics for interviewing survivors of child abuse and self-care strategies to consider while reporting on emotionally charged stories.

THE REPORTING PROCESS

Jeanny Gering: While reporting on allegations of child abuse, did you learn anything you hadn't anticipated? Or that you wished you'd known before you started?

Olly Lambert: When I began my reporting I was really enthusiastic about this project. I knew it would be a long process but I had no major concerns. I spoke with two psychotherapist friends of mine who grew increasingly worried about me getting involved in this project. But I was quite blasé about that: I had done 40 films and had been to war zones where I worked on all kinds of difficult, dark subjects. Eventually one of them told me, "You can always get on a plane and leave Syria, but this stuff is going to stick to you." I dismissed it at the time, but those words became incredibly important.

I simply didn't expect that having these long and detailed conversations would have such a dramatic effect on me. It took me about three months to realise that it was really eating into me, and that was only after I started having regular conversations with Jan Hawkins, a therapist and therapeutic supervisor who specialises in working with survivors of sexual abuse. She was also a consultant on the project.

Early on, Jan said quite simply that being affected by this kind of subject matter is "what happens when we do our jobs properly", which was very heartening and gave us a starting point to work toward protecting both my interview subjects and myself. This became my most important relationship, and enabled me to do the work.

Alex Renton: Covering stories of child abuse was a unique experience for me. I had interviewed victims of war with all sorts of symptoms of PTSD, so I thought I knew quite a lot. But the first thing I'd suggest to journalists covering this kind of story is to make sure they understand the boundaries and parameters.

I crossed a journalistic line because I was writing about my own childhood experiences at an abusive school that had a scandal attached to it. So while that ultimately proved helpful– I got an enormous amount of useful information from people who saw me as both a journalist and as a fellow sufferer – it wasn't something I had prepared myself for and was certainly something I should have thought more about.

Baseline knowledge of PTSD and an awareness of complex relationships with subjects is an important starting point, but it's also about what you bring to the interview. There is nothing wrong with standard techniques for gaining trust, as long as you are being honest. But if you talk with someone who experienced trauma in childhood, you need to be more careful about where you take the interview. Make sure your subject understands how the information might be used and what the follow-up might be. Be clear about the meaning of terms like "off the record" and "anonymous contribution."

Katharine Quarmby: I've covered stories about disability hate crimes and some have involved child abuse. Covering these cases taught me how important it is to acknowledge different forms of violence: Psychological abuse, neglect and bullying are all on a spectrum of violence perpetrated against people young and old, and it's important to capture them all in our reporting.

I learned that we also have a responsibility to make sure we don't revictimise. Our job is to move a case towards justice, which is typically served in the courts. But that doesn't always happen and sometimes, a media report can help. At the same time it is our responsibility not to name a perpetrator who may be innocent. We are under more pressure as investigative journalists: we aren't the court of justice, but we can be part of the process for reaching justice.

JG: How did you select your contributors? And how did you talk them through the process of being interviewed and appearing in the news?

OL: Filming anyone for a documentary is a massive responsibility, but it was never bigger than on this. Early on in the production process, we decided that every victim or survivor of abuse we interviewed would appear in the film because many had spent decades being ignored or not believed. So I had to feel completely confident that the subject was not only strong enough to be interviewed, but also strong enough to be seen by two to three million people once the film came out.

Many people wanted to take part but it was apparent that some weren't ready to take that step. The most important element for me was to understand their motivations for participating. Some had great reasons: they wanted to help others to see that they weren't alone; others simply felt they had been silent for too long and it was time to "own" their personal experience. But others had reasons that were less reassuring: they wanted to participate as some kind of revenge – I couldn't promise what the final product would be and I knew those people could be disappointed. Others I spoke with clearly didn't understand the full implications of an interview being broadcast to the nation.

As is always the case with documentaries, we were incredibly honest about what we were and weren't trying to do, who else we were filming and how long it was going to take. We also presented potential subjects with a worst-case scenario: we asked them to imagine that our conversation would be boiled down to its essence and might be seen by a person who had bullied them at school, or an ex-husband who didn't know their story. How would that feel? I wanted to introduce these potential scenarios because once they play out they can't be undone. We were very transparent, spending months fostering these relationships and checking in before and after filming. The public nature of what our subjects were dealing with made their experiences even more real to them, and we made an effort to connect some of our subjects to very good professional help.

AR: I take extra steps with victims of childhood sexual and emotional abuse, all of whom come to journalists for different reasons. They may feel a deep need to be heard by someone they see as an authority figure, so it becomes incredibly important to make it clear that you are not that authority figure. You may be able to tell their story, but they won't have control over it once they share it with you. They may speak with you for two hours and be shocked that only two quotes were used. This, to some extent is true of any interview, but in these cases I give more control to my sources because you're dealing with inflammatory material and with people who might have strong reactions to your work

I had to respond to a lot of letters after I published my first article and direct people to professional help or even to the police. I felt that anyone who contacted me needed to know that I couldn't be their solution, that it's a long road from making an allegation to achieving justice. It can be therapeutic for people to talk about their experiences, but it can also be taxing for them.

