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Source / Izvornik: **Medijska istraživanja : znanstveno-stručni časopis za novinarstvo i medije, 2017, 23, 127 - 148**

Journal article, Published version

Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)

<https://doi.org/10.22572/mi.23.1.6>

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:184:330109>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-07-12**



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# Media coverage of children in „out-of-home” care: Content analysis of Croatian daily newspapers

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## SUMMARY

*Media reports of children in care and “out-of-home” care can have an impact on attitudes towards children, caregivers, institutions and people who work in the system of care. The main objective of this study was to determine to what extent and how Croatian daily newspapers presented children in care during 2014. Quantitative content analysis of printed newspaper articles (Croatian national (1) and regional (3) daily newspapers) was conducted<sup>1</sup>. Children in “out-of-home” care are rarely covered (n = 78), media coverage is mostly focused on negative stories, and “episodic” or “case based”. Children are predominantly portrayed as “poor children”, victims of parental conflict, neglect and domestic violence. News media still violate children’s right to privacy and participation in the media, often using sensational content and style. Of all forms of “out-of-home” care, only news of foster care are presented in a positive context.*

Keywords: children in care, “out-of-home” care, media coverage, media presentation

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## **Introduction**

In recent years in Croatia, media coverage of children has become the subject of scholar's interest (Labaš & Osmančević, 2014, Vlainić, 2012, Ciboci et al., 2011). Although children are generally under-represented in the media (Ciboci et al., 2011), vulnerable groups of children have always been favourite media topic, not only because of the social importance of the issue, but also because of the marketing potential of the story of a child who is a victim of violence, neglect or parents indifference. News of vulnerable or threatened children provide "captured" audience because adults feel the need to protect them, to express empathy or moral outrage against the perpetrator<sup>2</sup>. Deontology of the media<sup>3</sup> in this area is grounded on recognition of the fact that the way the media cover this issue can cause a real damage to the child's psychological mechanisms and processes (Gabelica-Šupljika, 2009). Media presentation of the children can have an impact on the child's self-image, and how adults and society treat them. Due to this fact, media reporting and presentation of children in the media is seen as an issue of children's rights. Journalism ethics, when children are subjects, imposes several basic principles: to portray children accurately, to avoid stereotypes and reflect diversity of children's issues, to involve children in the media and give them platform for their voices to be heard, to respect their rights to privacy and dignity and avoid making harm, to acknowledge children's perspective and experience of media coverage and media portrays, and to inform children and society of their rights and responsibilities<sup>4</sup>. Public interest in stories of children who are victims or abandoned should never be used as an excuse for harming children in media reports (Vilović, 2007).

## **Children in „out-of-home” care as a media topic**

Children in „out-of-home” care are one of the most vulnerable groups of children. Their life is full of uncertainty, they are entering “out-of-home” care often already traumatized or stressed out due to separation from family which is why they are at risk to develop a range of behavioural problems<sup>5</sup>. They often develop insecure attachment pattern which puts them under a number of developmental risks (Brašnić, Ajduković & Ručević, 2009), like issues with trusting adults. Also, institutional care can be a source of secondary traumatization. Young people exiting “out-of-home” care face a number of challenges, frequently reporting that they were not adequately prepared for independent life, and that they lacked the support of adults (Kusturin et al., 2013). Children placed in “out-of-home” care due to behavioural problems should receive a high quality resocialization treatment (Marušić, 2012, Vukota, 2012), however, they also may have been traumatized in childhood, they lack moti-

vation for treatment, and sometimes they escape from social care institutions further jeopardizing their health.

There is no doubt that children in care and various forms of “out-of-home” care should be the topic of news media coverage. Media coverage can have a number of positive effects on children and on the efficiency of institutions - they can alert and warn the public of a violation of children’s rights and thus ensure the protection of a child, encourage the public to take part in humanitarian actions and projects, speed up the implementation of the deinstitutionalization process, popularize adoption and foster care, and affirm children in care as active members of the community by allowing them the opportunity to participate in the media.

Unfortunately, the media often violate children’s rights and harm children, caregivers, system of care, and social workers. Inadequate reporting can become a source of secondary traumatization of children (Gabelica-Šupljika, 2009), especially when they violate the child’s right to privacy, access to information and participation in the media. Stereotyping children in the media has been identified as an international phenomenon - research findings confirm that children are usually under-represented in media and predominantly represented in a negative context, usually as victims or as “cute” children with the use of descriptions and photos in order to provoke emotion<sup>6</sup>, while young people are usually demonised and criminalised or presented as a problematic group at risk (Gordon, McAlister, & Scraton, 2015). Since the children in care are often placed in “out-of-home” care due to the abandonment, domestic abuse, neglect or due to their behavioural problems, it is possible that the most common stereotypes regarding children in care are “poor children” or “incorrigible children”. Stigmatisation of children in care is a result of erroneous misconceptions and beliefs, such as feelings of regret towards children without parental care or negative stigmatization of children with behavioural problems. Stereotypes about social workers, foster parents, and the entire system of care are mainly a result of media coverage and the use of an inappropriate media language (Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013). In addition, the media can create a moral panic by using generalizations or premature conclusions and damage the reputation of a child, caregivers, social workers or institutions in authority. Today, when the guidelines for reporting on children are available, very few people would still argue that the media are in the business of selling “news” at any costs (Kitzinger, 1996). Balanced debate about what is good and what is bad for a child is missing in newspaper redactions between members of editorial board and journalists, so we often witness positive intentions of journalists that result in negative effects on a child. However, it is easy to criticize media coverage from researcher’s perspective because we are not faced with the commercial pressures that today’s journalists and editors face every day, and which are causing them to suppress ethical imperatives (Kanižaj, 2009).

