

Education and prevention through media. Interview with public relations officers

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“Don’t Offend” (German: “Kein Täter werden”) is a unique project in Germany that offers free and confidential therapy for people with pedophilia. In 2005, the project started at the Institute of Sexology and Sexual Medicine of the Charité Hospital in Berlin with a large media campaign to draw the attention of those affected. Today, the therapeutic offer is available in numerous cities throughout Germany. The aim of “Don’t Offend” is to prevent sexual assaults by giving people with pedophilia and hebephilia the opportunity to come to terms with their sexual preference.

Jens Wagner was responsible for the project’s public relations and networking work from 2011 to 2018. Today, Maximilian von Heyden has taken over this task.

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Dear Jens and Maximilian, thank you very much for your agreement to do an interview with us. This interview is mainly about your public relations work in the project “Don’t Offend”, what experiences you have had with the media, and what role you attribute to the media.

How did you get involved in this project?

Jens Wagner (JW): I previously worked mainly as a writer and editor for various TV stations. After a few years, I realized that I was longing for a job in which I could make a difference and have a lasting impact on society. I wanted to do something that was not only fun and fulfilling but also benefited other people. I had often read about the prevention project at the Charité hospital in Berlin and was fascinated by its approach. When friends told me one evening that they knew a medical doctor working in the project and that there was currently a vacancy for press and public relations work, I applied. Three days later, I had an interview and was hired.

Maximilian von Heyden (MvH): I was familiar with the project “Don’t Offend” from my studies, and I knew about the high prevalence of CSA

and about the variety of motives for committing these crimes. In addition, I had to deal with a CSA incident in my immediate environment, which is why I was already intensively concerned with the topic before I started working for the prevention network. When the chairman of a foundation approached me about a vacancy in the prevention project for young people, I immediately identified positively with it and decided to apply because I had the impression that I could contribute something meaningful here.

What does or did your work in the prevention project involve?

JW: In my role as press officer, the focus was mainly on the conception and implementation of communication strategies as well as press and public relations work. This included answering press inquiries, organizing and taking on interviews, writing press releases, as well as organizing, conducting and moderating press conferences. I also designed and edited the project's website and its social media channels. And I invested a lot of time in networking and lobbying for the development and expansion of the prevention network and for the intensification of cooperation with other institutions. This position for press and public relations work was only set up when I joined the project. The great thing about it was that I was able to contribute a lot of what I had already learned and was passionate about, such as developing and implementing event formats, films, and commercials. In this context, I realized, among other things, the commercial "Kein Täter werden" (Don't offend) together with the director Bernhard Semmelrock and the short film "Stigma" with Peter Jeschke as producer and director.

MvH: As the person now responsible for health communication in the prevention network, my goal, in cooperation with Clara Stockmann, is to positively influence the help-seeking behavior of those affected, i.e., to increase self-identification with one's own problem, to educate and destigmatize about the help offered, its contents, and its effectiveness. We have chosen the term "health communication" as a guiding concept for this work, since press and public relations work are only instruments to realize this work which is oriented towards psychological findings. We differentiate between target groups and channels and apply the findings of help-seeking research. In concrete terms, this means that we develop and implement campaigns, organize or participate in specialist events,

deal with press inquiries, and establish contact with political and other stakeholders.

Before you worked here, what did you know about CSA and pedophilia, and where did you learn it? How do you see your knowledge at that time today?

JW: Until then, my sources were exclusively the media. It was always clear to me that CSA can have serious consequences for those affected. I didn't know much about persons with pedophilia, except that they were always associated with CSA, at least in the media. That was my level of knowledge when I started at Charité. And if you had asked me back then if CSA offenders were persons with pedophilia, I probably would have answered: "I think so."

The issue of child protection has always been important to me. But the concept that not every person with pedophilia becomes a perpetrator of sexual violence against children and that preventive therapy services for persons with pedophilia can prevent acts, I found particularly appealing. Especially after I started my job, I realized how much resentment I had towards pedophilic individuals. I had my previous view, as I said, mainly through my own reception of the media. These resentments have diminished over time through personal contact with the participants in the project and discussions with my psychological and medical colleagues. I quickly realized how important it is that people who seek help should also receive help and that there is no reason to deny them this. Especially when people seek help in order not to harm others and themselves!

