



# **Guidelines or Guidance?**

## **Changing Media Reporting of Domestic Violence Homicides in Ireland**

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October 2019



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## FOREWORD

The Community Foundation for Ireland understands that domestic and gender-based violence are among the most prevalent and heinous crimes in Irish society and we are deeply committed to supporting projects that aim to tackle the systemic issues that perpetuate them. In 2017 it became clear to us from our work with NGOs that a significant part of the problem stemmed from the public discourse that surrounds this type of crime. As a first step to discuss this issue to ensure that domestic violence; its victims, survivors and perpetrators can be more realistically and accurately depicted in journalistic media, we convened an invited group of expert stakeholders from the NGO sector. These included the National Women's Council of Ireland, Safe Ireland, the National Observatory on Violence Against Women, Women's Aid, Rape Crisis Network of Ireland and Dublin Rape Crisis Centre along with relevant experts from Maynooth University and Dublin City University. What emerged from this group was a need for baseline data on the issue and, with this in mind; The Community Foundation for Ireland commissioned the following report by Dr Anne O'Brien and Dr Eileen Culloty to look at international best practice in this area and to generate baseline data of the Irish media's coverage of domestic homicides and familicides.

Philanthropy provides a unique platform from which to support projects that aim to alleviate and tackle domestic and gender based violence in Ireland. Our Women's Fund is a permanent, ring fenced fund dedicated to improving the lives of women and girls in Ireland and its central aim is to encourage philanthropy among women and to improve the lives of women and girls through social change grant making. To date, with the support of our donors, including individuals and families, we have awarded over €1.5 million. Societal change is rarely achieved overnight. While some societal issues can be solved quickly and with a once off injection of funds, most need persistent attention and sustained support over a period of years and this is particularly true of our twin priorities of prevention of violence against women and the empowerment of women to take leadership roles.

This project is an exemplar of the type of work we are supporting through the Women's Fund. The issue of Domestic Violence will not be solved without the collaboration of all sectors in society including government, media, philanthropy and the non-profit sectors, we all need to make a concentrated effort to change the culture and transform our response to domestic violence. We are hoping this first step is followed by a dialogue with the National Union of Journalists and NGOs, along with the organisations listed above to see how we can progress the reporting of these types of crimes.

Tina Roche  
Chief Executive, The Community Foundation for Ireland



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The authors are grateful to The Community Foundation of Ireland for convening the Changing Media Culture group and to Edel Coffey for facilitating the meetings of this group. We also extend thanks to Katie Pratt and Josh Moody for their contributions to the research.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is divided into four parts: Part I reviews international research on media representations of domestic violence and domestic violence homicide; Part II presents a quantitative analysis of media coverage of five Irish cases of domestic violence homicide; Part III presents a qualitative analysis of broadcast media coverage in the week following the Howe familicide; and Part IV reviews international guidelines on domestic violence reporting and concludes with an assessment of the best way forward for advocacy agencies aiming to change the culture of media reporting on domestic violence and femicide. The key findings from each part are summarised below.

**International Literature:** International studies of media coverage of domestic violence and femicide<sup>1</sup> find that news reports typically neglect to present a clear picture of the causes and consequences of domestic violence. This negatively impacts public perceptions of domestic violence as a social problem and potentially influences whether some women come to understand their own experiences as domestic violence. The literature identifies three major news frames that contribute to the misrepresentation of femicide. These relate to decontextualisation, blame attribution, and the use of sources.

The issue is decontextualisation due to the media's reluctance to name domestic violence as an element of the story and a reluctance to reference domestic violence as a social problem. In addition, the attribution of blame is shaped by an underlying (patriarchal) ideology whereby journalists tend to focus on the perpetrator rather than the coercive nature of the relationship prior to the murder. Such coverage creates an impression that the perpetrator 'just snapped' and the seemingly inexplicable nature of the murder is often presented with references to unsubstantiated claims about "mental health" issues. Coverage of this nature often implies that the perpetrator should be exonerated because he lacked full control over his actions due to unsubstantiated claims about "mental health" issues or inexplicable allusions that the perpetrator 'just snapped'. In terms of story sources, journalists primarily rely on the police as well as neighbours and bystanders. Domestic violence advocates or victims/survivors are rarely used as sources. This pattern of sourcing implies that solutions lie within male dominated justice institutions rather than with addressing the context of a patriarchal society.

**Quantitative Analysis of Irish Coverage:** The study examined five cases of domestic violence homicide that occurred between 2015 and 2017. A total of 210 news items were recorded. Within those items, 25 percent focused on the breaking news story and the inquiry into the murder while 30 percent reported on the trial or inquest. The most commonly cited information sources were friends and family (39%) followed by the Gardaí (24%) and community figures (24%). Only five percent of news items included a domestic violence advocate as a source and only 11 percent contextualised the crime in terms of domestic violence or coercive control. Only 10 per cent of news items made reference to other cases of domestic violence and only four percent included statistics about domestic violence. The perpetrator's mental health was referenced as a context in 26 percent of news items. Relationship breakdown was cited in 13 percent of news items. Nine percent of items presented the view that the crimes were an 'incomprehensible tragedy' and therefore without explanation. Most news items (96%) mentioned the victim by name, but only 55 per cent provided details about the victim as a person. The victim was clearly identified as a victim in 86 percent of news items, but five percent gave the impression that the victim was partially responsible for her murder.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of relevant terminology see 'words matter' on page eight.

**Qualitative Analysis of the Howe Case:** In their choice of sources to comment on the Howe case, journalists tended to privilege the voice of the Gardaí as well as using commentary from local church leaders, neighbours and unidentified bystanders; domestic violence advocates were not used as sources for the story. Journalists avoided making any contextual connection between the Howe murders and domestic violence or coercive control. This was done in an explicit sense, but also in very subtle ways that were implicit in references to the 'family' and in the dearth of references to the planned nature of the violence. The perpetrator of the four murders was frequently exonerated of blame in news reports. For example, when he was not named as the perpetrator of the murders, when he was presented in a neutral or even a favourable light, and when the premeditated nature of his crimes was consistently under-reported.

**Reporting Guidelines and Changing Media Culture:** Currently, there are no guidelines for reporting domestic violence in Ireland. Internationally, guidelines have been developed for print media, but broadcast, social or online media receive little attention even though these are the media people primarily use for news. In addition, existing guidelines tend to neglect the pressures of journalistic work and the practical needs of journalists.

A review of relevant case studies finds that effective change can be fostered through a close engagement between journalists and domestic violence advocates. It is through this relationship, rather than guidelines per se, that journalists can better understand and report on domestic violence homicide. As such, resources need to be directed to domestic violence advocacy agencies to enable them to undertake a national media engagement project within the framework of developing guidelines or a guidance handbook. Only through this sort of interaction is there hope for better coverage of domestic violence and femicide in Irish media.

## INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence is an abuse of the human right to live free of fear and violence. It is an abuse that is gendered as evidenced by the 'national crime surveys, police, court and hospital reports, which show that the overwhelming majority of people experiencing domestic violence are women' (Safe Ireland, 2014:19). In Ireland, one in every five women experience domestic violence; the Women's Aid helpline received nearly 17,000 disclosures of emotional, physical, sexual and financial abuse in 2018 (Women's Aid, 2018a).

There is a significant, gendered relationship between domestic abuse and intimate partner homicide. The term femicide was introduced to describe the killing of women and girls by men because of their gender; the term denotes that gender inequality and discrimination are a root cause of intimate partner homicide and indeed of all violence against women (Council of Europe, 2011:12). In Ireland, 225 women and 16 children died violently between 1996-2018, an average of 10 women per year (Women's Aid, 2018b:2). Of these victims, one in every two was killed by a current or former male intimate partner; the latter is defined as a man the victim was or had been in an intimate relationship whether a casual, hidden, dating, partnered or married relationship (Women's Aid, 2018b:2).

International research has found that domestic abuse, coercive control or stalking were present in more than 90 percent of intimate partner femicide cases (Monckton Smith et al. 2017). In relationships where there is coercive control, violence, or a separation after cohabiting, the potential for homicide increases 900 percent (Stark, 2009). Similarly, criminology research on domestic violence, femicide, intimate partner homicide and familicide finds that each of these phenomena occur in a clearly discernible pattern of escalating abuse and threats (Johnson and Dawson, 2011). Based on UK Domestic Homicide Reviews, Monckton Smith (2018) identified eight stages of progressive abuse that lead ultimately to homicide. These include pre-relationship history; early relationship behaviours; relationship behaviours; potential homicide trigger; escalation; change in thinking; planning; and homicide. Although criminologists and other researchers have developed a clear and consistent understanding of intimate partner violence against women, journalists are not generally aware of the evidence-based explanations for domestic violence homicides. This failure to understand and correctly represent these deaths is particularly problematic in the context of a society where media are ubiquitous and formative to our understanding of, and interventions in, the social world.

**Media Matters:** In the last decade, there has been a radical shift in our consumption of media messages from unidirectional mass media transmissions to more complex, networked and interactive exchanges. It is always difficult to make exact claims for the effects of media on audiences. Nonetheless, it has been clear for some time that media reports influence public perceptions of social reality and play a formative role in how people understand society and social problems. For example, the way crime is framed by the media has been shown to influence public beliefs about crime (Gilliam and Iyengar, 2005). As the public obtains much of its knowledge about intimate partner violence from the news media, 'it is important to understand what media sources... currently report' (Wozniak and McCloskey, 2010:939). Stereotypical portrayals of intimate partner violence affect whether and how the public understands the problem at all.

As noted, research finds that most femicides are committed as a conclusion to a history of battering the victim (Websdale, 1999) and that most female-perpetrated incidences are cases of self-defence (Campbell, 1992). Consequently, 'whether and how newspapers cover domestic violence fatalities... could make a difference in how readers view such deaths and what should be done about them' (Bullock, 2007:40). Identifying domestic violence as a social



problem is hindered by widely held beliefs and myths including the idea that domestic violence is a 'private matter that women provoke' (Radford and Russell, 1992:10). In our current media environment, ideas are formed and disseminated rapidly. Nevertheless, 'ingrained societal beliefs ... may stubbornly persist and take decades to change ... normative beliefs that sensationalise or trivialise intimate partner violence are sustained and reproduced by news coverage that relies on ideologies established decades ago' (Fairburn and Dawson, 2013:148). It is important to address long-established, normative beliefs about domestic violence because these beliefs prevent the public from recognising the need for intervention through appropriate legal, social, cultural and political responses. Understanding how Irish media might enable this recognition is the key impetus for this research.

The following report is presented in four parts. First, it reviews international research on media representations of domestic violence and domestic violence homicide. Second, it presents findings from a quantitative analysis of media coverage of five Irish cases of domestic violence homicide. Third, it presents findings from a qualitative analysis of the broadcast coverage of the Howe familicide. Finally, it presents a review of international guidelines and international case studies in order to make recommendations for advocacy agencies and the media in Ireland.

