

Some Things Take Time: A Quantitative Content Analysis of German Press Coverage of Human Trafficking

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Abstract

Human trafficking (HT) can lead to other types of crime, such as kidnapping, smuggling, and drug trafficking. According to the 2021 Global Estimates, the number of victims is rapidly growing and in 2021 stood at 49.6 million, which is almost ten million more than in 2016. This study, a quantitative content analysis of press articles in Germany, demonstrates the dynamics of coverage during the pandemic and quarantine measures. Methodologically we rely on Entman's (1993)

four-functional classification, including portraits of victims and perpetrators, moral judgments, remedies, and calls to action. In addition, the connection between the political orientation of the newspapers and the coverage of the topic is revealed. The results show, that media construct their own reality: They create a stereotypical victim and focus on certain types of HT. The topic is given a strong political connotation, and the boundaries between HT and human smuggling are blurring.

Keywords: Framing analysis, German press, human trafficking, media coverage, pandemic.

Algumas Coisas Levam o seu Tempo: Uma Análise Quantitativa do Conteúdo da Cobertura da Imprensa Alemã Sobre o Tráfico de Seres Humanos

Resumo

O tráfico de seres humanos (TSH) pode levar a outros tipos de crime, como sequestro, contrabando e tráfico de drogas. De acordo com as Estimativas Globais de 2021, o número de vítimas não pára de crescer e em 2021 situou-se em 49,6 milhões, o que é quase dez milhões a mais do que em 2016. Este estudo, uma análise quantitativa de conteúdo de arti-

gos de imprensa na Alemanha, demonstra a dinâmica da cobertura durante a pandemia e medidas de quarentena. Metodologicamente, baseamo-nos na classificação quadrifuncional de Entman (1993), incluindo retratos de vítimas e perpetradores, julgamentos morais, soluções e apelos à ação. Além disso, revela-se a ligação entre a orientação política dos

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jornais e a cobertura do tema. Os resultados mostram que os meios de comunicação constroem a sua própria realidade: criam uma vítima estereotipada e centram-se em certos tipos

de TSH. O tema recebe uma forte conotação política e as fronteiras entre o TSH e o contrabando de seres humanos estão a confundir-se.

Palavras-chave: Imprensa alemã, tráfico de seres humanos, cobertura jornalística, análise de enquadramento, pandemia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Slave trade has not disappeared and lives on today under a different guise, namely “human trafficking” (HT), which can lead to other types of crime, such as kidnapping, smuggling, and drug trafficking. According to the 2021 Global Estimates, the number of victims is rapidly growing and in 2021 stood at 49.6 million (ILO et al., 2022), which is almost ten million more than in 2016. The pandemic has not only increased economic inequality, but also transferred HT to the virtual world, because laundering of virtual currencies has become easier (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021; UNODC, 2021; Smith, 2022). The number of instances of HT is increasing, despite the significant measures implemented by governments (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Mass media performs a dual role here: Spreading knowledge about HT, informing the audience for self-insurance purposes and to identify victims, but also creating a picture based on which the government makes decisions in combating this phenomenon. Media coverage of HT has been studied at different regional levels across the world, particularly in the USA (Johnston et al., 2015; Sanford et al., 2016; Austin & Farrell, 2017), Great Britain (Dugan, 2013), and Germany (Küblbeck, 2019). This study, a quantitative content analysis of press articles, investigates the dynamics of coverage during the pandemic and accompanying quarantine measures. Methodologically we rely on Entman’s (1993) four-functional classification, including portraits of victims and perpetrators, moral judgments, remedies, and calls to action. In addition, the study considers the connection between the political orientation of the newspapers and the coverage of the topic.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Human trafficking and the case of Germany

Human trafficking is imprecise, shapeless, distant. Various official sources present different figures since it is impossible to determine the exact number of victims in the modern world. For instance, the UNODC states that there were 325 cases of HT in Germany in 2020. However, according to the BKA report, law enforcement agencies reported approximately 459 cases of HT in 2020 (DW, 2022). The German NGO network against trafficking (KOK) considers that there are no national, comprehensive, and reliable statistics on HT in Germany (Blücher et al., 2020). This means an ambiguous and vague data situation in this area (Haverkamp, 2018).

