



BIP Survey | 5

The quality of journalistic information on the abandonment of children in Alcácer do Sal



Pressão Média

Survey question: How do you assess the quality of the journalistic coverage of the recent case involving the abandonment of two French children by their family on a roadside in Alcácer do Sal?

Public availability: 29 May to 06 July 2026

Respondents: 83

Sample: non-probability accidental sample (does not allow statistical generalisation)

What the survey says: coverage of the children's abandonment is rated as "Good"

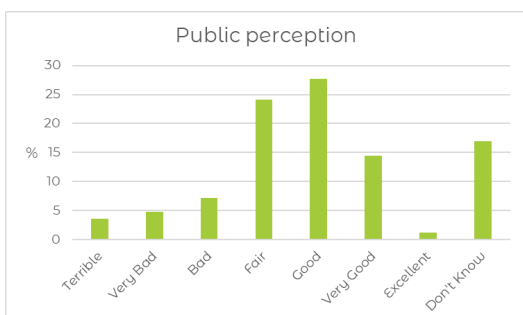


Figure 1 – Public perceptions of the quality of the news coverage of the abandonment of two French children by their family in Alcácer do Sal

Figure 1, showing the distribution of responses from the 83 participants, indicates that 27.7% rated the journalistic coverage of the abandonment of two French children by their family in Alcácer do Sal as "Good", making it the most frequently selected category (mode). Furthermore, 43.4% rated the coverage in the positive range, namely the categories "Good", "Very Good" and "Excellent". It is also noteworthy that 24.1% rated the

information as "Fair", while 16.9% selected "Don't Know". Regarding participants' level of education (Figure 2), 51.8% of the 83 respondents held a master's degree, 19.3% a doctoral degree and 18.1% a bachelor's degree, which may be explained by the academic context in which the BIP operates. Participants with only primary or secondary education accounted for a small proportion of the sample (approximately 6% overall).

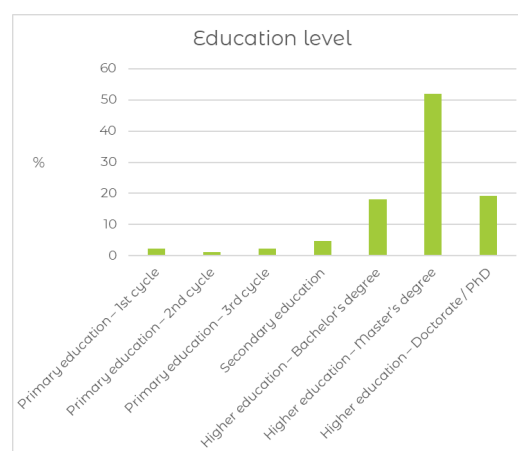


Figure 2 – Distribution of participants by level of education

Regarding participants' ages (Figure 3), the 30–34 age group (23 participants) and the 35–39 age group (19 participants) are the most represented. This was followed by the 45–49 age group, with nine participants.

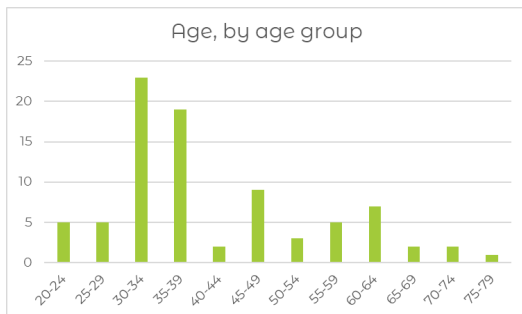


Figure 3 – Distribution of participants by age group

Concerning the variable “Place of Residence”, Braga and Porto were the most represented locations, accounting for 31.3% (26 participants) and 20.5% (17 participants), respectively. Pombal also stands out, with seven participants (8.4%).

What the research says: journalistic coverage of stories involving children and traumatic events should follow specific ethical principles and professional guidelines

In light of public perceptions of the coverage of the Alcácer do Sal case, the academic literature and professional ethical guidelines suggest a more in-depth examination of the ethical and technical challenges involved in reporting traumatic events involving children.

The principle of the best interests of the child

Experts and international codes of ethics are unanimous: in cases involving

children, the best interests of the child should take precedence over any other consideration, including the public's right to know (Martins, 2024). The principal ethical concern identified across 200 journalism codes worldwide is the assessment of potential harm from media exposure (Martins, 2024).

The most widely recommended procedure for protecting children in situations of risk, such as abandonment, is the concealment of their identity (anonymity). Identification, even indirectly, may result in “secondary victimisation” and contribute to the long-term stigmatisation of the child (Martins, 2024).

Trauma journalism and the approach to victims

As “first responders” in times of crisis, journalists have a responsibility not to exacerbate victims' suffering (Brayne, 2007). In cases involving abandoned children, they are in a state of extreme vulnerability and may be experiencing shock (Brayne, 2007; Martins, 2024). Recommendations from specialists, such as those at the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, include the following (Brayne, 2007):

- Prioritise humanity: Journalists should be human beings first and professionals second, offering basic support if necessary before beginning their reporting;
- Give the victim control: Victims of trauma often feel that they have lost control over their lives; the journalistic approach should allow interviewees to set the pace

and decide whether they wish to speak;

- Avoid clichés and sensationalism: Expressions such as “community in shock” or intrusive questions like “how do you feel?” are regarded as ineffective and potentially retraumatising.

The challenge of consent and “Act II Journalism”

Research suggests that informed consent is particularly complex in cases involving children, as they (and, at times, their guardians) may not have the capacity to anticipate the long-term consequences of making a public statement (Martins, 2024).

Finally, specialists argue that coverage should move beyond the immediate emotional response (the “Act I” of journalism) towards “Act II Journalism”, which focuses on recovery, social support and the long-term follow-up of victims, providing not only coverage of the tragedy itself but also perspectives on recovery and hope for the community (Brayne, 2007).

Against this background, and concerning the specific case addressed in this survey—the abandonment of two children by their family on a roadside in Alcácer do Sal—it is noteworthy that participants generally perceived the journalistic coverage to be of good quality.

Despite this predominantly positive perception, which reflects public validation of journalists’ work, communication research indicates that news audiences often struggle to assess normative criteria, such as the ethics and

objectivity of an individual news story (Urban & Schweiger, 2013). In this context, the proportion of participants who responded “Don’t Know” (16.9%) is also significant, as it may reflect precisely this difficulty identified in the literature. Members of the public frequently use the media outlet’s brand as a mental “shortcut” (heuristic) when judging quality, tending to perceive content produced by organisations they already regard as credible as ethical, regardless of the specific content itself (Urban & Schweiger, 2013).

References

Brayne, M. (Ed.). (2007). *Trauma & journalism: A guide for journalists, editors & managers*. Dart Centre for Journalism & Trauma.

Martins, P. (2024). A cobertura noticiosa de crianças e jovens em códigos de ética. *MATRIZES*, 18(2), 145–167.

Urban, J., & Schweiger, W. (2013). News quality from the recipients’ perspective: Investigating recipients’ ability to judge the normative quality of news. *Journalism Studies*, 15(6), 821–840

Tiago Estêvão, Inês Mendes & Luís M. Loureiro

Machine Translation Post-Editing: Anabela Delgado

This work is supported by national funds through FCT – Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., under the funding of the Communication and Society Research Centre (CECS) 2025–2029.