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**Australian Print Media Framing of Mandatory Reporting**

**Abstract**

Mandatory reporting is a key aspect of Australia's approach to protecting children and is incorporated into all jurisdictions' legislation, albeit in a variety of forms. In this article we examine all major newspaper's coverage of mandatory reporting during an 18-month period in 2008-2009, when high-profile tragedies and inquiries occurred and significant policy and reform agendas were being debated. Mass media utilise a variety of lenses to inform and shape public responses and attitudes to reported events. We use frame analysis to identify the ways in which stories were composed and presented, and how language portrayed this contested area of policy. The results indicate that within an overall portrayal of system failure and the need for reform, the coverage placed major responsibility on child protection agencies for the over-reporting, under-reporting, and overburdened system identified, along with the failure of mandatory reporting to reduce risk. The implications for ongoing reform are explored along with the need for robust research to inform debate about the merits of mandatory reporting.

**Introduction**

Mandatory reporting (MR) of suspected child abuse or neglect has become increasingly contentious following its introduction in the USA in the 1960s and Australia in the 1990s. Few academics have focused on MR (see Ainsworth, 2002a & 2002b; Harries & Clare, 2002; Mathews, 2012), however the effects of the policy have been criticised by a range of stakeholders for net-widening and creating increased workload, risk-averse and often inappropriate reporting decisions, negative impacts on families, and the punitive nature of the legislation. The Australian print media is critical in the public dissemination of information relating to government legislation, and it also plays a pivotal role in public opinion and in generating political support for policy reform (Lonne & Gillespie, 2014).

In this article we critically examine Australian newspaper coverage of MR, identifying the major themes, news frames and implications of the various portrayals upon the community. Reception and attitude to news and events reported in the print media can be manipulated through the use of 'frames' – the composition, presentation, and language of the story that define, diagnose and communicate a cause, solution and judgement relating to an issue (Entman, 1993). Frame analysis has become a popular methodological approach within the social sciences. Here it will be used in combination with thematic analysis to investigate the portrayal of MR in Australian print media from 2008 to 2009. This was a period of significant debate and inquiry into the effectiveness of contemporary approaches to protecting children and related policy changes in Australia. This study is part of a larger quantitative and qualitative study of the influences of print media coverage of maltreatment upon public perceptions and policy making. No previous studies of media portrayals of MR have been conducted – however, this is an important topic to consider given the media's influence on a government's policy responses to social problems, particularly child protection (Humphreys et al., 2010; Lewig, Scott, Holzer, Arney, Humphreys & Bromfield, 2010).

**Mandatory Reporting**

Mandatory reporting is the legal requirement to report suspected acts of child abuse or neglect, which may be applied to teachers, doctors, nurses, or anyone suspecting maltreatment. Although all Australian states and territories have legislated mandatory reporting of some persuasion, laws on reporting can differ greatly in terms of who reports, level of concern or grounds required, and types of abuse deemed reportable, as well as the system and thresholds employed to action reports (Matthews, Goddard, Lonne, Short, & Briggs, 2009). Child maltreatment is an important issue, affecting all cultural and socio-economic groups across the globe.Costs of these abuses, both financial and social, are considered sufficient to justify the implementation of a national government response in many jurisdictions (Gilbert et al., 2009a & 2009b). Kempe and his colleagues wrote the report "Battered Child Syndrome" in the early 1960s, concluding that child maltreatment was being perpetrated in hundreds of homes across the country (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller & Silver, 1962). MR laws were quickly and uncontroversially introduced in many US states to respond to this problem. Today, many other nations – including all Australian states and territories – have some form of MR legislation or policy frameworks that entail reporting requirements (Mathews et al., 2009).

Reporting in most Australian states and territories is required when there is a belief or suspicion on 'reasonable grounds' of the sexual abuse of, or risk of serious physical or psychological harm to, a child (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2013), and over time this has been tightened to 'significant harm' in many jurisdictions. Mandated reporters differ by state, ranging from 'anyone' having the duty to report in some regions (Northern Territory) to only doctors, nurses, school staff and authorised child safety employees in other states (Queensland).  West Australian legislation covers only the reporting of sexual abuse. Penalties typically apply for failure to report a case of suspected child abuse or neglect.

