

Femicide Watch 2019
Panel Discussion
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Media reporting on Intimate partner homicide.

Most of the research done on media representations of intimate partner homicide has been done in the US and it mainly focuses on print outlets. There are about 23 such studies. But there is relatively little research done in the Irish or European contexts and not enough on broadcast or online outlets, which are changing how they produce stories all of the time.

1. From those **international studies** we know that there are three key problems with how intimate partner homicides are reported.

Decontextualisation – very little of the representation names the murders as involving domestic violence. They do not use that language explicitly and they often fail to look for or mention a previous history of violence on the part of the perpetrator. Because they fail to name domestic violence they fail to frame these murders as a social problem as something that society can choose to act on and change, instead each story remains separate and disconnected from the overarching issue. Every murder remains a 'one off' not part of a larger pattern of domestic violence homicides.

Blame – This is a subtle process whereby the focus shifts away from the victims and who they were towards the perpetrator and who he was. The victims get erased and instead there is an articulation of 'reasons' or excuses for the perpetrators actions – references to unsubstantiated claims about mental health issues – he just snapped, or 'explaining' the violence in terms of the ending of a relationship or referencing the use of drugs or alcohol.

Sources – The third problem with reporting is with who journalists select as the sources for information on stories. The police and court officials tend to be the most used source, followed by neighbours and bystanders. Domestic violence experts, survivors or advocates are rarely approached. This means that people with no expertise are often asked to comment and those people who can explain intimate partner homicide with real expertise are often not asked to contribute.

2. In the **Irish research** that I recently completed with my colleague Dr Eileen Culloty at DCU, we found that these findings map into the Irish context.

We looked at 5 cases of intimate partner homicide, which occurred between 2015-2017 and gathered all the coverage of those cases across the Irish Times, the Irish Daily Mail, journal.ie and RTE.ie, this meant we had 210 news items on the 5 cases.

There are **five statistics** that are interesting to consider

11% of stories contextualised the murders as cases of domestic violence homicides.

10% of coverage used sensationalist language and headlines. (Mainly in the tabloid).

10% of news items made reference to other cases of domestic violence homicides.

5% of news items used a domestic violence expert as a source

4% of stories used statistics about domestic violence.

3. These findings are important because they point to **what needs to change**.

Best practice would see stories that (fit with what is in the Femicide Watch Report – pg11)

- Set out the domestic violence **context** clearly
- Avoid **sensationalism** and focus on the victim
- Frame domestic violence as a **social problem**.
- Use experts and survivors as **sources**
- Use national **statistics** to show the extent of the problem
- Use the Women's Aid **helpline** on stories.

4. So **how do we get there?**

The international research shows that just generating guidelines and distributing them doesn't really work.

The guidelines need to be developed **in collaboration with journalists...** to do that we need to know what are the challenges they face in reporting on this issue.

I've done a pilot study on that with colleagues Mary Corcoran and Pauline Cullen at Maynooth and we found that:

- Journalists would like if the **police** could name crimes more clearly and liaise with families for information so that they don't have to rely as much on bystanders and community commentators.
- They would like if **domestic violence agencies** could proactively engage with them for greater education on the issues.
- They still need to change their very traditional, **institutionalised** way of reporting this issue and be open to new possibilities in how they might think about it and really stop to think about the damage done to families when journalists get it wrong.
- To get journalists to think more about this issue I think we need to hear the **voices of families** who can best express what the impact of problematic reporting has been on them and on their families, this is the next piece of research that I want to do...
- So, to my mind guidelines are not enough we need constant ongoing **guidance for** journalists
- This will require substantial and dedicated additional **resources**, but it's such vital work to collaborate to change the public's misunderstanding of intimate partner homicide.