In connection with my work, I read more and more studies and learned that not all CSA acts are committed by persons with pedophilia and that other factors besides sexual preference can be decisive for committing such acts. For example, lack of empathy, own experiences of abuse, and much more. And that it is a great challenge for someone who has this sexual inclination not to act on it and to learn to live with it. A very important learning experience for me was the differentiation between sexual inclination and sexual behavior. To understand that no one chooses their sexual preference and orientation, but of course everyone is responsible for their behavior.

MvH: I had already explored the concept of pedophilia before I took the job, and of course I continued to do so during my work. Before that, I already had the mindset "I am a human being and nothing human is alien to me" – otherwise I wouldn't have wanted to take the job. But working

on destigmatization and the consequences of sexual traumatization at the same time has repeatedly triggered integration tensions. In retrospect, it was not so much my level of knowledge that evolved; it was my attitude. It creates cognitive dissonance to destigmatize those affected, to protect their human dignity, and to advocate for them to get help, on the one hand, and at the same time to be confronted with convinced pedophilic sex offenders who actively work against the prevention network, sometimes beyond the law, or who go to great lengths to motivate persons with pedophilia to act out their preference. Here it is not always easy to keep one's composure. This is what has shaped the development of attitudes, to find an adequate way of dealing with the emotions that are understandably intense on all sides in connection with both the sexual preference pedophilia and CSA.

What did you particularly enjoy about your work, or are there moments that you remember fondly? What negative experiences did you make?

JW: As I mentioned, it was great to bring a lot of what I liked to do before into this job. That I could work in a cinematic way. And that the core of my work was always about people. That's why networking was essential to me. Also, in my opinion, child protection can function more successfully if all the stakeholders in this important field of work are involved and connected to be part of the network with their diverse competencies. Particularly through our films (Jeschke & Wagner, 2017, 2018) and Commercials ("Kein Täter werden", 2013, 2018) I was able to gain a much deeper insight into the lives of persons with pedophilia, for whom the therapeutic services are intended. That was an important experience, and, above all, it helped me grow as a person. Also important was to learn that not everything in life is black or white.

Unfortunately, however, there have also been repeated attacks and accusations against our work from very different areas. From some sides, for example, we were accused of protecting offenders with our work.

From some specific Internet forums came the accusation that we deny that children can also have fun having sex with adults. This is, of course, completely absurd and contradicts all clinical experience and all serious scientific studies. Accordingly, we have always communicated here quite clearly that there is no such thing as "consensual sexual relations" between children and adults. For reasons of developmental psychology alone, a child cannot consent consensually and cannot assess the consequences.

Dealing with such attacks was not always easy.

MvH: Of course, I particularly enjoy it when things you have thought about succeed – for example, cooperation projects with companies came about that allow for large coverage and a high degree of differentiation in addressing target groups. A particularly positive experience in the area of press relations was when an experienced science journalist contacted us with the intention of applying for a grant and reporting in detail on the work of the prevention network (Smith, 2021). Through his unusually detailed research, a comprehensive and internationally published picture of the work of the prevention network was created for the first time, which also allowed that critics with whom we ourselves had never had any exchange had their say. Before the article was printed, Undark Magazine gave us a fact check with over 40 questions. This kind of quality journalism was very encouraging.

In contrast to this experience, there was a particularly negative one. A journalist called us and said something like, “So, I’ve always reported positively about you, but now I’ve come across criticism, I’m horrified by it, and I’m going to write something negative because I see myself as an investigative journalist and I’m outraged.” And then she published a completely undifferentiated, polemical article, which then also led to a right-wing political party starting protest actions. There have been marches on a clinic campus and people have rung the doorbells of citizens in the vicinity of the clinic and warned about the “danger” posed by the pedophile patients. Also, the site manager of the project was summoned to the ministry. Yet the criticism was neither new nor unknown. Instead of reflecting on her own working methods and questioning why she had overlooked them, the journalist consequently launched an emotional campaign against us. And that made me very angry, especially since we always point out the limitations of the approach and the limited validity of the available studies when talking to the press.