**Words Matter:** In a research context, the terms 'intimate partner violence', 'domestic violence' and 'gender-based violence' are all commonly used. However, some advocates object to the phrase 'domestic violence' because it hides the fact that women are generally the victims and men the perpetrators (Meyers, 1997:110). To clarify who is committing the violence, Comas d'Argemir (2015) proposes the terms 'partner violence against women' and 'partner femicides'. In this report, these terms will be deployed as originally used in primary sources and they will be variously applied as most appropriate to the context or situation described. However, the authors accept and foreground the fact that all forms of abuse described in the report constitute a form of gender-based violence. The United Nations (1992) defines gender-based violence as 'violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty'.

## PART I: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Few academic studies explore representations of femicide and less again focus on femicide-suicide and familicide (Richards et al., 2014). Most studies examine how femicide is portrayed in newspapers, primarily in the US, but there is a dearth of studies investigating broadcast and online news coverage of the phenomena. To date, only one study examined social media: Quinn et al. (2019) examined news coverage of the Hawe familicide in the aftermath of Twitter campaigns that criticised news media coverage. These gaps in the academic literature, as well as gaps in the analysis of Irish cases, are significant because, for anyone who has not suffered it directly, the media are the main source of information on gender violence in Ireland.

International studies tend to use Entman's (1993) concept of frames. Frames are 'persistent patterns of selection, emphasis and exclusion that furnish a coherent interpretation and evaluation of events' (Norris et al., 2003:2). A 'conventional' or dominant media frame repeats a particular interpretation or understanding of domestic violence. These dominant frames arise from a combination of factors including: institutionalised approaches; newsrooms production practices; how individual journalists observe phenomena; how people or issues have been depicted in past coverage; and the sources used to report a story. These conventional frames matter because they generate 'predictable, simple and powerful narratives that are embedded in the social construction of reality' and they cluster 'key concepts, stock phrases and iconic images to reinforce certain common ways of interpreting developments' (Norris et al., 2003: 2-6).

At a practical level, frames allow journalists and other actors to quickly sort, interpret and structure vast amounts of information. However, frames are also core interpretative devices that shape public attention and interest. Overtime, they encourage the public to process complex events into regularised patterns and interpretations. Once established in media practices and routines, frames are constantly reproduced and further institutionalised through media training and 'news cultures which strengthen a common interpretation of events' (Norris et al, 2003:8). Research on media coverage of femicide identifies three persistent frames through which the phenomena is presented to the public. The first frame de-contextualises domestic violence by failing to name the crime as such and by presenting it as a personal conflict or tragedy rather than a social problem. The second frame reports the crime in ways that blame or apportion responsibility to the victim and excuse, exonerate or fail to address the abuser. The third frame presents domestic violence in ways that privilege institutional sources over the voices of survivors or expert advocates. The explication of these frames within the academic literature is discussed in detail below.

**Framing and Context:** Nearly all studies of femicide news coverage identify a failure to frame the story in the context of domestic violence. News producers create this pattern in two key ways: journalists fail to use the term 'domestic violence' to describe an intimate partner homicide and they fail to outline a history of violence, even when evidence of such violence is available. The first study to examine news coverage of femicide noted that coverage attributed the causes of violent female victimisation to 'individual and family pathology rather than to social structures and gendered patterns of dominance and control' (Meyers, 1994:48). In 2000, the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence found that less than 20 percent of newspaper articles made clear reference to the type of violence involved in femicide; incidents were instead labelled as a 'family tragedy' or as a tragic 'love story' even with evidence of prior intimate partner violence. A study of 230 newspaper articles from Washington state found that more than 75 percent of articles 'elaborated little' on the context of domestic violence and 'seldom labeled a killing as domestic violence' (Bullock and Cubert, 2002:483).

Bullock (2007) also found that an episodic frame was applied to domestic violence fatalities in Utah state whereby femicides were presented as isolated incidents rather than as cases with domestic violence as a common denominator. Of the 292 articles sampled, only 99 referenced domestic violence and 42 did so in a way that made it impossible to determine who was responsible. Relationship history was portrayed in a neutral or 'equal blame' style such as for instance sourcing the problem with the couple rather than the perpetrator; for example, 'the couple had a history of domestic violence' (Bullock, 2007:42). Only 10 percent of articles clearly linked the murders to domestic violence. Taylor (2009) identified the same pattern in a study of femicide news coverage in Orlando, Florida. Only 34 percent of the 292 articles sampled discussed the murders in the broader context of domestic violence; of those, half were ambiguous about who was responsible for the crime. As Wozniak and McCloskey (2010:942) note 72 percent of the articles in their US newspaper sample did not 'even mention the term domestic violence or any derivative thereof' such that 'neutral' reporting was the norm (ibid. 948).

Similar findings were reiterated by Richards et al. (2011) in North Carolina. They found that most articles (87%) failed to present the murder of a woman in the context of intimate partner violence, 'even where there was a documented history of violence by the perpetrator towards the victim' (Richards et al., 2011:193). Likewise, Fairbairn and Dawson (2013:162) found that only nine percent of their sample from Toronto, Canada indicated a previous history of perpetrator abuse towards the victim. Richards et al. (2011) identified an important connection between framing and subsequent coverage. Articles that did frame the murders as intimate partner violence were more likely to subsequently 'include the perspective of domestic violence advocates, statistics on the prevalence of intimate partner abuse and resources for victims and their families (and to) blame femicide on inadequate responses by the criminal justice system' (Richards et al. 2011:194).

A clear pattern is found in these studies: there is a disinclination to name femicides as domestic violence and a related failure to connect them to histories of domestic violence. This clarity is replaced with a 'neutral' framing of the incident as something that 'happens' to a couple, rather than one that most often happens to a female victim and caused by a male perpetrator. The consequences of this omission are that mainstream newspaper coverage ignores the gendered nature of the violence. Not using the term domestic violence or intimate partner homicide 'sidesteps the issues of male control, manipulation, and abuse of women' (Bullock and Cubert, 2002:483). In short, explaining why a femicide occurs at the individual level is likely to preclude discussions of the broader social origin and roots of this violence. By portraying stories as separate and discrete events, disconnected from domestic violence and devoid of experts who could make the connection, newspapers deny both the widespread nature of intimate partner violence in society and locate the problem as one of conflict within a relationship. As Fairbairn and Dawson (2013:168) note 'news coverage that limits explanations to individual qualities may entrench the public in a belief system whereby violence against women is seen as an inevitable outcome of high levels of stress in an intimate partnership and therefor unpreventable ... [intimate partner violence] as a social problem loses out to a discourse of individual pathology'.

The issue of context and the naming of femicide as something that results from and is connected to domestic violence as a social problem is vital to the subsequent framing of the causes and consequences of the story. Revealing more of the structural context is potentially educational for the public (Websdale, 1998:205). As Lowney and Best (1995:48) note, 'a key step in social problem construction is linking a troubling event to a problematic pattern, defining a particular incident as an instance of some larger problem'. If there is a failure to connect the pattern of individual cases then it is impossible to make the case for a larger public concern. At the most basic level, the correct naming of the nature of the crime is vital to how it is subsequently understood. Put another way, the failure to name these murders as intimate partner homicides sets in train a whole plethora of misrepresentations that detract from the

truth of the stories and the truth of the victims' experiences. As Fairbairn and Dawson (2013:151) put it, 'a history of violence is a relevant contextual factor in the majority of intimate partner homicides that if reported can help to counter the idea that these homicides are one-time, spontaneous instances of a male "snapping"'. Furthermore, 'without linking the fatalities to domestic violence and its roots in socially accepted power imbalances that minimise the importance of men's violence against women, the coverage fails as a meaningful call to action' (Bullock, 2007:53). Moreover, and vitally, the explicit framing of femicide as domestic violence helps women experiencing it to identify 'their own experiences as violence' and presents it as an experience that needs to be addressed by the public rather than as the responsibility of an individual woman (Gillespie et al., 2013: 228).

**Framing Blame:** Media reporting of intimate partner homicide frames blame in various ways. First, it frames the parties involved as 'different'; second, it directly or indirectly blames the victim; and third it exonerates or excuses the perpetrator. Meyers (1994) was the first to note that the allocation of blame came from journalists' attempts to explain why domestic violence occurs and that who was blamed in news coverage was shaped by an underlying (patriarchal) ideology. Bullock and Cubert (2002) subsequently found, in their Washington State sample of 230 newspapers, that 48 percent of articles suggested at least one motivation or excuse for the perpetrator. Items that excused the perpetrator included 'mental and physical health problems, separation or divorce, that the homicide was accidental, that the victim was the abuser, that the perpetrator came from an abusive home or that the victim deserved it or brought it upon herself' (Bullock and Cubert, 2002:485). Only eight percent of articles placed the blame with society (ibid. 486). The authors also noted a frame that portrayed those involved as 'different', implying that domestic violence only happens to certain types of people: 'both the perpetrators and victims were usually represented as being from different cultures, either ethnically or provincially, and from a low social class. Their criminal pasts and/or involvement with drugs and alcohol were highlighted, implying that those involved with domestic violence situations were already "troublemakers"' (ibid. 490). Non-social couples were also set apart and there was a sense that perpetrators should be easily identifiable: 'many articles expressed surprise that a perpetrator seemed normal, despite literature that supports this phenomenon' (ibid. 490). There was also a tendency for journalists to focus more on the perpetrator and to ignore the relationship prior to the murder with the final impression given that the perpetrator 'snapped', which 'was viewed as the ultimate tragedy' rather than the homicide itself (ibid. 493).

These findings about blame and exoneration were further supported in Bullock's (2007) Utah study which noted additional ways in which the perpetrator was set apart by using place; that is, perpetrators were commonly framed as being from elsewhere. Taylor's (2009) study of a Florida metropolitan newspaper revealed the dichotomy that femicide victims are blamed both directly and indirectly. Direct approaches to blame included using negative language to blame the victim's 'inadequate' response to her situation; using sources such as the police to blame her for not pursuing a prosecution; and describing her interactions with other men as a contributory factor in her murder. Indirect approaches to blame included 'using sympathetic language to describe the perpetrator' (Taylor, 2009:21). This involved describing the killer's stress, hardships, ailments, family background, mental health issues, and financial problems as mitigating factors or describing the murder in terms of the perpetrator 'snapping'. In addition, indirect excuses were offered by looking for reasons other than domestic violence as the cause of the homicide; by framing stories as though nobody was responsible for the violence; or by assigning equal blame to both partners. Similar findings were offered by Richards et al.'s (2011) analysis of coverage in North Carolina.

