

# Canadian News Coverage of Intimate Partner Homicide: Analyzing Changes Over Time

Feminist Criminology

8(3) 147–176

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DOI: 10.1177/1557085113480824

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## Abstract

News coverage of intimate partner homicide can reveal and reproduce societal assumptions and beliefs that may influence social and political responses to violence against women. This study analyzes all male-perpetrated intimate partner homicides reported in three daily newspapers in Toronto, Canada within two separate time periods (1975-1979 and 1998-2002) to explore if and how this coverage has changed over time. Results suggest that, in more recent years, news coverage is more likely to report a previous history of intimate partner violence and less likely to employ news that excuses or justifies the perpetrator's actions. However, coverage continues to employ victim-blaming news frames and to portray intimate partner homicide as an individual event, in part, through the absence of the voices of violence against women organizations, researchers, and service providers as legitimate authorities in both time periods. Thus, news coverage fails to encourage social and political responses to violence against women in intimate relationships that emphasize the need for social structural changes focusing on gender equality.

## Keywords

intimate partner violence, media issues, Canada, violence against women, news

The killing of intimate partners is a crime that occurs across geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic lines, yet its victims are predominantly women (Johnson & Dawson, 2011). Contrary to widespread portrayals of these killings as spontaneous

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“crimes of passion,” these murders are the culmination of a history of violence in over 70% of cases (Dauvergne & Li, 2006) and are more likely to be premeditated than nonintimate partner killings (Dawson, 2006). Media coverage of intimate partner homicide plays a powerful role in shaping and reinforcing societal understandings of these crimes specifically and about violence against women generally. While the relationship between media content and public understandings is a complex one, much audience research suggests that media portrayals foster and reinforce particular perceptions of and attitudes toward violent crime (e.g., Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Roberts & Doob, 1990), and help set the political and policy agenda concerning criminal justice (Doyle, 2003). For these reasons, it is important to develop an understanding of how Canadian news media constructs intimate partner homicide, and how these portrayals may have changed over time. The specific goal of this study is to explore whether and how news constructions of male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide in Canada have changed from the mid to late 1970s to the turn of the century.

### **Constructing Social Problems Over Time**

In our current information age, social perceptions form rapidly, yet ingrained societal beliefs—such as violence in intimate relationships is a private, individual issue—may stubbornly persist and take decades to change. Change is further prevented if normative beliefs that sensationalize or trivialize intimate partner violence are sustained and reproduced by news coverage that relies on ideologies established decades ago. Moreover, change cannot occur if news coverage fails to consider more recent activist and academic work that has approached intimate partner violence as a social problem rooted in a patriarchal environment and gender inequalities that foster violence against women. The potential for news coverage to promote biased or stereotypical understandings of these crimes is particularly important because, “not only are intimate murders violent and deviant but they also allow journalists to generate the sexual innuendo and romantic drama for audiences with which they can ‘tickle the public’” (Wykes, 2001, p. 149).

Biased or stereotypical portrayals of intimate partner violence may also affect whether and how the public understands this issue as a social problem. By “social problems,” we are referring to “conditions believed to occur frequently, to be very troublesome in their consequences, and [which] therefore need to be eliminated” (Loseke & Best, 2003, p. 3). The identification of intimate partner violence as a social problem has historically been hindered by widely held beliefs that such violence is “a private matter that women provoke” and that “women are the property of their husbands” and, thus, public intervention is not appropriate (Radford & Russell, 1992, p. 10). Historically, these types of assumptions prevented intimate partner violence from being identified as a social problem deserving of public attention and, as a result, hindered the development of appropriate social, legal, and political responses (Radford & Russell, 1992).

Representations of crime, victims, and perpetrators are influenced by social, political, and economic changes in society (Meyers, 1997). Feminist efforts to reframe

gender-based violence as a social problem have been strong in recent decades, however. Violence in the home was not understood as abuse until the 1970s when feminist activists campaigned to have it labeled as such (Loseke, 1989), and the women's movement of the 1970's has been credited with bringing intimate partner violence against women from the private domain into the public sphere (Crocker, 2005). Two decades later, the 1994 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was passed in the United States, sending a message that domestic violence was a national crime problem and deserving of political attention (Stoltz, 1999).<sup>1</sup> Recent work surrounding intimate partner violence has specifically focused on the 1990s as a key period of transformation surrounding domestic violence legislation (e.g., Reckdenwald & Parker, 2012). In Canada, rape law reforms of the 1980s, such as replacing the term *rape* with the term *sexual assault* as well as the creation of spousal rape provisions, demonstrate the significant impact of feminist advocates on the legal process (Tang, 1998). In addition, the killing of 13 women in the December 6, 1989 Montreal Massacre at École Polytechnique led to the Canadian media becoming "a discursive battleground for issues of violence against women" (Bradley, 2006, p. 930). The intensity of the media coverage and public debate, and annual vigils that commemorate these deaths, can be seen to have increased societal awareness and movement surrounding violence against women, perhaps the most prominent example being the 1991 creation of the White Ribbon Campaign.<sup>2</sup> Other campaigns and community initiatives, such as the 1991 YWCA and Health and Welfare Canada's Community Action of Violence Against Women project (CAVAW),<sup>3</sup> demonstrate increased social and political commitment towards preventing and eliminating violence against women.