The real amount of HT is not fully revealed due to at least six factors which directly affect media coverage. Firstly, one of the reasons for this shortcoming is that not all cases of this phenomenon can be detected due to the lack of visibility of the crime. Secondly, ongoing monitoring of the phenomenon by various international, governmental, and non-governmental organizations differentiates depending on the methods and approaches of data collection and the extent to which logistical resources are made available. The process continues with the collected information being filtered through metadata analysis and then validated by state authorities. Exemplarily the annual U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons report is developed “based on information gathered from U.S. embassies, government officials, non-governmental and international organizations, published reports, news articles, academic research, research visits to all regions of the world and information sent to tipreport@state.gov” (U.S. Department of State, 2022, p. 52). Thirdly, not all victims seek help from law enforcement agencies and NGOs for their own safety and to avoid possible deportation from the country. This is further compounded by the “reluctance of victims and witnesses to disclose intimate aspects of their lives” (Alekseev & Rocha, 1973). Often, when alleged victims from Romania and Bulgaria in Germany dare to come forward, their statements are subsequently withdrawn (Spiegel, 2013). Fourthly, different scientific interpretations of the definition of HT fundamentally lead to a distorted picture of the criminal phenomenon due to the complexity of its mechanism of operation, meaning that differences in definitions can weaken the reliability of data on HT. Lee (2007) identified over 20 definitions of the concept of HT. The situation is complicated by the fact that the boundaries between “human trafficking” and “hu-

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man smuggling” are blurred. Fifth, because of the historical legal background, investigations have focused on forced prostitution (Follmar-Otto & Rabe, 2009). Although several measures have been adopted to combat sexual exploitation, little has been undertaken with regard to HT for the specific purpose of labor exploitation (Probst et al., 2016). However, things are changing, and exploitation is now recognized in Germany in the practice of begging, trafficking for the purpose of committing criminal acts and forced marriage (BKA, 2021). Sixth, this is because HT is a control offence, i.e., without control, no crimes are recorded in this area (Zietlow & Baier, 2017). For instance, German federal criminal police statistics are based on reports from police departments on completed investigations (BKA, 2021). Against the background of the uncertainty of the phenomenon itself, it is extremely interesting to see how the media shapes the topic and its fundamental concepts.

2.2 Agenda-setting and news values

Agenda setting is “the phenomenon of the mass media selecting certain issues and portraying them frequently and prominently, which leads people to perceive those issues as more important than others” (Wu & Coleman, 2009, p. 776). Apart from choosing the topic itself, formal aspects such as headline size, article placement and photography signify the importance of the event (Conway & Patterson, 2008). Surette (1998) summarises from a content-related perspective why crime coverage is so widespread: Besides its social function by defining the limits of acceptable social behavior it foremost increases circulation and thus has economical value for media outlets (Surette, 1998). “Real’ but ‘atypical’ crimes such as those Anders Behring Breivik” (Cere et al., 2013) seem most attractive for the readers. This phenomenon can be explained by the relevance of news values. According to this framework, journalists have certain criteria for news value - and trivial offences do not fall into this category. Only those offences appear interesting that have a special, unusual significance due to the seriousness of the offence, the circumstances or the people involved (Galtung & Ruge, 1973). Media reports on crime are therefore not a reflection of reality. Neither is the number of articles proportional to the extent of crime, nor is the composition of the reported offences representative of the composition of real offences. Violent offences are disproportionately represented in media coverage.

2.3 Framing

Building on that media logic researchers argue that media hold a strong influence on the construction of social reality and function “within a pre-existing structure of social relationships and a particular social and cultural context” (McQuail, 2010). Framing assumes that the way an issue is described in news stories can affect the audience’s understanding of it (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). As Martinelli (2012, p. 2) points out, this “distinction is important because the main issue of sex trafficking already has a particular perception, but the problem is the frequency of news media and so awareness of the issue”.

Through framing the media, by creating some kind of information boundaries, helps to keep the audience’s attention focused on certain moments and phenomena. A frame is a knowledge structure for representing a stereotypical situation, which is easier to absorb and assimilate (Piterova & Teterina, 2016). Thus, stereotypes serve the interests of one social group and act as an embodiment of its self-assertion, protecting its position in society. From this perspective, framing could be used a manipulative tool, and that issue “frames originate from politicians and issue advocates rather than journalists” (D’Angelo, 2017; p. 3). In the present case, the study of frames is crucial because they provide the criteria based upon which the policy measures can be evaluated (McCombs et al., 1997). The increased interest of government officials influences the increase in stories (Sobel, 2014). From an empirical perspective, periodicals when covering this phenomenon often confuse related concepts in the field of trafficking, for instance, “human trafficking”, “sex trafficking” and “prostitution” (Chuang, 2014), while the interpretations and visions of journalists may reduce the readers’ focus solely to the female victim (Denton, 2010).

According to Entman, frames (1993) can be located at four stages in the communication process: the communicator, the text, the recipient, and the culture. Consequently, framing process involves three steps: framing, its setting and framing consequences (D’Angelo, 2002). De Vreese (2005) notes, there are frames in the newsroom because of both internal and external influences on the journalistic process. Journalistic frames could be identical to citizen or audience frames (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). HT, as a highly specific topic, is studied here in terms of issue-specific frames. When journalists address HT, other aspects related to this phenomenon – migration, refugee issues, prostitution, climate change and others – remain behind the scenes, or vice versa. At times, however, these processes are interconnected and inseparable,

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which can act as an element of defining a problem, a cause, or a way to solve it (Entman, 1993). A recent study showed that before the pandemic German media are more likely to rely on official sources, reporting on cases of sexual and labour exploitation with a focus more on persecution (Küblbeck, 2019). However, this may depend on the political stance of the newspapers concerned: Conservative media offer punitive measures, while liberal media focus on causes of crime and address wider societal issues to counteract the problem (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018).

