

Analysis of reporting of family violence reporting in print media in regional Western Australia

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Family violence (FV) is a gendered and serious public health issue in Australia.¹⁻³ The pattern of violence also differs between genders, with women's most recent incident of physical assault most likely being perpetrated by a male, someone they know, and in their home, while for men it is likely to be perpetrated by a stranger and in an entertainment or recreation venue.⁴

The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022 defines FV as various forms of violence that may include physical, emotional or financial abuse that are perpetrated by a person to an intimate partner or another family member.⁴ The National Plan describes how FV is often a patterned behaviour with the aim or intention to control another person through fear.

Media reporting of FV

The role of the media in shaping community attitudes to FV is well documented in research.⁵ How FV is reported can affect a range of people, from politicians and policy makers through to victims of FV who may or may not choose to report their abuse.¹ Carlyle et al. (2014) note that newspaper readers' perception of FV can change depending on how the news article is written. Readers exposed to a context highlighting victim responsibility for the violence reported less sympathy towards the victim compared to those who were exposed to an article situating violence within a context of perpetrator responsibility.¹ With the media holding this power, it is important that FV is reported in ways that avoid victim-blaming, excusing perpetrators' behaviour or reinforcing myths around FV that stem from misogynistic attitudes.^{6,7}

Abstract

Objectives: This research aimed to gain insights into the reporting of family violence (FV) and to explore any changes in FV reporting associated with a FV primary prevention initiative in Geraldton, Western Australia.

Methods: An in-depth analysis of articles published by the Geraldton Guardian in 2019 examined the nature of FV reporting. Analysis was based on deductive coding from existing literature and inductive identification of new themes. A comparative analysis examined articles from the Geraldton Guardian and Albany Advertiser over the same three-month period in 2015, 2017 and 2019 to analyse trends in FV reporting.

Results: Of 135 articles analysed, there was alignment with five previously reported themes and two new themes were identified: FV as a public health issue; and community responses to reduce FV. Episodic framing was overwhelmingly associated with court reporting. There was more reporting of efforts at primary prevention of FV over time in both newspapers.

Conclusions: Local media can contribute to the promotion of community and public health issues related to FV. Efforts are needed to improve court reporting to situate FV in a broader context.

Implications for public health: Concerted efforts to educate the public and journalists can support FV being recognised as a public health issue.

Key words: media, family violence, gender equality

FV reports can be presented through thematic framing or episodic framing. Framing is defined as the angle or perspective from which a story is told including what information is included in the article.⁸ Framing defines the problem and can identify its causes, make a moral judgement on the topic and describe the effects or results of the problem.⁹ FV is commonly reported through episodic framing, which describes FV as a one-off situation rather than as a social issue in a broader context.¹ An example of episodic framing is reporting a family violence incident as an isolated incident, lacking any context behind the violence in the relationship or elaboration of the pattern of control or violence.¹⁰ This framing may leave the reader believing that FV is a rare occurrence in society.¹

Family violence reported through a thematic frame can educate the reader about FV and raise FV as a public health issue as it places FV in a broader social context, giving the opportunity to discuss why FV occurs, and exploring gender inequality, women's lack of power in the relationship and the impact that FV has on the individual and broader community.¹ Research suggests that news articles that use thematic framing are more likely to result in readers examining their beliefs and attitudes towards FV and supporting messages of FV prevention.¹¹ Labelling the issue as 'family violence' rather than 'domestic violence' speaks to the pervasive impacts of the issue and highlights that it is broader than a singular, private (domestic) problem.¹²

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Previous research by Sutherland et al. identified five themes on the reporting of family violence in Australian print media: lack of context in reporting; sensationalism; misrepresentation or myths; blame and responsibility; and sources of authority and opinion.¹³ These reflect contemporary concerns with how FV is reported in Australia, with the lack of social context feeding into perceptions that FV is rare and with responsibility being attributed in a way that blames the victim.¹³