With increasing awareness of violence against women as a serious social issue, it may be that these news frames have changed over time to more accurately reflect the dynamics of these crimes. In fact, Berns (2004) argues that victim-blaming attitudes have shifted to reflect increased understanding and sympathy toward female victims of intimate partner violence. However, despite this increased understanding, Berns finds that victims are still ultimately being held responsible. While "people are less likely to think that the victim stays in the relationship because she enjoys the abuse . . . the public still holds the victim responsible for preventing the abuse or leaving the relationship" (Berns, 2004, p. 28). Furthermore, while there may arguably be a greater understanding of the victim's situation, far less is known about abusers and much of existing knowledge appears to be based on stereotypical media portrayals of "the drunk husband and the battered wife" (Berns, 2004, p. 28). Thus, despite shifts in academic and activist thinking about the gendered and systemic nature of intimate partner violence, this discourse may have been slower to find its way into popular knowledge. As Berns (2004, p. 31) explains, "Even though academic theories have advanced our understanding of domestic violence to include structural and cultural factors, public understanding of domestic violence focuses primarily on the individual or psychological level."

Before laying out the present study, it is important to understand the research context within which this study is grounded. Portraying intimate partner homicide as part of a larger social problem of violence against women is important because it increases

the likelihood that the public (including policy makers) will understand these crimes as typically the final act in a series of violent acts against women, acts that may have been prevented. In recent years, in fact, research has shown that intimate partner homicide may be the most preventable form of lethal violence (Campbell et al., 2003; Websdale, Sheeran, & Johnson, 2004). In the next section, we consider literature surrounding intimate partner violence and media constructions of this violence. A key element to this discussion is the importance of constructing intimate partner violence as a social problem rather than an individual issue. Following this, we review the literature surrounding social constructions of intimate partner violence to explore five themes that are the focus of this study: reporting a history of violence, exonerating the perpetrator, victim blaming, premeditation, and sources of authority in news coverage. Throughout, we emphasize what sorts of information and explanations are most frequently utilized by news media to report intimate partner homicide, and how these frames relate to our social and political potential to comprehend, react to, and prevent violence against women.

## Review of the Literature

### *Intimate Partner Violence and Intimate Partner Homicide*

In Canada, one out of every five homicides involves the killing of an intimate partner (Johnson & Dawson, 2011). Intimate partner homicide, defined as the killing of one person by their current or former married, common-law, or dating partner, is the subject of much social, legal, and criminal justice discourse (for examples, see Felson & Messner, 1998; Garcia, Soria, & Hurvitz, 2007; Johnson, 1996; Peterson, 1999; Richards, Gillespie, & Smith, 2011; Swatt & He, 2006). A central issue is the disparity in victimization rates for men and women. Women killed by their current or former husbands or partners make up approximately one half of female homicide victims worldwide (United Nations, 2008). In Canada, women are about three times more likely to be victims of an intimate partner homicide than men. For example, in 2009, 49 women and 15 men were killed by a current or former partner (Beattie & Cotter, 2010, p. 14). While rates have fluctuated during this time period, Statistics Canada reports a general overall decline in intimate partner homicide over the past 30 years (Dawson, Pottie Bunge, & Balde, 2009). However, the specific rates of this overall decline vary by gender: between 1991 and 2004, male victims of intimate partner homicide decreased by 59% while female victims of these homicides decreased by 39% over the same time period (Johnson, 2006, p. 21). Research has consistently shown that, although men have overall higher rates of homicide victimization, males are more likely to be killed by a stranger or an acquaintance whereas women are significantly more likely to have been killed by a male intimate partner (Johnson & Dawson, 2011). Thus, statistical data indicate that intimate partner homicide is a social problem primarily of violence against women. Given the above patterns, what is lacking is an understanding of news media portrayals of intimate partner homicide and how this is linked to or reflects broader social realities of male violence against women.

Existing literature on news construction of intimate partner violence has not considered changes over time but is nonetheless fundamental to the development and context of this current study. Four key areas of study have emerged from research on news constructions of intimate partner violence: reporting prior violence, explanations for the perpetrators' actions, victim blaming, and news sources as voices of authority. A fifth key area, premeditation, will also be discussed as an emerging area of potential importance in news coverage of intimate partner homicide.

### *Reporting Prior Violence*

Despite empirical evidence indicating that the majority of intimate partner homicides are precipitated by men's use of violence against their female partners (Johnson & Dawson, 2011), prior U.S. research has demonstrated that news coverage of these killings does not identify the link between the frequency of previous abuse and the homicide itself (Taylor, 2009; Richards et al., 2011). For example, in their analyses of news coverage in Washington State, Bullock and Cubert (2002) and Bullock (2007) found that terminology such as *violent history* and *battered women* was infrequently used when reporting intimate partner homicide. Carlyle, Slater, and Chakroff (2008) looked specifically at whether a history of intimate partner violence was reported in news articles covering these events and found that over 90% did not give any indication of a history of violence in the relationship. Richards, Gillespie, and Smith (2011) found that 22% of articles in their sample cited a history of violence by the perpetrator and, furthermore, that only 13% of articles actually used intimate partner violence language to describe the cases.

Without specifically naming intimate partner violence as such, the individual death remains an isolated incident rather than an ongoing process that is linked to the broader social issue of violence against women. Although a history of violence does not always precipitate intimate partner homicides, data show that it is the case more often than not. For example, between 1991 and 2004 there was a reported history of violence in 59% of intimate partner homicides, ranging from 45% of cases where the perpetrator was the legal husband to 72% and 77% of cases where the perpetrator was the separated or divorced husband respectively (Johnson, 2006). A history of violence is a relevant contextual factor in the majority of intimate partner homicides that, if reported, can help to counter the idea that these homicides are one-time, spontaneous instances of a male "snapping." As such, the absence or underreporting of such context is a problematic aspect of news media coverage.

