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Family Support and the Media in Ireland: Newspaper Content Analysis 2014–2017

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to inform a critical analysis of how the media portray family support in Ireland. Findings of a content analysis carried out on national and regional Irish newspapers between 2014 and 2017 are presented which describe communication about family support services provided by Tusla—Child and Family Agency. Results show that even though child protection was not used as a specific search term, news items on the Child and Family Agency and family support were usually focused on child protection and children in care. Results also show that family support activities are reported more positively in local papers compared to national papers. In the discussion, we argue that these findings are important as the media plays an important role in how the public understand, view, and engage with integrated child protection and welfare systems. We consider the implications of the research and advocate working with the media to inform their interpretation and understanding of family support. We suggest this is important as the manner in which the media communicate and frame family support as part of the overall child protection and welfare system is one of the main influences on public understandings and awareness of preventative family support and child welfare services.

Introduction

In this article, we consider research focused on the reporting of family support by the print media in Ireland. This newspaper analysis is part of a larger body of research which evaluated Tusla—Child and Family Agency's (Tusla) Prevention, Partnership and Family Support programme (PPFS) from 2014 to 2017 inclusive. The media analysis was part of the Public Awareness study which examined how PPFS was meeting its aim to transform child and family services by embedding prevention and early intervention into Tusla's operation and culture.¹

In presenting the findings, we show how media interpretations of family support are often connected to child protection. We also highlight differences in reporting between local and national reports with the former having more negative reports about family support services. We argue that these findings are important as the way statutory prevention and family support services are portrayed in the media impacts on how the public understand, view and engage with integrated public child protection and welfare systems.

Family support and child protection in Ireland: context

This study took place within the context of a significant system change in the child welfare and protection system in Ireland. In 2014, Tusla—Child and Family Agency, was established as an independent agency. Before this, the child protection and welfare services were delivered as part of a wider integrated health and social services system (Burns & McGregor, [2019](#)). While statutory child welfare and protection systems have always included both preventative and protective features (see Devaney & McGregor, [2017](#); McGregor & Devaney, [2020a](#), [2020b](#)), child protection has persistently dominated as the main aspect of the statutory service while family support services tended to be more associated with (commissioned/funded) third sector/non-governmental organizations (Canavan, Devaney, McGregor, & Shaw, [2019](#); Devaney, [2017](#); Devaney, Rodriguez, & Cassidy, [2019](#)). While the Irish legislation (Child Care Act 1991) makes statutory provision for prevention, as well as protection, it has not been until the establishment of Tusla that a comprehensive approach to prevention was developed and an explicit attempt to re-orient the system emerged. For example, in 2018, Tusla figures showed a leveling of services coming under child protection (approximately 4.6% of the child population come to the attention of Tusla as child protection referrals) and family support (approximately 3% of the child population come to the attention of Tusla as family support referrals) (Tusla, [2019](#)). Moreover, over half of all child protection referrals came in as child welfare (as opposed to abuse in the categories of physical, emotional, sexual abuse and neglect) which imply that 50% of child protection responses are also effectively family support. As elucidated by McGregor and Devaney ([2020a](#), [2020b](#)), the majority of cases coming to the attention of child welfare services can be described as “families in the middle” needing “protective support and supportive protection”. The expansion of PPFS is enabling the delivery

of an overall more integrated and holistic model of practice which places help on a continuum from low to high level of need and risk.