Wozniak and McCloskey (2010) presented a contrasting account in their sample of 100 newspaper articles from across the US. In their sample, very few articles provided either positive or negative depictions of the perpetrator or victim. This 'neutral' reporting could be understood to be unbiased and a contradiction of previous studies. However, as Wozniak and

McCloskey (2010:948) note, 'neutrality and vagueness can conceal the context in which the crime occurred and therefore the social context of [intimate partner violence] homicide may remain obscured'. Gillespie et al. (2013) examined the blame frame in a comparative random sample of 113 articles about cases of femicide that defined the murder as domestic violence and 113 that did not. Their findings indicate that both groups were represented by multiple frames, of which blame was one, which occurred in both groups. Fairburn and Dawson (2013) examined changes in Canadian coverage between the mid-1970s and late 1990s. They found that coverage continued to employ victim-blaming news frames, but they also identified a reduction in that frame over time, from 29 percent in the 1970s to 14 percent in the late 1990s. A similar reduction in the perpetrator-excusing frame - from 54 percent to 15 percent - was in evidence. However, mental illness was used more in the latter period as an explanation for violence. Fairburn and Dawson (2013:168) argue that 'one cannot assume that most depressed individuals are going to be violent towards others... it is problematic to use depression as a main explanation for intimate partner homicide'. A key finding from Fairburn and Dawson emphasises the fact that elements of murder planning and preparation are still relatively ignored (15% of articles) so as not to disrupt the narrative of the crime of passion: 'While factual mention may be made of these premeditative elements, news portrayals are not troubled by the apparent contradiction between their presence and the wide use of attention-grabbing, sensationalistic crime of passion explanations' (Fairburn and Dawson, 2013:154). With regard to femicide-suicides specifically, these fit within the blame frame pattern set out above, loss of control (14%), perpetrator jealousy (3%) and 'mercy' killings (4%) were the explanations offered (Richards et al, 2014:37). Niblock (2018:2151) similarly notes that murder-suicide reports often blame women for 'leading a loving father to "snap"'.

Researchers agree that more responsible reporting - reporting that eliminates victim blaming - could contribute to social change by reframing myths and stereotypes that underlie understandings of domestic violence and homicide. By excusing and exonerating perpetrators or by portraying their actions in a neutral fashion, news stories can lead the public to believe that the female victim is the one in control of (or to blame for) the situation (Jewkes, 2004). By stereotyping the victim and excusing the perpetrator as ill, mad or provoked, news producers fail to show their audiences that intimate partner homicides occur after a pattern of escalating abuse and previous threats (Johnson and Dawson, 2011). In short, these story features (victim blaming, the designation of difference, and perpetrator exoneration) all have a 'tendency to orient themselves around notions of individual pathology to the exclusion of social aspects such as the status of women in society and sociocultural norms allowing violence to continue' (Fairburn and Dawson, 2013:169).

**Framing and Sources:** The third major device that constructs the framing of femicide stories is the selection and use of sources to comment on a story. The police tend to be the most used sources while neighbours and bystanders are also regularly engaged for comment. Domestic violence advocates or victims are rarely approached. Research finds that the sources used in femicide coverage are most likely to be police or court contributors (Bullock, 2007). Some 57 percent of the articles reviewed by Richards et al. (2011) used 'public' sources of information, primarily the criminal justice system. Journalists drew much less on expert or advocate voices who could provide an evidence-based explanatory frame for the events. In addition, coverage rarely included the voice of victims to directly articulate the experience of domestic violence.

The use of police as sources is problematic because they tend to emphasise the 'what, where, when and how of the crime' (Bullock and Cubert 2002:493). Furthermore, Taylor's (2009:37) analysis identified a link between the use of police and defense attorney sources and a tendency towards blaming the victim. This arises because the sources highlight the fact that the victim did not make official reports or statements or dropped charges. Richards et al. (2011:191) also note that police officers tend to offer 'overly simplistic descriptions' as to why the murder occurred such as single specific reasons like an 'argument over cigarettes'.

Apart from the police, journalists 'routinely look to the neighbors of a couple or other members of the community for information about a couple in femicide coverage [which] serves to perpetuate harmful myths about domestic violence' (Taylor, 2009:27). Such coverage tends to reinforce the idea that femicide is an unpredictable, isolated act and tends to omit references to domestic violence as a social problem. Cullen, O' Brien and Corcoran (2019) note that the reason journalists often use neighbours, bystanders and other community sources for comment is a direct consequence of the police's failure to provide any information beyond the bare facts of the case. Reporters rarely call on victim advocates for their professional opinions because advocates tend to be viewed 'as biased sources rather than as experts' (Taylor 2009:27) or as 'strategy heavy' sources (Cullen, O' Brien and Corcoran 2019:8).

Richards et al. (2011:191) similarly found that 37 percent of the articles they reviewed used 'private' sources such as friends or family while only six percent used domestic violence experts. Fairbarin and Dawson (2013:162) found that advocates, service providers and researchers were not used as sources in any of the news articles they sampled and none of the articles referenced statistics on intimate partner violence. Carlyle et al. (2008) further observed that only five percent of articles provided any information regarding resources such as shelters, websites or support-lines. As Niblock (2018:2463) comments, such 'reporting is, in effect, speaking to readers as if they stood apart from the crime rather than addressing them as potential victims, perpetrators or bystanders'. Richards et al. (2014:34) noted with regard to femicide-suicide specifically, a similar pattern occurred, with 88 percent of articles using the police as a primary source while only 14 percent used domestic violence experts. Neighbours tended to be used less in those cases (29%) than friends and family (52%). For Niblock (2018:2451) this sourcing strategy is 'distorting the true picture and foregrounding tragedy narratives for the predominantly male perpetrators'. Cullen, O' Brien & Corcoran (2019:10) note that the failure to include advocates or experts in murder-suicide reporting connects back to the police's failure to frame incidents as domestic violence; without that official source, journalists felt that they 'could not have made that leap' to frame a familicide as a case of domestic violence.

The cumulative effect of this combination of sources has important implications for femicide coverage. Firstly, relying on police sources for context means that a story will not be framed as domestic violence unless there is a previous record of reported incidents. As domestic violence 'commonly goes unreported, relying solely on police for this information leads to false portrayals of the context of femicide as well as blatant misinformation on some individual cases' (Taylor, 2009:27). Secondly, relying on police sources also tends to portray solutions as resting with male-dominated institutions - such as the police or courts - and does not challenge the overarching context of the patriarchal systems within which the violence against women occurs. As Richards et al (2014) note, the absence of domestic violence experts means that coverage fails to explain the difficulty of severing an abusive relationship; fails to identify any links between an individual murder and the extent of domestic violence locally or nationally; and fails to document the impact of femicide on the family, community, and society.

**Conclusion:** Journalists often use sources, blame and decontextualisation as ways to frame femicide and familicide stories. They frequently and repeatedly fail to name the crime as a social problem of gender violence and instead depict it as a personal conflict or tragedy; they directly and indirectly blame the victim while exonerating or excusing the perpetrator; and they use privileged legal sources over the voices of experts and survivors. This approach profoundly misrepresents the nature of domestic violence and femicide. The consequence of this misrepresentation is that the phenomena are not accurately understood by the public.

## PART II: IRISH MEDIA COVERAGE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOMICIDES

The impetus for this study arose in part from the controversy surrounding media coverage of the murder of Clodagh Hawe and her sons - Liam, Niall, and Ryan - by Alan Hawe in August 2016. An online campaign (#HerNameWasClodagh) coalesced around criticism of the news media's passive descriptions of the murder-suicide, which absolved the perpetrator through positive portrayals of his good nature and community status and erased Clodagh Hawe's identity. In this context, this study seeks to identify wider patterns of representation in Irish media coverage before and after the Hawe familicide. Using prior international research as a guide, this section presents the findings of a content analysis of print and broadcast coverage of domestic violence homicide in Ireland. The data consists of 210 news items relating to five cases of domestic violence homicide that occurred between 2015 and 2017. The data was analysed to assess how domestic violence homicide is framed as an issue and the choices journalists and editors' make when covering such cases.

**Methodology:** The study concerns five cases of domestic violence homicide that occurred between 2015 and 2017 (see Table 1). To assess and contextualise the controversy surrounding coverage of the Hawe murder-suicide in August 2016, we selected the two most recent cases of domestic violence homicide before and after the Hawe murder-suicide. Although the aim is to compare coverage of these cases, there are, of course, substantial differences between them. The women victims were aged between 23 years (Natalie McGuinness) and 72 years (Kitty Fitzgerald). They lived in rural areas (Clodagh Hawe and Kitty Fitzgerald), a village (Brigid Maguire), and town suburbs (Natalie McGuinness and Nicola Collins). Clodagh Hawe and Kitty Fitzgerald were murdered by their husbands in acts of murder-suicide, which also claimed the lives of Clodagh Hawe's three children and injured Kitty Fitzgerald's adult son. Brigid Maguire was murdered by a former partner while Natalie McGuinness and Nicola Collins were murdered by men with whom they were in a relationship. The trial resulting from the murder of Natalie McGuinness concluded with a verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity. The trials resulting from the murders of Brigid Maguire and Nicola Collins concluded with guilty verdicts. While the varying circumstances of these individual cases undoubtedly shaped news coverage, we may also assess coverage of these cases collectively to identify any patterns in coverage of domestic violence homicide.

Table 1: Summary of Cases

Victim (age)	DOD	Perpetrator	Trial/Inquest Outcome
Natalie McGuinness (23)	28/10/2015	Oisín Conroy (boyfriend)	Not guilty by reason of insanity
Brigid Maguire (43)	14/11/2015	Danny Keena (former partner)	Murder conviction
Clodagh Hawe (39)	29/08/2016	Alan Hawe (husband)	Murder-suicide verdict
Kitty Fitzgerald (72)	01/11/2016	Tom Fitzgerald (husband)	Murder-suicide verdict
Nicola Collins (38)	27/03/2017	Cathal O'Sullivan	Murder conviction

News items were collected from four news media sources: the broadsheet newspaper *The Irish Times*, the tabloid newspaper *Irish Daily Mail*, the digital newspaper *TheJournal.ie*, and the website of the public broadcaster *RTÉ.ie*. These outlets were selected to reflect a range of editorial positions and target audiences. News items from *The Irish Times* and *Irish Daily Mail* were retrieved from the LexisNexis database of Irish news publications. News items were retrieved from *TheJournal.ie* and *RTÉ.ie* by searching the websites directly. *RTÉ.ie* differs from the other sources in that it covers the outlet's online articles in English and Irish as well as radio and television clips. Irish language reports were removed as these typically consisted of short versions of the reports in English.

Search terms for each case included the names of the victim and the perpetrator. The date ranges for data collection began at the date-of-death recorded for each case (see Table 1) and ended on the 28 February 2019. In effect, this covered any initial reporting of the murder

investigation and funerals, the trial or inquest, and any subsequent developments relating to the case. Regarding the latter, the Hawe case has been in the news throughout 2019 as Clodagh Hawe's family have led a campaign for an official review of the case and similar cases.

The coding framework for analysing the data was adapted from Richards et al. (2014) and Gillespie et al. (2013). Each news item was coded for details across the seven areas listed below. Apart from the description of case details, each item was coded yes/no for the presence of the characteristics listed below. Where a 'yes' was recorded, an extract or description of the relevant item was also recorded. Regarding the use of images, LexisNexis does not include visual material but does provide a summary of the images that accompanied an article. The coding framework included the following:

- *Item details*: the date, source, title, word count, and item topic. Item topics were defined as the primary focus of the article; for example, the funeral or the trial/inquest.
- *Use of sources*: the Gardaí, community figures, friends and family, neighbours, domestic violence advocates, barristers, judges, pathologist/coroner, and other.
- *References to motivating or explanatory factors*: a history of domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health issues, infidelity, relationship breakdown/separation, financial difficulties, and other. In addition, items were coded for referencing the incomprehensible nature of the crime (i.e. therefore, without explanation).
- *References to the victim*: victim name, coverage of the victim beyond naming, clear identification of the victim as a victim, victim-blaming, and majority focus on the perpetrator.
- *References to domestic violence as a social problem*: references to other domestic violence cases, actions against domestic violence, domestic violence advocacy groups, and statistics on domestic violence.
- *Elements of sensationalism*: use of dramatic language (e.g. 'battered', 'blown away', 'monster') in the item headline, content or in commentary from sources.
- *Use of Images* was recorded by describing any still images or video clips that were used in the item.