The themes of 'lack of context in reporting' and 'sensationalism' refer to when FV is reported with little background to the story or event and how the reporting is displayed and highlighted by attention-grabbing headlines and emphasis of statistically unlikely events.¹³ Misrepresentations or myths often become a by-product of the first two themes and influence the public's perception of FV.¹³ Newspapers also can display information that turns the blame away from the perpetrator and their actions, often resulting in victim-blaming. The last theme by Sutherland et al. acknowledges that inappropriate people can be used for sources and quotes in an article. Police are often used as the source, with advocates or FV researchers neglected. These quotes can lend the article to incorporating other themes such as lack of context and misrepresentation or myths, which negatively impact on a broader context and understanding of FV.¹³

Family violence in rural settings

Rates of FV are higher in regional and rural areas compared to metropolitan settings,¹⁴ so efforts to reduce FV must include rural areas. In response to high rates of FV in the Mid West region of Western Australia (WA), where assault and threatening behaviour of a family member is reported by WA Police as ~2.5 times higher than the state average,¹⁵ a community-led primary prevention of FV initiative – the Community Respect and Equality (CRE) Action Plan – was launched in the Mid West regional City of Greater Geraldton in 2017.¹⁶ Primary prevention aims to prevent an issue – in this case, FV – before it occurs by changing the attitudes, values and behaviour that underpin FV on a community-wide level.¹⁷ The Our Watch primary prevention framework argues that violence against women is preventable if gender equality is promoted in public and private life, including challenging the condoning of violence against women,

promoting women's independence and decision making, challenging gender stereotypes and strengthening positive, equal and respectful relationships.¹⁸

The CRE Action Plan was based on the Our Watch framework and aimed to inspire, innovate and connect community leaders, sectors, service organisations and government to work together on creative and sustainable strategies for the primary prevention of FV in the City of Greater Geraldton. Organisations, services and sporting clubs were encouraged to sign on the CRE agreement, to pledge to promote gender equality in their workplace and to take a stand against the factors that normalise FV.¹⁶ Based on the *Change the Story* framework,¹⁸ the CRE aimed to prevent FV through actions that break down gender stereotypes, promote gender equality and change public attitudes to FV. Organisations that were signatories to the CRE worked together to implement a communications plan that included raising awareness of FV in the community and working with journalists on reporting of FV.

The aim of the media analysis described here was to provide a baseline for understanding reporting of FV in the print media in Geraldton. Analysis could provide insights into the activities of the CRE and any changes in reporting of FV associated with the CRE. Since events and policies beyond the local region also impact on news reporting, a comparative analysis of print media in Geraldton with another regional newspaper for a period preceding and following the launch of the CRE was undertaken. Hence, a second aim was to compare FV reporting in a newspaper in Geraldton with that of another regional newspaper to gain insight into the impact of the CRE and any associated change in media reporting.

Methods

The research used critical theory as a philosophical framework, with articles being analysed through a gendered lens that acknowledges a power difference between men and women.²² Critical theory acknowledges that within society there are differences in power, with various groups being marginalised or left with less power.²² This reflects the gendered nature of FV, where men are more likely to perpetrate violence, and women are most likely to be the victims of such violence.¹⁸ Critical theory

and the gendered lens also align with the approach of Sutherland et al., who identified how print media reporting of FV reflects the power imbalance between genders.¹³ The work of Sutherland et al. was identified as the framework to use for this study as their research was supported by the peak bodies of FV prevention in Australia (ANROWS and Our Watch) and was specifically funded to establish the extent and nature of reporting of violence against women by the Australian media to inform future strategies for change. This piece of research has also been used and cited by numerous other researchers in Australia and internationally.^{6,12,13} The use of critical theory and a gendered lens enabled the analysis to explore if and how the print media reinforces gender inequality and to evaluate the effect the CRE has had on the reporting of FV.