The implementation of MR in Australia started in Victoria, in response to 2-year old Daniel Valerio's brutal murder and the low rates of reporting by medical practitioners and educators (Saunders & Goddard, 2002). It sought to increase the number of cases of child abuse being reported and to enable earlier intervention into these cases (Matthews & Kenny, 2008). Legal protection safeguarded reporters from breaches of privacy and challenges to professional ethics, thereby removing obstacles that may have hindered the reporting of suspected maltreatment (Denham, 2008).

Support for outside reporting of suspected cases of abuse can be seen when looking at the source of referrals. Perpetrators rarely seek help (0.1% in the US), and there are low rates of referrals from within the family (Matthews & Bross, 2008). In the US and Canada, children account for approximately 0.5% and 2% of referrals, while parents account for 4.1% and 11% respectively (Matthews & Bross, 2008). The largest proportions of referrals, an estimated 58% of substantiated referrals in Australia, are from professionals who are mandated reporters (Matthews & Bross). Jurisdictions without mandatory reporting such as Norway can have far higher proportions of reports from family members seeking assistance than are found in Australia (Kojan & Lonne, 2012).

Although a large number of countries – up to 75% by some studies – have adopted a policy of mandated reporting , many, such as New Zealand and the UK, have not (ISPCAN, 2008; Matthews & Kenny, 2008). The reasons behind this lie in concerns about the potential for over-reporting of innocent cases, the damage that investigation may have on families, and the valuable resources that may be misdirected (Ainsworth, 2002a; Ainsworth & Hansen, 2006; Harries & Clare, 2002; Melton, 2005). Even in countries where mandated reporting policy is in place, a lack of confidence in child protection services and a fear of misdiagnosis still lead many professionals to fail to report a significant proportion of cases (Francis et al., 2012; Matthews & Bross, 2008). Many workers also fear that the system of mandated reporting may diminish their clients' perceptions of them as 'helpers' (Francis et al., 2012; Melton, 2005). Additionally, there have been reports of great variability in mandated reporters' perceptions and knowledge of reporting requirements (Denham, 2008).One study showed significant variability between experts in the depiction of 'reasonable suspicion', with almost half the respondents stating they had received no education on the interpretation of this term (Levi & Crowell, 2011).

Some doubt the worth of MR, claiming it does not reduce child abuse or maltreatment (Ainsworth, 2002b), and others suggest it even harms children and parents by unnecessary removal of children and alienating them (Ainsworth, 2002a; Ainsworth & Hansen, 2006; Harries & Clare, 2002; Melton, 2005). However, the real effects of MR are complex and difficult to definitively determine as there has been little research of its impacts and benefits upon multiple stakeholders at the macro and micro levels.

**Print Media**

Australian research has found that the mass media, particularly newspapers, is arguably more influential than research, child protection workers, and academics in generating policy debates and influencing policy development(Humphreys et al., 2010; Lewig et al., 2010). Dissemination to large audiences enhances the power of news discourse to shape widely-shared constructions of reality. Hence, print news media plays a crucial role in child protection, as coverage helps inform policy-makers and the public about abuse prevention and intervention (Mejia, Cheyne & Dorfman, 2012); indeed, a US study of public officials found that 100% of respondents received a portion of their information on child sexual abuse from the media (Sample & Kadleck, 2008).

How the media frames contested issues can profoundly affect audience understanding and acceptance. It is therefore important to understand just how MR is presented and portrayed in the media. Print media stories of child abuse and the policies that surround it are often only reported when the story is considered 'newsworthy' – that is, when it involves a particularly horrific event or a disastrous failure in the child protection system (Hove, Paek, Isaacson & Cole, 2013). Media reports predominantly emphasise personal, punitive and individualised angles, portraying maltreatment as something 'bad' people do, overlooking the social structural context and instead blaming the parents or the child protection system itself (Hove et al., 2013; Lonne & Gillespie, 2014; Lonne & Parton, in press; McCosker, Lonne, Gillespie & Marston, 2014). We sought to investigate how MR was portrayed in the print media using a frame and thematic analysis.