**Coverage Levels:** A total of 210 news items were recorded across the cases (see Table 2). The Hawe case is clearly atypical as it represents almost 45 percent of all items and 58 percent of the total word count (see Table 3). In part, the increased coverage evident in this case reflects the controversy generated by the initial media coverage and the fact that it remained a news story two years after the murder-suicide due to the family's campaign to establish an official review. The Fitzgerald case received the least amount of coverage representing only 10 percent of all news items. Although the Collins case represents 19 percent of the news items, this coverage only represents nine percent of the total word count. This indicates that while there were more news items than in the earlier cases, the items were shorter and presented less information.

Considering the topics covered, 25 percent focused on the breaking news story and the inquiry into the murder including any arrests. Some 30 percent reported on the trial or inquest. Unsurprisingly, given their duration, the three murder trials generated more news items than the inquests into the Hawe and Fitzgerald murder-suicides. Items about victim-impact were more likely to feature in coverage of cases resulting in trials rather than inquests. This is significant because, as outlined below, the post-trial victim-impact statement is a key means through which families can contest negative framing of the victim and raise awareness of domestic violence as a factor in the murder. Regarding the Hawe case, some 34 percent of items are categorised as 'other'; these included items about the impact of the murders on the community and the subsequent family-led campaign for an official review of the case.



Table 2: News Items by Case (n=210)

	McGuinness	Maguire	Hawe	Fitzgerald	Collins
The Irish Times	8	6	32	4	6
Irish Daily Mail	9	9	31	4	11
RTE.ie	6	8	13	5	15
TheJournal.ie	4	5	18	9	7
Case Total	27	28	94	22	39
% of Total Cases	13%	13%	45%	10%	19%

Table 3: Word Count by Case

	McGuinness (n=27)	Maguire (n=28)	Hawe (n=94)	Fitzgerald (n=22)	Collins (n=39)	Total (n=210)
The Irish Times	3,838	2,800	18,888	1,652	2,293	29,471
Irish Daily Mail	4,165	4,271	25,803	2,387	3,358	39,984
*RTE.ie	2,323	1,149	3,541	974	2,598	10,585
TheJournal.ie	3,251	3,241	11,537	3,615	1,172	22,816
Case Total	13,577	11,461	59,769	8,628	9,421	102,856
% of Total Cases	13%	11%	58%	8%	9%	

\*The RTE.ie data excludes audio and visual clips

Table 4: Topics by Case

	McGuinness (n=27)	Maguire (n=28)	Hawe (n=94)	Fitzgerald (n=22)	Collins (n=39)	Total (n=210)
Inquiry/Developments	30%	36%	6%	55%	41%	25%
Funeral	7%	0%	17%	14%	8%	11%
Trial/Inquest	37%	43%	22%	14%	44%	30%
Victim Impact	11%	18%	3%	0%	5%	6%
Opinion	7%	4%	17%	9%	3%	10%
Other	7%	0%	34%	9%	0%	17%

**Information Sources:** Each item was coded for the use of different sources. Table 5 identifies which types of sources were used in news items, but not the overall number of sources used. For example, a community figure was used as a source in two news items relating to the McGuinness case, but there may have been multiple community figures cited in those two news items.

Considering all 210 news items, the most commonly cited information sources were friends and family (39%) followed by the Gardaí (24%) and community figures (24%). Only five percent of news items included a domestic violence advocate as a source. Moreover, these relate to just two cases: Clodagh Hawe and Kitty Fitzgerald. Kitty Fitzgerald is referenced in two articles about domestic violence - the *TheJournal.ie* article 'The real danger to women is within their own home' (15/11/2016) and *The Irish Times* article 'Nearly nine out of 10 women knew their killer' (25/05/2018) - but domestic violence advocates are not used as a source in news items that are specifically about her murder. In coverage of the Hawe case, domestic violence advocates included the National Women's Council of Ireland, Women's Aid, the Dolphin House Family Law Court Support and Referral Service, and a Cavan-based refuge established in memory of Clodagh Hawe. Most of the news items featuring domestic violence advocates were published two months or more after the murder-suicide.

Some 39 percent of news items included friends and family members as sources. Coverage of the Maguire case drew heavily on these sources (64%); in particular, the trial testimony of Brigid Maguire's two children. As the mother and sister of Clodagh Hawe led a campaign to review cases, the overall coverage of this case reflects extensive use of family sources. In

addition, coverage of this campaign cited statements by TDs and government ministers as well as psychiatrists (these sources are categorised as ‘other’ in Table 5).

Community figures were used as sources in 24 percent of news item and in coverage of the Hawe and Fitzgerald cases in particular. Some 59 percent of news items about the Fitzgerald case featured a community figure; primarily, the parish priest. A community figure was cited in 30 percent of news items about the Hawe case. Primarily, these included the school principals who worked with Alan and Clodagh Hawe, members of the clergy, and local politicians. The parish priest was also a notable community source in coverage of the Collins case. Local politicians were cited in coverage of the McGuinness, Maguire, and Collins cases. Neighbours and members of the local community were cited in only nine percent of all news items. Indeed, initial coverage of the Hawe case included references to the fact that neighbours did not want to speak to the media.

The use of trial and inquest sources varied considerably by case. Coverage of the trial of Oisín Conroy for the murder of Natalie McGuinness drew heavily on barristers’ opinion (41%) and the judge’s commentary (33%). Some 13 percent of the coverage also cited statements by Oisín Conroy and mental health experts (these sources are categorised as ‘other’ in Table 5). State pathologists and coroners were used as sources in the Hawe (20%), Fitzgerald (9%), and Collins (21%) cases.

*Table 5: Information Sources by Case*

	McGuinness (n=27)	Maguire (n=28)	Hawe (n=94)	Fitzgerald (n=22)	Collins (n=39)	Total Items (n=210)
<b>The Gardaí</b>	33%	21%	21%	32%	21%	24%
<b>Community Figure</b>	7%	7%	30%	59%	13	24%
<b>Friends/Family</b>	33%	64%	48%	18%	13%	39%
<b>Neighbours/Locals</b>	11%	11%	7%	3%	2%	9%
<b>DV Advocates</b>	0%	0%	9%	9%	0%	5%
<b>Barristers</b>	41%	43%	0%	0%	18%	14%
<b>Judge</b>	33%	4%	0%	0%	0%	5%
<b>Pathologist/Coroner</b>	0%	0%	20%	9%	21%	14%
<b>Other</b>	13%	0%	24%	0%	1%	18%

**References to Motivations and Explanations:** Each news item was coded for any references to motivating or contextual factors that might explain the crime. Only 11 percent of news items contextualised the crime in terms of domestic violence or coercive control. Most of these concern the Maguire case for which 57 percent of news items referenced domestic abuse. The perpetrator’s history of domestic abuse was a key focus of the murder trial including the testimony of Maguire’s children. In contrast, in the Collins case, evidence of Cathal O’Sullivan’s history of domestic abuse was not presented until after his trial and is only referenced in 13 percent of news items about that case.

The perpetrator’s mental health was referenced as a context in 26 percent of news items. This reference was most prevalent in coverage of the murder of Natalie McGuinness by Oisín Conroy. Conroy’s mental state was cited in 59 per cent of news items. As noted, the trial focused heavily on his mental health and he was found not guilty of the murder by reason of insanity. Some 26 percent of news items presented mental health issues as a frame for the Hawe murder suicide. It should be noted that the nature of this frame changed over time. While initial coverage referenced depression as a possible context, this was subsequently contested publicly by Clodagh Hawe’s family who also questioned whether murder-suicides should be understood through the lens of depression. References to mental illness as a context in the Fitzgerald murder-suicide were found in 27 percent of news items about that case. These are

primarily drawn from coverage of the inquest during which the Fitzgerald’s son stated that his father had experienced depression.

Relationship breakdown is cited in 13 percent of news items, but only in reference to the Maguire and Hawe cases. In coverage of the Maguire case, 61 percent of news items noted that the relationship had broken down, but many of these items also noted that the relationship broke down due to the perpetrator’s domestic abuse. Regarding the Hawe case, 12 percent of news items suggested that marriage breakdown may have been a motivating factor. Most of these items appeared in the *Irish Daily Mail* and one of which - ‘Hawe family tragedy has wiped happy memories (05/09/2016) - cites “speculation” about Alan Hawe’s “fears about the future of what he thought was the perfect marriage”. Subsequently, there was substantial emphasis on other motivations including Alan Hawe’s ‘imminent fall as a pillar of the community’ and ‘pressure from a work issue’.

Some nine percent of items present the view that the crimes were an ‘incomprehensible tragedy’ and therefore without explanation. The fact that Kitty and Tom Fitzgerald were pensioners from a rural area appears to have influenced the overall framing of the murder-suicide as an incomprehensible tragedy. A report for *RTÉ’s ‘Today with Sean O’Rourke’* (02/11/2016) refers to Tom and Kitty Fitzgerald as ‘community stalwarts’ from a ‘rural outpost’ and notes that people have left ‘sandwiches in tinfoil and flasks’ outside the Fitzgerald home as ‘local touches’. An apparent incongruity between domestic violence homicide and rural Ireland was also evident in the Hawe coverage. For example, a report in *The Irish Times* - ‘Cavan in shock at the discovery of five bodies in a home near Ballyjamesduff’ (30/08/2016) - references ‘rolling Cavan hills across a narrow country road’ and describes the murder-suicide as a disturbance ‘in this quiet rural corner’. Similarly, an article in *TheJournal.ie* - ‘Four hearses on a country road’ (29/08/2016) - observes: ‘there is no “right” place for such an unspeakable tragedy to occur, but this one feels particularly out of place.’

Table 6: Contextualisation of the Crime by Case

	McGuinness (n=27)	Maguire (n=28)	Hawe (n=94)	Fitzgerald (n=22)	Collins (n=39)	% of Total Items
Domestic Violence	0%	57%	1%	5%	13%	11%
Substance Abuse	4%	0%	0%	5%	10%	3%
Mental Health Issues	59%	0%	34%	27%	3%	26%
Infidelity	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Relationship Breakdown	0%	61%	12%	0%	0%	13%
Financial Issues	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Tragedy	0%	4%	13%	0%	0%	9%
Other	15%	54%	23%	27%	3%	20%

**Coverage of the Victim:** Most news items (96%) mention the victim by name, but only 55 per cent provide details about the victim as a person by quoting people who knew her or by providing details about her background or work. The extent of this coverage ranges from brief statements of fact about the victim’s life to lengthy descriptions of the victim’s life and character. The latter tend to be linked to coverage of funeral eulogies and the victim impact statements issued after a trial or inquest.