Two analyses of the print media reporting of family violence in Geraldton were undertaken. The first was a thematic analysis conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guide to thematic analysis.²³ This analysis included all articles from the *Geraldton Guardian* over the entire year of 2019. The second was a cross-sectional comparative analysis of articles from both the *Geraldton Guardian* and *Albany Advertiser* between 1 September and 30 November in the years 2015, 2017 and 2019. These years were chosen as the CRE was launched in September 2017,¹⁶ and the three-month timespan was chosen for pragmatic reasons related to database access for the two relevant papers.

In both analyses, themes were identified deductively, using those identified by Sutherland et al.¹³ and inductively to develop codes for newly emerging themes. The second analysis enabled examination of similarities and differences in FV reporting between the two newspapers, as well as any changes in how FV was reported in a period before the CRE and during and since its implementation.

The Albany-based newspaper, the *Albany Advertiser*, was used as a comparison paper due to several similarities between the cities. According to the 2016 Census data, both cities have a similar population size with Geraldton having 38,000 residents and Albany having 36,500 residents.¹⁹ Albany has a slightly older population (mean age 43 years) compared to the average age of Geraldton's residents (38 years).¹⁹ Both local newspapers require subscription or purchase,

are owned by Seven West Media and are printed twice a week (as of 2019).^{20,21}

Data collection/ Identification of articles

Articles from the *Geraldton Guardian* and *Albany Advertiser* were identified by the lead author undertaking an advanced search using the database PressReader. This database was used as these regional WA newspapers were not available through other online databases such as Factiva. Search terms were identified from the literature based on being commonly used in newspaper articles discussing FV,¹² with other terms identified through previous searches conducted by the researchers. The search terms used were 'family violence' OR 'domestic violence' OR violen* OR 'harm' OR 'abuse' OR 'assault'. Only printed media articles were collected, as not all articles from the newspapers are posted online and online articles are sometimes changed.²⁴

Screening of articles occurred by reading the headline and the early paragraphs of the article to decide if the article met the inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria for the articles were: i) a news article published between 1 January and 31 December (for Analysis One only) or between 1 September and 30 November 2015, 2017 or 2019 (Analysis Two only); and ii) content must discuss issues related to FV, either an incident or a more general awareness-raising happening (such as a White Ribbon or 16 Days of Activism event) or policy change. The articles were initially screened by the lead author and excluded if they did not meet the criteria or were duplicate articles. If it was not clear if an article should be included, the article was read independently by all members of the research team and then discussed to reach a consensus on inclusion/exclusion.

Data coding and analysis

Data coding and analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) step by step guide to thematic analysis²³: 1. Familiarising yourself with the data; 2. Generating initial codes; 3. Searching for themes; 4. Reviewing themes; 5. Defining and naming themes; and 6. Producing the report.

The lead researcher read through each article completely without coding the article to ensure familiarisation. After re-reading as necessary, the article was deductively coded by the lead author based on the five themes identified by Sutherland et al.¹³ with new

codes created from the data²⁵ that did not align with those of Sutherland et al. New codes were grouped into themes by the lead researcher, then reviewed by re-reading the newspaper articles entirely again to confirm that the themes were applied correctly to the data.

Rigour

To increase the dependability of the analysis, coding questions were created that related to the five themes created by Sutherland et al.¹³ Examples of questions to elucidate the five themes from Sutherland et al. included: How is the article framed?; Is there any evidence of victim-blaming?; and Who is quoted in the article? These questions ensured consistency in the coding of all articles²⁶ and the systematic approach supported maintaining an audit trail. An open audit trail was maintained between the research team including articles collected, coding of articles as well as research updates.²⁷ Randomly selected articles (14) were coded or discussed by all members of the research team to increase the robustness of the coding and identification of additional themes.²⁶

To minimise the influence of researcher bias and increase the confirmability of the study, the lead researcher acknowledged and reflect on their personal biases and how these could impact the study,²⁸ and maintained journal reflections from throughout the research.²⁹