Research on media coverage of children in care and “out-of-home” care are very rare, the only relevant research on the various forms of “out-of-home” care was conducted by Riggs et al. (2009), but it focused exclusively on a foster care. Only one analysis of newspaper coverage of children’s homes was conducted in Croatia in 2012, which confirmed that newspapers rarely report on this subject, and when they do, they mainly report on specific events or cases without any reports on children’s success (Labaš & Osmančević, 2014). However, sample of this study included only stories from national newspapers and study dealt exclusively with children’s homes, so stereotypes of children in other forms of care, and sensationalism in content and style were not investigated in the study.

## **Research problems and hypothesis**

The main objective of the study was to determine to what extent and how Croatian daily newspapers covered news of children in “out-of-home” care during 2014. Specific objectives of the study were to determine whether newspapers support stereotypes of children in care, undertake sensationalist coverage, and if national and regional newspapers differ in media coverage.

Two main research hypothesis were recognized: first, daily newspapers do not often report about children in care and various types of “out-of-home” care; second, most reports are episodic or “case based”, predominantly focusing on negative stories. Several specific hypothesis were defined: first, daily newspapers support the stereotype of a “poor child” when reporting on children without parental care, and the stereotype of “incorrigible child” when reporting about children placed in care due to behavioural problems; second, daily newspapers undertake sensationalist approach when reporting on children in care, particularly when reporting on negative stories; third, daily newspapers still violate children’s media rights (right to privacy and right to participation in the media); fourth, national and regional newspapers differ in coverage and presentation of children in “out-of-home” care.

## **Material and methods**

The study was conducted using quantitative content analysis of newspaper<sup>7</sup> articles about children in care and the various forms of “out-of-home” care in the Croatian national and regional daily newspapers. According to a shortened definition, content analysis is a systematic, objective and quantitative analysis of message characteristics<sup>8</sup> (Neuendorf, 2002: 1). Analytical matrix was previously tested on a random sample of newspaper articles, thereafter was revised, and as a result the final version contained 17 classification categories. Analytical matrix included the general infor-

mation about the newspaper articles (month of publication, an announcement on the front page, national or regional orientation of the newspaper, size of the article), specific topics of a newspaper article (affirmative stories: the success of children in care, humanitarian actions, projects and volunteering, foster care and adoption, living conditions and children's rights; negative stories: child abuse and neglect of children in care, disappearances of children in care, criminal behaviour of children in care, judicial proceedings and measures of centres for social welfare (CSW)), reporting approach (problem approach or “case based” approach), child's characteristics (categories of children: children without parental care, children with behavioural problems, children with disabilities), the stereotypical view of a child (“poor child”, “incorrigible child”, “baby angel”), identity protection (direct disclosure or indirect disclosure), “out-of-home” care (specific form of “out-of-home” care and dominant representation of care), sources of information (number of sources and the main source), and sensationalism (in content and style).

Children in (“out-of-home”) care are children without appropriate parental care, children with behavioural problems and children with developmental difficulties or with disabilities who are placed in some form of temporary or permanent care. For the purpose of this study, we also considered children who need to be placed in some form of “out-of-home” care, children and youth exiting care, and adults who were placed in some form of care during childhood. For the purpose of this study, various forms of “out-of-home” care are institutional care (children's homes), foster care, family alike group home care, youth residential communities and adoption<sup>9</sup>.

## Sample

We coded newspaper articles that appeared in Croatian daily newspapers between January 1, 2014 and December 31, 2014. We analysed four Croatian daily newspapers, of which one national (*Jutarnji list*) and three regional (*Glas Slavonije*, *Novi list* and *Slobodna Dalmacija*). *Jutarnji list* was chosen because it is one of the two daily newspapers in Croatia<sup>10</sup> with the highest average sales circulation. *Glas Slavonije*, *Novi list* and *Slobodna Dalmacija* were chosen because they are the most relevant regional newspapers with the highest average sales circulation in their territorial regions. The unit of analysis was a newspaper article (e.g., news, reports and other journalistic forms except advertising articles) on children in care and “out-of-home” care. All articles from which headlines was obvious that the story was about children in care and “out-of-home” care<sup>11</sup> were included in the sample.

## Results and Discussion

### *General characteristics of the newspaper coverage*

During 2014, we found 78 news articles about children in care and „out-of-home” care, 19 (24.4%) in *Jutarnji list*, 26 (33.3%) in *Glas Slavonije*, 18 (23.1 %) in *Novi list* and 15 (19.2%) in *Slobodna Dalmacija*. Only 78 articles published during one year in four daily newspapers is a disappointing result and confirms the hypothesis that the media in Croatia rarely report on children in care and „out-of-home” care. One-third of all articles (26) were published during the festive season (November 12.8% and December 20.5%), when the attention is mainly directed to humanitarian activities and campaigns (56.3% out of all articles in December), and to adoption (18.8% out of all articles in December). Although it can be assumed that the primary intention of these contributions was to encourage the public to provide help for children or to popularize adoption, focus on these stories during the festive season contributes to the stereotype of children in care as „poor children“ who have been abandoned, unfortunate and totally dependent on adults. We have not found any article dedicated to success of children in care, which is a further confirmation of this claim. Only 12.8% of all articles were announced on the front page of the newspapers, from which 70% on the front page of regional newspapers. This result confirms that the issue of children in care is positioned as an important social issue, but rather as a problem of minority of “unfortunate” children in particular communities, than as an important national problem. Data on a size of articles also support this result, more than half of all articles (52.6%) covered less than half a page, and only one fourth of all contributions reported extensively on the subject (more than one page).