The victim was clearly identified as a victim in 86 percent of news items. In cases of murder where the perpetrator went to trial, almost all news items clearly identify the victim. The framing of victims is more ambiguous in the two cases of murder-suicide. Only 27 percent of news items clearly identified Kitty Fitzgerald as a murder victim. News items repeatedly referred to ‘the Fitzgerald couple’ as ‘pillars of the community’ and described the murder-suicide passively as a ‘tragedy’. Consequently, coverage often lacked a clear separation between the murderer and the victim. This ambiguity leaves the victim open to a suspicion of being complicit in her

death. For example, an article in *The Irish Daily Mail* - 'Injured son was victim in murder-suicide' (05/11/2016) - implies that Kitty was complicit her death while her son who was injured in the attack was an 'innocent victim'. Some 20 percent of news items about the Howe case did not make it clear that Clodagh Howe was murdered and that she was not complicit in the murder suicide. Most of these items were published in the week following the murder-suicide.

Some five percent of news items give the impression that the victim was partially responsible for her murder. Examples of the latter are found in coverage relating to the murders of Brigid Maguire (25%), Natalie McGuinness (4%), and Nicola Collins (8%). An early report on the murder of Natalie McGuinness in *The Irish Times* - 'Sligo murder suspect subdued with stun gun' (29/10/2015) - reports that 'Gardaí believe the killing arose from a disagreement'. The remaining instances of victim blaming all emerged during coverage of the trials. In the case of Brigid Maguire, the perpetrator's defence argued that she provoked her killer by calling him a 'bad father'. This was reported by *The Irish Times* and *Irish Daily Mail*; although it should be noted that these news items also cited the history of domestic abuse which was presented by the prosecution. In the case of Nicola Collins, *RTÉ* television news - 'Man goes on trial for murder of Cork mother of three (13/11/2018) - reported that the jury heard a statement from the perpetrator, which claimed that 'Ms Collins "got stuck into him" during an altercation'. During an *RTÉ News* report on the guilty verdict, the journalist noted that she had 'spent a number of days in the flat drinking and watching TV' with her murderer. The same report notes that the victim's family criticised the way her character was attacked during the trial.

Table 7: Coverage of the Victim by Case

	McGuinness (n=27)	Maguire (n=28)	Howe (n=94)	Fitzgerald (n=22)	Collins (n=39)	% of Total Items
Referenced by Name	100%	96%	94%	95%	100%	96%
Given Coverage	74%	61%	56%	68%	31%	56%
Clearly Identified as a Victim	96%	96%	80%	27%	100%	82%
Elements of Victim Blaming	4%	25%	1%	0%	8%	7%
Majority Focus on Perpetrator	52%	36%	17%	5%	5%	20%

**References to Domestic Violence as a Social Problem:** Only 10 per cent of news items make reference to other cases of domestic violence and only four percent include statistics about domestic violence. References to actions on domestic violence are found in 10 percent of items. These references to action tend to come from the victims' families. For example, during the sentencing hearing of her father, Brigid Maguire's daughter Jade made an explicit call to support women experiencing domestic violence. Although this call was reported in 25 percent of the news items about the case, no accompanying references to statistics on domestic violence were provided by the journalists.

There were news items addressing domestic violence as a social problem. For example, a report in *The Irish Times* - 'Nearly nine out of 10 murdered women knew their killer' (25/05/2018) - compares cases of femicide in Ireland with other European countries. This article is not about a specific case, but it does name a number of Irish victims including Clodagh Howe and Kitty Fitzgerald. Citing data from Women's Aid, the article notes that "a total of 216 women have died in Ireland since 1996" and that "nearly nine out of 10 of these women knew the man who killed them, and 56 per cent were killed by a current or former partner." Interestingly, however, the article does not mention any actions against domestic violence and does not provide any details about support groups.

Following the murder of Kitty Fitzgerald, *TheJournal.ie* featured an article by Sharon O'Halloran, the CEO of SAFE Ireland: 'The real danger to women is within their own home' (15/11/2016). The article is critical of media coverage for erasing domestic violence as a context of intimate partner homicides and makes a specific reference to the framing of the Fitzgerald case: "the Mayo community should not have been reassured that no third party was involved in Kitty Fitzgerald's death a few weeks ago. They have a much more real need to be reassured about the threats inside their homes and relationships."

Table 8: References to Domestic Violence (DV) by Case

	McGuinness (n=27)	Maguire (n=28)	Hawe (n=94)	Fitzgerald (n=22)	Collins (n=39)	% of Total Items
Other Cases of DV	11%	0%	17%	9%	0%	10%
DV Marches/Actions	4%	25%	13%	5%	0%	10%
DV Advocacy Groups	4%	0%	16%	9%	0%	9%
DV Statistics	4%	0%	5%	9%	0%	4%

**Sensationalism:** Some 11 percent of items were overtly sensational in their use of headlines and in the language of the news item. Sensational comments from sources were found in eight percent of items. Perhaps unsurprisingly, sensational references to the perpetrator as a 'monster' or 'evil' person tend to come from sources connected to the victim. The use of sensational, graphic language is most prominent in the *Irish Daily Mail*. Headlines in this outlet use a tabloid vernacular such as 'blood-drenched scene' and graphic quotes such as 'her tongue was blue'. Oisín Conroy, who murdered Natalie McGuinness, is dubbed the 'Matrix killer' and two articles - 'Wild Rages, Delusions and Death' (04/06/2018) and 'Matrix killer not guilty of murder due to insanity' (08/07/2018) - quote his graphic admission that he strangled McGuinness with "a rear naked choke which I learned from Brazilian jiu-jitsu. She struggled so hard, I knew I had to kill her, kill her, kill her". Other outlets opted to cite only segments of this quote.

However, sensationalism was not confined to the tabloid. In relation to the murder of Natalie McGuinness, a number of articles in *The Irish Times* state that Oisín Conroy 'believed "he was in the Matrix" and strangled his girlfriend to death in order to save her'. Coverage of the Nicola Collins trial presented gruesome and salacious details. An *RTÉ News* report on the guilty verdict - 'Man found guilty of the murder of Nicola Collins' (29/11/2018) - states that Nicola Collins 'was found naked on the floor with her legs on a bed'.

Table 9: Sensationalism by Case

	McGuinness (n=27)	Maguire (n=28)	Hawe (n=94)	Fitzgerald (n=22)	Collins (n=39)	% of Total
Headline	7%	21%	9%	5%	8%	11%
Language Used	22%	4%	13%	0%	10%	11%
Commentary from Sources	30%	7%	7%	0%	0%	8%

**Use of Images:** Almost half of all items used photographs to accompany the news story, but only 22 percent included images of the victim. The range of photographic subjects primarily included: the murder scene or local area, the victim, the perpetrator, the funeral, and, if applicable, the court house. The use of images is likely to be influenced by availability, which may explain some differences between the cases. For example, coverage of the Fitzgerald case primarily used photographs of the rural scene rather than pictures of the victim and the perpetrator.

In other cases, the same photographs of the victim were used repeatedly. The images used in items about the Hawe case were more diverse and changed over time. An initial criticism of coverage was the use of photographs depicting Alan Hawe alone or with his sons. Subsequent coverage included various images of Clodagh Hawe, images of Clodagh with her sons, and images of Clodagh with her sister and mother.

*Table 10: Use of Images*

	McGuinness (n=27)	Maguire (n=28)	Hawe (n=94)	Fitzgerald (n=22)	Collins (n=39)	% of Total
<b>Items with photographs</b>	37%	46%	53%	63%	33%	48%
<b>Of the victim</b>	22%	25%	27%	0%	23%	22%

**Conclusion:** Although the nature of coverage is heavily influenced by the circumstances of individual cases, this study has identified a pattern of coverage that is broadly consistent with the international literature. Across coverage of the five cases, domestic violence and femicide are decontextualised as a social issue. Only 11 percent of news items contextualised the crime in terms of domestic violence and just 10 per cent made reference to other cases of domestic violence. Only four percent included statistics about domestic violence and only five percent of news items included a domestic violence advocate as a source. As noted elsewhere in this report, this decontextualisation has significant implications for the public understanding of domestic violence and femicide and for efforts to address this social problem.

## PART III: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF THE HAWE FAMILICIDE

On Monday August 29<sup>th</sup> 2016, the bodies of Clodagh Hawe and her three sons Liam (13), Niall (11) and Ryan (6) were found in their home in Co Cavan, Ireland. The woman and children had been murdered by their husband/father, Alan Hawe, who then died by suicide. People in Ireland were shocked and saddened at the murder of an innocent woman and three children, but there was also anger at the media's erasure of that woman, Clodagh Hawe, from the media representations of their deaths (Quinn et al., 2019). This case study seeks to map in detail the problematic patterns of representation that were evident in the broadcast news coverage of the Hawe familicide. The key findings are that the coverage: decontextualised domestic violence, by failing to name the murders as domestic violence; used inappropriate sources by privileging the voices of police and neighbours over those of domestic violence advocates and criminologists; and exonerated the perpetrator by failing to name him as the perpetrator and by presenting him in a neutral or even a favourable light, with the premeditated aspect of his crimes under-reported.

**Methodology:** The content that was included for qualitative examination included all national radio and television news broadcasts. More specifically, the following programmes were examined:

- RTÉ Radio 1 'Morning Ireland': weekdays 07:00-09:00
- RTÉ Radio 1 'Drivetime': weekdays 16:30-19:00
- Newstalk 'The Right Hook': weekdays 16:30-19:00
- Today FM 'The Last Word with Matt Cooper': weekdays 16:30-19:00
- TV3 'News at 5:30': weekdays 17:30-18:00
- RTÉ News 'Six One': daily 18:01 -19:00

The timeframe of analysis incorporated all transmissions that occurred from the time the bodies were first discovered on Monday August 29<sup>th</sup> 2016 until the funerals occurred on Saturday September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016. Table 11 outlines which programmes covered the story and on which days.

All of the programmes were broadcast live and most of the reporting on the Hawe case featured content that came live from Cavan. However, many of the programmes also use pre-recorded packages or feature reports that were filmed or recorded by a journalist earlier on the day of transmission. These pre-recorded packages potentially give journalists more time to reflect and consider the use of sources, that is the voices that they choose to feature in content. Pre-recorded content also allows reporters time to think about the context within which a story is framed, as well as time to review the language that is used to describe events. However, many of the practices that journalists deploy in reporting on domestic violence homicides are heavily institutionalised and are simply the way that these stories have always been covered. Each of the problematic dimensions of coverage within these programmes, (in terms of sources, context and blame) is discussed in detail below. It is to the objective of inviting journalists to reflect on whether or not these are the best ways of reporting on a story like the Hawe case that this section is directed. It is hoped that the rationale for changing practices of reporting will become clearer when the Hawe case is examined in detail.