2.4 Information sources

Valenzuela & McCombs (2019: p. 103) point out to four “elements” that could influence agenda setting: “(E)xchanges with sources that provide information for stories, the daily interactions among news organizations themselves, journalism’s norms, and traditions, and - more recently - online social media trends. Professional practices are the most determinant factor (...)” Among the external sources shaping the media agenda, government officials occupy an important place (Valenzuela & McCombs, 2019: p. 103). Most of the news favor official sources, and their positions and statements are hardly questioned (Gulati, 2010). Journalists cooperate with various organisations, including state and international organisations, when covering HT. The role of the victims of exploitation themselves is important. The words of victims can influence the formation of public opinion about an issue. Less heard are the voices of victims and their advocates (Johnston et al., 2014).

2.5 Professional constraints

The media plays a crucial role as the main provider of information, but especially in the case of HT is affected by organisational constraints and day-to-day routines (Reichert et al., 2018). When co-operating with information sources, a journalist may face, according to Islamova (2014), some difficulties and obstacles in covering HIV-related topics, which are very close to the topic of HT as well: (1) Limited number of experts to get information and interviews; (2) reluctance of people living with HIV and their relatives to communicate with journalists and give interviews for fear of being recognized; and (3) inability to verify certain information – for example life history, as the data on people living with HIV is confidential (Islamova, 2014). In addition, newspaper reporters said that there were difficulties regarding limited page

space (Reichert et al., 2018). Together, the prioritization of certain sources of information and the difficulties for journalists, in our view, make it difficult to cover an already latent crime like HT. This creates a media reality as opposed to a social reality, from which audiences may be able to draw their own picture of the problem.

2.6. Research Questions

Based on the foregoing, the following research questions are formulated.

Amount of coverage of HT

RQ 1.1: How frequently did German periodicals report on human trafficking during the pandemic (from January 2019 through December 2021)?

RQ 1.2: What were the changes in the number of articles?

Frames of coverage of HT

RQ 2.1: In what ways did newspapers and magazines define HT, identify its causes, attribute blame, offer solutions, and call to action?

RQ 2.2: How did periodicals frame the topic based on their political views?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

All the objects of the study are produced throughout Germany and are distinguished by typological features (qualitative, tabloid press) as well as by political positions. The prototypical representative of tabloid journalism in Germany is the *Bild Zeitung* (Klein, 1998), with a paid circulation of over one million (Statista Research Department, 2023); and close to conservative parties. *Welt* is assigned to the bourgeois-conservative spectrum and represents a recognizable economically liberal attitude. *Tageszeitung (taz)* is one of the ten largest national daily newspapers in Germany and has a centre-left/left political orientation (Bartels, 2021). *Spiegel* is a news magazine with a weekly circulation of more than a million, it is one of the biggest magazines of its kind in Europe and being known for having a centre-left political alignment (Bartels, 2021). *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) is newspaper with the widest circulation abroad (Balaban et al., 2016), and sees itself “as a liberal-conservative voice in business, politics and culture” (FAZ, 2019). *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

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(SZ) with the political perspectives of centre-left, progressive liberalism (Bartels, 2021) has a daily readership of over one million readers in Germany and a comparatively wide distribution globally (Balaban et al., 2016).

3.2 Sample

It should be noted that the articles published in *Bild* (federal edition), *Welt*, *Spiegel*, *taz* for the years 2019-2021 were selected via the electronic database LexisNexis by searching for the term “Menschenhandel” (human trafficking). Articles on HT published in *FAZ* and *SZ* were retrieved via the newspapers’ library. The sorting of 439 found articles was carried out according to the relative importance of the topic in the overall text. Among the articles, those in which “human trafficking” is interchanged with the term “smuggling” were not included. As a result, reports with primary and secondary focus amounted to 144 articles. The articles with a secondary focus were those in which at least 10% of the text was devoted to HT (the calculation was made according to the number of words without a title).

4. RESULTS

4.1 RQ 1 – Overview of human trafficking coverage

By examining RQ 1, it was found that six periodicals published 439 articles in 2019-2021, and over 635 items in 2016-2018¹. As can be seen from Figure 1, which shows the comparative dynamics of articles published together before and during the introduction and intensification of quarantine measures – from 2016 to 2021 – by all periodicals, except for *Spiegel*, all other newspapers reduced their attention to the topic of HT after the onset of the pandemic. Although a slight decrease can be seen in *taz* (from 135 to 130), and *Welt* (from 71 to 65), a sharp jump can be seen in *FAZ* (from 301 to 197), which was in the forefront before the pandemic and gave way to *taz* after lockdown was declared. This may be attributable to the fact that the pandemic made it difficult for *FAZ*, which has the largest correspondent network, to get information from other countries. In sum, the consistently weak coverage of HT in

¹ Only “Bild Bund” disappears from the list due to inaccessibility to information for 2016 in the LexisNexis database.