### *Perpetrator Explanation*

In addition to a lack of context regarding previous acts of violence, the "why he did it" element of news reporting is another area that contributes greatly to maintaining the stereotype that intimate partner homicide is the result of individual pathology. Previous research indicates that news coverage of intimate partner homicide attributes these crimes to specific characteristics or circumstances of the perpetrator such as substance

abuse (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Carlyle et al., 2008) or jealousy (Wilson & Daly, 1992). For example, an article may focus on the perpetrator's alcohol consumption, depression, or temper (particularly regarding perceived infidelity with respect to the latter). Individualized explanations of violence may exonerate the perpetrator by excusing or justifying the killing to varying degrees (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Meyers, 1997). For example, Bullock and Cubert (2002) found that individualized reasons or explanations were reported in almost 50% of news stories. Additional research examining Utah press coverage of intimate partner homicide found that almost 40% of articles included one or more items that, the authors argued, indicate the perpetrator had an excuse or could be exonerated in the killing, such as mental health issues or drug and alcohol use (Bullock, 2007). Of course, explanations do not automatically equate excusing or exonerating the homicide. Such news frames may be accurate and these issues relevant to the homicide, as mental health and substance abuse are important and complex issues that are often misunderstood and misrepresented. However, such news frames are significant and often problematic for feminist approaches to ending violence against women because explanations that focus on individual qualities or situational variables preclude broader discussions about social, cultural, and systemic roots of violence against women such as patriarchal social structures, tolerance of misogynistic attitudes, promotion of violent masculinities, and/or lack of access to social resources and supports for many marginalized women.

Perhaps the most analyzed area of news reporting of male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide, however, surrounds media tendencies towards victim blaming. Indeed, the question of "what did she do to provoke him to violence" seems to be an unfortunate progression from (or precursor to) the "why did he do it" question. In this regard, news frames may continue to perpetuate the historically entrenched myth that women hold the "responsibility to prevent" men's physical and sexual violence as discussed next.

### *Victim Blaming*

Victims of intimate partner violence may be more vulnerable to public blame than victims of stranger violence because the nature of the victim-perpetrator relationship often leads to the belief that the victim should have known better than to be involved with their abuser. Berns (2004) argues that the public often holds victims responsible for the abuse, blaming them for provoking the perpetrator through specific behaviors and/or for not leaving the abuser (or not leaving soon enough). The social and legal acceptance of provocation as a justification for killing has significant bearing in this regard. Wilson and Daly (1992, p. 83) argue "the law of provocation reflects a folk theory of the male mind, for which the apprehension of [perceived] female infidelity allegedly constitutes a uniquely powerful impetus to violence." Thus, when used in representing male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide, the notion of provocation may suggest that male anger is a lethal, uncontrollable, and often understandable force in certain contexts:

It is often said by defense lawyers, judges, and prison officials that men who kill an intimate woman partner are just ordinary men who, in a moment of extreme passion or under extreme "provocation," just "snap". They kill, but they are not like others who do so (Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 2004, p. 577).

Underlying this discourse of provocation is an assumption that men who kill female partners are simply succumbing to a natural tendency that may be inevitable and even understandable under certain circumstances. Thus, rather than asking why women are considered "an appropriate repository for male rage and blame" (Meyers, 1997, p. 123), these portrayals lend themselves more to questions of what women do that "provokes the men who love them" to kill them.

Research surrounding media coverage of physical and sexual violence against women has demonstrated a tendency to blame females for their victimization (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Bullock, 2007; Meyers, 1997; Voumvakis & Ericson, 1984). In particular, print media reporting of intimate partner homicide has been shown to engage in subtle or overt blaming of the victim (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002, Campbell, 1992; Wykes, 2001). For example, Campbell (1992, pp. 109-110) argued that, while the majority of intimate killings generally only merited a few lines placed deep in the paper, in those cases where coverage was longer, women were almost always portrayed as equally to blame for the homicide by describing the deaths as the result of "domestic squabbles," "arguments," or "domestic troubles." In the United Kingdom, Wykes (2001) found that female victims were often constructed as "nagging" or "promiscuous." For example, in two contrasting cases, a male perpetrator who killed his "nagging" female partner received a significantly shorter sentence than a female who killed an abusive partner (Wykes, 2001).

News portrayals may also ascribe responsibility to victims by focusing on characteristics that demonstrated they were different, marginalized, or "from the fringes" of society in some way. For example, Bullock (2007) found that newspaper coverage reported victims to be antisocial or eccentric, had money issues, or were involved in the drug trade. Common among these news frames is the notion that the victims' behavior preceding the homicide was somehow unacceptable (Bullock, 2007). Furthermore, even when a history of violence is identified as precipitating the crime, females may fall victim to the deeply culturally embedded skepticism of "Why didn't she leave?" Bullock and Cubert (2002) observed news frames that suggested that the victim somehow sought out or sustained abusive relationships. In one case, the newspaper quoted the victim's ex-sister-in-law saying that "(the victim) had a habit of getting with men that abused her" (Bullock & Cubert, 2002, p. 491).