### *Specific topics and framing*

The most popular newspaper stories were news about violence against children in care, escapes and disappearances of children from institutional care, and criminal behaviour of children (24.4%). Although humanitarian activities, projects and volunteering were almost equally represented (23.1%), specific topic of court proceedings and CSW measures were usually a result of inadequate parental care therefore related to the separation of children from their families due to neglect and other problems. It is encouraging that nearly 20% of all articles were devoted to the process of foster care and adoption using problem approach (80%), so 2014 can be considered as a year of raising public awareness about process of de-institutionalization of “out-of-home” care and promotion of foster care and adoption. Daily newspapers frequently reported on specific cases when reporting on violence against children, disappearances and runaways from institutions and criminal behaviour of

children (84.2% of all articles), as well as court proceedings and measures of CSW (83.3% of all articles). Although the analytic matrix predicted newspaper stories on child's success, during the 2014 we did not find any article dedicated to this specific topic.

We analysed the journalistic approach to the topic to determine how journalists frame stories of children in care and “out-of-home” care. According to the *framing* theory approach, journalists highlight certain parts of reality, while other elements are (un)consciously ignored to simplify selection and processing of information (Kunczik & Zipfel, 2006: 147). It is a necessary tool of complexity reduction which is based on the assumption that the way a particular issue is presented can have an impact on how the audience understands it (Gans, 1979, acc. Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The media have the opportunity to present “out-of-home” care as a social problem, and media have greater probability to achieve that goal using problem approach. Media reporting focused on “case based” approach leaves public with the misconception that it is a problem of a few individuals, and not a serious social problem that cannot be efficiently resolved without significant financial investment. Specific topics of the articles according to journalistic approach are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Specific topics of articles according to frames of the issue  
*Tablica 1. Specifične teme članaka prema novinarskom pristupu*

Specific topic	N (%)	Frame (N)	
		Problem approach	„Case based“ approach
Violence against children, disappearances of children in care, criminal behaviour of children	19 (24.4)	3	16
Humanitarian actions, projects and volunteering	18 (23.1)	1	17
Foster care and adoption	15 (19.2)	12	3
Living conditions and children's rights	14 (17.9)	10	4
Court proceedings and CSW measures	12 (15.4)	2	10
Success of children in care	0 (0)	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>78 (100)</b>	<b>28 (35,9%)</b>	<b>50 (64,1%)</b>

When reporting on children in care and “out-of-home” care, the media tend to report on specific cases and events (64.1%), and less likely undertake problem approach (35.9%). In only 11.5% of all articles, journalists used the opportunity to apply mixed approach (“case based” approach with the problem approach).



*Children in care and their rights: stereotypes and right to privacy*

During 2014, daily newspapers mostly reported on children without parental care (75.6%), followed by children who were placed in care due to behavioural problems (12.8%). Four articles were testimonials of adults who had been placed in care during childhood, and only two articles dealt with children placed in care due to developmental difficulties and disability. Low number of articles about children in care with physical, intellectual or sensory impairments probably induces low level of public interest and understanding of the problem.

The most prevalent topics when reporting on children without parental care were violence against children, court proceedings and CSW measures (34.4%), followed by humanitarian actions and projects (24.6%), foster care and the adoption of children (21.3%), and finally living conditions and rights of children in care (19.7%). However, when reporting on children placed in care due to behavioural problems, newspapers mainly addressed the problem of runaways from residential care facilities (8 of 10 stories discussed this topic).

The analysis sought to determine whether a daily newspaper support stereotypical view of children in care, taking into account only those articles which are child focused (all problem articles about institutional, foster care and adoption which are not mentioning specific child/children are excluded from the analysis). All articles were coded in order to track three specific stereotypes about children in care: “poor child”, “incorrigible child” and “baby angel”.

Methodologically articles were coded as a stereotypical of children in “out of home” if:

1. The photograph or illustration supported particular stereotype (“poor child” = a child who is crying, who is abused, neglected or abandoned on the illustration or photograph; “incorrigible child” = a child who is involved in any kind of hedonistic or anti-social or delinquent behaviour like drinking or smoking on the illustration or photograph, “baby angel” = a child who is too happy or presented very sweet (e.g. under the Christmas tree, holding stuffed toys) and/or;
2. The text supported particular stereotype by using adjectives, phrases or diminutives (e.g. “poor child” = *poor, little orphan, unhappy*; “incorrigible child” = *incorrigible, maladjusted*; “baby angel” = *little baby, baby angel, little lovebirds*) or direct citations from a child which are used to make assumptions about a child’s character.

Total of 45 articles supported stereotypes of children in “out-of-home” care. The most common stereotype is the “poor children” stereotype which refers to the view of children as unfortunate, abandoned, victims of violence and neglect (Table 2).

“Poor child” stereotype appeared in stories about the court proceedings and about imposed measures to separate children from their families, but also in other stories, including reports on humanitarian activities and campaigns with the aim of provoking reader’s feelings of pity and compassion.

Table 2. Stereotypes of children in “out-of-home” (N=45)  
*Tablica 2. Stereotipi o djeci u alternativnoj skrbi (N = 45)*

<b>Stereotype</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
„Poor child“	33	73,4
„Incorrigible child“	7	15,6
„Baby angel“	5	11,1
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>100</b>

The stereotype of “incorrigible child” was typical for reports on children placed in care due to behavioural problems. Only three articles undertook problem approach to this topic considering risks children were facing while escaping from institutions, however, both approaches (problem and case based approach) suggest hedonistic and anti-social tendencies of children as a reason for escape (“they were looking for vent”, “maladjusted”, “from home to stroll and crime”, “they flee toward the end of the school year”). The children were not used as a source of information, moreover, representatives of institutions spoke on their behalf. Although hedonistic tendencies may sometimes be the reason for escape, before making a judgment journalists should ask a subject to explain his/her own reason. Other possible causes of the escape such as poor conditions in residential care facilities and foster care or family problems have not been mentioned in the reports. On the other hand, the only article focused on child abduction described abducted child as a child with serious behavioural problems. Five articles supported “baby angel” stereotype referring to a view of a child who will never be able to do anything wrong.