Bild and *Spiegel* is probably due to typological factors: Tabloid paper *Bild* with many photos and short commentaries, the number and scope of illustrations exceeds the content (Kolesnikova & Karpenko, 2012), so that articles on HT are informative in nature rather than large reports with in-depth analyses. Even though *Spiegel* is published once a week, this does not limit the quantitative possibilities of this periodical, as a single issue contains 124-132 pages, but it strengthens the focus on the diversity of topics in one issue per week, which is likely to be why articles on HT are rare.

Figure 1

Number of articles published by each edition between 2016-2018 and 2019-2021



In Figure 2, we can see the changes by year in the publications of each media during the period during which lockdown measures were in place. Naturally, the spread of coronavirus began to gradually reduce the share of “secondary” thematic coverage, which is clearly visible in the five periodicals. What is remarkable is that, once again, *FAZ* shows a dynamic very different to that of the other publications: While the interest in the topic of HT gradually drops to a minimum between 2019 and 2021, *FAZ*, after a significant drop of 20% in the number of articles in 2020, suddenly began to write more about the phenomenon in question – an increase of 15% in 2021. The reason for this might be that in May 2020, 16 members of the German Bundestag publicly supported the Nordic model which was followed by the CDU and FDP arguing against the prohibition of sex work. Consequently, the *FAZ*, with its centre-right political position, has addressed this topic of debate more frequently since June 2020. As the newspaper itself writes “it is unlikely that either side expects the debate to be less heated in 2021 than it was in 2020” (Feuerbach, 2021, own translation).

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Figure 2

Frequency of published articles by annual parameters between 2019-2021, by each year

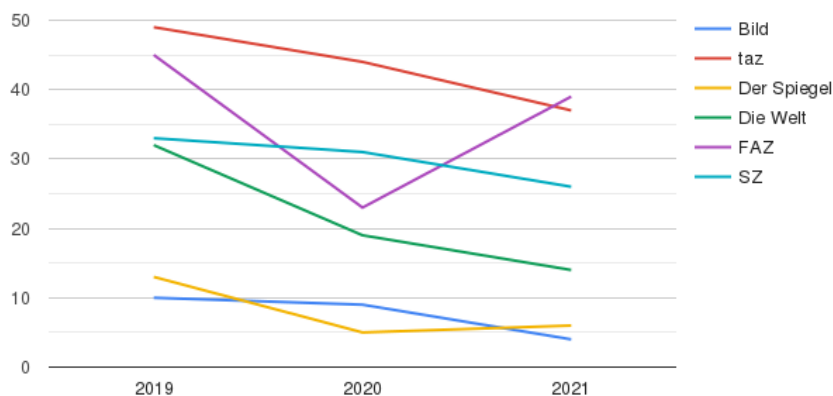


Table 1 reveals the degree of importance of the issue of HT in articles published during the study period. It is obvious that, overall, articles with primary and secondary focus lag behind the number of articles with peripheral focus. This trend is inherent in all periodicals at the same time, which justifies two accompanying factors: 1) The coronavirus and the topic of health have advanced to become a key agenda (Fotopoulos et al., 2022), while preventing the implementation of the main types of HT for the purpose of sexual and labor exploitation. 2) This once again proves that HT directly functions with other criminal activities, the importance of which, in turn, increases or contributes to the lessening of its coverage in the media. Examples include illegal migration, martial law in some countries, illicit money flows, the use of fraudulent travel documents, and cybercrime (Interpol, n.d.). Hence, the task of a journalist is multifunctional when preparing an article on HT, since this criminal act is flexible and adapts to time and various political and economic changes, and is relevant to many areas of society.

Table 1

Relevance given to the issue of human trafficking in comparison to other issues mentioned by the author (% of articles)

	Bild	taz	Spiegel	Welt	FAZ	SZ	Total
	<i>N = 23</i>	<i>N = 130</i>	<i>N = 24</i>	<i>N = 65</i>	<i>N = 107</i>	<i>N = 90</i>	<i>N = 439</i>
High relevance	5	27	5	19	12	13	81 (18.5)
Medium relevance	1	24	3	9	14	12	63 (14.4)
Low relevance	17	79	16	37	81	65	295 (67.2)
Total	23 (5.2)	130 (29.6)	24 (5.5)	65 (14.8)	107 (24.4)	90 (20.5)	439 (100)

3.2 RQ 2 – Frames and political orientation

The presence of frames in articles with a primary or secondary focus on HT (144) are classified according to Entman’s (1993) four-part typology: description of the problem, identification of cause, attribution of blame and proposed remedy, in addition, a call to action.