Table 11: Broadcast news programmes that covered the Hawe familicide

	Monday Aug. 29th	Tuesday Aug. 30 <sup>th</sup>	Wednesday Aug 31st	Thursday Sept. 1st	Friday Aug. Sept. 2nd	Saturday Sept. 3rd
RTÉ 'Morning Ireland'		✓				
RTÉ 'Drivetime'	✓	✓			✓	
Newstalk	✓	✓				
Today FM	✓	✓	✓		✓	
TV3 'The 5:30'	✓	✓	✓			
RTÉ 'Six One'	✓	✓				✓

**Sources:** As mentioned in the literature review, journalists often take their lead from police in how crimes are defined in the early stages of breaking news stories. In their choice of sources to comment on the Hawe case, journalists tended to privilege the voice of the Gardaí, as well as using commentary from local church leaders, neighbours and unidentified bystanders, while domestic violence advocates were not used as sources for the story. The way in which these sources were used each day over the period of coverage is examined in detail below.

On Monday the 29<sup>th</sup> of August, the day that the bodies were discovered, the story was carried on *RTÉ Radio One's* main news and current affairs show, 'Drivetime'. The main source of information was the station's Crime Correspondent, Paul Reynolds, who covered the story for both radio and television programmes. The use of the crime correspondent frames the story as a crime and places the focus on the Gardaí as the main actors in the story. The crime correspondent immediately noted that the police were 'not looking for anyone else at present', but did not name the deaths as murder-suicide. The programme returned to the story later in the show following a Garda press briefing, from which inserts were played into the programme. Interestingly, the journalists' questions were included on air as part of those inserts. Journalists directly asked the Gardaí, 'Can you confirm that this was a murder suicide?' to which they did not provide a direct answer but a rather coded response that they were 'not looking for anybody else. We believe all the answers are within that house'. Their comment that 'the most likely scenario is that one person in that house may have caused the death of others' did nothing to clarify the fact, which the police knew at the time, that Alan Hawe had murdered Clodagh, Liam, Niall and Ryan. As a source of information, the police gave no clarity to journalists breaking the story as to the criminal nature of the events, nor who were the victims and who was the perpetrator.

A second source used in that initial *RTÉ* radio broadcast was a journalist from a local Cavan newspaper, Seán McMahon. He offered an account of bystanders' reactions on the street in Ballyjamesduff, the nearest town to the crime-scene. As was discussed in the previous section, a preoccupation with the rural site of the murders and the incongruity of crime with such a rural idyll, was in evidence in this commentary. McMahon gave some description of the local area and a depiction of the family as one which was involved in the GAA, a local community sporting organisation. The final source for 'Drivetime' on the day the story broke was a local politician Paddy Smith. While the family were not named by any media on the first day of coverage, the politician indirectly identifies them by revealing that the father was Vice Principal of the local school and Treasurer of the local GAA club. This mistake speaks to the lack of expertise that a local politician has in commenting on a sensitive murder-suicide story, and begs the question why he was interviewed. But it also begins a pattern of inexpert (male) sources offering detail about and so placing emphasis on the father in his public roles, which began the erasure of Clodagh, Liam, Niall and Ryan from the story of their own deaths.

The national commercial radio station Today FM made a brief mention of the Hawe murders on their drivetime evening programme 'The Last Word with Matt Cooper' on August 29th. The



presenter Matt Cooper interviewed the same local journalist as RTÉ, Sean McMahon. He again offered basic factual information about the ages of the family and unlike the first RTÉ report, Today FM was clear that the Gardaí had named the crime as a murder-suicide. However, again there was no clarity about who had murdered whom, murder-suicide was used as a passive description. The national commercial radio station Newstalk on their evening programme 'The Right Hook' also clearly named the crime as a murder suicide. The story was covered only by their reporter with an insert from the Garda press briefing. The commercial television station TV3 carried the story as the lead item on its flagship evening news programme 'News at 5.30'. It did not name the crime as a murder-suicide but instead stated that, 'the Gardaí are treating this incident as a tragedy'. The code 'they're not looking for anyone else in connection with the deaths' was also deployed.

That evening on RTÉ television's main evening news programme, 'Six One', the station's Crime Correspondent and the Gardaí were again the main sources of information. Again, their language obscured rather than revealed information; for instance 'upon finding the five deceased people a full investigation has been launched'. There was no mention that four members of the family were murdered, no account of a murder weapon was offered other than 'objects were found in the house', there was no clarity from the Gardaí that the crime was one of 'murder suicide' and there was no categorisation of the nature of the investigation launched by the police. The delivery of the Garda account of the crime on camera was stilted, abstract and unclear. The Assistant Chief Commissioner essentially recounted the sequence of events that lead to the finding of the bodies that day and noted that 'we are not looking for anybody else' but did not clarify who killed whom within the house. At this juncture, the Gardaí knew that the 'objects' were knives and an axe and knew that the woman and children had been stabbed to death but did not give this information to journalists. Nor did they tell journalists that a note had been left on the door which speaks to a pre-meditated, rational and calculated approach to the murders. When Garda sources fail to give this factual information to the press, they fail to point to the calculated nature of domestic murders and so they set the public up to misunderstand the crimes as some kind of inexplicable and therefore unpreventable 'tragedy'. In the absence of a Garda source to corroborate that angle, journalists feel that they simply 'cannot go there' to make that connection themselves (Cullen, O' Brien, Corcoran, 2018).

The day following the discovery of the bodies, August 30<sup>th</sup>, every news programme on national radio and television carried the story. The first radio programme on air, 'Morning Ireland', opened with effectively a vox-pop of responses from bystanders in the area recounting how they heard the story and their thoughts and feelings in response to it. Two unnamed men and two unnamed women gave the predictable responses that any member of the public would give, but none of these added any information, insight or expertise to frame the story. Emphasis was put on geographical proximity to the crime rather than expert or informative analysis of the crime, which a day after the event should feasibly have been sourced, even internationally sourced. The RTÉ Crime Correspondent Paul Reynolds was again a main source of information and the family were named in that broadcast. Another main source for commentary on the second day for both radio and television coverage was the Catholic bishop, Leo O' Reilly but there was no explanation as to why a Catholic bishop was approached for comment on the crime; it was assumed to be self-apparent that this was an appropriate source. The bishop however framed the story in heavily religious terms as a 'tragedy' and a 'most difficult cross' and spoke of keeping the community in 'prayers'. The bishop was also used as a source in the commercial radio coverage on Today FM at 5pm.

That evening RTÉ's 'Drivetime' followed a similar pattern of using inexpert sources, with an unnamed bystander interviewed about living nearby and his reaction to the events. A key source of commentary on 'Drivetime' was the RTÉ reporter John Cook, who recounted information about the family given to him by locals. He foregrounded an interview with a neighbour Larry McGinn, who also featured on the 'Six One' news that evening, as well as appearing on TV3's evening 'News at 5.30'. The latter also included a short insert from an

unnamed woman as she was leaving mass and she made comments about having seen Clodagh at mass that weekend and having seen Liam the week before. She testified that the community was in shock and traumatised. Similarly, the Newstalk coverage on 'The Right Hook' on the second evening of coverage used a comment from an unnamed bystander to capture the response of local members of the public.

In the second episode of 'Six One', the police were again one of the main sources of information but police knowledge about the elements of planning involved in the murder of Clodagh, Liam, Niall and Ryan remained underplayed, negating the rational and premeditated nature of the crime. The Crime Correspondent mentioned the note left at the entrance to the house at the beginning and end of his pre-recorded package but only gave one line to the fact that other evidentiary notes were also found inside the house, which disabuses the idea that the incident was a 'bolt from the blue' as one neighbour, Larry McGinn, testified during the second day of coverage. That neighbour spoke only of his impressions of Alan Hawe and did not individually mention Clodagh or the children in the television version of his interviews, on either RTÉ or TV3. This is another erasure that Clodagh, Liam, Niall and Ryan underwent in media coverage of their murders. In a further bizarre recounting of an exchange with a bystander, RTÉ's Crime Correspondent used comments from an unnamed, unverified source to say that Alan Hawe was someone that the bystander 'looked up to'.

It was three days after the murder (Wednesday August 31<sup>st</sup>) before Today FM news explicitly stated that Alan Hawe was the murderer of the other four family members. On that day, Today FM also made an explicit connection between the murders and domestic violence. It reported, as part of its hourly news bulletin, that the domestic violence helpline run by Women's Aid had seen an increase in the number of women calling since the Hawe murders/suicide. That report carried a brief clip from the Director of Women's Aid, Margaret Martin, who commented that the deaths had 'caused a high level of distress, fear and anxiety for women... with concerns for themselves and the safety of their children'. The news bulletin did not go beyond that observation to access Martin's expertise on the patterns and characteristics that underpin domestic murders and to connect that understanding to the specifics of the Hawe case. Similarly, TV3 carried a package the week after the murders, which was a pre-planned feature on the Women's Aid helpline, within which the Hawe murders were mentioned. But at no time in any of the national news broadcasts about the murders did any journalists include comment from domestic violence organisations or from experts on femicide that could link the Hawe murders to patterns nationally or internationally. It is as if such a body of knowledge, research and expertise simply did not exist and was overlooked in favour of the commentary of neighbours, religious figures and self-appointed community spokespersons.

'News at 5.30' on TV3 was the only television news programme to cover the story on the third day after the murders. In that broadcast, delivered entirely by the reporter, the station made its first mention of the notes left at the house by the murderer. On the Friday before the funeral, RTÉ's 'Drivetime' returned to the local journalist Sean McMahon for further commentary on the preparations for the funerals. There was a very strong emphasis in his reporting on the family as a unit, he described matching coffins for the children and the same type of timber being used for Clodagh and Alan Hawe's coffins. He described a family photo that was issued that day and described the children as like 'steps of the stairs' and he inappropriately mentions they all look 'brilliant' in the photo. Institutional attendees - such as the Bishop, priests, the Gardaí, County Councillors, and Dáil Deputies - were all mentioned. And there was a mention made of anger in the community about how the press had speculated as to the contents of notes discovered in the house. Those same notes, which speak to the planning put into the murders by Alan Hawe, had been very much underplayed in the broadcast coverage, which largely omitted to analyse how planned the murders were.

The cumulative effect of the combination of sources described above is that very little information or knowledge was available to journalists. The Gardaí did not name the crime and

its perpetrator clearly and did not speak accurately to the planned nature of the murders. In addition, bystanders, mostly male commentators did not reference all of the family equally and spoke more about the male perpetrator. Religious leaders were included as sources and reframed the murders as tragic and therefore unavoidable. There was an additional failure to use domestic violence advocates as sources, a failure to connect the deaths to international patterns and a lost opportunity to explain coercive control and abuse within the home. There was moreover a failure to offer women suffering domestic violence any information on helplines and supports if they were in a similar situation. The only helplines that were referenced live on air were those of The Samaritans but there was no reference in any report to domestic violence support lines until three days after the murders. In addition to problems with sources, the Irish case also reflected findings in the international literature, which notes a failure to set stories of domestic violence homicide in the correct context of coercive control and domestic violence.