In addition to stereotyping the victim, a news focus on "what the victim did" precludes analysis of premeditative elements of the homicide that indicate that the killing was not spontaneous and unpredictable. News consumers and producers may not be aware that many intimate partner homicides occur after a pattern of escalating abuse and previous threats (Johnson & Dawson, 2011). Thus, it is important to look at how premeditation is constructed in news coverage of intimate partner homicide.

### *Premeditation*

Perpetrator premeditation is a relatively new concept that has only recently been given research attention as an area of importance in understanding intimate partner homicide (for examples, see Dawson, 2006; Swatt & He, 2006). Premeditation is important to consider in relation to intimate partner homicide because its presence can be used to contradict claims that the killing of one partner by another occurred in the heat of passion. Historical focus on “passion” as the underlying cause of intimate partner homicides has resulted in a lack of awareness of the premeditative aspects of these killings and a narrow focus on the crime of passion elements (for example, see Goodman, 1958). However, empirical research surrounding intimate partner homicide in Canada has found that evidence of premeditation is actually more common in cases of intimate partner homicide (41%) than nonintimate partner homicide (31%) (Dawson, 2006, p. 1443).

Research findings indicate that reporting of premeditative elements does not necessarily preclude crime of passion stereotyping, however. Campbell (1992) finds that language describing the intimate partner killing as the result of a “domestic squabble,” “argument,” or “quarrel” is frequently emphasized over indicators of premeditation or a history of abuse. For example, a premeditated killing where a man went to his lover’s place of employment with a gun and shot her seven times was described as “the result of an apparent argument” (Campbell, 1992, p. 110). Another case where a woman was handcuffed before she was shot was described as “domestic trouble” (Campbell, 1992, p. 110). What these cases indicate is that elements of planning and preparation are not sufficient to overtake the dominant crime of passion framework in the news. While factual mention may be made of these premeditative elements, news portrayals are not troubled by the apparent contradiction between their presence and the wide use of attention-grabbing, sensationalistic crime of passion explanations.

The above research indicates that premeditative elements of intimate partner homicide may not be acknowledged as such in the news. In this regard, additional variables such as who is used as a source in news coverage become increasingly significant. For example, neighbors may focus on individual qualities (‘he seemed like such a nice guy’) whereas violence against women organizations may zero in on elements noted above such as bringing a gun to the victim’s workplace that indicate premeditation. Advocacy groups may also be able to speak to intimate partner violence at a broader societal level, such as highlighting the role played by gender inequality. Thus, the people, organizations, and professions included in news coverage of intimate partner homicide are an important area of analysis.

### *Voices of Authority*

The people or associations cited in newspaper coverage indicate who is regarded as an authority in the situation (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991; Welch, Fenwick, & Roberts, 1997) and this may impact how the incident is portrayed. Within newspaper coverage of crime, research has shown that law enforcement officials are quoted as experts in feature news articles the majority of the time (Welch et al., 1997). Police



focus is generally limited to the particular characteristics of the homicide; therefore, quoting police as authorities restricts the explanations and subsequent context provided. In intimate partner homicide cases, for example, Campbell (1992, p. 106) observed that police frequently trivialized the perpetrator's homicidal desire to reclaim ownership of the victim by saying that the men were simply jealous of the new boyfriends and "wanted to get back together" with their girlfriends. Without further information or scrutiny, these news frames result in motives of sexual possessiveness being portrayed as sufficient explanation for killing an intimate, and usually female, partner.

In other research, Bullock and Cubert (2002) found that press accounts of intimate partner killings relied significantly on information from criminal justice sources such as police (58%), legal professionals (38%), and court documents (26%). Personal sources such as friends, neighbors, and acquaintances were used in about 20% of cases. Family members of victims and perpetrators were used in less than 10% of articles and intimate partner violence experts, women's groups, and/or advocacy groups were used in approximately 4% of cases. Thus, news stories primarily used sources that view the intimate partner homicide as a legal, individual matter, and almost never used sources that could provide context about the broader social factors that contribute to intimate partner violence (Bullock & Cubert, 2002, p. 486). Research and advocacy perspectives may not be widely or regularly included in much crime news coverage more generally, but identified social problems such as drunk driving, homelessness, obesity, or bullying often include advocacy organizations, policy makers, teachers, doctors, and/or researchers. News articles may provide further social context for the violence by providing contact information for community agencies working to prevent and address intimate partner violence. This does not appear to happen often. Carlyle et al. (2008) found that only 5% of articles reporting intimate partner violence incidents provided any information regarding resources such as shelters, web sites, hotline services, or other forms of victim services such as advocacy and counseling. Richards et al. (2011) found that articles that linked the femicide to intimate partner homicide frequently included contact information for a local domestic violence advocacy group and/or a local shelter, although this coverage represented less than 13% of their sample.

## The Present Study

The overarching purpose of this study is to explore if and how newspaper coverage of male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide has changed over time. We fulfilled this broad objective by exploring five research questions and comparing two time periods (1975-1979 and 1998-2002):

*Research Question 1:* Does the coverage indicate whether or not there was a past history of abuse (physical, psychological, or sexual) in the relationship?

*Research Question 2:* Does the coverage use news frames that directly or indirectly exonerate the perpetrator?

*Research Question 3:* Does the coverage use news frames that directly or indirectly blame the victim?

*Research Question 4:* Does the coverage report elements of premeditation?

*Research Question 5:* What sources are used in the coverage?