Results

Analysis One: In-depth analysis of one year of FV reporting in the *Geraldton Guardian*, January – December 2019

There were 66 *Geraldton Guardian* articles in 2019 that met the inclusion criteria. A large proportion of articles concerned court reporting (n=47). Eighteen articles used thematic framing and 48 used episodic framing, with those classified as episodic framing more likely to appear as court reporting and to align with the themes identified by Sutherland et al.¹³ Coding identified two new themes which linked to thematic reporting as discussed below. These themes are 'community response to reduce family violence' and 'family violence as a public health issue'.

Overall, the mean word count for court reporting was lower than that for non-court reporting with a large range in word count (Table 1). All articles based on court reporting

aligned with the five themes of Sutherland et al., while the newly identified themes were only associated with non-court reporting. Voices of authority and opinion were evident across both court and non-court reporting articles, with police being the most quoted ahead of experts and advocates. Non-court reporting occurred with low frequency, generally 0–2 articles per month and mostly related to FV awareness-raising events associated with CRE week, White Ribbon Day and the 16 Days of Activism campaign held from late November to early December.

A marked increase in non-court reporting articles in May 2019 was due to a 'Special Report' that focused on FV services in Geraldton and FV prevention events. This special report contained several interviews with local advocates involved in the CRE along with the WA State Minister for the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence. Articles covered issues such as policy changes, reporting FV to police, and local events with an anti-violence message; all articles utilised thematic framing.

Except for January 2019, court reports occurred in all months of the year. Court reporting articles outnumbered non-court reporting articles in all months except May. A spike occurred in August associated with nine court reports. Those articles with a high word count occurred with high profile local FV cases.

Analysis and framing of articles

Text from the articles aligned with all five themes identified by Sutherland et al.¹³ plus

Table 1: Word count and frequency of articles in the *Geraldton Guardian*, 2019.

	Court Reporting	Non-court reporting
Average word count	262 words	290 words
Word count range	67 – 718 words	95 – 620 words
Number of Articles by Month		
January	0	0
February	3	1
March	4	1
April	6	2
May	4	7
June	4	1
July	6	1
August	9	0
September	3	1
October	2	1
November	4	3
December	2	1
Total Articles	47	19

the two themes inductively coded from the data around 'community response to reduce FV' and 'FV as a public health issue'. The two most common themes in Analysis One were 'sensationalism' and 'removing blame from the perpetrator', with 'community responses to reduce family violence' being least common. In Analysis Two, 'family violence as a public health issue' was the most common theme, followed by 'sensationalism'.

Community responses to reduce family violence

The theme of community responses to reduce FV refers to the many articles that used thematic framing to report on a whole-of-community approach to prevent FV. The reporting of community events and FV prevention often encouraged people to "step up" and contribute to preventing FV, some occurring at CRE events or referring to the CRE.¹⁶

The whole community has a role to play in saying this is not the society we want to live in. [Quote from local researcher and advocate, Geraldton Guardian, May 2019]

It is time for the community to step up and make a difference. [Quote from local police superintendent, Geraldton Guardian, Apr 2019]

This type of reporting invoked a prevention focus and the role everyone has in the prevention of FV in line with the community approach frequently adopted in health promotion programs to generate change.³⁰ Articles coded to this theme did not have a strong gender inequality message. The theme of 'community response to reduce family violence' appeared in fewer articles than 'family violence as a public health issue'. Both new themes were identified in this analysis appeared less than the themes identified from Sutherland et al.

Family violence as a public health issue

In this type of thematic framing of FV, the information in the articles aligned with *Change the Story* framework from Our Watch and the National Framework to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children. Both frameworks focus on gender inequality as the primary driver of FV.^{4,18} This message was reinforced in the print media when discussing FV as a public health issue.