**Framing Analysis**

A frame is a schema of interpretation, a complex presentation of reality that allows an author to guide a reader's understanding of a story by careful selection and organisation of language, interpretation, moral evaluation, and recommendations (Cissel, 2012; Entman, 1993). Simply put, frames are mental structures that shape the way people see the world, and in politics it is frames that shape social policies and the institutions that implement these (Lakoff, 2003). In the print media and, specifically, newspapers, frames are the central organising idea of the news item that seeks to shape how the public interpret and respond to the information given to them (Odijk, Burscher, Vliegenthart & de Rijke, 2013). Media framing allows journalists to choose from arguments, definitions, causes, judgments and other salient attributes in order to activate particular moral evaluations and value interpretations in their readers (Mejia et al., 2012; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

Frame analysis can be taken further by identifying the levels of responsibility within identified frames – for example, whether family wellbeing is the primary responsibility of the state or private citizens, or whether all professionals have a moral and legal duty to report suspected cases of child abuse and neglect. News articles can be either 'episodic' (describing specific individuals or events, thereby putting a 'human face' on the news story) or 'thematic' (placing events and issues within a more general, social context) (An & Gower, 2009; Mejia et al., 2012).

Australian newspaper representations of MR, are explored in our analysis of the media framing utilised in all MR articles, including the thematic or episodic nature of the stories, and suggestions or insinuations of the 'cause' and 'solution' to the issues. No published studies of media portrayals of MR were identified in our literature review, and previous studies into the media framing of child abuse and neglect were limited to generalised reporting of maltreatment. With respect to MR reports, the aims of the current study were to:
1. Identify major themes (issue-specific frames)
2. Identify which general news frames were used, including
    a. how these frames were used to interpret and depict major themes, and
    b. the causes and solutions discussed
3. Investigate how these themes and frames were used within different newspapers.

**Methods**

The current thematic document analysis is a sub-analysis of a larger study, which looked at print media across Australia between January 2008 and June 2009 (Lonne & Gillespie, 2014; McCosker et al., 2014). The initial study comprised 2710 articles relating to child abuse or neglect from 10 broadsheet and tabloid papers representing all Australian states and territories. This dataset was created by searching the Australian and New Zealand Reference Centre database within 'Factiva' using key search terms including 'child*' ('abuse*', 'neglect', 'protection' or 'safety'), 'pedophil*', 'paedophil*', or 'parent neglect', 'harm' and 'maltreatment' (where * means 'and derivatives').

Australian print media portrayals have been criticised for over-representing sexual and physical abuse, harm by strangers, and maltreatment (particularly sexual) within Indigenous societies (Lonne & Gillespie, 2014). In order to investigate this and other aspects of media representations of child maltreatment, a study of Australian newspapers from 2008-09 was conducted. This study found that newspaper coverage of abuse and neglect tends to highlight institutional failures, focuses on criminal matters of sexual and physical abuse rather than on the less 'newsworthy' topics of neglect and emotional abuse, placed individual blame on Indigenous communities and over-emphasised sexual abuse within these communities, and largely ignored the societal and systemic factors which contribute to child abuse and maltreatment (Lonne & Gillespie, 2014).

This paper builds on these findings by investigating how MR policies are framed and presented in the media. In the current analysis, textual meaning will be drawn from the articles by a process of identifying and describing 'frames' used by the media. The practice of using frame analysis to further inform and build upon content analysis reduces the inherent bias within content analysis, by treating all thematic terms as equally salient and significant. This form of analysis investigates how meaning is constructed, how themes are presented and portrayed, and how these meanings may be understood and interpreted by the reader. By investigating these frames – that is, the complex organisation of information used by journalists to create specific messages and perspectives – we will enhance the results gained from our earlier study.