Although Croatia has a legal framework to protect children’s right to privacy, the Media Act (Official Gazette 59/2004, art. 16) does not regulate the indirect disclosure of the child’s identity, therefore cases of indirect disclosure in non-electronic media<sup>12</sup> cannot be sanctioned. Amendment of the Act in 2013, Article 7, Paragraph 2, introduced a fine for chief editors who publish information that could identify the witness or the victim of criminal offense<sup>13</sup>, which is not a sufficient measure for potential harm that disclosure of identity could impose on a child. Journalists and editors can possibly bear the reputational consequences within their own profession, yet only if the Journalists’ Council of Honour affirms a violation of the Code of Honour of Croatian Journalists. Another problem relates to the general functioning

of the implementation of the Act. Although the legal framework for the protection of children's privacy rights has been improved in recent years, there is no supervision over the implementation of regulations in the field of printed media. Therefore, when violation of the child's right to privacy in the printed media is confirmed, children's rights can be protected only by a private charge. The private prosecution requires financial expenses and it alludes that parents are fully aware of the fact that the disclosure of the child's identity can cause damage to the child, as well as parents' understanding of the definition of indirect disclosure of identity, which is not always the case.

Almost half of all articles revealed the child's identity (43.6%), equally directly (48.5%) and indirectly (51.5%). Direct disclosure of a child's identity means revelation of a child's identity by disclosing his/her first and the last name or photograph of a child. Indirect disclosure means revelation of a child's identity indirectly - revealing photos or names of parents, family members, place of residence or address, school or day care, and other details from child's life (Gabelica-Šupljika, 2009). In order to determine disclosure of identity in cases where it should be protected, we recoded the specific topics in the affirmative and negative contributions. Affirmative contributions are newspaper articles which address humanitarian campaigns, projects and volunteering in care, the success of children in care, foster care and adoption processes, living conditions and rights of children in care. News on violence against children and neglect, disappearances, kidnappings and escapes of children from institutions, as well as court proceedings and CSW measures are grouped as negative contributions. Child's identity should always be protected in negative stories, with the exception in cases of abduction and disappearance of a child, when disclosure of the identity is justified only until the moment of finding the child, after which the media coverage of the event should stop<sup>14</sup>. However, despite the recommendations of the Ombudsman for Children, the daily newspapers in 2014 reported about missing children after the cases were closed, offering explanations for their unacceptable behaviour ("vent", "stroll", etc.).  $\chi^2$  test showed that there is a statistically significant difference in the disclosure of identity when reporting on affirmative and negative stories about children in care. Although there is no need to reveal the identity of the child, except when it comes to the success of children in care and similar affirmative contributions, it is interesting that the Croatian daily newspapers are more prone to protect the child's right to privacy in the affirmative stories and reveal the identity of the child in negative stories when it is supposed to be protected (Table 3).

Out of 21 negative stories about children in care which disclosed the identity of the child, 16 disclosed identity indirectly. Therefore, it can be suggested that media workers know that they should protect the identity of the child in negative contribu-

Table 3. Disclosure of a child's identity in relation with thematic type of the news story ( $\chi^2$ test)Tablica 3. Otkrivanje djetetovog identiteta u pozitivnim i negativnim vijestima ( $\chi^2$ test)

Disclosure of a child's identity	Thematic type of the news story		Total
	Affirmative story	Negative story	
Disclosed identity	13	21	34
Protected identity	34	10	44
<b>Total</b>	47	31	78

$\chi^2$ test = 12.20, df=1, p<0.01

tions, and for this purpose they try to cover up the violation of this principle by disclosing it indirectly. While writing about negative stories mostly using “case based” approach, they include the child's biological parents, guardians and educators as a source of information, usually using their full name or photograph, and providing case details, consequently violating the child's right to privacy and potentially endangering the child. Media workers are not the only one responsible for the disclosure of the child's identity. Children are often “accidental victims” of their parents who accidentally or purposely expose them to the public eye without thinking about consequences of such exposure (Kanižaj, 2009). In the stories about CSW measures, which were dealing with removal of the children from families, where parents believed that their children were unjustly taken away, parents themselves disclosed child's identity. For these kind of news stories one-side reporting is typical, mostly in favour of parents represented as “victims of the system” who voluntarily come out and warn public of system failures. Whereas it is beneficial to inform the public about the system failures, it is not appropriate to rely on parents as the only source of information, and to present institutions of care in a negative way. The revelation of a child's identity can be very harmful, moreover if it is combined with a stereotypical view of a child or other details concerning the event being reported. Research and practice confirm that disclosure of child's identity can enhance the traumatic experience and expose a child to various interpretations of significant others, and have an impact on a child's self-image, cognitive processes, the amount of stress and social functioning due to a stigmatisation. Although the majority of the public doesn't personally know a child whose identity is disclosed, children are not so much concerned with what people they don't personally know think, they are occupied with opinions and interpretations of their peers, family members, neighbours and other people in their local environment who can recognise them. Although daily newspapers rarely disclosed child's identity in the affirmative stories, even then media workers must be careful and present a child emphatically, not with

pity or as a helpless victim to avoid a negative influence on a child's self-image (Gabelica-Šupljika, 2009).

*Representation of "out-of-home" care and sources of information*

Table 4 shows that the most represented form of "out-of-home" care is institutional care<sup>15</sup> (70.1%), followed by news on the adoption of children (14.9%), and then on the foster care (11.9 %). The table includes only those articles from which the type of "out-of-home" care could be easily recognized, respectively, news stories in which the child is still located in the family before separation from the family, as well as the news stories about deinstitutionalization were excluded.