While the overall conceptualization of services by the State agency has been arguably transformed in recent decades from being a reactive residual child protection service to a proactive comprehensive child and family support and protection service, the public in general, and those in the media specifically may not be aware of this change. A recent study on public awareness of family support (McGregor, Canavan, & O'Connor, [2018](#)) concluded that when describing family support specifically, the public, and the media, were more likely to see this in the context of child protection and working with children in care. One reason for this has been the unique Constitutional protection the Irish family (especially where the parents are married) have had from “state intervention” which has led to a discourse, not exclusive to Ireland, of associating some child protection practices with too much interference in the privacy of the family (see for e.g. Gibbons, [2010](#); McGuinness, [1993](#)). The historical role of the State in providing child welfare an issue of ongoing concern from the point of view of rights violations, abuse in industrial schools (residential care settings), mother and baby homes (for unmarried mothers and their children) and related adoption services may also be a factor (see Buckley & McGregor, [2019](#); DCYA, [2009](#); Raftery & O’Sullivan, [2001](#)). This has resulted in victims, survivors and their families still experiencing the trauma of the past in the ongoing failure in the present to adequately provide for redress, compensation, information (about adoption for example) and conciliation for past abuses and harm. A third reason is that, while improving services, Tusla, has continued to attract negative media attention for high profile failures in practices such as the Garda McCabe case (Disclosures Tribunal, [2017](#)) and the Grace case (Dignam, [2016](#)). A fourth reason for this disconnect as shown in findings from a related study (McGregor & Nic Gabhainn, [2018](#)), is that the public, in general, continues to view statutory family support as closely connected with child protection. This suggests that the detailed conceptual re-orientation of child welfare through the implementation of PPFS has not, as yet, been sufficiently communicated to the public in general or those in the media in particular (see McGregor et al., [2018](#)). With this context in mind, the aim of the media analysis was to objectively, systematically, and quantitatively describe the content of communication about PPFS through newspapers from 2014 to 2017. The objectives of the media content analysis were to:

1. Explore if there is a change in frequency and reporting about PPFS.

2. Examine change in nature of reporting about PPFs.
3. Establish whether there is any evidence of greater awareness of Tusla family support services.
4. Ascertain the nature of regional and national reporting.

Literature

Two main sets of literature informed this study: firstly, the role of the media in child protection and welfare; and, secondly, communication and framing theory. It is noteworthy that there is a paucity of literature on the role of the media in family support *per se*.

Since the 1970s, high profile child deaths, media campaigns, concern of the general public and political debate created a strong move towards a child protection system primarily based on risk assessment and authoritarian interventions (Devaney & Dolan, [2017](#); Frost, Abbott, & Race, [2015](#)). This focus on risk assessment led to a decrease in efforts promoting family support and prevention. Child protection is defined as “the term used to identify government policy and its services working to prevent children being neglected and abused and to intervene when they are” (DCYA, [2020](#)). This definition links closely with the terms prevention and early intervention, key components of family support: “a style of work and a set of activities ... primarily focused on prevention early intervention across a range of levels and needs ... for all children, young people and their families ...” (Canavan, Pinkerton, & Dolan, [2016](#), p. 20; Devaney & Dolan, [2017](#)). It therefore logically follows that in order to protect children and prevent child maltreatment, families should be fully supported with necessary interventions occurring at an early stage for those who find themselves in need of more specialized support services (see Devaney, [2020](#); Devaney et al., [2019](#); McGregor & Devaney, [2020a](#), [2020b](#)). However, in practice in Ireland and elsewhere, there is much debate about the relationship and balance between child protection and family support (Devaney, [2020](#); Devaney & McGregor, [2017](#); Featherstone, White, & Morris, [2014](#); Frost & Parton, [2009](#)). More increasingly, there is a need to look at this relationship between family support and child protection in an integrated way as research shows the public tend not to

differentiate between them (Devaney, [2014](#); Devaney, [2020](#); Devaney et al., [2019](#); Devaney & McGregor, [2017](#); McGregor & Devaney, [2020a](#), [2020b](#)).

Saint-Jacques et al. ([2012](#)) looked at the impact media coverage of children in need of protection had on the number of cases reported to child protection agencies in Canada. They found a statistically significant relationship between coverage and cases reported. They also stated that the child abuse and neglect cases reported were often sensational and involved tragic outcomes for children. Lonne and Parton ([2014](#)) focused on how the Australian and English media portrayed child abuse scandals and the impact such coverage had on policy and practice. They state that the media play an important two-way role in the coverage of child maltreatment. On a positive note, the media contribute to raising public awareness, reform, and increased resources for child protection agencies. Negatively, the media tend to focus on criminal matters such as sexual and physical abuse and less on neglect and emotional maltreatment, which distorts public understanding. Such sensationalized coverage is reflected in official child abuse inquiries, which contributes to systems becoming risk averse. For example, Ayre ([2001](#)) examined three decades of what he described as sensationalist coverage of child abuse scandals in England and Wales. He found that the media contributed to the creation of public fear, blame, and mistrust of the child protection system. Jones ([2012](#)) states it is possible to shape and inform media coverage of social work by engaging with journalists and offering broader overviews of practice and policy contexts. While these inputs may never be reported, such contributions, he states, can be influential.