Domestic violence and sexual violence is a manifestation of gender inequality in our community. [Quote from Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence Minister

Simone McGurk, Geraldton Guardian, May 2019]

Other public health approaches were visible in the media such as policy and law changes, for example, reporting on the introduction of non-fatal strangulation as a crime into state parliament.

The new laws, which will impose higher penalties for choking a partner or family member, will be tabled in State Parliament before the end of the year. [Excerpt from Geraldton Guardian, Nov 2019]

Articles discussing FV as a public health issue were more likely to adhere to the guidelines recommended by Our Watch. This included supplying support numbers for those affected by FV in the article (such as the 1800RESPECT, the National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service), which appeared in seven articles discussing FV as a public health issue compared to only once in an article discussing a single FV event. These articles also quoted researchers and experts instead of using the police or judiciary, another recommendation from Our Watch. This may reflect that the article was based on a media release prepared according to current best practice guidelines.

(Lack of) reporting of the social context

Failure to report the social context of the violence was a key issue raised by Sutherland et al. in their review¹³ and occurs in episodic framing of FV where no background is given to the story. This theme appeared commonly throughout the articles. Evidence of this lack of context was seen in the court reporting of the *Geraldton Guardian*, where context provided was only in noting breaches of various restraining orders or a history of frequent offending rather than any deeper exploration of FV as a recurring pattern of behaviour in which a woman is harassed and lives in fear.

A Geraldton man charged with 173 counts of breaching a family violence restraining order has appeared before Geraldton Magistrate's Court. [Excerpt from Geraldton Guardian, April 2019]

Sensationalism

Sensationalism is used to attract readers and create interest in a story.^{31,32} It was the most common theme in Analysis One. Sensationalism was evident among the 2019 *Geraldton Guardian* articles with court reporting using this style of language when referring to perpetrators of violence or

describing the violence mentioned with lines such as: "A Geraldton woman who broke a whiskey bottle over her partner's face" (GG, Oct 2019) and "A man who repeatedly stabbed his childhood sweetheart with a kitchen knife" (GG, June 2019). This language was mostly used in headlines with the likely aim to attract, shock or fascinate the reader, and it risks violence being misinterpreted or minimalised.¹⁰

Reinforcing myths and stereotypes

Various myths and stereotypes about FV can be perpetuated through the media.¹⁰ These myths and misrepresentations were not common but were still evident in the analyses. Myths around alcohol or drug use as a primary factor in FV were common in reports, inferring substance use to be a causal or mitigating factor.

A Geraldton father who threw a metal torch at his former partner's head, leaving a 3cm wound requiring stitches, allegedly told police, "I was off my face on drugs." [Excerpt from Geraldton Guardian, May 2019]

Removing blame from the perpetrator

Gender inequality was recognised in articles that discussed prevention of FV but was not seen in the court reporting of FV cases where other factors were frequently named as the cause of FV. These reasons often removed responsibility from the perpetrator and their actions.

It's unemployment and homelessness that seems to be the cause (of his offending). [Quote from defence lawyer, Geraldton Guardian, Aug 2019]

Even if broader social issues occur, they should not be used as excuses such as in the example above. Social circumstances are not a valid reason for violence, as most people who are unemployed or homeless are not perpetrators of FV. If not excusing the perpetrator, court reporting often drew on sympathetic quotes from defence counsel.

... said his client was disappointed with the verdict because he "feels that he didn't intend to harm her in any way". [Quote from defence lawyer, Geraldton Guardian, Mar 2019]

Removing the blame from the perpetrator was very common in Analysis One as the court reporting articles often used quotes from defence lawyers. These quotes often also aligned with the 'Sources of authority and opinion' theme of Sutherland and colleagues.

Source of authority and opinion

The most quoted voices in reporting of FV were defence lawyers/counsel and police, reflecting the high volume of court reporting in the articles analysed. Police were regularly quoted to explain current prevention measures and as advocates for better services.