Table 4. Representation of various forms of „out-of-home” care in newspapers

*Tablica 4. Prevalencija različitih oblika alternativne skrbi u novinama*

<b>Form of „out-of-home“ care</b>	<b>N = 67 (%)</b>
Institutional care	47 (70.1)
Foster care	8 (11.9)
Family type group care	1 (1.3)
Youth residential communities care	1 (1.3)
Adoption	10 (12.8)

Only two articles were devoted to the family-type homes and youth residential communities, accordingly, it is possible to assume that the Croatian public is poorly informed about the problems of these forms of "out-of-home" care. It is interesting that in a total of 10 articles on the adoption, five dealt with the adoption by same-sex couples, some of which represented stereotypical attitudes towards sexual minorities (e.g. "Danger to children"), one was devoted to the adoption by unmarried couples, one about interstate adoptions, two dealt with the process of adoption and growing up as an adopted child, and one was a report about a specific child who was adopted.

The analysis sought to determine how many articles reported objectively on "out-of-home" care in a neutral tone, and how many articles were subjectively presented (presentation of positive or negative attitudes). It was found that newspapers almost equally reported objectively (43.6%) and subjectively (41%) of various forms of care. Although the institutional care had the highest proportion of objectively presented articles, at the same time it was the only form of care in which the subjective reporting was presented in a negative context (Table 5).

Table 5. Different forms of „out-of-home” care according objective reporting  
 Tablica 5. Objektivnost izvještavanja o različitim oblicima alternativne skrbi

Form of „out-of-home“ care	Objective reporting	Subjective reporting		Difficult to determine
		Positive context	Negative context	
Institutional care	26	10	7	4
Foster care	1	7	0	0
Family type group care	0	0	0	1
Youth residential communities care	0	1	0	0
Adoption	3	3	0	4

On the other hand, newspaper coverage of the foster care was predominantly positive, which is probably a consequence of the process of deinstitutionalization of “out-of-home” care, and media professionals’ efforts to encourage the Croatian public to foster parenting.

A large number of sources in the newspaper article, especially named sources, increase the credibility of a newspaper article. It is ethically controversial not to name the source of information. The analysis showed that articles about “out-of-home” care usually used a single source (41%) and that in nearly 25% of articles was not possible to determine the source of information (Table 6).

Table 6. Number of information sources  
 Tablica 6. Broj izvora informacija

Number of sources	N=78 (%)
1	32 (41.0)
2	13 (16.7)
3 or more	14 (17.9)
No sources	19 (24.4)

In the articles containing only one source (N = 32), a dominant source of information were the representatives of the system of care (40.6%), followed by representatives of NGOs (15.6%), the biological parents of a child in care (15.6%), politicians and officials (9.4%), while the field experts were sources of information in only one article. A child in care was the source of information in only one article during 2014, which is particularly disappointing since it is clearly indicating that children are not included in the public discourse on the issues concerning them directly. Participation of children in the media is important because it evokes a feeling of pride, curi-

osity and media competence, and contributes to social justice and greater social inclusion (Žižak et al., 2012, Kołucka & Lemish, 2013).

*Sensationalism in reporting on children in “out-of-home” care*

Sensationalist content refers to the reporting of unnecessary details on the specific characteristics of the event/person combined with the arousing language. Although most articles do not include details, we found unnecessary details of specific cases in 37.2% of the articles (Table 7).

Table 7. Sensationalist content and style in news on children in care and „out-of-home” care

*Tablica 7. Senzacionalistički sadržaj i stil u vijestima o djeci u skrbi i “izvanobiteljskoj” skrbi*

	<b>Sensationalist content; N (%)</b>	<b>Sensationalist style; N (%)</b>
Yes	29 (37.2)	44 (56.4)
No	49 (62.8)	34 (43.6)
Total	78 (100%)	78 (100%)

Although it has been established that the majority of newspaper articles did not use sensationalism in the content,  $\chi^2$  test determined that it was more often used in negative stories (Table 8).

Table 8. Affirmative and negative type of news according to sensationalist content ( $\chi^2$ test)

*Tablica 8. Senzacionalizam u sadržaju u pozitivnim i negativnim vijestima o djeci u skrbi ( $\chi^2$ test)*

<b>Sensationalist content</b>	<b>Type of news</b>		
	<b>Affirmative story</b>	<b>Negative story</b>	<b>Total</b>
Yes	12	17	29
No	35	14	49
Total	47	31	78

$\chi^2 = 6.86, df=1, p<0.01$

In contrast, sensationalist style<sup>16</sup> when reporting on children in care was found in 56.4% articles,  $\chi^2$ test ( $\chi^2$ test = 25.2, df = 1, p <0.01) determined that journalists are more likely to use sensationalism in style when reporting about the details of spe-