3.2.1 Story triggers, sources and dominant frames

Key events that triggered the writing of articles, are shown in Table 2. The overall results show that almost half of the stories (48.6%) were initiated by political and administrative actions (for instance, legal rules are envisaged to stop the negative consequences of the global division of labor, such as deaths in textile factories, the modern slaves on fishing trawlers or farm workers poisoned by pesticides). Similar to our results Küblbeck (2019) observes a strong focus on raids and police as triggers and proposed legislation as a reason for reporting on HT. Alike a study of news frames and story triggers in the US press in 1980 and 2006 determines that “a majority of the articles (60%), that were published during this period, were triggered by some official government action or event” (Gulati 2011, p. 370). Thus, we can assume that HT, regardless of country and time, is getting part of the public agenda at the expense of government actions. Criminal action was a news trigger in 15% of articles, more than half of which are stories published in *taz* (7.6%), which considers itself to be an counter-public newspaper, followed by *FAZ* and *SZ* (2% each). Meetings or conferences where anti-trafficking is more often discussed were the triggers for 7.6% of items, especially in *SZ* (3.5%). According to our data, journalistic initiative appears

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in about 3% of articles. A journalist admits that there are “difficulties to report on the issue without a specific occasion or event” (Küblbeck, 2019: p. 18f.). This already has a significant impact on the rest of the process: If there is no initiating key event, then there will be no coverage of a potential news story or public issue; interested parties who try to hide information can often successfully block the story; preference is given to institutional, influential sources with more information and other means; expecting journalists to take the first step towards sources misses some of the unique details of the stories (Reich, 2006).

Table 2

Key events that had impact on the writing of the articles (% of articles)

	Bild N = 6	taz N = 51	Spiegel N = 8	Welt N = 28	FAZ N = 26	SZ N = 25	Total N = 144
Political/administrative/authority action	5	21	2	17	13	12	70 (48.6)
Elections/direct-democratic action/ petitioning	0	1	0	1	1	0	3 (2)
Meeting/conference	0	3	0	1	2	5	11 (7.6)
Protest/mobilizing event	0	1	0	0	3	1	5 (3.5)
Criminal action	1	11	1	2	3	3	21 (14.6)
Catastrophes and other incidents/conflicts	0	2	1	3	1	1	8 (5.6)
Journalistic initiative	0	0	1	1	0	2	4 (2.8)
Another real-world initiating event	0	1	0	0	3	0	4 (2.8)
No real-world event (e.g., publication, survey)	0	11	3	3	0	1	18 (12.5)
Total	6 (4.2)	51 (35.4)	8 (5.6)	28 (19.4)	26 (18)	25 (17.4)	144 (100)

92.3% (n=133) of the articles cited at least one source, 65.3% (n=94) used two sources, and 49.3% (n=71) cited three or more sources. The main cited actors were the media themselves, either expressing their point of view or referring to other media representatives – in a total of 15.7% of the articles. The second most important actor for journalists was the government – or the authorities that conduct business on behalf of the government (8.3%). The advantage of this type of source is that they are more often open to cooperation and are easily accessible (Gulati, 2011). On the downside, this curtails the journalist’s initiative to continue research. The third source of information was law enforcement authorities – police, security services,

military, prosecutor's office, which accounted for 7.4% of items. The words of scientists and experts are heard in 6.7% of cases. A voice was given to the victims of HT and their relatives in 4.9% of the stories. This is explained by the fact that victims do not always make contact with the media and publicize their stories, fearing persecution by criminals (Gulati, 2011). The voices of NGOs, the participants in criminal activity themselves, and the communities of sex workers are barely heard. Given the political predisposition of periodicals, centre-rights (*Bild*, *FAZ*) to use quotes from law enforcement agencies and experts more often, while centre-left/lefts (*Spiegel*, *taz*, *SZ*) refer more to media sources.

Dominant frames are identified according to the duration, frequency, and order of appearance of the various elements. Moreover, the headline and lead are given extra weight when determining a news story's dominant frame (de Vreese et al., 2016). Regarding HT these were crime, prosecution of crime, and the experiences of the victim (31%) and human rights/legislation (29.8%), which means that these articles more reflected the description of the phenomenon itself and real stories (Table 3). In most cases, prostitution (15.2%) was prevalent when it came to the topic of the ban on sex work. There was a discussion between political parties about the adoption of the Nordic model, in some cases the impact of the pandemic on this industry. Issues of migration and national security were less frequently represented than the above – 8.9%, which always attracted the attention of political actors. It is noteworthy that while *SZ* and *Spiegel* were more focused on human rights and legislation, others were oriented on crime. The dominance of prostitution was more frequent in *taz* and *FAZ*. This again corresponds with the results of the Germany KOK survey for 2010-2019 (Blücher et al, 2019), as well as non-European states (Sobel, 2014).