Superintendent Roger Beer said there was a lack of options for perpetrators...The primary focus of support is victims – “and it should be because they’re the ones impacted by the harm,” he said. [Quote from local superintendent, Geraldton Guardian, May 2019]

Analysis Two – Geraldton Guardian and Albany Advertiser, September – November 2015, 2017, 2019

Sixty-nine articles met the inclusion criteria for Analysis Two, of which 52 articles were from the *Geraldton Guardian* and 17 from the *Albany Advertiser*. The large difference was due to the higher volume of court reporting in the *Geraldton Guardian* (24) compared to *Albany Advertiser* (3). Hence, the data for Analysis Two includes a breakdown of framing by categories of court and non-court reporting. The selected time frame contained some key dates associated with reporting of FV events such as White Ribbon Day and the announcement of Federal funding for FV.

Court reporting

As shown in Table 2, all court reporting was episodic in nature, focussing on the crime or event for which the person was charged and on trial. The *Albany Advertiser* had no court reporting of FV in 2015, but two of the five articles collected from 2019 were court reports. In 2019, nine of 14 articles in the *Geraldton Guardian* were court reports using episodic framing.

Non-court reporting

Excluding the court reporting, most news reports were thematic, placing FV within a broader social context. This led to greater evidence of the two newly identified themes appearing in Analysis Two compared to Analysis One. A change in the nature of non-court reporting occurred over the period, from a focus on support services and improving funding for women’s refuges and victims of family violence to reporting on primary prevention of family violence and committing to a community approach. This was more evident in the *Geraldton Guardian*

compared to *Albany Advertiser*, but it did occur across both newspapers.

A focus on support services for victims of FV was evident in 2015 and largely reflected an announcement of Federal funding for family violence services. Part of this funding was to create resources to educate young people on healthy relationships.³³ Some people expressed the opinion that funding measures would be better directed to support services.

While I welcome the initiatives in this package, I would like to see more financial support for the accommodation of victims of domestic violence included in the next round of domestic violence measures. [Written in an opinion piece from the National’s MP for O’Connor (Federal electorate that includes Albany) in the *Albany Advertiser*, October 2015]

The reporting embraced a greater primary prevention focus in 2017 and 2019, acknowledging larger social systems and gender inequality as the underlying cause of family violence. In the *Albany Advertiser*, this was reflected in articles that promoted FV prevention events such as the ‘16 days in WA’ campaign and ‘Reclaim the Night’ march. In Geraldton, the CRE launch in 2017 was associated with an increase in reporting using thematic framing of FV. An article about the launch of the CRE in 2017 quoted the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence Minister Simone McGurk, who described the need to promote gender equality to prevent FV:

This means challenging gender inequality and the condoning of violence, challenging male control and decision-making, challenging behaviour in male peer relationships and considering what messages we’re sending and if we need to challenge them. [Quote from Simone McGurk, Geraldton Guardian, Nov 2017]

From 2017, articles in the *Geraldton Guardian* incorporated greater detail about prevention of FV, the gendered drivers of FV and the methods of addressing these. Articles discussing FV prevention went into more detail about the gendered drivers of FV in the *Geraldton Guardian* compared to the *Albany Advertiser*. A 2019 article highlighted the need to challenge male peer relationships that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women, one of the Our Watch gendered drivers of FV. This differed from the general anti-violence message to the community reported in the *Albany Advertiser*:

The march would send a strong message to the community that domestic violence would not be tolerated. [Excerpt from Albany Advertiser, Oct 2019]

Analysis Two included the same themes from Sutherland et al. as Analysis 1, again much more likely to occur in court reporting with its episodic framing of family violence. A recurring theme of court reports was that alcohol and/or drugs were the reason for the violence, as these were frequently raised as an excuse for the alleged perpetrator’s behaviour by quoting the proceedings or defence lawyer’s comments.