cific events (93.1% of all articles with sensational content). In those rare cases when stories about children in care appeared on the front pages, journalists used sensational style and content, and reported mostly negative stories about children in care (80%), e.g., family abuse, runaways, or unfortunate situations that children in care had undergone. Two such newspaper articles, announced on the front pages, were about the separation of children from their families<sup>17</sup>. Both presented the institutions in an extremely negative way with sensational content and language: “grey home”, “jaws of bureaucracy”, “CSW will take child away” or as those who “don’t want to let the child’s parents to take their son”, as unprofessional and incompetent (“case without end”, “declaration will be given only on Tuesday”, “decision on child custody was not known until yesterday”). Only one article reported about successfully resolved court case of a child in care and journalists assigned credit to themselves for that success (“because of our writing”). Media professionals should warn the public about the social welfare failures, however, by focusing on failures without analysing the reasons why a failure occurred and the lack of balanced reporting on the success of social welfare create a stereotype of social workers as incompetent, lazy, insensitive to the needs of its users, and well protected by the authorities. One newspaper article was very moving testimony of an adult who grew up in “out of home” care and it was published over nearly the entire front page<sup>18</sup>. Testimony took a total of 5 pages using very sensational content and style. Informant described how he had been “raped by adult men in “out-of-home” care”, that “guards had forced children to prostitution, dealing drugs and stealing”, “one boy had been killed and they covered up the murder”, however, all reports were written in the plural form, creating the impression that all the guards were involved in the abuse of children in homes. Subtitle implied that described situation is still a reality in institutional care in Croatia, because today’s situation in institutional care is described as a motive for the testimony “shaken by today’s news of the situation children are facing in institutional care, he considered that he should speak about terrible reality of those children”. Although the testimonies of people who have grown up in care, even if they open up about negative sides of care, are good because they take care of children’s perspective and warn the public about potential violations of the rights of children in care, described testimony is extremely sensationalist in content and style (“take your clothes off and get on your knees”, “I would not be the only one who comes out of there in a coffin”, “testimony from a child’s hell”). Additionally, extensive coverage and generalization when explaining the motives for testimony can create the wrong impression that it is a reality experienced by most children in institutional care. Although it is quite understandable that the report used a single anonymous source, journalist did not involve any other informant, nor did he/she try to contact accused institutions thereby jeopardizing his/her own credibility. From the perspective of media workers, this article contains several “newsworthiness” factors



when it comes to reporting on violence (Cheit, 2003): multiple counts, additional violence, multiple victims and perpetrators with the element of cover-up, for that reason, it is important to alert the public. Nevertheless, news value should never be a justification for one-side representation of events. This reduces the opportunity for ‘the other side’ (the suspect) to defend himself/herself and to present “his/her version of events”. Subsequent publication of the statement of ‘the other side’ cannot reduce the damage caused by this type of one-sided testimony (Vilović 2004, acc. Majstorović, 2010). Although in most articles child’s identity was not disclosed, it was significantly more revealed in articles with sensational content, 69% violated the right to the privacy of a child (Table 9).

Table 9. Disclosure of identity and sensationalist content ( $\chi^2$ test)

Tablica 9. Senzacionalizam u sadržaju i otkrivanje djetetovog identiteta ( $\chi^2$ test)

Sensationalist content	Disclosure of identity		
	Disclosed	Protected	Total
Yes	20	9	29
No	14	35	49
Total	34	44	78

$$\chi^2 = 12.08, df=1, p<0.01$$

Sensationalism in the style was statistically significantly more prevalent in the news about violence against children, disappearances, runaways, court proceedings and CSW measures than in other specific topics (54.5%), and in overall reporting on violence against children, disappearances, escapes and court proceedings was used in 77.4% of all articles (Table 10).

Table 10. Specific topics and sensationalist style ( $\chi^2$ -test)

Tablica 10. Specifične teme i senzacionalizam u sadržaju ( $\chi^2$ test)

Specific topics	Sensationalist style		Total
	Yes	No	
Living conditions and children’s rights	6	8	14
Violence against children, escapes from institutions, court proceedings	24	7	31
Humanitarian actions, donations and projects	8	10	18
Foster care and adoption	6	9	15

$$\chi^2 = 9.30, df=3, p<0.05$$

It is disappointing that journalists use sensationalist approach more frequent while reporting on negative stories in combination with the disclosure of child's identity and excessive details thus violating a child's right to privacy, dignity, and even the right to safety. Even the only article announced on the front page about the humanitarian campaign of collecting gifts for St. Nicholas for the children in care<sup>19</sup>, used sensational style of the subtitle (“The gifts that children ordered are unthinkably modest. They wished a box of cookies, hair gel, socks for football”). Use of illustrations (lonely child who walks barefoot) has contributed to the stereotype “poor children in care” and was clearly written with the purpose to evoke emotions.

### *Differences in reporting and the orientation of newspapers*

The statistical significance of differences in reporting and presentation of national<sup>20</sup> and regional newspapers could not be tested because of the small sample size<sup>21</sup>, however, we found some differences in reporting between national and regional newspapers. While both kind of newspapers more often reported on “case based” stories, national newspapers rarely undertook problem approach (in only 15.8% articles). National and regional newspapers both mostly reported on violence against children (36.8% of national, 40.7% regional), but national had slightly larger proportion of news regarding foster care and adoption (31.6%), as well as humanitarian actions, donations and projects (31.6%) than regional. In contrast, regional newspapers 23.7% of the articles dedicated to living conditions of children in care and the rights of children in care, while national newspapers did not devote any article to this specific topic. Regional newspapers had a slightly greater proportion of the articles devoted to court proceedings and CSW measures (16.9% of all articles) compared to the national (10.5%). However, we haven't found significant difference in the prevalence of affirmative and negative reporting in relation to the orientation of the paper.

When reporting on children in care, newspapers regardless of the orientation equally represented children without adequate parental care, however, 9 of 10 articles of children with behavioural problems have been published in regional newspapers. At the same time, the only two articles on children with developmental difficulties and disability were published in regional newspapers. The stereotypical view of children was equally represented in national and regional newspapers, however, stereotype of children as unadjusted was characteristic for regional newspaper that dealt with issues of children in re-socialization process, in particular the problem of runaways. When it comes to the violation of the child's privacy right and the manner of disclosing the identity, national and regional newspapers do not differ. In addition, national newspapers have revealed more details of the case (52.6%) compared to regional (32.2%), although they did not differ in the use of sensational style.