The first step in the current analysis was to collect only those stories that discussed, or were related to MR. The sample was filtered using a keyword search for the terms 'mandatory', 'report' and 'notif*'. Articles identified were then checked and duplicates or irrelevant articles deleted. Indicator questions and an initial data analysis strategy were used to identify frames. Issue-specific frames were chosen after an initial analysis of the qualitative data. Once these frames or 'themes' were chosen, the data were again checked and these themes coded. Coding and data entry was conducted by one researcher, with each entry audited by a second researcher, to increase rigour and reliability. Causes and solutions were also chosen from this initial analysis and coded. Each article was labelled as 'episodic' or 'thematic'. General frames, those that transcend issue-specific ideas, were chosen from previous literature (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000); these included the following:

- *Conflict frame* – This frame reflects divergence and disagreement between individuals or, more commonly, government and other organisations dedicated to child welfare. Previous studies have found that the conflict frame was the second most common frame used by US and European media, and was used more frequently in more serious (as opposed to sensationalist) newspapers (An & Gower, 2009; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The current study will utilise the terms broadsheet and tabloid to describe these separate media types.

- *Morality frame* – This frame highlights (either directly or indirectly) the moral or religious tenets or consequences relating to the issue; the issue may be mentioned in terms of moral values or social responsibilities (An & Gower, 2009).

- *Attribution of responsibility frame* – This frame is used to attribute the responsibility for the origin, cause, or possible solution of an issue to a government organisation, institution, or individual (An & Gower, 2009; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Semetko and Valkenburg noted that this frame is used most frequently in broadsheet newspapers.

In order to increase reliability, frames were identified using seven yes/no indicator questions (Odijk et al., 2013):

- Conflict frame: (1) Does the story reflect disagreement between parties, organisations, or individuals? (2) Does the story reflect two or more opposing opinions on an issue?

- Morality frame: (1) Does the story make reference to morality, or religious tenets? (2) Does the story offer ethical and/or moral judgments regarding an issue? (3) Does the story contain a moral message?

- Attribution of responsibility frame: (1) Has one particular party, organisation, or individual been blamed for a problem/solution? (2) Does the story suggest that a party, organisation, or individual has the ability to cause or resolve an issue?

*Statistical analysis*

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 21. Continuous variables are reported as means and standard deviations and were assessed using independent samples *t*-tests. Associations between categorical variables were assessed using chi square analysis.

**Results**

An analysis of the articles from our larger initial study found that 75 of the 2710 articles discussed MR. These articles ranged in length from 97 to 2134 words (M = 596.79, SD = 396.634), and just over half (54.7%) were from tabloid papers. Broadsheet articles (M = 812.71, SD = 463.141, range = 349-2134) tended to be longer than tabloid articles (M = 417.73, SD = 203.929, range 97-1044) by more than double (t(44) = 4.616, *p* < .001). Articles were found in nine different papers:

- *The Australian* (19/25.3%)
- *The West Australian* (19/21.3%)
- *The Sydney Morning Herald* (11/14.7%)
- *The Adelaide Advertiser* (9/12.0%)
- *The Daily Telegraph* (7/9.3%)
- *The Herald Sun* (5/6.7%)
- *The Age* (4/5.3%)
- *The Hobart Mercury* (3/4.0%)
- *The Northern Territory News* (1/1.3%).

Four issue-specific themes were identified from the title and body of the articles. These include 'over-reporting of abuse', 'under-reporting of abuse', 'failure to reduce the risk of harm' and an overburdened 'system in crisis'. There were no significant relationships found between type of article (tabloid or broadsheet) and themes or frames used.

*Over-reporting of abuse*
The mention of large, overwhelming, or increasing numbers of reports, and the over-notification and re-notification of a small proportion of families received a significant amount of coverage; indeed, 22 (29.3%) articles mentioned this theme. Many articles focused on the fact that frontline workers had become "utterly overwhelmed by the sheer number of notifications" they received (*Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 17), and were able to "get to about half of all calls [while] the rest get noted, filed, and forgotten" (*Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 26). Helplines were described as being 'swamped' by calls from mandatory reporters, most commonly police (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 16/02/2008, Line 5).

Articles often mentioned that increases in child notifications represented only a small portion of children at risk of abuse or neglect, instead "capturing an increased level of dysfunction in Australia's expanding underclass of welfare-dependent families which have serious problems including domestic violence, parental drug abuse and mental illness," (*Australian*, 27/06/2009, Line 37). In an effort to highlight these at-risk children, mandated reporters often notify child protection services about these children "at least twice before they met the artificial threshold that triggers any investigation" (*Australian*, 12/04/2008, Line 23).