I did the painstaking journalistic job of meeting contributors, assessing their emotional state and their expectations for participating. And whether they'd be able to manage the disappointment if they didn't get what they'd hoped for. I took this part of my reporting process very seriously and it was time consuming. You also need to factor in the amount of time and energy required after the reporting is completed and the story is published. It's not only a moral duty: you too would suffer as a journalist if one of your subject's problems got worse because of your reporting.

ADVICE FROM TRAUMA EXPERTS

JG: How can a journalist prepare a source for an interview about their abuse?

Shelagh Beckett: It's important to think about whether they have family and friends to support them. Who already knows their story and who doesn't? That applies to both children and adults, as there is going to be potential fall-out when they share their story publicly. One of the key themes is the loss of power and control when children are abused. More often than not, taking time to build trust results in better access. It becomes much more of a partnership.

A journalist should also think about why an individual wants to share their story. An obvious example may be a mother who is embroiled in separation from her partner and child abuse allegations are made during that process. This may raise concerns about her motives, so understanding why someone wants to talk to you is very important.

JG: And that's something we should ask our source about directly?

SB: With adults it's important to ask about the context directly, but as a broad rule of thumb I avoid "why" questions with children. A child is often asked "why" when he or she does something wrong, and you want to avoid making a child feel like that. When children are abused there is obviously a huge loss of trust and journalists can avoid adding to that. Even with very young children, think about reasonable things they can influence and control and how to help them experience those feelings in an interview.

Never offer something you can't deliver on, but it can be helpful to convey the message that you are trying to build a relationship based on respect and that you are thinking about their preferences. Establishing ground rules is one way of doing that: Are there particular aspects of the story they want to include or that they definitely don't want to talk about? Children may use their own words for the abuse and the people involved. It's important to be mindful of these things to avoid confusion in an interview. For example, children may have two men in their life that they refer to as "Dad."

I also tell a child that I might not get everything right and that they should feel free to correct me if they think I might have misunderstood something. Similarly as a journalist, you have to show that you're doing your best to get it right. Children may like to tell you a story from beginning to end, or more likely depending on their age and what is important to them, they might jump to and fro. Children respond well to techniques such as active and reflective listening, where the interviewer repeats back the gist of what has been recounted.

JG: To what extent does this apply to adults who suffered abuse as children?

SB: Very much so. Giving some choice about where they want to start in their story can have a huge impact. Offer some prompts if it's difficult for the adult to know where to begin. During the interview try to ask open-ended questions like: "Can you tell me a bit more?" rather than giving explicit instructions. Also avoid using phrases like "I understand." We tend to say that without thinking to assure someone that we've heard them, but it can upset and potentially anger an interviewee as we can't fully appreciate much of what they went through. We need to think about "stock phrases" that we might use to reassure ourselves during an interview. If we phrase something clumsily in a way that might be unintentionally hurtful, then it's best to quickly acknowledge this: "Sorry I don't think I put that very well. What I meant was..."

JG: What do you think is the difference when someone approaches you to tell their story of abuse versus you approaching them?

Sarah Heke: It can be quite politically and emotionally charged for various reasons. Some might have been let down in the past because they felt their story wasn't adequately told, for example, or they may feel abused by "the system." But whatever they have experienced, it's important for you to find out what they expect from you as a journalist.

JG: What can a journalist look out for when interviewing a victim of child abuse?

SH: We would encourage the subject to take the interview at their own pace, and for the journalist to pay close attention to the way they are responding. If a subject is getting more aroused or upset, react to it gently. Try things like getting up and moving around with your interviewee subject to create some space and a bit of a break. If someone seems embarrassed, it's important not to come across as judgmental. It's a delicate balance between giving your subject the feeling that they are being heard and making sure they aren't using you as a vehicle to offload all of their troubles.

Follow their story and their reactions to telling it. If you sense that it's becoming too distressing, return to an earlier topic or help to make them aware of the situation. It's fair to stop and ask if they want to talk about this in so much detail.

JG: Are there certain questions we should not ask?

SH: I don't think so. It may be that the same question will shut one person down and won't be a problem for another. It's more important to remain open and encourage the subject to talk about what they're comfortable with.

JG: What signs can journalists look out for that may indicate we need to be more careful during an interview?

SH: When a person starts to avoid eye contact and becomes irritated or distant, or starts breathing heavily, or if they zone out, it's likely a sign that they are feeling or thinking about things that are triggering intrusive memories.