## **Limitations of the study and recommendations for future studies**

Although the study gives us an important and unobtrusive insight in the way Croatian daily newspapers portray children in care, there are several methodological limitations of the study. The sample size was limited by the availability of the material and financial constraints, so the study does not provide a comprehensive analysis of all relevant national daily newspapers in Croatia and some statistical analysis could not be performed. Future research should employ longitudinal content analysis of all relevant daily newspapers which would provide not only enough material to analyse, but also track of changes in newspaper coverage trends through time. Other media outlets should be included in the analysis since it is possible that there are differences in television and newspaper coverage. Although most of the variables were quite easy to analyse in order to reach an agreement, future analysis should employ at least three independent coders in order to calculate intercoder reliability for the variables stereotypes of children in “out-of-home” care and objective/subjective reporting. The quantitative content analysis here presented is purely descriptive of the media content and does not allow conclusions about the impact of the media coverage, so in order to claim that newspaper coverage influence public attitudes towards children in care, future studies should be combined with other research methods. Qualitative research methods could provide us with in-depth knowledge on how the public perceives media coverage of children in care, and also how media coverage and presentation impacts child’s self-image.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis confirmed the first hypothesis that daily newspapers in Croatia underrepresent the children in “out-of-home” care. Stories about children in care were usually published during the festive season probably with the aim of provoking emotions of the readership. Newspapers often reported about individual cases and negative stories, confirming the second hypothesis that most reports are case-based. A success of children in care was not the topic of the newspaper coverage. Although the stereotype “incorrigible child” was present in newspaper coverage while reporting on children with behavioral problems, when reporting on children in care, the most prevalent stereotype was a “poor” child which was expected result. Media stereotyping of children in care as “poor” children or as “incorrigible” will further continue unless educational campaigns at the macro level are conducted, which would explain what is the “out-of-home” care, which forms of the care exist and how they differ. Journalists usually used one-sided approach while reporting on separation of chil-

dren from their families. Using only the statements of the biological parents, who were represented as “victims” of the system, probably contributed to the formation of negative stereotypes about the system of care and social workers.

Children were not the sources of information and they did not participate in the creation of the image of themselves, which is confirmation of the initial hypothesis that children’s right to participation in the media is violated. The only positive aspect of the coverage in the context of deinstitutionalization was the promotion of foster care as a good form of care for children, although reporting was not balanced with potential problems and solutions while hosting children.

The language used in the newspapers supported stereotypes of children in care, because the public often does not distinguish among various forms of “out-of-home” care, so they could identify a child without parental care as a child with behavioural problems. Sensationalist style is represented in most of the articles, but particularly concerning is that sensationalism in the content is often combined with disclosure of child’s identity in stories when it should be protected. Analysis confirmed hypothesis that daily newspapers still violate children’s right to privacy, the identity was disclosed in almost half of the stories. Unfortunately, parents are those who often reveal the identity of a child to a journalist, not always intentionally. Moreover, journalists often use this fact to transfer responsibility, however, they should be aware of the fact that regardless of parental consent, the children could sometimes be the victims of their parents and that they should not publish each story regardless of parental permission. It is therefore necessary to educate journalists and editors to respect children’s rights because, even when they have good intention, they could find themselves in the role of those who violate them. Although we did find some differences in coverage based on the newspaper’s orientation, small sample size did not allow us to make statistically significant conclusions.

Request to reduce identification of children who grow up in “out-of-home” care as children from “out-of-home” care is paradoxical. It is their own personal experience for which is quite natural to become a part of their identity regardless of whether they acknowledge it publicly or keep it secret. Therefore, instead of a reduction of identification as children in care, we should reduce the identification of different forms of care as extremely negative. It should start with education of journalists (and editors) on children’s rights, “out-of-home” care, the reasons for separation of children from parents, and the effects of negative media images of “out-of-home” care and children in care on the child’s self-image and the way adults treat them.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> We thank to the Croatian Office of the Ombudsman for Children who allowed us access to the newspaper articles. Research results will be presented at the international scientific conference “Child maltreatment & well-being: Contemporary issues, research and practice”, July 7-8 2017, University of Rijeka.
- <sup>2</sup> Children’s Rights and Journalism Practice – Student Guide. (2007). UNICEF – Dublin Institute of Technology. Available at: [http://www.unicef.org/honduras/UNICEF\\_Master\\_FEB\\_2008\\_BON.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/honduras/UNICEF_Master_FEB_2008_BON.pdf), (09.12.2015.)
- <sup>3</sup> Croatian Ombudsman for Children has issued a series of recommendations for the media: Recommendations for the media reporting on children, Recommendations on the protection of the privacy right of children in the media, Recommendations on the protection of privacy when reporting on missing children, available at: [http://www.dijete.hr/index.php/hr/preporuke-pravobraniteljice-mainmenu-81/cat\\_view/910-preporuke-pravobraniteljice/915-mediji-i-oglaavanje.html](http://www.dijete.hr/index.php/hr/preporuke-pravobraniteljice-mainmenu-81/cat_view/910-preporuke-pravobraniteljice/915-mediji-i-oglaavanje.html) (12.02.2015). Children privacy right in Croatia is protected by Media Act (Official Gazette 59/2004), the Electronic Media Act (Official Gazette 153/2009), and by the Regulations on the protection of minors in electronic media (NN 60/2010). About other mechanisms of protection of children’s rights to privacy read in: Blažević, S., Stipišić, J. (2009.) *Pravna zaštita privatnosti djece u medijima*. U: Maja Flego (ur.) *Zaštita privatnosti djece u medijima. Zbornik priopćenja s tribine*. Zagreb: Pravobranitelj za djecu.
- <sup>4</sup> Children’s Rights and Journalism Practice – Student Guide. (2007). UNICEF – Dublin Institute of Technology. Available at: [http://www.unicef.org/honduras/UNICEF\\_Master\\_FEB\\_2008\\_BON.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/honduras/UNICEF_Master_FEB_2008_BON.pdf), (09.12.2015.)
- <sup>5</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics. <https://www.aap.org> (09.12.2015.)
- <sup>6</sup> Children’s Rights and Journalism Practice – Student Guide. (2007). UNICEF – Dublin Institute of Technology. Available at: [http://www.unicef.org/honduras/UNICEF\\_Master\\_FEB\\_2008\\_BON.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/honduras/UNICEF_Master_FEB_2008_BON.pdf), (09.12.2015.)
- <sup>7</sup> We sampled newspapers because of their availability in the archives, and because they set the agenda for other media (Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009).
- <sup>8</sup> In this study content analysis is justified because the way the media present the children in care and „out-of-home“ care can have an impact on public understanding and attitudes towards children, institutions, and individuals responsible for their care.
- <sup>9</sup> Although the adoption can be considered as a form of „out-of-home“ care when it comes to procedures and accommodation prior to adoption, for the purposes of determining the media presentation of children who are adopted, and the process of adoption, in this study it was considered as a form of „out-of-home“ care. As well, there is a possibility that the public is not aware that adoption is not a form of „out-of-home“ care, and that children themselves can see an adoption as a form of „out-of-home“ care.
- <sup>10</sup> According to the Croatian Chamber of Economy ([www.hgk.hr](http://www.hgk.hr)), the newspaper *24 hours* has the highest average sales circulation, but it was not analyzed due to its tabloid orientation. *Jutarnji list* was chosen instead of *Večernji list* because according to Labaš and Osmančević (2014) study, which investigated media coverage of children’s homes in press during 2012, *Jutarnji list* had more published stories (18 more), so we wanted to ensure a larger number of units for our analysis.
- <sup>11</sup> *Presscut* Database access for research was provided by the Croatian Office of the Ombudsman for Children.
- <sup>12</sup> The Electronic Media Act (Official Gazette 153/09) regulates direct and indirect disclosure of identity and defines the regulatory body responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Act - The Agency for Electronic Media (<http://www.e-mediji.hr/hr/>)