A proportion of these articles also reported an increase in the numbers of children in out-of-home care following the introduction of MR – for example, one article stated that "reports of suspected abuse and neglect more than trebled" and "the number of children in Australia in out of home care has doubled" following the introduction of MR policy in Australia (*Australian*, 19/04/2008, Lines 15 and 17). Whether these statistics reflected an increase in the actual incidence of child abuse and neglect in the community, or were merely inflated by increased reporting, was touched upon in the media, with many articles concluding that, "rather than revealing sudden, unprecedented levels of family breakdown", the alarming statistics concerning the number of children 'notified' and 'removed' more accurately "reflect official policy" (*Australian*, 19/04/2008, Line 28).

The nature of reporting was often described as risk-averse, risk-shifting and inappropriate, noting that the "present arrangements place the onus for reporting on those in the front line, with penalties for remaining silent. They [Child Protection workers] have reacted to that threat by over-reporting" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 26/11/2008, Line 13). This over-reporting was highlighted in a number of papers, for example with accounts of children being reported for having head lice. This highlighted problems when "professionals do not feel free any more to use their judgment", (*Daily Telegraph*, 27/02/2008, Line 39), and where mandatory reporters are "reporting excessively out of fear of legal consequences" (*Daily Telegraph*, 27/02/2008, Line 18).

The increased rate of children 'notified' and 'removed' as a result of MR policy was discussed with a tone of alarm in many articles. One article claimed that MR had left the child protection system "close to collapse" (*Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 39), and another stated that the system was in a state of "of impending crisis" (*Australian*, 19/04/2008, Line 9) and "coming apart at the seams" (*Australian*, 19/04/2008, headline). The coverage noted that, in response to the introduction of MR, the system had become "highly defensive" and "increasingly bureaucratic", "preoccupied with shifting risk, rather than reducing the risk to children" (*Australian*, 19/04/2008, Lines 18, 19 and 20). A number of articles discussed how MR had become a tool by which frontline workers transferred the responsibility of protecting the welfare of an individual child to others, effectively making it "somebody else's problem" (*Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 29).

There were many articles discussing the need for overhauls to the MR system and, indeed, the child protection system in general. For example, the *Adelaide Advertiser* noted that the "alarming number of notifications revealed in a Department of Families and Communities report has prompted child protection experts to call for 'a major rethink' of the system, which it says is overburdened by mandatory reporting of possible abuse" (30/07/2008, Line 4). The solution most commonly offered in these articles was to introduce more stringent thresholds, suggesting that "police, health workers, teachers and other groups will have to produce 'reasonable evidence' that a child or young person is exposed to risk or harm", rather than simply a 'reasonable belief or suspicion' (*Daily Telegraph*, 19/04/2008, Line 30).

### *Overburdened system*

An overburdened child protection with limited resources, a lack of funding and low staff levels were discussed in the 17 articles (22.7%). The themes debated in these articles were heavily linked to the above-mentioned topic of 'over-notifications', which was seen as the major cause of burden within the child protection system. Many articles were written in a tone of helplessness with no solution in sight: "DOCS [the Department of Community Services] has been swamped. Children, about whom it has been notified, have died. Thousands of families in need of help, if not urgent attention, slipped through the net" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 25/02/2009, Line 19). Child protection staff were often described as "drowning in paperwork" (*Daily Telegraph*, 19/04/2008, Line 12).

A lack of adequate funding and staff were prominently decried as major catalysts for deterioration within the system. A large proportion of articles called for increases in funding, often quoting the recommendations of the Wood Report: "more education, and more care and support for workers" (*Hobart Mercury*, 22/01/2008, Line 44). The child protection system was described as having "become increasingly absorbed by receiving, recording and investigating reports ... and consequently hav[ing] insufficient resources to help or support children and families that come to their attention" (*Australian*, 19/04/2008, Line 76). The strain on the child protection system was often said to be exacerbated by the incorrect channelling of money and resources; indeed, one article stated that it was "apparent the limited resources at DOCS' disposal can be far better employed than having to deal with the significant proportion of frivolous and/or insignificant notifications" (*Daily Telegraph* 27/02/2008, Line 10).