Some agencies have published specific guidelines for reporting news covering child welfare issues for journalists; (for example National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, [2016](#); NSPCC, [2012](#); Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, [2017](#)). These guidelines encourage journalists to include societal factors that contribute to child abuse and neglect; consequences of maltreatment; early intervention benefits; prevention strategies; avoidance of sensationalist reporting, all of which can create discussion among the media and the general public about child welfare in a broader social context as opposed to specific individual cases (Hove, Paek, Isaacson, & Cole, [2013](#)). Warner ([2014](#)) highlights the UK College of Social Work's media center and its strategy to improve the media's image of social work and states social workers, the press, the public and politicians all share a desire to make child protection work less risk orientated and more risk sensible. By focusing on the everyday

work of social work and the difficult decisions which must be taken, the criticism of adverse events may become less likely thereby detoxifying defensive practice.

Communication science, according to Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2014), is at the center of all social sciences because “communication increasingly defines what we do, how we do it, and even who we are individually, socially and culturally” (p. 13). In order to develop communication science pertaining to media communication, content must be logically assessed, where the objective is to predict and explain phenomena. Quantitative content analysis can provide reliable and valid communication content whereby communication patterns emerge and, in turn, causes or potential effects begin to develop. A framework to achieve this involves the use of theory on processes that affect content, together with the effects of that content.

McCombs and Shaw (1993) theorized that the media not only told people what to think about but also how to think about items and what to think. McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (2014) state: “many regard agenda setting as the transfer of issue salience from the news media to the public agenda” which has now expanded to cover many more channels of communication including social media, which they call the social media conversation occurring on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs (p. 787/8) Framing theory, whereby the media draw public attention to certain topics, was the original agenda-setting thought (Gupta, 2006). A frame represents how the media and media gatekeepers organize and present issues and how audiences interpret them. This type of agenda-setting perspective tells us not only what to think about but also how to think about it, while also expanding beyond the issues or messages and focusing on the ethos of the issues. The media have also been criticized for providing professional scapegoats, usually social workers or social work professionals, following child deaths as a result of abuse by their parents/caregivers. The majority of newspapers in the United Kingdom, following the death of baby Peter Connelly, framed the issue around those who worked to assist and protect children and not on those who had killed him (Fitzgibbon, 2012; Shoesmith, 2016). Other examples of negative media framing include focusing on abuse of children carried out by strangers when in fact most cases of child maltreatment are perpetuated by individuals known to children (Cheit, 2003). Positive framing of issues reported in the media includes a focus on victims’ experiences of abuse and/or neglect which in turn contributes to an acceptance to talk about and disclose child abuse (Goddard, 1996). In addition, a focus on exposing child abuse scandals can result in raising public awareness of

issues, campaign for change and can prompt survivors to come forward and testify in Inquiries into abuse (Powell & Scanlon, 2015).

The challenge highlighted by Ho and Chan (2018) is to refocus the news media from reporting sensationalized, individual events to portraying the broader issues from other perspectives such as social and health services, children and family development services and social responsibility. The media could be a valuable tool used to widen the discussion on child welfare, creating greater awareness of the range of services available to support and protect children and families.

Methodology

All Irish newspapers from 2014 to 2017 which were contained in two databases, *Lexis Nexis* and *The Irish Newspaper Archive* were included for content analysis. Content analysis is a technique used in research to systematically and quantitatively describe the content of communication. It seeks to quantify contents in predetermined categories in a systematic and replicable manner which can be applied to varying forms of media (Bryman, 2001). Media content analysis can be a useful source of information about current affairs, public opinions and attitudes, and how society reacts to the media (Macnamara, 2005).

Busch et al.'s (1994–2012) formal six-step approach to conducting content analysis was applied in this study. These steps included: stating the research questions; selecting text sampling and categorizing it; reading, reviewing and examining; identifying themes; coding material; and interpreting and reporting the findings. This process was used to select the themes discussed below.

Pilot study

In order to produce a valid and reliable media content analysis, conducting a pilot study can ensure the researcher is thoroughly familiar with and understands the research process and the research objectives by reading a subset of relevant content (Neuendorf, 2002). In line with the

content analysis approach, an initial search for “Parenting”, “Prevention”, “Family Support” & “Tusla” content in 30 articles was conducted which identified eight themes (Support Services & Programmes; Childcare Services & Creches; Schooling & Home-schooling; Foster Carers; Funding; Child Protection; Tusla Policies & Procedures; and Young People’s Mental Health). The themes reflected the subject matter of each item published. Information was then entered into a database to determine the frequency and classification of information identified. This provided an initial thematic framework to the overall approach used in the main content analysis.