How does the typical cooperation with journalists look like?

JW: In my years as a press officer, I spent a lot of time explaining to journalists the differences between CSA and pedophilia and that one is not necessarily related to the other. That not every person with pedophilia commits sexual violence against children, and not every offender is a pedophilic person. Similar to what happened to me before I started my job, this information was new to many journalists and made quite a difference

to them. I was always very happy to do this because I could understand it and found it essential to enlighten.

At the same time, it annoyed me when I noticed in press inquiries that the focus of interest was not on education but rather in the direction of sensational journalism.

However, most of the time I found the cooperation with journalists to be very interested, professional, and appreciative.

MvH: With the exception of press conferences and press releases on significant events such as the start or completion of projects, we work with journalists rather passively, which is also due to the large number of inquiries. We acknowledge an average of 1.3 media inquiries per week. In recent years, the media landscape has changed noticeably. For example, the number of inquiries from podcasters, YouTubers, and affected people who are politically and publicly active themselves has increased considerably. The cooperation on well-known CSA cases is something special. Here, we have only been available to the press since 2020 after the recommendation of the network advisory board, as long as the question at the focus of the inquiry is “why people commit such acts”. The challenge here is to avoid suggesting that all persons with pedophilia become perpetrators and at the same time to use the opportunity to educate and draw attention to the offer.

How has media coverage of CSA developed in recent years from your perspective?

JW: Even though I no longer work in the project, I naturally notice that pedophilia is often discussed in the media. Unfortunately, this reporting is still usually done in connection with current cases of sexualized violence against children. And pedophilia and sexualized violence are still often equated. At the same time, however, I notice that there is also more informative and differentiated reporting than many years ago. I think that the project’s media work has made a big difference here and continues to do so.

MvH: I systematically follow the media coverage based on certain search terms. The prevention network is mentioned much more often than we would expect based on the number of press inquiries. Even without our involvement, the reporting is increasingly oriented towards the question of how acts can be prevented. Also, CSA is no longer equated with pedophilia as often as it still is in other countries. I find it positive that, similar to reports about suicides, a reference to the offer of help is made – and

often without our involvement – when cases of abuse that have become public are reported. What still happens is the publication of potentially stigmatizing images, such as the hand reaching for the child, even if it is not about a concrete case of CSA but about the work of the prevention network. But that's also hard to get out of people's heads. I find it interesting that especially young journalists have published excellent reports with high impact in the last few years and have reached a lot of people with their approach.

How do you think media can help prevent CSA?

JW: Of course, the media cannot directly prevent CSA. But they can, for example, help reduce stigmatization within society through differentiated reporting and thus encourage those affected to open up. This, in turn, helps prevent CSA. Especially in the case of offenders of sexualized violence, we know that social isolation can be a risk factor. In addition, media reports can draw the attention of the various affected groups to specific therapy offers.

The media can also educate people about what we as a society can do to intervene and prevent sexualized violence. After all, reporting often focuses heavily on highlighting the acts as well as the perpetrators. This form of reporting is undoubtedly essential. At the same time, however, I think it's important to show what every one of us can do, or what we can do together, to prevent and combat sexualized violence. How we can support children, for example, so that they don't have to do anything that makes them uncomfortable. For instance, that they don't have to hug their aunt just because it's their aunt, and that they don't have to shake hands with their neighbor just because he wants them to. In my opinion, learning integrity is just as crucial for children as knowing that they will always be seen and taken seriously. Not least to protect them from sexualized violence and show them that we are all attentive and are there for them when they need us.

MvH: Because of their reach, the media have enormous influencing power. Prevention research shows that the work of the media can also promote undesirable behavior. I have the feeling that journalists are often not aware of this ethical dimension. For example, victims of sexual trauma can be re-traumatized by reporting, and persons with pedophilia can be stigmatized, but they can also learn that it is apparently easy to find images of CSA on the darknet with little risk of discovery, and so on. If media

want to prevent CSA, they have to report on the causes and the risk and protective factors. They must also help to ensure that potential offenders learn about offers of help and that they are not unnecessarily stigmatized.