A number of the articles called for the government to "abolish mandatory reporting" (*Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 17). One article did acknowledge that, "politically, it would be very difficult to scrap mandatory reporting" as "the premier of any state that tried it would find his head in the noose the next time a child died" (*Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 38), however this article goes on to highlight that such "short-term political thinking [is] very damaging for children" (*Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 48). In line with the conclusions made above, a number of articles suggested an increase to the reporting threshold as a means for reducing work-load, while others reported favourably on the Wood Report's recommendation to end MR for any child at 'conceivable' risk of harm, and instead focus "on locating those children who actually are at risk" (*Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 41); though precisely how this was to be done remained unanswered.

*Under-reporting of abuse*
The under-reporting of child abuse was mentioned in 22 (29.3%) articles. These articles tended to include personalised stories of appalling abuse, specific incidences ending in death or tragedy, or descriptive scenes of horror within Indigenous communities. These stories used particularly emotive language, describing events such as the "beatings of girls who had sex with adult men" and pregnancies in "girls as young as 12 … while sexually transmitted diseases were frequently detected in teenagers who had been raped by family members or other males" (*Adelaide Advertiser*, 07/05/2008, Line 28).

These articles often insinuated the immoral implications of failing to report abuse, and the consequences for children: "Given the under-reporting, it seems fair to assume that an Indigenous girl…is at dire risk of being sexually abused" (*Australian*, 07/05/2008, Line 19). These articles almost never mentioned the MR system in a larger societal context but, rather, discussed the issue at an individual level of responsibility. Personal stories of abuse lead to moral judgements and conclusions related to MR policy, such as the "necessity of teacher education and the mandatory reporting of suspected sexual abuse in schools" (*Australian*, 21/02/2008, Line 54). Emotional appeals for increased reporting are adduced as personal convictions and expectations: "I believe everyone should report abuse. It's their moral duty. If it takes mandatory reporting to make sure, that's how it will have to be" (*Herald Sun*, 28/02/2008, Line 46). Appeals were made for "people to come forward with hard evidence so we can lock these bastards up" (*Australian*, 07/05/2008, Line 26), signalling a populist law-and-order response.

A number of stories also discussed the duty of the clergy and their responsibilities for reporting, after one highly publicised case of abuse involving the perpetrator confessing perpetration of child sexual abuse to his priest, who under Australian law was not a mandatory reporter. These stories drew heavily on topics of morality and obligation, and the vast majority called for clergy to be nominated as mandatory reporters. One article stated, "if medical practitioners can break patient-doctor confidentiality about child abuse, then churches must see that it is their moral obligation to put the child's safety above their own traditions" (*Herald Sun*, 07/03/2008, Line 85).

*Failure to reduce risk of harm*

The most frequently-mentioned topic in the print media was that of failure within the child protection system, discussed in 39 (52%) articles. This included failure to protect children from harm, or failure to act after a notification had been made. A number of articles suggested that MR policy had failed in its fundamental objective of reducing children's risk of harm, primarily because "children who may actually come to harm…[have] their cases lost under the deluge" (*Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 36) – relating to the theme of an overburdened system, discussed above. Many articles highlighted the fact that "welfare workers can respond to only a very small number of reports, and…the important ones do get missed" (*Australian*, 19/04/2008, Line 30). One article expanded on this point, claiming: "The big lie that underpins the system is that children reported to DOCS get help. Hardly any do. Only 13 per cent of those reported ever get a visit from a DOCS worker. DOCS responds to only the most serious cases, and even then misses many children who subsequently die" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 07/03/2009, Line 18).

Articles discussing the failure of MR policy to reduce the risk of harm to children drew heavily on evidence from the high-profile cases of Dean Shillingsworth and 'Ebony'. These were children who had been reported to child protection authorities on multiple occasions but who nevertheless died from abuse and neglect, and whose cases subsequently prompted inquiries and criminal convictions. Dean Shillingsworth's grandmother was quoted as saying "it would've changed a lot if DOCS had pulled their finger out. Things would've been different, but DOCS never told me anything" (*Daily Telegraph*, 25/11/2008, Line 47).