Don't leave someone with a really distressing thought at the end of the interview. Instead, ask about their plans afterwards. Do they have some self-care measures in place?

It's also helpful not to jump in with an assumption about their feelings, for example something like, "You're looking really agitated, is it because you're still angry with your abuser?" Instead ask, "Are you still ok to talk about this, or do you want to take a break?"

JG: Is there something unique to the trauma caused by child abuse?

SH: Shame and self-blame are generally more prevalent. "Why did this happen to me? What is it about me?" Those kind of negative thoughts are more likely to be activated than they would be in a trauma from a car accident, for example, which would trigger thoughts and feelings that are more fear-based.

As journalists you shouldn't avoid the issue of shame because that might make the person feel like they are not being listened to. If it comes up, you can try to normalise it. It helps to have a bit of knowledge about "developmental memory." As a child you form memories differently – when you're 18 years old you don't have the same narrative as a five year-old. So an abuser might have said a child was ugly or special, or even threatened a child's life. Victims may not have received help to work through all of this.

SELF CARE & STORY SELECTION

JG: Sometimes vulnerable subjects can build up expectations that go beyond having their story published. What have you found helpful in negotiating these tricky boundaries?

OL: This was one of the most important things for me. Many of our sources were sharing their stories either for the first time, or with a level of detail they had never shared before. As the repository for that information, I felt a huge responsibility to be respectful of that.

There was also the additional responsibility that this film was going to be broadcast on television. It made the film very difficult to edit because I felt as though each of my subjects were on my shoulder, wanting me to get it right.

And there was another, much more complex dimension that made the process difficult. I was explaining to my supervisor, Jan Hawkins, that I felt unworthy of the task at hand. I felt guilty asking people to unpack their lives and unearth their pain, and much to my confusion, I felt ashamed of what I was doing. She stopped me after a few minutes and pointed out very simply that this was a perfect example of “counter transference.” She pointed out that the words I was using like “shame,” “guilt,” and “lack of self-worth” were basically the same words used by my subjects in our interviews. In some small way I had absorbed their feelings and I was carrying them around with me. It was a very difficult but also fascinating process to try and separate “my stuff” from theirs.

JG: Did you have a strategy to deal with the challenge of being so close to your subjects’ stories?

OL: I never wanted to become a campaigner on behalf of my sources—I wanted to be the most truthful teller of their stories and in order to do that I needed to have clear eyes.

That process became slightly muddled. So Jan and I had an hour-long conversation each week, and she helped me see what was my responsibility and what wasn’t. For example I was never going to be able to take away their pain and I couldn’t make promises to make it better. But I could be respectful and truthful. I could listen with empathy and use that to make their experiences as visceral and understandable as possible. That was ultimately what they wanted: to be heard and understood and believed. So these sessions helped me more effectively do my job as a documentary-maker and not slip into the role of therapist, supporter or friend.

JG: Alex, what did you do to protect yourself over the course of working on stories of child abuse at your own school?

AR: My wife is a child therapist so I talked about a lot of issues with her. I also have a friend who is a trauma expert and I discussed some of the worst cases with her: examples of self-harm or dealing with a perpetrator who was still around.

I lined up people who could help, although I had to be careful for confidentiality reasons not to mention the victims’ names, for instance. Still, some thought I had gotten too involved and I was getting too anxious about the cases.

As a freelancer you’re mostly on your own, but I felt a real sense of obligation and had to handle that without a lot of support from the media organisation that published the story. A story like this is a big personal investment. To do a morally and ethically half-decent job, you’re going to put in a lot of hours before and after the story.

JG: And Katherine how do you deal with the challenges of covering child abuse stories?

KQ: Before taking on a story, I tend to observe the trial. I only work with people involved once the trial is over, because that's when I'm able to report the full story safely. There can be tremendous legal risks involved, and especially as a freelancer you have to think through these sorts of issues. It can be very difficult to verify certain aspects of an abuse story as they often happen in very intimate spheres.

Getting legal advice and being clear about the legal situation of your sources gives you some reassurance before putting yourself on the line.

These cases can be very time-consuming. I've worked on stories that took a full year. So I have become careful and always ask in the very beginning whether the potential subject has spoken to a lawyer and who their lawyer is. I push quite hard to be able to speak to that lawyer, too. I do this because I have to be very selective about which story I can pick up.

JG: What's your take on how the media should approach stories of child abuse allegations?

OL: I learned two things from my subjects that really shaped the film. I asked them what they felt the film should do, and one of the first things they said was that they couldn't stand how much the face of Jimmy Savile and other celebrity abusers were used in the media. I understand why media outlets do this, but in the reporting on Savile, picture editors reached for the most revolting images they could find and he was on the front page of every newspaper.