Taken together, these questions allow for a broad understanding of patterns in news reporting of intimate partner homicide over two time periods. Individually, these questions enable us to explore the specific ways that news frames have, or have not, changed. The next section outlines the specific approach and data collection methods used to answer these questions.

## Method

The methodological tool used in this study is content analysis. Dowler (2006, p. 286) identifies content analysis as a “detailed and systemic examination” of text in order to identify patterns, themes, or biases. In this study, we focus on quantitative analyses of news patterns. The research design of this study was primarily deductive in that certain focal themes and categories were identified beforehand. However, there was also an inductive element as certain themes emerged through the research process, such as news sources that had not been anticipated based on prior research. Deductive and inductive strategies are often used in combination (Babbie & Benequisto, 2002; Braun & Clark, 2006; Ericson et al., 1991) and, for the purposes of this study, allow for maximum inclusiveness of news frames relevant to the research questions.

## Data Collection

The three newspapers analyzed in this study were the *Toronto Star*, the *Toronto Sun*, and the *Globe and Mail*. All are English-language newspapers published 7 days a week in Toronto, Ontario and are regarded as catering to a certain readership (Ericson et al., 1991; Voumvakis & Ericson, 1984). The *Toronto Star* is Canada’s largest daily with a circulation of approximately one million people.<sup>4</sup> The *Globe and Mail*, a national newspaper, is considered to be a “quality” newspaper, catering to “elite” audiences and emphasizing business, economics, politics, and international affairs (Voumvakis & Ericson, 1984). In contrast, the *Toronto Sun* is generally classified as a “popular” newspaper and has been identified as a more right-leaning publication than the *Globe and Mail* or the *Toronto Star* (Ericson et al., 1991).

The two temporal periods of coverage analyzed are 1975-1979 and 1998-2002. The purpose of using two separate time periods was to determine if and how coverage of intimate partner homicide in Canada has changed following the significant events and policy changes of the 1980s and 1990s surrounding violence against women discussed previously. In addition, our objective was to analyze the total population of newspaper coverage of male-perpetrated intimate partner homicides during two particular time frames without having to rely on newspapers to identify the victim-perpetrator relationship. This is particularly important in the 1970s when language such as “domestic

homicide” may not have been as widely used. Richards et al. (2011) argue for the importance of conducting media analyses of femicide cases using a population list of such cases. We were able to do this because the articles were retrieved from a list that documented all intimate partner homicides in Toronto from 1975 to 2002 inclusive.<sup>5</sup> Because we were able to search all newspapers by both victim and perpetrator name, we are able to confidently say that our data represents the total population of male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide newspaper articles for the newspapers and years studied; this reliability of data was not available post-2002. Although our aim here is to analyze changes in news reporting for a period of time following the societal changes of the 1980s and 1990s, we hope that additional research in this area will build on this work by conducting follow-up analyses of news reporting of intimate partner homicide in more recent years.

Articles for this study were selected as follows: Drawing from a list of all homicides in Toronto from 1975-1979 and 1998-2002 and the databases *Toronto Star: Pages of the Past* and *Globe and Mail: Canada's Heritage from 1844*, articles from the *Toronto Star* and the *Globe and Mail* were searched for and retrieved by both victim name and perpetrator name.<sup>6</sup> Articles from the *Toronto Sun* were retrieved manually from microfilm at the Toronto Reference Library Periodicals and Newspapers Centre.<sup>7</sup>

Two restrictions were used when selecting articles. First, newspaper coverage of intimate partner homicides that involved child victims was excluded because research has shown that there is increased media attention to cases involving child victims (Peelo, Francis, Soothill, Pearson, & Ackerly, 2004). Furthermore, “good girl” or “innocent” victims (which we argue children are likely to be considered) are more likely to elicit strong societal reactions (Meyers, 1997). In such cases, the portrayals of the (adult) female victims are likely to be affected by news attention to the child victims. Articles that reported on cases involving more than one victim or more than one accused<sup>8</sup> were kept so as not to potentially exclude love-triangle killings<sup>9</sup>; however, data was not collected on the additional (nonintimate partner) victim or perpetrator. Second, this study is limited to heterosexual intimate partner homicides. Due to the lack of research on same-sex relationships and the related attitudes and stereotypes surrounding such relationships in society (for example, see Faulkner, 1998), it is difficult to compare same-sex intimate partner homicide coverage. Additionally, the information that the victim and the accused were in a same-sex intimate relationship may not always be available or acknowledged by the news media, particularly in the earlier time period (1975-1979) when there was a greater stigma surrounding same-sex relationships. This process resulted in a total sample of 213 newspaper articles that covered 49 cases of intimate partner homicide: 134 articles (32 cases) from the earlier time period and 79 articles (17 cases) from the later time period (an average of 4.19 and 4.65 articles per case respectively). The lower number of cases and articles in the later time period is consistent with the comparatively lower rate of intimate partner homicide in Canada in more recent decades (Dawson et al., 2009). For this study however the article itself was the unit of analysis and not the case as discussed next.