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Table 3

Dominant frames in coverage of human trafficking (% of codings)

	Bild	taz	Spiegel	Welt	FAZ	SZ	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Crime, its prosecution, victims	4	20	2	11	10	2	49 (31)
Human rights/legislation	1	12	4	9	6	15	47 (29.8)
Prostitution	0	12	1	4	7	0	24 (15.2)
Migration/security	0	6	0	3	3	2	14 (8.9)
Media	0	2	0	0	1	1	4 (2.5)
Economy/labour	0	2	0	0	0	1	3 (1.9)
History	0	0	1	0	1	1	3 (1.9)
Pandemic	0	0	0	0	2	0	2 (1.3)
Other	1	3	1	1	2	4	12 (7.6)
Total	6 (3.8)	57 (36)	9 (5.7)	28 (17.7)	32 (20.3)	26 (16.5)	158 (100)

3.2.2 Portrayal of victims as well as offenders

Prototypically following persons are in the focus of the articles: The victim was a girl under 18 years old, and the perpetrator a man over 40 years old. Yet, in 60.7% and 76.9% of cases, the age of the victim and perpetrator, respectively, was not mentioned. In addition, individual periodicals more often did not mention a specific person identifiable by gender and age categories. However, despite this, the sum of the above two tables again makes it clear that the media show a specific reality: According to the UN, most victims found in 2020 worldwide (60%), in 2019-2020 in Germany (average 94%) are women (UNODC, 2018). Media often choose facts in the form of sexually exploited people for their stories. By shaping the ideal victim, journalistic outlets can create a persona that promotes sympathy and cooperative action among the public. Sexual exploitation is one of the most common forms of HT, which makes it easy for journalists to cover it. In addition, according to Borer (2015), in many instances, the media, by providing a certain picture of traffickers, reinforces existing stereotypes in society. As a result, if traffickers do not really fit the media picture they are portraying, then they may not be identified as such. More problematically, it harms those victims who do not conform to these stereotypes (Gregoriou & Ras, 2018).

3.2.3 Causes, blame, remedies, and calls

Providing information about the origins of a social problem may contribute to the adoption of necessary decisions at state level and the formation of a well-founded opinion about the victims among the audience. So, most of the articles list at least one reason for HT, while 35.4% of the stories did not take care about it (Table 4). A thematic classification reveals that political or administrative reasons are indicated in 17.7% of articles, economic reasons in 11.4%, and reasons related to personal characteristics in 10.2%. More specifically, 7.4% of articles mention lack of legislation as a reason for HT, 5.7% religious issues. Other reasons include cultural, family, scientific and technological aspects, aspects of health, climate change, colonization, pandemic, globalization, the authority of the criminal, which together account for 16.6% of the articles. In articles on sexual exploitation, usually economic, then political and personal factors were mentioned more often, while reports about labour exploitation – political, economic, then personal issues. Precise data on the circumstances that pushed the victims to fall into the hands of traffickers in Germany and thus determine to what extent the press constructs reality, are not available. However, globally, in 2016-2018 the most frequently identified risk factors were economic necessity (51%), dysfunctional family (20%), intimate dependency (13%) (UNODC, 2021). The pandemic did not significantly change these indicators, as the researchers believe that push factors are most often economic criteria (Farrell & Fahy, 2009). Thus, it can be assumed that the media adds a little political colouring to the phenomenon of HT in general and labour exploitation in particular within the framework of migration processes.

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Table 4

Causes of HT highlighted in the articles (% of codings)

	Bild N (%)	taz N (%)	Spiegel N (%)	Welt N (%)	FAZ N (%)	SZ N (%)	Total N (%)
<i>Political/administrative causes</i> (including incorrect actions of the government, migration)	0	4	0	1	2	1	8 (4.6)
Political instability (e.g., war)	0	2	0	1	1	2	6 (3.4)
Lack of legislation	0	5	0	6	0	2	13 (7.4)
Problems in the system of law enforcement organs	0	0	0	4	0	0	4 (2.3)
<i>Economic need/issues</i> (e.g., unemployment)	0	6	2	0	0	1	9 (5.1)
Poverty	0	3	0	1	1	3	8 (4.6)
Financial indebtedness	0	1	0	1	5	0	7 (4)
<i>Private issues</i>	0	0	0	2	0	0	2 (1.1)
Lack of education (secular/religious/language knowledge)	0	2	0	1	0	3	6 (3.4)
Religious issue (e.g., voodoo)	1	5	0	1	1	2	10 (5.7)
<i>Dependency</i> (e.g., loverboy/on drugs, alcohol)	0	1	0	2	0	3	6 (3.4)
<i>Other related crime actions</i> (e.g., kidnapping, violence etc.)	0	4	0	0	1	0	5 (2.9)
<i>Other</i>	1	9	5	4	2	8	29 (16.6)
<i>No causes</i>	4	20	2	11	15	10	62 (35.4)
Total	6 (3.4)	62 (35.4)	9 (5.1)	35 (20)	28 (16)	35 (20)	175 (100)

Blaming is usually associated only with negative events, due to unforeseen or expected consequences that cause damage to society. Literally, in the accusation, responsibility is placed on a certain object for these consequences, including reasoning about causality, responsibility, and guilt (Shaver, 1985). Official accusations by law enforcement authorities have been considered as well. There was no accusation attributed in about 33% of the articles, but most often the victims and their relatives

(9.6%) were blamed for the origins of HT or what happened. Whereas *Welt* and *SZ* most often blamed the victims or those around them (9.7% and 8%), *taz* and *FAZ* blamed the government most of all (9.8%).