Increases in notifications and reporting of child abuse were often noted, but many papers felt that this was not a reflection of any improvement to child welfare, outlining that "at a time when stringent standards of compulsory notification have been in place, some of the worst instances of criminal child abuse and neglect have gone undetected" (*Daily Telegraph*, 27/02/2008). Although a large proportion of articles blamed failings within the child protection system in general for the tragedies described, many articles identified MR itself as a failed policy, for example: "the fact that mandatory reporting doesn't save children was amply illustrated…with the death of several children who were known to welfare authorities, including one…[whose] body was found in a suitcase floating in a lake" (*Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 42). Some articles blamed MR for hindering the ability of health care workers to help abused children – "won't this [the introduction of mandatory reporting] mean girls could be too scared to go the doctor or tell their troubles to an adult?" (*Northern Territory News*, 28/04/2009, Line 8).

A small number of articles considered the impacts of MR policy on the parents of 'notified' children. One article claimed that MR "enrages, frightens and humiliates a very large number of parents" (*Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 37), and another stated that parents are "hostile the moment they hear they've been reported for child abuse" (*Australian*, 19/04/2008, Line 46). A third article claimed that that removing children "contravened the rights of parents" (*Adelaide Advertiser*, 26/08/2008, Line 46).

Some of the problems associated increased rates of removal of children as a result of the introduction of MR policy were discussed earlier; however, a number of the articles also considered the harmful effects removal from the home has on individual children. It was often cited that children placed in unstable foster homes "could

sometimes develop more problems" (*Adelaide Advertiser*, 23/08/2008, Line 4), and that "state care is a very dangerous place to be" (Line 6). One child protection expert was quoted as saying, "you couldn't design a more stupid system than the current one built around mandatory notifications" (*Adelaide Advertiser*, 23/08/2008, Line 3).

**Media Frames**

Sixty-eight articles (90.67%) used one or more of the three identified frames – conflict, morality, and attribution of responsibility – to define their stories. The attribution of responsibility frame was used 38 times, the conflict frame was used 22 times and the morality frame was used 18 times. Chi square analyses showed a significant relationship between themes and news frames. For example, stories discussing a system failure (failure to act or failure to reduce harm) were more likely to use an attribution of responsibility frame (71.1% compared to 32.4%; $\chi^2(1) = 11.202$, $p = .001$). Articles that discussed underreporting were less likely to use a conflict frame than those that did not (9.1% compared to 37.7%; $\chi^2(1) = 6.154$, $p = .013$), but far more likely than all other themes to use a morality frame (59.1% compared to 9.4%; $\chi^2(1) = 21.017$, $p < .001$).

Level of responsibility

The structure of each article was examined to determine whether it was episodic or thematic. Over half of the articles were thematic (n = 52 / 69.3%). The morality frame was more likely (66.7%) to be used in conjunction with an individual level of responsibility (episodic) ($\chi^2(1) = 14.436$, $p = .001$).

Suggested Cause and Solution

Almost three quarters the articles described or insinuated a cause (n – 54 / 72.0%). The primary insinuated causes were: the child protection system or government agencies (n = 25/33.3%), MR policy (n = 23/30.7%), the perpetrators of child abuse / neglect (n = 13/17.3%), the under-reporting of abuse (n = 8/10.7%) or wider society (n = 4/5.3%).

Not as many articles were willing to offer a solution (n = 36/48.0%). Solutions proffered or insinuated included changes to MR policy, or increased reporting of abuse (n = 19/25.3%), a system overhaul or system/culture change (n = 12/16.0%), or an altered form of MR (specifically an increased threshold) (n = 8/10.7%).

**Discussion**

This study investigated the use of news frames in child abuse stories, specifically MR, in Australian major newspapers over 18 months in a period of significant policy and institutional change. Four themes were identified. Unsurprisingly, it was found that stories of 'underreporting' were more personal and used a 'morality' frame, whereas stories discussing 'system failure' tended to attribute responsibility for this to a person, system or organisation.