## *Analysis*

Our approach to this study of news articles was to analyze each article as a separate phenomena. Coding each case collectively (the alternative approach) would result in the amalgamation of multiple news articles published over a period of weeks, months, or even years into one unit of analysis. Approaching each individual article as the unit of analysis has the benefit of more accurately representing the frequency of news frames. To illustrate the importance of treating each individual article as a separate “dose” of news coverage, consider the following hypothetical scenario: one homicide case results in three newspaper articles, one of which includes victim-blaming frames and two that do not. With each homicide case as the unit of analysis, the case would either have to be coded as including victim-blaming frames because of the presence of one (despite the fact that two of the three articles did not contain such frames) or as not including victim-blaming frames because the majority of the articles did not contain such frames (despite the fact that many people likely would have read the one article that did contain such frames). In addition, using the article rather than the case as the unit of analysis acknowledges that the audience may not read all articles related to the one case; rather, they may read articles intermittently and, thus, news frames in individual articles rather than over the entire case are argued here to be more important.

Our approach to coding news content was consistent with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) stages of thematic analyses as well as other researchers who have analyzed news coverage of intimate partner killings (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002).<sup>10</sup> To conduct the analysis, all articles were read three times by the first author of this study. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), articles were read once during data collection to get a general idea of the data set and to ensure eligibility for inclusion. Initial notes were taken to refine data collection categories developed from previous literature (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002). Next, articles were read a second time and coded by highlighting and transcribing portions of articles that corresponded to one or more of the categories included within the four broad themes: a history of abuse, blaming the victim, exonerating the perpetrator, and premeditation. News sources used in the article were also recorded.

As per Braun and Clarke’s (2006) process of thematic analysis we continued to identify and refine categories throughout the data collection process. Following the initial coding, the first and second authors consulted regarding the coding process and the development of new categories based on patterns observed in the data pertaining to the narrative of how and why the homicide occurred. This resulted in the creation of three new categories: “victim engaged in argument/dispute with the perpetrator” (as part of the victim-blaming theme), “perpetrator ‘lost control’ due to perceived victim rejection or infidelity” (as part of the perpetrator-excusing theme) and “homicide was or may have been accidental” (also part of the perpetrator-excusing theme). A final analytical reading of the articles was conducted to double check the coding and to ensure that all key information and inductively identified categories had been recorded accurately.

Our key themes were coded as follows: History of abuse was recorded if a source (police, lawyer, family member/friend/neighbor, medical professional, advocacy

organization, etc.) was quoted in the article stating that they knew of or believed that the perpetrator had been violent or abusive previously, or if any reference was made to the victim currently or previously having a protection order from the perpetrator. Examples of references to past violence could be less direct, such as a doctor stating they had contacted police after seeing suspicious bruises on the victim prior to her killing<sup>11</sup> or more direct, such as the daughter describing in detail a series of beatings she had witnessed her father inflict on her mother over the years leading up to her death.<sup>12</sup> Part of our inductive coding process was to identify articles that reported emotional or verbal abuse but not physical abuse; however, we did not identify any such articles. As such, emotional and verbal abuse was not coded separately from physical abuse when measuring previous history of violence.

Victim-blaming was captured by examining whether or not the article reported one or more of the following: victim used drugs or alcohol in the hours prior to her death; victim was allegedly unfaithful to her partner; victim precipitated violence; victim actively engaged or started an argument that lead directly to the homicide; victim grew up in an abusive home, and/or had been involved in abusive relationships in the past. Perpetrator-excusing frames were recorded if the article stated one or more of the following: the perpetrator “lost control” due to extreme emotion; the homicide may have been accidental; the perpetrator’s drug or alcohol use factored into the killing; the perpetrator had mental health problems at the time of the homicide; the perpetrator killed the victim because the victim abused him; the perpetrator had physical health problems; the perpetrator grew up in an abusive home; and/or that the perpetrator killed the victim in self-defense. Finally, premeditation was recorded if the perpetrator was reported in the news article to have done one or more of the following: followed or laid in wait for an opportunity to kill the victim; broke into the victim’s home; killed the victim when she was sleeping; made previous attempts or threats to kill the victim; brought a gun to the home or location of the victim; purchased a gun or weapon immediately prior to the killing; and/or written a suicide note indicating intent to kill himself and the victim.

In addition to descriptive analysis of the data, we conducted bivariate and multivariate regression analysis to look at patterns over time. While descriptive results provide an understanding of what type of information is presented in news coverage of male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide, regression analyses allow us to observe the independent effects of key variables by controlling for other theoretically relevant variables. For this study, we controlled for the effect of newspaper, type of coverage, article length, and victim–perpetrator relationship.

First, “newspaper” (*Toronto Star*, *Toronto Sun*, or the *Globe and Mail*) was included because the newspapers have varying target audiences and can, therefore, be expected to have varying news foci. Second, “type of coverage” was derived from Voumvakis and Ericson’s (1984) categories of news stories of incidents and news stories of court cases, and was coded as “initial coverage” and “trial coverage” respectfully.<sup>13</sup> Third, article length is important because longer articles may be more likely to go beyond the basic details of a case and present episodic narratives about why the homicide occurred and, therefore, may be more likely to report a history of violence, excuse the

perpetrator, blame the victim or report premeditation. Fourth, the relationship state of the victim and the perpetrator in intimate partner homicides has been shown to influence criminal justice outcomes (Dawson, 2003, 2004). It is, therefore, possible that the type of victim–perpetrator relationship (whether or not the victim and perpetrator are in an intimate relationship at the time of the homicide) will have an impact on how the homicide is constructed in the news.<sup>14</sup>