It was expedient to study the subject of the accusation, that is, the one who imposes the accusation. In view of the fact that official accusations from law enforcement agencies were taken into account, in 11.9% of items one can notice the indictment of a certain person in committing a crime. There were articles where media representatives themselves pointed to those responsible for the consequences of events – these are 10.8% of stories, experts/scientists, as well as victims of HT and those close to them considered someone or something to be guilty – in 7.6% and 7%, respectively. If there were more stories with accusations by law enforcement agencies (5.4%) in *Welt*, then there were more media workers (4.9%) in *taz*.

The solution attribute is important because, firstly, it can serve as a set of ideas and a roadmap for counteraction for the government, and secondly, the audience can present a clear picture of the problem with its causes and solutions, as well as trace the chronology of the actions of those responsible, starting from the period of proposal of decisions until their execution. It should be noted that almost half of the articles (48.4%) did not provide a solution to the problem that arose (Table 5). According to the thematic breakdown of combating HT, actors more often propose preventive measures, that is, the emphasis is on combating the causes of the phenomenon (25.5%), followed by prosecution (13.6%) – counteracting the consequences of a crime, protecting vulnerable parties of the process – 6.8 % and cooperation – 3.1%, the least, although 20.1% of stories were devoted to the analysis of events concerning Germany and another country at the same time. More specifically, the most often stated solution in the articles was changes at the state level, which was mentioned in 19.9% of the articles. This result is in line with the results of a frame study regarding coverage in India, Thailand, and the United States (Sobel, 2014). Stronger punishment for criminals (8.7%) was the second most frequently mentioned solution.

More conservative news outlets are more likely to emphasize tough punitive solutions, and more liberal media cover crime stories that focus on the root causes of crime and the need to address larger social issues to fight crime (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018). It should also be considered that *Bild* does not offer any treatment at all in its stories, similarly, *SZ*, *Spiegel* and *Welt* did not have potential solutions in more than half of the articles – 72.7%, 62.5%, 55.2% respectively. *Taz* and *FAZ* were more likely than others to make decisions to punish criminals and protect victims

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more severely. It can be assumed that the political predisposition of German periodicals has no influence on the expression of decisions in the example of *SZ*, *Spiegel* and *taz*.

Table 5

Remedies and solutions suggested for the problem of HT in each article (% of codings)

	Bild	taz	Spiegel	Welt	FAZ	SZ	Total
<i>Prevention (including conducting research)</i>	0	3	0	0	0	0	3 (1.9)
Changes at the state level (policy, economy, legislation, education, labour market, migration, social protection, sanctions)	0	12	2	7	8	3	32 (19.9)
Increasing awareness, strengthening general and specialized education on HT	0	3	0	2	0	1	6 (3.7)
<i>Prosecution</i>	0	1	0	1	0	0	2 (1.2)
Effective investigation/cooperation with international/local law enforcement authorities	0	2	1	0	2	1	6 (3.7)
Stronger punishment for criminals	0	7	0	2	5	0	14 (8.7)
<i>Protection (including aiding victims/sex workers)</i>	0	7	0	0	4	0	11 (6.8)
<i>Partner ties (internal and external relations)</i>	0	2	0	0	2	1	5 (3.1)
Other	0	2	0	1	1	0	4 (2.5)
No remedies	6	24	5	16	11	16	78 (48.4)
Total	6 (3.7)	63 (39.1)	8 (5)	29 (18)	33 (20.5)	22 (13.7)	161 (100)

A call to action is a word or phrase that prompts the addressee to perform some action, and they are expressed in various ways, direct and indirect speech acts (Rogers et al., 2019). We, on the other hand, identified sentences with the words “necessary”, “should”, “must”, “worth” and similar terms that are directed to a certain category of people and can motivate them to perform certain acts. Thus, words with calls to action existed in 58.7% of the articles on average. More often government representatives sent appeals to 6.7% of items. The appeal was also repeatedly expressed by media

outlets (6%) and representatives of the legislative sphere (5.3%). Remarkably, associations and groups, where we also included communities with sex workers, called for action in 4.7% of cases and in decreasing order victims, migrants, people close to them (3.3%), individual citizens (2.7%). Again, the government, as well as single citizens, audiences (e.g., Yazidi women) were more likely to receive these encouraging words (9%). In second place, the actors speaking in the articles emphasized the need to act themselves (5.2%). Further, a vulnerable people (victims, migrants, etc.) were called to act – this is in 3.9% of stories. Very few calls were made to political parties, the judiciary, criminal participants, clients (0.6%) and others. As a result, it seems that the media creates an image of HT as a political threat that requires quick action. One limitation of the study of the previous and current frames was that studies of the decision and call to action frames were not available for the period prior to the pandemic, which precludes a comparative analysis of the results of the two periods.