Newspaper content analysis 2014–2017

The search terms were broadened to nine search terms pertaining to Tusla and PPS and yielded 3,040 articles. Search terms included: “Tusla and Family Support”; “Tusla and Parenting Support”; “Tusla and Prevention”; “Tusla and Early Intervention”. In addition to the eight themes which emerged from the pilot study, a further five themes were identified (Advertisement for Foster Carers & Staff; Children & Young People in Care; Adoption and Mother and Baby Homes; Tusla’s Legal Spend; and Retrospective Abuse).

Each newspaper item was examined and categorized into one of the nine search terms used with some of the news items common to more than one search term. In addition, some of the items appeared in both databases. Therefore, to ensure that no item was repeated and where overlapping occurred, the predominant theme of the item was chosen and categorized accordingly. The search terms chosen are not mutually exclusive but are broadly related to prevention, partnership and family support, which yield a broad overview of public awareness in the results.

Finally, the name of each newspaper and the area in which each item was published were recorded in order to compare coverage across regions. The regions were categorized according to Tusla’s Area Management Structures: Dublin Mid Lenister; Dublin North East; South; West; and a further two sections entitled Northern Ireland and National. A total of 1497 independent newspaper items were reported on. Analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel (2016) and IBM SPSS Statistics 26 (IBM Corporation, [2019](#)). The significance level used in this study

was $p < .05$ and measures of effect size are reported throughout. When Lambda could not be calculated, Cramer's V was used where relevant (Field, [2013](#)).

Limitations

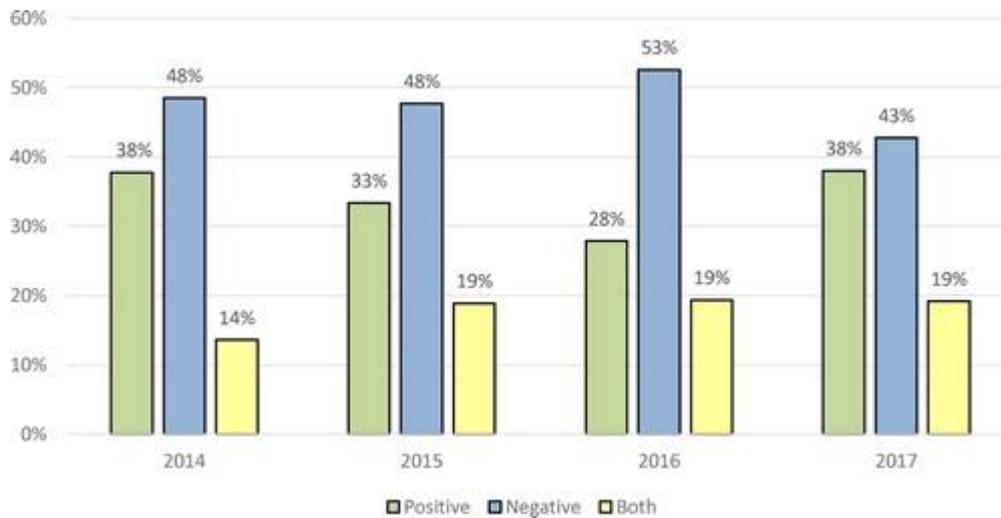
This media content analysis was an exploratory study. The databases used did not always produce exact search results, and results were sometimes difficult to distinguish. However, the search terms were very specific and related closely to PPFS and not to the wider Tusla services. The analysis was only completed on print media. However, newspapers have been found to play a crucial role in setting the agenda for other platforms such as television and other media outlets (Hove et al., [2013](#)). Notwithstanding these limitations, there are some key findings that are relevant and point to the need for further investigation.

Results

A total of 3040 news items were recorded across the four years 2014–2017. After repeated articles were removed a final total of 1497 articles were analyzed. The largest number of articles appeared in the search term “Tusla and Family Support” ($n = 934$), while “Tusla and Parenting, Prevention and Family Support” yielded no results.