Discussion

This research provides an understanding of how FV is reported in Geraldton’s print media and gives insights into the reporting of FV over time and through comparison with the *Albany Advertiser*. Other research which has examined how FV is reported in Australia has generally focussed on capital city newspapers which are published daily,¹¹⁻¹³ and reporting FV in regional newspapers has been under-researched. The research confirmed that the themes of Sutherland et al. were major issues in regional reporting, and the two new themes identified likely reflect emerging efforts locally and nationally to highlight issues of gender inequality and disrespect towards women. Overall, our research clearly identifies that many of the problems with the framing of FV arise from court reporting providing an essential understanding of what

Table 2: Framing breakdown of both court reporting and non-court reporting by newspapers (Albany Advertiser (AA) and Geraldton Guardian (GG)), 2015, 2017 and 2019.

	Year		
	2015	2017	2019
Number of Articles			
AA (n = 17)	7	5	5
GG (n = 52)	17	21	14
Framing			
Episodic	18	14	11
Thematic	6	12	8
Court Reporting			
AA (n)	0	1	2
% Episodic	-	100%	100%
GG (n)	6	9	9
% Episodic	100%	100%	100%
Non-court reporting			
AA (n)	7	4	3
% Episodic	0%	25%	0%
GG (n)	11	12	5
% Episodic	0%	8%	0%

shapes public opinions, which can direct opportunities for improvement.

Episodic framing of FV has been identified as problematic in previous research as it reinforces public belief that FV is a single incident that is a private matter,^{6,11,12} with similar issues identified in this research. Reporting based on episodic framing does not inform the public of a number of relevant issues associated with FV: the underlying drivers of FV; that FV is an ongoing problem linked to broader social attitudes and issues²⁹; FV as patterned behaviour; or the relationship of FV with gender and other types of inequality. Rather it represents FV as isolated incidents arising, for example, from an individual's intoxicated state. Analysis One showed the difference in the themes and discussion of FV between articles that used episodic framing and those that used thematic framing. As most articles that used episodic framing were court reports, the focus was primarily on the one event that precipitated the charges leading to the court case and generally visible evidence of FV such as physical injury. Again, this perpetuates a limited understanding of and characterisation of FV and reiterates the theme of '(Lack of) social context' and the idea that FV is a one-off event rather than an ongoing pattern of coercive control.¹⁰

Other themes described by Sutherland et al. were also manifest in court reporting, particularly the use of 'sources of authority and opinion' where police and lawyers are quoted in FV articles over advocates or researchers.¹⁰ The predominance of quotes from police in court reporting means their voices appeared more often than victims, advocates or professionals, who may have more information or different views on FV. The use of the advocate's voice can highlight FV as a public health issue and explain the underlying factors,³⁴ while the inclusion of the victim's voice is more likely to increase sympathy for the victim and understanding of the wider context.³ The recurring use of police voices may limit commentary on broader issues relevant to FV.³⁵

Constraints on more thematic reporting of FV arise from the laws that aim to protect information about victims or the complainant of the case when reporting on court stories, as well as protecting witnesses and parties to the victim.³⁶ These laws do not restrict other areas of reporting that contribute to the issues identified, such as the use of quotes from defence lawyers who try to