4. CONCLUSION

Our study initially posed two general research questions, which can be answered in general terms as follows: *Taz* and *FAZ* showed the highest interest in the topic of HT, both before and after the pandemic, although, as expected, the number of articles decreased in all but *Spiegel*. The infrequent publication of articles about the HT in *Bild* and *Spiegel* was most likely related to typological characteristics. Every year between 2019 and 2021, the number of stories decreased markedly. One can notice some sensitivity of *FAZ* to events at the political level, which was reflected in its dynamics. The focus of journalists on this topic lessened during the pandemic. During the pandemic, other processes allegedly subsided. It is generally inappropriate and difficult for a journalist writing on the topic of HT to focus solely on this topic, since it is interconnected and covered along with other important processes, such as migration, illegal labour, kidnapping, etc.

Regardless of the country and time, the topic of HT, more often becomes the agenda at the expense of official initiatives. Government actions were the triggers in almost half of the cases. This trend was also observed in other countries, in the USA, before the pandemic. Journalistic initiative was manifested in small numbers. This leads to two conclusions (similar Reich 2006): Potential stories or problems may be left unaddressed, or unpleasant data may be hidden; and journalists, without their

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own initiative, miss unknown details of events. The sources of information were mostly the government, and law enforcement agencies. Regular sources painted the same picture. Meanwhile, the victims were only quoted in one-in-twenty of the stories. The voices of NGOs, participants in criminal activity, and communities of sex workers were barely heard. Centre-rights were more likely to use quotes from law enforcement and experts, while centre-left/lefts were more likely to refer to media sources. The dominant narrative for *SZ* and *Spiegel* was human rights and legislation; the rest all focused on crime. These data were obviously influenced by triggers and sources of information. The dominance of prostitution was more commonly focused on among *taz* and *FAZ*, who disagree with the official political stance.

During the pandemic, almost half of the items described international events. Perhaps this was the impact of the pandemic or creating a picture that cases of HT were more likely to occur in another country and have little to do with neighbours. More often they talked about sexual and labor exploitation. However, the articles in *taz* were diverse in typology, which could serve to improve the awareness of the audience. The prototypically victim was also inherent in the German media. As a result, this reinforces stereotypes in society, distances the audience from reality, and discriminates against “atypical” victims.

Political or administrative reasons, namely lack of legislation, were mentioned more often than others. In articles about sexual exploitation, economic exploitation tended to be mentioned more often, and labour exploitation – political exploitation. The push factors are most often economic criteria. Consequently, the media gave political colouring to this phenomenon.

A well-directed accusation attribute can make a difference in solving social problems. In most stories, it we could identify a blame attribute. The main perpetrators were the victims and those around them. *Welt* and *FAZ*, as conservative media, attributed the cause of the problem to individual inclinations. While *Welt* featured more stories with accusations by law enforcement agencies, *taz* there were more media employees due to the reasons mentioned earlier as well as the political position.

More than half of the articles put forward specific solutions to the problem; however, many periodicals (four out of six) lacked the solution attribute. Actors often offered preventive measures: the emphasis was on combating the causes of the phenomenon, namely changes at the state level. *Taz* and *FAZ* were more likely than others to make decisions to punish criminals more severely and to provide greater protection for victims. The solution attribute is important because, firstly, it can serve as

a set of ideas and a roadmap for how to tackle the issue for the government. Secondly, the audience can be presented with a clear picture of the problem with its causes and solutions, as well as trace the chronology of the actions of those responsible, starting from the period of proposal of decisions until their execution. Often, appeals were made by representatives of the government. Only a very small number of appeals to political parties, the judiciary, criminal participants, clients, and others were identified.

Thus, the real situation and contexts of HT are not covered due to at least six factors that directly affect media coverage. The information provided to the audience passes through a multi-stage filtering process, as well as the prism of their own perception: Pre-media and media filtering. The influence of triggers on the final form of stories is traced in the direction of the latter and in the selection of information sources. The media create their own reality: They create an stereotypical victim and focus on certain types of HT, the topic is also stereotyped, it is given a political connotation, the boundaries between HT and human smuggling are blurred. When covering a topic, the political orientation of the objects also plays a role – for example, in the sources of information and the target of the accusation. However, the coverage of the topic does not choose the time and country: Similar results can be found in press studies before the pandemic in Germany, America, Thailand, and India. By painting its own reality, the media isolates the audience from reality in a kind of vacuum without fulfilling the key role of raising awareness, which is likely to be a factor in the increase in the number of victims. In addition, it most likely also acts as a political tool for conducting discussions by political actors.

The level of social connections of a journalist with sources of information is interesting. Information conveyed through multilateral social ties can be more influential and binding (Malling, 2021). An interview study with journalists, how they shape the messages they create when dealing with the issue of HT, is still pending.

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