Across all years, the highest percentage of articles was negative, followed by positive, and lastly a mixture of both. The number of negative articles in the newspapers in the first three years of Tusla's existence (2014–2016) increased while the number of positive articles decreased. There has been an increase in the number of articles which fall into the “both” category from 2014 onwards. In 2017, the highest number of articles was negative (43%). However, the number of positive articles increased by over 10% from the previous year (38%): 2017 is the first year since Tusla's establishment that the number of positive articles has increased. [Figure 1](#) details the percentage of news items (2014–2017) found to be positive, negative, or both.

Figure 1. Analysis of news items 2014–2017.



To ascertain whether a difference was present in each items rating (positive/negative/both) over time, a Pearson chi-square was conducted. The result was statistically significant [$\chi^2(6) = 16.784, p = .010$]. The effect size for this finding, Cramer's V, was low/weak, 0.07.

Of note, in 2017, 573 items were analyzed. The majority of articles were negative (43%), 19% of all items covered in 2017 pertained to An Garda Síochána (Irish Police Force) whistleblower controversy² (90% of these items were negative, 3% positive, and 7% both positive and negative). However, when those whistle-blower articles were removed there were more positive (46%) than negative (32%) articles for the first time since Tusla's establishment in 2014.

Table 1 sets out the 13 themes identified across each search term and whether the article or news item was positive, negative or both. The highest number of items related to Support Services and Programmes (25.2%), followed by Child Protection (14.6%), then Children and Young People in Care (14.4%). Funding was also in the top four articles identified, at 12.4%. Support Services and Programmes scored highest for positive articles at 17.2% of the 1,497 articles, while articles regarding Children and Young People in Care scored the highest negatively of all articles, at 10.4%. The majority of Child Protection items also scored negatively, at 7.3% of the overall number of articles. With the exception of Support Services and Programmes, most themes scored higher negatively than positively, not taking into account advertisements for foster carers, carers and staff, which were predominantly placed into the "positive" category. In addition, Schooling and Home-schooling scored marginally higher

positively (1.6%) than negatively (1.5%) together with Foster Carers who scored positively at 0.9% and negatively at 0.7%.

Table 1: Articles & News Items by Theme and Rating (overall %)

Theme	Number of Articles	Positive	Negative	Both
Support Services & Programmes	377 (25.2%)	256 (17.2%)	65 (4.3%)	56 (3.7%)
Child Protection	219 (14.6%)	41 (2.7%)	109 (7.3%)	69 (4.6%)
Children & Young People in Care	216 (14.4%)	19 (1.3%)	156 (10.4%)	41 (2.7%)
Funding	185 (12.4%)	58 (3.9%)	104 (6.9%)	23 (1.6%)
Tusla Policies & staffing issues	159 (10.6%)	6(0.4%)	139 (9.3%)	14 (0.9%)
<i>Whistleblowers</i>	<i>108 (7.2%)</i>	<i>3 (0.2%)</i>	<i>97 (6.5%)</i>	<i>8 (0.5%)</i>
Childcare, Services & Crèches	125 (8.4%)	33 (2.2%)	54 (3.6%)	38 (2.6%)
Schooling & Homeschooling	61 (4.1%)	24 (1.6%)	22 (1.5%)	15 (1.0%)
Advert for Foster Carers/Carers/Staff	51 (3.4%)	50 (3.3%)	0	1 (0.1%)
Adoption & Mother & Baby Homes	47 (3.1%)	9 (0.6%)	28 (1.8%)	10 (0.7%)
Foster Carers	28 (1.9%)	13 (0.9%)	10 (0.7%)	5 (0.3%)
Tusla Legal Spend	16 (1.0%)	0	11 (0.7%)	5 (0.3%)
Young Peoples Mental Health	7 (0.5%)	0	6 (0.4%)	1 (0.1%)
Retrospective Abuse	6 (0.4%)	2 (0.1%)	4 (0.3%)	0
Total	1497 (100%)	511 (34.2%)	708 (47.2%)	278 (18.6%)