- <sup>13</sup> Available at: [http://narodne.novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2013\\_06\\_81\\_1707.html](http://narodne.novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2013_06_81_1707.html) (04.12.2015.)
- <sup>14</sup> The recommendation of the Ombudsman for children’s privacy during media coverage of missing children (2013). Office of the Ombudsman for Children, Republic of Croatia: Zagreb. Available at: <http://www.nestali.hr/default.aspx?id=137>, (16.11.2015.)
- <sup>15</sup> Institutional care includes homes for children without parental care and homes for children with behavioral problems. See detailed classification:[http://www.mspm.hr/adresar\\_ustanova/ustanove\\_socijalne\\_skrbi](http://www.mspm.hr/adresar_ustanova/ustanove_socijalne_skrbi) (14.12.2015.)
- <sup>16</sup> Variable *sensationalist style* is adopted from Vukušić Rukavina study (2011) and it refers to the use of the imperative, superlatives, pejorative words and phrases, rhetorical phrases, nouns and adjectives with the aim of highlighting the extreme, bizarre illustrations and photographs, and the excessive use of question marks and exclamation points or exaggerated size and color of the title. Source: Vukušić-Rukavina, T. (2011) Razvoj mjernog instrumenta za procjenu stigmatizacije duševnih smetnji u tiskanim medijima. Doktorska disertacija, Sveučilište u Zagrebu.
- <sup>17</sup> Glas Slavonije. My only wish is to be a father to my son that I love more than anyone, 31.05.2014. & Novi list. Slobodan and Sonja take their son home, 08.01.2014.
- <sup>18</sup> Jutarnji list. I was raped for years, please, protect children in „out-of-home“ care, 21.12.2014.
- <sup>19</sup> Jutarnji list. In half a day they collected gifts for St. Nicholas for all children from *Nazor* home, 27.11.2014.
- <sup>20</sup> The reader should bare in mind that the study is based on analysis of one national newspaper (*Jutarnji list*). Due to financial constraints, this research cannot provide comprehensive analysis of all relevant daily national newspapers in Croatia.
- <sup>21</sup> At least one cell was less than 5 during cross-tabulation.

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# **Medijsko izvještavanje o djeci u alternativnoj skrbi: analiza sadržaja hrvatskih dnevnih novina**

**Stjepka Popović  
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## **SAŽETAK**

Način na koji mediji izvještavaju o djeci u skrbi i različitim oblicima skrbi može imati utjecaj na stavove prema djeci, skrbnicima, institucijama i osobama koje rade u sustavu skrbi. Osnovni cilj istraživanja bio je utvrditi u kojoj su mjeri i kako hrvatske dnevne novine izvještavale o djeci u skrbi tijekom 2014. godine. U radu je korištena metoda kvantitativne analize sadržaja novinskih priloga o djeci u skrbi u četiri hrvatske dnevne novine (jedne nacionalne i tri regionalne). Dnevne novine su rijetko izvještavale o djeci u skrbi i različitim oblicima skrbi (N=78), pri čemu su dominantno izvještavale o konkretnim slučajevima u negativnom kontekstu. Djecu su najčešće prikazivale kao „jadnu djecu” žrtve roditeljskih sukoba, zanemarivanja i nasilja u obitelji, pri čemu su i dalje kršile dječje pravo na privatnost i sudjelovanje u medijima, nerijetko uz korištenje senzacionalističkog sadržaja i stila. Od svih oblika skrbi, jedino su o udomiteljstvu izvještavale u dominantno pozitivnom kontekstu.

Ključne riječi: djeca u skrbi, alternativna skrb, medijsko izvještavanje, medijska prezentacija