The overarching purpose of this study is to explore if and how newspaper coverage of male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide has changed over time. Below, we begin by briefly discussing the descriptive findings in relation to the five key independent variables: “reports history of violence,” “blames victim,” “perpetrator,” “reports premeditation,” and “news source.” During data collection, individual news frames representing the first four variables were recorded and then later collapsed into a dichotomous (yes/no) umbrella variable. For example, an article that reported the perpetrator was suffering from depression and was drinking when the homicide occurred would have been recorded as reporting that “perpetrator was under influence of alcohol/drugs” and “perpetrator had mental health problems” as well as counted as “yes” for the presence of one or more perpetrator-excusing news frames. Four Pearson  $\chi^2$  analyses were run on the relationship between time period of article and the presence of one or more news frames within each larger variable to determine if news frames reporting a history of violence, excusing the perpetrator, blaming the victim, and reporting premeditation had changed over time.<sup>15</sup> Bivariate findings are presented for each umbrella variable except “news source” because it was not possible to collapse “news source” into dichotomous categories (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*) for either bivariate or multivariate analysis. However, the inclusion of news source as a descriptive variable is important because exploring these patterns provides an understanding of who is represented as voices of authority as well as who may be dictating news frames related to a history of violence, excusing the perpetrator, blaming the victim, and reporting premeditation.

## Results

*Research Question 1:* Does the coverage indicate whether or not there was a past history of abuse (e.g., physical, psychological, or sexual) in the relationship?

Of the 213 articles produced by the three newspapers analyzed during these two time periods, Table 1 shows that 9% indicated that there was a previous history of perpetrator abuse towards the victim. While reporting rates remained low throughout both time periods, bivariate results suggest that there was a significant increase in the rate of reporting overall: 5% of articles from (1975-1979) reported previous violence compared to 18% from 1998-2002.

*Research Question 2:* Does the coverage use news frames that directly or indirectly excuse the perpetrator?

**Table 1.** Percentage of Articles Reporting A History of Violence.

	Total sample	Time period	
	(N = 213) %	1975-1979 (n = 134) %	1998-2002 (n = 79) %
History of intimate partner violence reported	9 (20)	5 (6)	18 (14)**
Past violence (physical, emotional, verbal) reported	8 (16)	4 (6)	14 (11)
Existence of protection order reported	1 (3)	1 (5)	3 (2)
Other indicators	<1 (1)	6 (1)	1 (1)

Note: Numbers are percentages. Frequencies are in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Of the total sample, 39% of articles used one or more of the frames listed in Table 2 as explanations for why the perpetrator allegedly killed his partner. However, there appears to be a significant reduction in perpetrator-excusing frames over time from 54% of the articles in the earlier time period to 15% of articles in the later time period. Bivariate analysis of the relationship between time period and the presence of one or more perpetrator-excusing frames suggests a significant reduction in news focus on individual “why he did it” explanations over time. The categorical breakdown of this variable presented in Table 2 describes specific frames where these shifts may have occurred (e.g., homicide was or may have been accidental; perpetrator was suffering mental health issues).

*Research Question 3:* Does the coverage use news frames that directly or indirectly blame the victim?

Table 3 suggests a decrease in victim-blaming news frames over time: 29% of articles in the earlier time period versus 14% in the later time period. The largest proportional decrease (from 16% to 1% of articles) within this variable was within the category of “argument or dispute” where the news article reported that the killing stemmed directly from a fight and made it sound like the perpetrator and victim were equal participants in the violence. This may suggest a reduction over time in viewing intimate partner homicides as the “inevitable outcome of domestic disputes,” a frame which attributes a significant portion of responsibility to the victim. Bivariate tests indicate a significant decrease in the presence of victim-blaming frames overall between 1975-1979 and 1998-2002.

*Research Question 4:* Does the coverage report elements of premeditation?

The presence of news frames reporting premeditative elements to the homicide does not appear to have changed drastically over time. Table 4 demonstrates that 15%

**Table 2.** Percentage of Articles Using Perpetrator-Excusing Frames.

	Total sample	Time period	
	(N = 213) %	1975-1979 (n = 134) %	1998-2002 (n = 79) %
Excuses perpetrator	39 (84)	54 (72)	15 (12) <sup>***</sup>
Perpetrator "lost control" due to perceived victim rejection/infidelity	10 (22)	14 (19)	4 (3)
Homicide was/may have been accidental	10 (22)	16 (21)	1 (1)
Perpetrator was under influence of alcohol/drugs	12 (25)	18 (24)	1 (1)
Perpetrator had mental health problems	10 (22)	13 (17)	6 (5)
Perpetrator killed victim because victim abused him	—	—	—
Perpetrator had physical health problems	1 (3)	2 (2)	1 (1)
Perpetrator grew up in an abusive home	<1 (2)	—	3 (2)
Perpetrator killed victim in self-defense	—	—	—
Other indicators (e.g., perpetrator killed victim because he believed victim had put a "voodoo curse" on him)	4 (9)	6 (8)	1 (1)

Note: More than one category may be used per article therefore percentages will not equal category total. Numbers are percentages. Frequencies are in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

of articles from the total sample contained such news frames: 16% from the earlier sample and 13% from the later sample.

*Research Question 5: What sources are used in the coverage?*

Consistent with previous research (Welch, Fenwick, & Roberts, 1997), the police were found to be the source used most often (46% overall) as shown in Table 5. There appear to be decreases in the use of perpetrators and medical professionals in the later time period (from 27% to 3% and 15% to 1%, respectively). Perhaps most revealing, advocates, service providers, and researchers—voices more likely to speak to the broader social context of intimate partner violence—were not found as sources in any of the news articles sampled.