An alternative way of envisioning the ratings across each theme is presented in Table 2. Across the 4 years, the largest number of items appeared in the theme Support Services & Programmes in 2016 (8.0%). The number of items under Child Protection increased steadily from 2014 to 2017. Children and Young People in Care news items increased from 2014 to 2016, but coverage almost halved from 2016 (6.5%) to 2017 (3.4%). News items regarding funding appeared similarly in 2014 and 2016 but were covered more in 2015 and 2017. Under the theme Tusla Policies & Staffing issues, most items pertained to the Whistle-blowers. When these were removed, coverage of Tusla's policies and staffing issues rose sharply in 2017. Childcare

services were covered most often in 2016 (3.1%) and 2017 (2.7%) compared to the first two years. Advertising for foster carers and staff has remained steady across each year. Coverage of items pertaining to Adoption and Mother and Baby Homes increased sharply in 2017 (1.5%) compared with 2014 (0.3%). Foster Carers items also increased sharply in 2017 (1.5%). Retrospective Abuse news items did not appear in 2017. Very little coverage was given to Young People’s Mental Health (0.5%) and Retrospective Abuse (0.5%).

Table 2: Articles & News Item Themes across 4-Year Period

Theme	Percentage of News Items				Total
	2014	2015	2016	2017	
Support Services & Programmes	52 (3.5%)	100 (6.7%)	120 (8%)	105 (7%)	25.2%
Child Protection	16 (1.1%)	43 (2.8%)	69 (4.6%)	91 (6.1%)	14.6%
Children & Young People in Care	20 (1.3%)	48 (3.2%)	97 (6.5%)	51 (3.4%)	14.4%
Funding	27 (1.8%)	72 (4.8%)	26 (1.7%)	60 (4%)	12.3%
Tusla Policies & staffing issues	0%	7 (0.5%)	3 (0.2%)	149 (10%)	10.7%
<i>Whistleblowers</i>				108 (7.2%)	
Childcare, Services & Crèches	19 (1.3%)	18 (1.2%)	47 (3.1%)	41 (2.7%)	8.3%
Schooling & Homeschooling	9 (0.6%)	7 (0.5%)	27 (1.8%)	18 (1.2%)	4.1%
Advert for Foster Carers/Carers/Staff	14 (0.9%)	14 (0.9%)	12 (0.8%)	11 (0.7%)	3.3%
Adoption & Mother & Baby Homes	5 (0.3%)	11 (0.7%)	10 (0.6%)	21 (1.5%)	3.1%
Foster Carers	0%	3 (0.2%)	3 (0.2%)	22 (1.5%)	1.9%
Tusla Legal Spend	6 (0.4%)	3 (0.2%)	3 (0.2%)	4 (0.3%)	1.1%
Young Peoples Mental Health	0%	3 (0.2%)	4 (0.3%)	0%	0.5%
Retrospective Abuse	1 (0.1%)	4 (0.3%)	1 (0.1%)	0%	0.5%
Total	11.3%	22.2%	28.1%	38.4%	100%

The highest percentage of positive items relating to Support Services & Programmes was published in 2017 (82%). Negative items in this area have decreased from 2014 (25%) to 2017 (8%). Regarding Child Protection, the percentage of negative items decreased from 62% in 2014–38% in 2017. The highest number of items published on Children and Young People in Care appeared in 2016 ($n = 97$) and remained predominantly negative. However, the percentage of articles rated “both” increased from 5% in 2014 to 35% in 2017. Positive coverage of

Funding items increased from 26% in 2014 to 60% in 2017. Negative coverage rose steadily across 2014 (67%), 2015 (72%), and 2016 (84%) but dropped in 2017 to 20%. Positive coverage of Childcare Services & Crèches rose from 16% in 2014 to 49% in 2017. Negative coverage fell from 42% in 2014 to 17% in 2017. Further, Schooling & Home-schooling positive coverage rose from 11% in 2014 to 61% in 2017. Adoption and Mother & Baby Home coverage appeared most often in 2017 ($n = 21$) and was largely negative (67%). Foster Carers coverage appeared most often in 2017 and was mostly positive (55%). Young People's Mental Health items were not published in 2014 or in 2017.

Regional and national differences

Two-thirds of the articles were published in a national newspaper (published daily). The highest number of regional papers (published weekly) was found in the West (17.9%), while the lowest was found in Northern Ireland (0.6%). A Pearson chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the region of publication of items (national/local) and the items rating (positive/negative/both). A significant interaction was found [$\chi^2(2) = 377.28, p < .001$]. A moderate measure of this association was calculated using Lambda ($\lambda = 0.284$). Using knowledge of the region each item was published in (national/regional) would allow a 28.4% reduction in predicting its rating (positive/negative/both).