remove blame from the perpetrator. However, guidelines from the Australian Press Council cover areas that could support improved court reporting, including reporting FV stories in a manner that does not put blame on the victim.³⁷ While Sutherland and colleagues included court reporting, their analysis did not highlight that it was court reporting that overwhelmingly contributes to episodic framing. Arguably, court reports could be accompanied by some general information that educates about the nature of FV without prejudicing the outcome of any trial. Interestingly, while undertaking this study, a senior journalist of one of the regional newspapers expressed initial surprise that court reporting was considered to be reporting on FV. Another commented that the obligation of the newspaper was to be "balanced" through reporting both sides of prosecution and defence arguments. However, unfortunately, court reports often reinforced common beliefs about FV, where individuals blamed their violence on alcohol or drug use. These myths are already prevalent, including amongst people who work in FV prevention.¹⁷ In this study, they were often reinforced through quoting the defendant or the defence lawyer, who blamed alcohol or drug consumption prior to the FV event. As the print media influences public perception of health issues, reporting that focuses on alcohol or drugs as the cause of FV may be seen to excuse the perpetrator's behaviour and minimise concern over the violence occurring.³ There have been effective interventions working with the media around reporting of mental illness and suicide to help reduce stigma and copycat suicides.^{38,39} Changes to policy and media guidelines could assist journalists to write articles in a manner that does not reinforce public beliefs that alcohol or mental illness are the causes of FV. Further efforts to educate journalists about the impact of media on public opinion and the issues with FV reporting could lead to better quality reporting and education of the public.

The thematic framing of articles in Analysis One was influenced by the existence of the CRE, shaping discussions around FV as a public health issue and highlighting community efforts to prevent FV. These articles emphasised the primary prevention efforts being undertaken in Geraldton as well as the CRE messaging which acknowledged and reinforced the gendered drivers of FV as per the *Change the Story* framework. By

reading reports where FV is presented as a public health issue and that acknowledge the gendered drivers of FV, community members may become more attuned to the nature of FV and their potential role in preventing FV by challenging the gendered drivers themselves.⁴⁰

The results of Analysis Two suggest that there have been some improvements over time, with more focus on primary prevention. These improvements may be influenced in part by the CRE generating newsworthy activities that change the conversation towards a focus on primary prevention in Geraldton. However, the relative paucity of identified articles from the *Albany Advertiser* and the fact that the Albany paper had also published articles on prevention of FV, even if often linked to national policy or events, means it cannot be claimed that improvements in reporting in the *Geraldton Guardian* are related to the CRE. It is also not clear from published articles as to which ones were based upon a press release (either local, state or national) versus a journalist independently seeking out a story. The fact that several of the articles included contact details for support services may indicate they were based on media releases written by experts in the FV prevention area. Well-crafted press releases can be an important source of information that ensure thematic framing along with the use of survivor and other expert voices.

This research only examined the regional newspapers published in Geraldton and Albany for which readers pay. Limitations that impacted on the findings of this research include the use of PressReader, a repository of newspapers that is less commonly used compared to other media databases such as Factiva in which regional newspapers from WA were not represented. This also constrained the time frame of Analysis Two, with collected articles published over a total period of nine months because PressReader only commenced collecting AA articles in August 2015. Collecting all FV-related articles over a longer period would enable the inclusion of a greater number of articles and potentially allow for the findings to be more robust.

Conclusion

Research that analyses how FV is reported in the media tends to focus on metropolitan-based newspapers. This may in part reflect the limitations we identified with digital

repositories and searching of regional newspapers. Due to higher rates of FV in regional and rural areas, this research aimed to understand how FV is reported in two regional newspapers. Newspaper reporting provides one means by which to evaluate whether a local FV prevention initiative in Geraldton can impact on local reporting. By conducting two analyses, this research showed that reporting of FV has changed over time with a gradual transition from reporting on support services for victims of FV to more focus on primary prevention of FV. The biggest issue with the reporting of FV in Geraldton stems from the high volume of court reporting that frames FV as single episodes unrelated to broader social issues. This is important because it can impact on a reader's understanding of FV and can reinforce myths that minimise the impact of FV and obscure its roots in deeper social issues related to the place and treatment of women. Current laws and guidelines around the reporting of FV are designed to protect the identity of the victim or other witnesses, but more consideration is needed to how reporting on court matters should occur so as to avoid shifting the blame for the violence from the perpetrator and reinforcing widely held myths about the causes of FV. In the current climate of cuts to regional newspapers and local journalists,⁴¹ the provision of well-crafted media releases and contextual information about FV from sources other than the courts is increasingly important to ensure public health perspectives are heard.

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