**Decontextualisation:** Journalists avoided making any contextual connection between the Hawe murders and domestic violence or coercive control. This was done in an explicit sense but also in very subtle ways that were implicit in references to the family and violence or control. The first RTÉ radio programme to cover the Hawe murders/suicide, during the late afternoon of Monday August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016 was 'Drivetime'. During the report, there was a lot of coded language used that served to implicitly separate a 'normal' family from a situation of potential control or violence. For instance, Sean McMahon, a local journalist, gave an account of the family for 'Drivetime', in which he said four times that the family were 'well known in the community'. This mantra was repeated by Paddy Smith a local politician, who noted three times that the family were 'well known'. Similarly, the Newstalk coverage mentioned the family being 'prominent members of the community'. TV3 asked if they were 'a very popular and well-liked family'. This idea of being 'known' seems to contain an expression of the idea that domestic violence or coercive control could not be associated with such an apparently normal or well-known family, it is something that could only happen to 'other' types of family.

Later that week, in the coverage of the funeral, it was notable how often the word 'family' is used as a descriptor, despite the fact that the family was the cause of death for four people. The word is used six times in a short RTÉ 'Six One' report on the second day and on TV3 it is used eight times in a report on funeral arrangements that lasts one minute and twenty-three seconds. In the funeral coverage, the family were still referred to as a unit 'friends and neighbours attending prayers in memory of the *whole* family' and the bodies are almost always referred to in an order leading with 'Alan Hawe, his wife Clodagh and their three young sons' which was used consistently across RTÉ and TV3. Similarly, on Newstalk their report opens with the line, 'tributes are being paid to Clodagh and Alan Hawe and their three boys...'. There is no distinction made between the murderer and the murdered and the 'tributes' are described as applying equally to all. It is as if the fact of four murders having been committed was overlooked by the reporters. No distinction is made with regard to differences in their cause of death, nor is any reference made to the criminal and murderous betrayal that occurred within that 'family'.

On the second day of broadcasting, Morning Ireland aired extensive commentary from Bishop Leo O' Reilly who also shifted the context of the murders out of the crime framing and into one of religious faith and mystery. The bishop offered only a religious salve to the crimes 'I think we just have to think of them and those affected by it and keep them in our thoughts and prayers at this very difficult time'. He reframed the crime of their murders as a test of Catholic faith 'I think hope is very important in this situation and our faith that death is not the end and even the greatest tragedy that God can use this in some way that we don't understand at all and bring some good out of it'. The bishop is included on TV3's 'News at 5.30' and on the commercial radio station Today FM where a clip is used of the bishop saying 'death is not the end'. That strain of religious stoicism and fatalism is highly questionable as a dimension of what was supposed to be news coverage of multiple-murders. The bishop's comment that

‘unfortunately there are no answers and we simply don’t understand’ belies the extensive criminological research and expertise on murder-suicides that could have offered a more thorough and evidence-based assessment of the Hawe case than the religious context offers. Only Newstalk does not use any of the audio from the Bishop’s statement.

In all of the coverage of the Hawe murders and suicide, no broadcaster interviews a criminologist who specialises in familicide or murder-suicide, which would have set the story firmly in the context of coercive control and domestic violence. This failure to correctly frame the story misses the opportunity for a meaningful call to action for the state to address this problem with appropriate resources for education and prevention. In all of the coverage of the Hawe story no national politician is questioned about recourses for tackling coercive control. The Hawe deaths only become a political issue when Clodagh’s family call directly on the Minister for Justice and the Garda Commissioner to act. Revealing more of the typical context of intimate partner and familial murders might better serve to educate the public on the dangers of coercive control and domestic violence. Placing responsibility with perpetrators rather than exonerating them of blame might also serve to make the public aware of the controlling dynamics that underpin domestic violence.

**Blame:** In the Hawe case the perpetrator was frequently exonerated of blame in the reporting of the murders. This was done when he was not named as the perpetrator of the murders and he was presented in a neutral or even a favourable light, with the premeditated nature of his crimes consistently underplayed.

Right from the very first broadcasts about the killings, the crimes were described in ways that placed Alan Hawe to the foreground. Even before the victims were named the deaths were listed beginning with his and everyone else was named only in terms of their relationship to him. For instance, on RTÉ television ‘deaths of a man, his wife and their three sons’ and on TV3 ‘the bodies of a man in his 40s, his wife aged in her 30s and their three sons...’. There was a significant imbalance in the number of mentions that various member of the families received in the total broadcast news coverage. Ryan and Niall were referred to 25 times each, while Liam was referred to 26 times, Clodagh was mentioned 30 times while Alan Hawe was mentioned or referred to 54 times.

On the first day of coverage the references to various member of the family are fairly balanced and nobody is named at this juncture. Only RTÉ’s ‘Drivetime’ is an exception to this balance, no names are mentioned but ‘the children’ are referred to on three occasions, the ‘oldest child’ twice, the ‘mother’ three times but the ‘man in his forties’ has eight statements made about him.

*Table 12: Mentions of victims/perpetrator by programme on day one (Sept. 29<sup>th</sup>)*

	“a man”	“a woman”	“the children”
RTÉ ‘Six One’	5	5	5
Newstalk	2	2	2
Today FM	5	5	5
TV3 ‘The 5:30’	1	1	1
RTÉ ‘Drivetime’	8	3	3

On the second day of radio coverage the family were named publicly. On ‘Morning Ireland’ the photo of Alan Hawe with Liam, Niall and Ryan was described, which started a tendency, begun in print coverage (Quinn et al, 2019) to foreground the murderer at the cost of his victims. As noted in the table below, on TV3 Clodagh was mentioned more than anybody perhaps because a female bystander was interviewed who had observed Clodagh at mass the previous weekend. On Newstalk each family member was mentioned once but Alan Hawe was described in more detail as ‘the man in his 40s, who was Deputy Principal in Castlereagh

National School, he killed his wife and his three young lads by stabbing them to death before taking his own life'. The attention given to Alan Hawe was at least concerned with naming his crime clearly, a distinction that many other reports failed to make. On RTÉ's 'Six One' news, Alan Hawe was mentioned in six different ways: as the Deputy Principal who killed his wife and children; as the man in a photo attending a basketball event; as the treasurer of the GAA club; as a man that a neighbour said he would go to for help; as someone who was always reliable and positive and as someone another bystander would 'look up to' if any other family had been murdered. The only mention of Clodagh Hawe during that entire main evening news broadcast was in relation to the actions of Alan having 'killed his wife Clodagh and their three young children' (30/08/16). The boys were named once and their ages are listed, and their participation in sports and music were mentioned. They got two sentences in a broadcast that had RTÉ's crime correspondent, a neighbour and hearsay from a bystander each offer neutral or even positive statements about the murderer, whose crimes were completely underplayed within the report. Clodagh, Liam, Niall and Ryan as the victims, and as people who merit tributes, comment and description, were underrepresented, most notably on the public service station, while disproportionate attention went to their murderer.

*Table 13: Naming of victims/perpetrator by programme on day two (Sept. 30th)*

	Clodagh	Liam	Niall	Ryan	Alan
RTÉ 'Morning Ireland'	3	2	2	2	8
RTÉ 'Drivetime'	3	2	2	4	12
TV3 'The 5:30'	3	2	1	1	2
Today FM	3	3	2	2	3
Newstalk	1	1	1	1	1
RTÉ 'Six One'	1	1	1	1	6

In short, a consistent and very obvious pattern emerges in the first two days of coverage whereby Alan Hawe was given more attention on the public service station RTÉ than the people he murdered. Unsurprisingly that strain within the broadcast coverage which was duplicated in the print coverage raised public sanction expressed by the # HerNamesClodagh (Quinn et al, 2019).

While he was mentioned more than anyone, that preoccupation was not with Alan Hawe as the perpetrator of murder. Instead much of the attention given to him was very sanguine descriptions provided by his neighbour in particular. On Drivetime's second day of coverage Larry McGinn claimed Alan Hawe was someone he knew 'very very well' was 'easygoing and ready to help out'. He mentioned Clodagh and the children only as people he 'knew well' but sadly fails to describe at all. When asked if there was any 'indication that there was anything wrong in the home' the neighbour authoritatively stated 'No absolutely not. Definitely. I was a very near neighbour and met them quite often. No absolutely not...' but McGinn did not say that he ever spent any time inside the home nor that he had any relationship with Clodagh or the children. Later Clodagh's family would clarify the control that was exerted within that home by Alan Hawe (RTÉ 2019). Asking neighbours questions that they had no expertise to answer did not add to the public understanding of a specific news story nor to coercive control, domestic violence or murder-suicide more generally. The ways in which Alan Hawe was represented did not serve to lay blame and responsibility and sanction where they belonged, with him.

**Conclusion:** Stories about the Hawe familicide used problematic sources, decontextualised domestic violence and exonerated the perpetrator. The police as sources did not clarify the

nature of the crime, did not state who was the perpetrator and did not highlight the planned nature of the attack. Bystanders were used to offer local detail on the family, which did not speak to the crime committed and spoke only to their limited knowledge, which was generally of the perpetrator. There was a complete failure to use criminologists or domestic violence advocates as sources who could more expertly contextualise the story for the public. The coverage of the Hawe murders placed heavy emphasis on the normativity of the family unit, even after it was clear that the family was the site of destruction for four of the victims. The use of religious leaders to offer commentary on the deaths served only to displace a narrative of crime and the social problem of coercive control and domestic violence and replace it with one of stoicism, mystery and faith. In the Hawe case the perpetrator was exonerated of blame by not being presented as the perpetrator of the murders but instead being presented in a neutral or even a favourable light, with the premeditated nature of his crimes consistently underplayed, as if he was as much a victim as Clodagh, Liam, Niall and Ryan. This approach to reporting on familicide, and by extension, on intimate partner murders, serves to misrepresent the characteristics of murder-suicides and their connection to coercive control and domestic violence. The consequence of that misrepresentation is that domestic violence, coercive control and the end results familicide, are not accurately understood by the public. A key measure in addressing these failures needs to center on the generation of adequate guidelines for police, journalists and editors and the dissemination of those guidelines. This in turn points to the broader need for close engagement between journalists and domestic violence advocates so that all parties can learn more about the phenomenon, how to report it and how society can better understand the causes and consequences of incidents like the murders of Clodagh, Liam, Niall and Ryan Hawe.

## PART IV: CHANGING MEDIA CULTURE: GUIDELINES OR GUIDANCE?

The preceding sections all reiterate the key problems with media coverage of domestic violence homicide. Problems exist with how stories are sourced, with the exoneration of perpetrators and the decontextualisation of domestic violence as an aspect of the killings. These critiques translate into various potential reforms that are needed within journalism institutions. Potential reforms include: changes in news practice, changes in the training of journalists, and the development of institutional guidelines for the coverage of domestic violence murders (Ryan et al., 2006:213). To this end, this section evaluates existing, international guidelines and sets out the context for the potential implementation of guidelines in Ireland. Through relevant case studies, we examine the current status of knowledge about how guidelines can most effectively be developed, disseminated and implemented in order to generate change in how media cover domestic violence homicide. In summary, we identify the potential value of greater co-operation and engagement between journalists and domestic violence advocates.