The print media play vital roles informing and shaping public perceptions of maltreatment and the child protection system (Lonne & Gillespie, 2014), making it

important to explore their portrayals. With respect to MR, this study found four major themes:

1. Overburdened system – The child protection system as overburdened, and ill-equipped: understaffed, underfunded, poorly organised and inefficient.
2. Over-reporting – Child protection as a system is overburdened by mandated calls and crushed under the weight of its own bureaucracy.
3. Under-reporting – Child abuse as a rampant and insidious problem that is not being brought to light. Children remain unprotected due to a lack of reporting, and unsatisfactory requirements and outcomes of MR.
4. Failure – a system incapable of protecting children that are currently in the system. Those who are reported are merely tallied in the system and forgotten about, or redirected to inappropriate services.

The media filters information through particular frames and often portrayed MR through a conflict frame as policy contested by a variety of stakeholders, including academic and community leaders, and child protection agencies and governments. This was particularly evident in the over-reporting themes reflected in stories, but to a lesser extent for under-reporting. The over-reporting noted here is consistent with the academic examinations outlined earlier. Moral frames were evident in some stories, particularly those highlighting under-reporting that resulted in tragedies - concluding that these crimes should have been prevented by wider and more effective reporting. The attribution of responsibility frame was used the most, focussing on system failures with the departments most often held to account.

The focus on system failure in MR is also reflected in related studies of feature article portrayals of out-of-home care (McCosker et al., 2014), and all stories in major newspapers about child abuse and neglect (Lonne & Gillespie, 2014) where coverage was dominated by criminal matters that were short, provided scant detail and 'newsworthy' portrayals. Newspaper coverage of horrific events such as the Daniel Valerio, Dean Shillingsworth and 'Ebony' cases have often led to major inquiries, and have been instrumental in exposing flawed child protection systems and bringing about policy changes (Lonne & Parton, 2014). Maltreatment stories are mostly individualised and ignore the social structural factors at play, the overall emphasis being upon social control rather than social care responses and the dominant voices being police, politicians, community claims makers, and academics (Lonne & Gillespie, 2014). Nonetheless, system failure presents as a general theme found in many reports, particularly feature articles. Unfortunately, the stories on MR in this study did not tend to offer a lot of solutions to the varied portrayals of malfunctioning.

In our view, the results here indicate that the print media for the most part successfully informed the public about the serious issues confronting our child protection policy, the merits of MR, and its impacts on systems. The coverage embraced a number of frames and did hold departments to account for broad and individual case outcomes. Whilst research has shown that academic studies have far less impact on child protection policy-making processes than does media portrayals (Humphreys et al., 2010; Lewig et al., 2010), our examination of the MR coverage highlights the prominence given to academic viewpoints, albeit in feature articles which are relatively lengthy and go unread by many citizens. This begs the question as to whether researchers might potentially be more influential in policy development if they are active 'public intellectuals' and engage in media debates.

But their influence only goes so far, perhaps because much media claims making lacks a robust supportive evidence base, the Wood Inquiry, for example, rejected the "limited, and primarily academic support expressed to the Inquiry for abolition of mandatory reporting" (Wood Inquiry, 2008, p.189). It recommended the reporting laws remain, with an upgraded system for greater effectiveness in reporting and more appropriate treatment of cases, including by differential response. In our view there is an urgent need for more detailed research of the mandatory reporting regimes and their respective positive and negative impacts. Given how contested the media coverage is, it is surprising that so little empirical research evidence is available to verify the public claims being made about MR.

Newspaper portrayals of maltreatment and system failure in Australia have been important for reform agendas (Lonne & Parton, 2014; McCosker et al., 2014). The coverage of MR is a further case in point and we posit that just as our protective systems need to continually evolve and improve, so do approaches to identifying those at risk and in need of protective interventions. However, we note concerns in England about the increased expansion of the 'preventative state' and the role of reporting systems within this (Featherstone, Morris & White, 2014).

The role of the media in ongoing reform is crucial as it informs and shapes social constructions of the issues at play and policy responses to them. We have identified here that conflict, morality and attribution of responsibility frames are all employed in newspaper coverage of MR, with the contested policy issues generally captured well, albeit within a backdrop of failure from imperfect reporting systems. Under-reporting and over-reporting were highlighted, as well as an overburdened system susceptible to failures and tragedies. Given the important issues at stake, further research is needed to properly inform policy and practice, and broader community perspectives about reporting suspected harm to children, and the intended and unintended consequences of doing so.

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