Do you feel that your work makes or has made a difference in the media coverage?

JW: I think so. I often recognize our wording in the reporting. The changes I recognize are not hurricane-like, but that would be expecting too much. I think that we have initiated a lot in terms of differentiation in media coverage of persons with pedophilia and CSA, and the media work of Clara Stockmann and Maximilian continues to make a lot of difference. In any case, I am happy about every report in which not every offender is automatically labeled a “pedophile”. After all, pedophilia is a clinical diagnosis and not a crime. Not everyone knows that, not even every journalist. And that’s why we need to continue to educate people about it.

MvH: The international comparison shows clearly that the work of the prevention network has contributed to a differentiation in media coverage in the sense of the distinction between sexual preference and behavioral disorder. The impressions in the cooperation with journalists from abroad and the reactions to international campaigns suggest that the discourse in Germany has decoupled from the rest of the world – it would be interesting to validate this impression empirically.

What do you think are the basics that should be in every article about CSA?

JW: The mentioned differentiation should be covered. Contact points for all possible victims should always be mentioned. Depending on the reporting topic, it can be essential to inform that there are different types of perpetrators and that perpetrators often come from the direct social environment. Likewise, as I said, information should be provided more often about what we can all do personally to prevent or intervene in sexualized violence.

This topic naturally frightens many people. That’s why I think it’s all the more important not to leave the public, both children and adults, to deal with it alone and provide information early. In my opinion, education and prevention should also be incorporated more into the institutions where children are cared for and grow up. This can also be taught in a

child-friendly way early in kindergarten. There are specialized counseling centers that can do this and do it well.

In my opinion, the media can support such processes through their reporting by which they raise public and political awareness.

MvH: I also think that, if you are going to report on CSA, you should provide accompanying information and also explain why you are reporting on it, similar to the issue of suicide. And when journalists report on CSA, they also have to be aware that there are many victims who may also need help or may be re-traumatized by the reporting. So a trigger warning and naming adequate points of contact is the minimum. That should be the framework of the report.

How should society and journalists in particular deal with at-risk groups in order to take preventive action against CSA?

JW: A differentiated approach from all of us is undoubtedly essential for this. Our society should offer help, such as therapy, to people who fear and/or are at risk of committing sexualized violence, especially to those who actively seek help. I believe it's our duty to protect children and to help people who need help.

At the same time, we have to protect against those who pose a permanent danger. That's what the penal system is for. Of course, the protection of children always comes first.

Through their reporting, journalists can contribute a great deal to clarification, factual discussion, and finding solutions.

MvH: We know from help-seeking research that it is important to address risk groups in a differentiated way and without stigmatization. For example, one cannot expect every affected person to already conceptually understand their impulses and inclinations and to have integrated them into their self-image. This process of understanding can be accelerated through differentiated communication. Positive case reports can also reduce negative expectations of effectiveness and fears.

What can experts (scientists, consultants, etc.) do better in working with the media?

JW: Of course, science often communicates in a more complex way than journalism. That's why it's important to explain scientific research to the

public in an understandable way. That's why good science communication is so important.

In all the topics and areas we have been talking about we can only achieve the best possible results if we pull together. Especially when it comes to child protection, I think it's enormously important for the many disciplines involved in the topic to network and work together. If all who work with potential and real perpetrators, from politicians to specialized counseling centers and academia to people and institutions, share their knowledge and expertise to develop solutions and concepts jointly, they would serve as a fundamental building block for the most successful prevention and intervention of sexualized violence against children.

MvH: The current pandemic has clearly shown the importance of good cooperation between the media and experts. In my opinion, experts should always point out the limitations of the knowledge they have and make conflicts of interest transparent. This is the only way to gain trust and generate positive change in a highly complex issue like CSA.

Thank you very much for the interview!

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