**Existing Guidelines:** Reporting guidelines for domestic violence and femicide have been developed in a number of countries and by a number of organisations (see Appendix 1). Sutherland et al. (2016) reviewed a sample of eleven guidelines from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK, and US as well as the International Federation of Journalists. Although there are some variations between them, the guidelines frequently cross reference each other, most were developed in consultation with domestic-violence advocacy groups, and nearly all cite research to support definitions and claims about domestic violence (Sutherland et al, 2016:11). Only half were developed in consultation with media professionals or media organisations and a quarter were developed in collaboration with government agencies or departments.

The guidelines share key recommendations in common (see Sutherland et al, 2016). In summary, they recommend that journalists contextualise domestic violence as a social, not individual, problem; present relevant local statistics about the extent of the problem; avoid promulgating myths; focus on warning signs and obstacles for women seeking to leave abusive partners; use accurate, non-judgemental language; and avoid blaming women for violence perpetrated against them. In addition, most guidelines recommend that journalists consider how sources can shape the public's understanding of domestic violence. For example, they suggest that reporters: avoid using distant acquaintances who know little about the incident; do not rely exclusively on police as sources; and seek expert voices such as survivors and advocates or domestic violence experts.

Blatchford (2018) summarises that “an ideal article reporting on a domestic homicide would: contextualise the story with statistics or expert comment about violence against women; label the incident for what it was, such as “domestic violence”; humanise the story and, if possible, give a name to the victim; if relevant (and legal), report on the perpetrator’s prior violence; and include domestic violence helplines.” She notes that if these elements are not included in reporting, domestic violence homicide is likely to be represented as an isolated and random event.

**Limitations of Existing Guidelines:** Existing guidelines were largely developed in consideration of print media and afford only limited attention to broadcast, social or online media. This is a significant oversight for a number of reasons. First, there has been a dramatic decline in the consumption of newspapers. In Ireland, broadcast media is currently the dominant source of news, but social media and online media are dominant among younger

demographics (Kirk et al., 2019). Consequently, existing guidelines based on print media coverage are targeted at the news media people are least likely to consume.

Second, the success of reporting guidelines is likely to be influenced by the extent to which they are perceived as relevant and practical for journalists. As noted, only half of the guidelines reviewed by Sutherland et al. (2016) were developed in consultation with media professionals or media organisations. This is a significant gap. Moreover, digital technologies have had a profound impact on the news industry and journalism practice. Journalists are under pressure to do more with less resources and to meet the demands of a 24-hour breaking news cycle. These are practical issues that need to be considered.

Third, online and social media provide a platform for the public and voices that have been sidelined in media coverage. For example, there is evidence that social media is making public concerns about violence against women more salient leading journalists to report on it more (Simons and Morgan, 2018: 1202). In addition, social media is increasingly used by journalists to identify survivors and interviewees for stories (ibid). Currently, there is little understanding of how journalists are using social media to this or other effects and the ethical implications of these practices.

Finally, the development of guidelines is not an end-in-itself because guidelines are only effective if they contribute to change. As outlined below, implementing change to the culture of media reporting may require going beyond the provision of guidelines to also fostering ongoing engagement with journalists and providing guidance to news media institutions.

**Implementing Change:** Although there has been some international success in developing reporting guidelines, little is known about the effectiveness of their implementation. As Sutherland et al. note (2016:11), “while most guidelines describe the process by which the recommendations were developed, albeit briefly, few note implementation or dissemination strategies”. This is a significant gap in knowledge as it impedes our understanding of the circumstances that may stimulate a change in reporting practices. To better understand this process, we present the following case studies of organisations that have been effective in implementing change.

***The Rhode Island Coalition against Domestic Violence:*** To date, only one study examines the entire process of developing, implementing and disseminating reporting guidelines on domestic violence: Ryan et al. (2006) outline how the Rhode Island Coalition against Domestic Violence (RICADV) undertook a participatory communication project to change news coverage of domestic violence homicide. This case study provides valuable insights for effective engagement with news media professionals and it underlines the important role of advocacy groups in enabling and supporting changes in journalistic practice.



The RICADV project worked with journalists in three ways: “to identify difficulties encountered when reporting on domestic violence murders, to create and disseminate a handbook presenting best journalistic practices, and to establish ongoing dialogue with the handbook serving as a vehicle” (Ryan et al. 2006: 210). The RICADV study included: an analysis of local media coverage; an identification of best practices that broke problematic patterns; a focus group with survivors; interviews with local journalists to explore their understanding of domestic violence and the constraints on reporting it, and finally, what journalists needed to better cover the issue.



The resulting findings informed a RICADV handbook, which aimed ‘to serve not as a freestanding product but as a catalyst for building dialogues and sustaining working relationships with journalists’ (Ryan et al., 2006:215). The handbook was distributed widely but RICADV also met with journalists to seek feedback and address outstanding issues. In a second content analysis, post-handbook dissemination, RICADV research noted that handbook recommendations had been adopted in several key ways. Murders were identified as domestic violence and source patterns shifted so that advocates gained visibility, use of police sources expanded and the use of bystanders was sharply limited. Following its publication, RICADV continued to develop its own systems to respond to journalists’ needs.

**Our Watch:** In 2011, Australia adopted the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Their Children 2010-2022 as the country’s primary policy on domestic and family violence and sexual assault. Two years later, the Australian and Victorian government launched the Foundation to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children, which was later renamed Our Watch. Our Watch aims to change the culture, behaviours and attitudes that underpin violence against women and children. To do so, the organisation conducts a range of complementary activities that engage the media, policy makers, educators, sports organisations, workplaces and young people. Thus, addressing media coverage is just one component of a broader effort to change cultural attitudes.



Our Watch developed The National Media Engagement project to encourage high-quality reporting of domestic violence and to increase awareness of the impacts of gender stereotyping and inequality. The development of this project was informed by extensive research on media reporting and journalists’ needs. Feedback from media stakeholders indicated that reporting guidelines are useful resources but need to be supplemented with additional training and support. The National Media Engagement final project included the following components: resources and guidelines for media professionals; a curriculum on reporting on violence against women; media skills training for advocates; and a national media awards scheme.

The Our Watch media awards commenced in 2015 to recognise exemplary reporting on violence against women. The awards have received more than 1300 entries each year. A review conducted by the University of Melbourne (Sutherland, Simons, and Blatchford 2017) found that the awards have contributed to changes in reporting practices and provide an opportunity for journalists and advocates to discuss issues relating to domestic violence reporting. In 2019, Our Watch published updated guidelines on reporting violence against women, which provide detailed, practical advice for journalists regarding, for example, the use of language in reporting. An independent evaluation by PwC Australia (2018) found that Our Watch provides a much-needed independent, evidence-based, considered and impartial voice to the public conversation on violence against women and their children.

**Headline:** Headline, the Irish national programme to support media in reporting on suicide and mental illness, offers an interesting case study in changing the culture of reporting on sensitive content. When the organisation was founded in 2007 much of its efforts went into monitoring content. So much so that few resources remained for analysis of the nature of the coverage in any great detail. Print articles were categorised as positive negative or neutral; in cases where coverage was judged to be negative or potentially harmful to vulnerable audiences, Headline contacted journalists directly to flag that they were in breach of WHO and The Samaritan’s guidelines on reporting. However, following a 2017 review of practices, Headline noted that content monitoring was not always the most productive way of engaging with journalists. Although reporting had changed for the better, the organisation



shifted focus to adapt to an ever-changing media sector where the pressures and requirements on producers had changed significantly in the previous decade.

Headline has adopted a research-lead approach to identifying the challenges to responsible reporting. Some of the key challenges that Headline's research found journalists experienced were: maintaining sensitivity to suicide as a topic that needs to be handled carefully; focusing on finding the balance between the public interest in stories of deaths by suicide and the right to privacy of the families of the subjects of those stories. Journalists found reporting on mental illness difficult because of their limited understanding of various conditions and stigma associated with illness. The organisation's research also noted that journalists find guidelines, when they were aware of them, too rigid to apply to specific stories.

In response to evidence of the challenges, Headline became more focused on engaging and collaborating with the sector to meet their needs. The Headline education provision to third level institutions teaches the next generation about the workplace challenges of tough decision-making about content. In those workshops the facilitator works with students to develop an appreciation of the consequences of faulty coverage and also the potential benefit of good reporting. Headline also offers those workshops as in-house training to professional journalists and media producers. Beyond training, Headline generates resources to support media producers to learn more about suicide and mental illness. The delivery of this material appreciates that it is difficult for journalists, who are not 9-5 workers to attend for in-person seminars and so Headline is working on an online resource that journalists can access on their own terms in their downtime. That resource will not take an overtly guideline approach but rather offer journalists a sense of the issues that are important to consider in the coverage of sensitive issues. The key work of monitoring content, responding to negative reporting, educating future workers and engaging with the industry currently in ways that support them through the challenging decisions involved in reporting on sensitive topics are all possible approaches that might prove beneficial in changing the culture of reporting on domestic violence.

**Conclusion:** The key insight from the above case studies is that changing the culture of media reporting requires a proactive approach from domestic violence advocates. Domestic violence agencies need to be familiar with the norms and needs of news media and they need to build relationships with journalists. For example, "RICADV did not simply expect journalists to change, it changed its own practices to respond to reporter needs" (Ryan et al., 2006:223). Such an approach holds great promise for changing the culture of news reporting on domestic violence and femicide in Ireland. Developing a relationship with journalists and media outlets may not be an obvious priority for domestic-violence agencies. However, developing relationships and providing opportunities for discussion and training appear to have a positive impact on the uptake of reporting guidelines. Moreover, dedicated media personnel can have a positive impact in terms of receiving more media requests for interviews and information (Simons and Morgan 2018).

It is important to note that efforts to change journalistic practice extend beyond newsrooms. In the case of RICADV and Our Watch, journalists benefited from the wider, non-media based, activities undertaken by the organisations. For example, RICADV's parallel work with the police on their use of language around domestic violence incidents was a crucial context for journalists. As noted, journalists take their lead from how the police describe domestic violence murders and are very slow to move outside the parameters set by the police. It is vital that police spokespersons set out the correct context and language to describe the crimes committed (Cullen, O' Brien, Corcoran, 2019; Simons and Morgan 2017). Thus, while reporting guidelines are targeted at newsrooms and journalists, it is important to acknowledge that stakeholders have a role to play in the successful implementation of guidelines.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To inform the development of comprehensive guidelines or a handbook, further research is needed to identify and contextualise problematical patterns of coverage across all forms of Irish media: print, broadcast, and online.

There is a fundamental need for a dedicated participatory communication project in Ireland that investigates the development, uptake, and effectiveness of reporting guidelines across all forms of media production.

Domestic violence agencies need to engage directly with journalists and newsrooms to understand and address reporting needs. This engagement may include providing resources and training, providing opportunities for discussion and reflection, and engaging in complementary advocacy work such as changing how spokespersons from the Gardaí brief journalists.

This necessitates a fairly radical shift in how domestic violence agencies see their role vis-a-vis the media. As this constitutes an expanded agenda, resources need to be directed to domestic violence agencies to support their role in leading change. .

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## APPENDIX: INTERNATIONAL REPORTING GUIDELINES

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