All national newspapers had a higher percentage of negative articles than positive articles or than articles with elements of both positive and negative. The *Irish Examiner* published the highest number of negative articles (32.8%) followed by the *Irish Independent* (5.6%), the *Irish Times* (4.9%), and the *Irish Daily Mail* (4.4%). The highest number of positive articles also appeared in the *Irish Examiner* (8.3%) (although this was four times less than the number of negative articles), as did the highest number of positive and negative articles (10.7%).

More positive than negative articles were published in the Dublin Mid-Leinster (DML) region and the Dublin North East (DNE) region at 59%, respectively. 69% of items published in the South and in the West were also positive. The highest percentage of negative items was found in the Dublin North East region at 30%.

A total of 10% of all articles mentioned “Tusla” in the headlines. Most items (57%) were negative, 24% were both positive and negative and 19% were positive. A total of 25 of those items (16%) were on the front page, 68% of which were negative, 12% positive and 20% both positive and negative.

Discussion

Framing theory was the original agenda-setting theory whereby a frame represents how the media organize and present issues and how audiences interpret them. This study has shown how the media focus on specific events and place them within a field of meaning with regard to family support in Ireland. Overall, the findings that emerged from the media analysis tell us what the media are focusing on when they talk about family support, and what their understanding of it is. Even though this study was driven from very specific objectives for the study and the family support search terms utilized and had no specific search for child protection reporting, a number of themes emerged pertaining to this. This finding is important because it demonstrates that while professionally, we often differentiate child protection and family support theoretically (see Devaney, [2014](#); McGregor, Canavan, & Nic Gabhainn, [2020](#)), the public and the media are less likely to do this. Instead, the reports about family support have been more often “framed” within the context of child protection. McGregor and Nic Gabhainn ([2018](#)) concluded that there is a lack of clarity amongst the public regarding child protection and family support. This analysis shows that those who research and write for newspapers in Ireland are similarly unclear.

There are a number of possible reasons for this. As reflected in literature understanding of child welfare elsewhere (e.g. Ayre, [2001](#); Hove et al., [2013](#)) shows the need for greater education and awareness within the media of the complexities involved in child welfare practice and its various dimensions. In this study, the range of positive and negative reporting shows there is more than one narrative that frames media and public understandings. Also as discussed, the way child protection and welfare is reported in the media impacts negatively on public opinion and understanding. There is much less attention to reporting of family support. Such coverage of child protection and family support has the ability to strongly influence the way the readers understand news, especially coverage of highly publicized events and how those events are

framed to the general public. The divergences between the national and regional findings indicate the power of the print media to influence the way in which support services are perceived and understood. Child protection and family support services need to be clearly understood and known by both the public and the media. This awareness could encourage families in need to seek help earlier. This points to the need for greater communication about the interplay of supportive protection and protective support throughout child welfare systems as argued by McGregor and Devaney ([2020a](#), [2020b](#)).

In sum, the media content analysis shows that the media are changing their level of awareness and how they report on issues surrounding family support, child protection, prevention and early intervention. The findings have shown signs of more positive than negative reporting on PPFS over time. Communication patterns are emerging, and potential causes and effects are beginning to develop. The newspaper media are one source of public awareness and understanding about child protection and family support and they play an important role in how these issues are reported. As Warner ([2014](#)) argued, the more reporting there is about the “everyday” work, the more likely the public will gain a more balanced perspective.

Conclusion

The themes that emerged from the study are of significance in informing how the media interpret and understand family support. Communication theory and framing theory highlight the need to consider how services are communicated and how messages are framed to the public. This study highlights the need for greater partnership with the local and national media, in order to give a more in-depth understanding of the nature and diversity of family support and child protection in practice.

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Disclosure statement

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Notes

1 Details of all reports published can be found at <http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/cfrc/projects/completedprojects/preventionpartnershipandfamilysupportppfsprogramme/>.

2 Two members of An Garda Síochána (AGS), became widely known to the general public as Garda whistle-blowers following allegations they made of malpractice and corruption in AGS practices. An investigation was undertaken into whether files in certain State agencies, including Tusla, were created and distributed by senior members of AGS in inventing false allegations of sexual abuse and other concerns. This investigation received extensive media coverage.

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