That makes it really dramatic for the average reader, but for someone who was raped or sexually assaulted as a 10 year-old, the last thing they want is to confront a full size image of this garish monster. This kind of coverage excludes the most important people from the story: the victims themselves. So the people who have been affected most directly could not engage with the story publicly because it was too traumatic. Being sensitive and smart about images of offenders is important, and that's why I decided early on that the film should contain no images of Savile's face, and really the barest minimum of Savile as a figure. It wasn't his story, it was theirs, and it was our job to rebalance that equation.

There is also often a kind of salacious excitement when reporting on the actual abuse; it effectively becomes about who put what when and where. That is not only deeply off-putting to an audience; it actually isn't the most important part of the story. The real and massively underreported story is about how the events of many years ago had shaped the lives of my subjects and are still shaping their lives today. Even my mum asked me, "Why are you doing a film on Jimmy Savile? Haven't we heard enough?" And I replied that we haven't heard the least bit about it because we need to hear about the effects of it all to more fully understand.

JG: What kind of coverage do you find helpful?

SB: In general coverage of child abuse, there is often spoken or implied criticism that goes like this: If the story happened a long time ago, why has it not been told before? I think that is an important element for journalists to include in their stories. Perhaps we don't put enough emphasis on the pressures for victims "not to tell." The abuser will have typically used treats or threats or perhaps a combination of both to prevent a child from speaking out.

Asking questions in an interview about some of the things the abuser did to pressure the child is one way of getting at that bigger question, and it may help readers understand more about pressures not to disclose.

Some children may think that they told or tried to tell someone about the abuse, but they might have done so in an oblique way. For example, if the abuser was a babysitter, the child might

have said, “I don’t like it when Jamie looks after us.” The child feels that he or she has given a big clue and might expect the parent to react, whereas the parent might not understand the context and not take it seriously. More media coverage that makes it clear why it can be so hard for children – and adults – to speak up would be really helpful.

Particularly in cases of sexual and physical abuse, children are often made to believe things that are not true through what are known as “cognitive distortions.” For example, an abuser may tell the child that he does what he does because of the child: “You make me feel like this” or “the way you look makes me want to do this.” And children really can learn to believe it’s their fault. When they grow up and are still hard on themselves for what happened, it’s important to take the time in an interview to point out that they were only a child when the abuse occurred. Perhaps encourage them to think about a child of that age who they know now – how difficult it might be for such a child to tell. I’m often struck by how critical people are of their younger selves.

Using positive language can be helpful, too. Let people know they are “strong” or “brave” and be sure to thank them for sharing their story. Children especially will value being told “thank you” explicitly—sending a postcard or a note afterwards provides some tangible record and has been a helpful practice during and after documentaries I’ve worked on.

Check with children and adults about how they want to be identified: people react differently to labels such as “victim” or “survivor”. Some don’t want to be called either. There can be elements of victimisation in a person’s account but it’s also about recognising and calling attention to the journey, and the strength or resilience and positive developments that have happened since.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Alex Renton is a freelance journalist who specializes in poverty, development, the environment, food culture and food policy around the world. He is a contributing editor of the Observer magazine and writes regularly for Newsweek, The Guardian, The Observer, The Times, the Daily Mail, Intelligent Life and Prospect Magazine, and others. He has written a series of stories on abuse in boarding schools and other child care institutions for The Guardian and is currently writing a book on the history of the boarding school system (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017).

Katharine Quarmby

Katharine Quarmby is a writer and journalist, a contributor at Mosaic Science magazine and Royal Literary Fund Fellow at the London School of Economics. Previously, Quarmby worked as a producer for the BBC, a correspondent at the Economist and as a contributing editor at Newsweek Europe. She has written two books for adults, including *Scapegoat: Why We Are Failing Disabled People*, which won the Ability Media International Award, and *No Place to Call*

Home: Inside the Real Lives of Gypsies and Travellers, which was shortlisted for the Bread and Roses award. She is also a pro bono coordinator of the Disability Hate Crime Network and a member of the Crown Prosecution Service National Scrutiny Panel on Disability Hostility.

Olly Lambert

Olly Lambert is a BAFTA and Emmy Award-winning filmmaker. He has shot, produced and directed over 25 documentaries for broadcasters including the BBC, Channel 4 and Sky One. Most recently, his feature length documentary Abused: The Untold Story aired on BBC1. Over 18 months, he interviewed many survivors and victims of sexual abuse by Jimmy Savile and others, as well as the key figures who were at the frontline of a story that continues to send shockwaves around British institutions, police forces and the legal system.

Shelagh Beckett

Shelagh Beckett gained extensive experience as a practitioner and manager specialising in children's services, adoption and fostering. She works independently providing consultancy to local authorities, the third sector and the media. Beckett is regularly appointed as an expert witness and also lectures on specialist post graduate and post qualifying child care courses. She has been series consultant to many documentary programmes featuring social work, child protection, fostering and adoption – including various award-winning BBC series.

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