**Table 3.** Percentage of Articles Using Victim-Blaming Frames.

	Total sample	Time period	
	(N = 213) %	1975-1979 (n = 134) %	1998-2002 (n = 79) %
Blames victim	24 (50)	29 (39)	14 (11)*
Victim used drugs/ alcohol immediately prior to the incident	5 (10)	7 (9)	1 (1)
Victim was/may have been unfaithful	9 (19)	10 (14)	6 (5)
Victim precipitated violence	6 (12)	9 (12)	—
Victim engaged in argument/dispute with perpetrator	10 (22)	16 (21)	1 (1)
Victim grew up in an abusive home	—	—	—
Victim had been involved in abusive relationships in the past	—	—	—
Other indicators (e.g., victim made mistake trusting a boyfriend she met on the internet)	4 (9)	3 (4)	6 (5)

Note: More than one category may be used per article therefore percentages will not equal category total. Numbers are percentages. Frequencies are in parentheses.  
 \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

**Multivariate Results**

The preliminary  $\chi^2$  analysis discussed above suggests significant differences in news reporting of a history of violence, victim-blaming, and perpetrator-excusing frames over time. To isolate the effects of these factors further, we used multivariate analysis to explore whether significant differences found at the bivariate level were still present when controlling for other relevant variables. Recall that control variables for our regression models were chosen based on previous literature and theoretical relevance that supported their inclusion in each of the five models (Voumvakis & Ericson, 1984; Dawson, 2003; 2004). These variables were: type of coverage (initial event coverage or trial coverage), article length, type of newspaper (*Toronto Star*, *Toronto Sun*, and the *Globe and Mail*), and victim–perpetrator relationship (current or former relationship).

Table 6 shows that there were significant differences in the reporting of a history of intimate partner violence and perpetrator-excusing news frames depending on the time

**Table 4.** Percentage of Articles Reporting Premeditation.

	Total sample	Time period	
	( <i>N</i> = 213) %	1975-1979 ( <i>n</i> = 134) %	1998-2002 ( <i>n</i> = 79) %
Reports premeditation	15 (32)	16 (22)	13 (10)
Perpetrator followed/laid in wait to kill the victim	<1 (1)	<1 (1)	—
Perpetrator broke into victim's home	2 (4)	3 (4)	—
Victim was sleeping when she was killed	4 (9)	5 (7)	3 (2)
Perpetrator made previous attempts or threats to kill the victim	4 (8)	3 (4)	5 (4)
Perpetrator brought a gun to the home or location of victim	4 (8)	6 (8)	—
Perpetrator purchased a gun or weapon immediately prior to the killing	2 (4)	3 (4)	—
Perpetrator had written a suicide note for themselves and the victim	2 (4)	—	5 (4)
Other indicators (e.g., Perpetrator had made arrangements for children to be picked up and cared for by relatives prior to the murder-suicide)	1 (3)	2 (2)	1 (1)

Note: More than one category may be used per article therefore percentages will not equal category total. Numbers are percentages. Frequencies are in parentheses.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

period of the newspaper article (1975-1979 and 1998-2002). From this, we see that two of the three significant patterns at the bivariate level are supported at the multivariate level. That is, articles from the later time period were more likely to report a history of violence and less likely to use perpetrator-excusing news frames when controlling for other relevant variables. Specifically, articles were more than nine times as likely to report a history of violence if they were from more recent time period.

## Discussion

Based on our results, news coverage of intimate partner homicide seems to demonstrate some positive change between the late 1970s and the turn of the century, although not to the extent we had anticipated. In this study, we found a significant decrease in

**Table 5.** News Sources Used.

News source	Total sample	Time period	
	(N = 213) %	1975-1979 (n = 134) %	1998-2002 (n = 79) %
Police	46 (98)	40 (53)	57 (45)
Judge	10 (21)	10 (13)	10 (8)
Crown	14 (29)	14 (19)	13 (10)
Victim's family/friend/ coworker	12 (26)	8 (11)	19 (15)
Neighbor	11 (23)	10 (9)	18 (14)
Defence counsel	8 (17)	10 (14)	4 (3)
Perpetrator	18 (38)	27 (36)	3 (3)
Medical professional	10 (21)	15 (20)	1 (1)
Perpetrator's family/ friend/coworker	5 (10)	5 (60)	5 (4)
Advocates/service provider/researcher	—	—	—
Eyewitness	1 (3)	2 (2)	1 (1)
No source given	16 (35)	15 (20)	19 (15)

Note: More than one news source may be used per article therefore percentages will total more than 100. Numbers are percentages. Frequencies are in parentheses.

both the use of frames directly or indirectly excusing the perpetrator as well as an increase in the reporting of previous relationship violence. The lack of significant differences in victim-blaming frames and reporting premeditation as well as the complete absence of women's advocacy and research perspective from the news is concerning, however. Movements to end violence against women and feminist struggles to put intimate partner violence on the social and political radar have been the cause of much social change in recent decades. Cautiously, we suggest that these efforts have resulted in certain changes in news framing of intimate partner homicide. As a precursor to this discussion, we acknowledge that these two 5-year time periods represent only part of the entire eras from which they were drawn. Given that social changes occur slowly, and that this analysis does not explore the most recent decade of news coverage, we hope that future analyses of more recent years may reveal further shifts in news coverage trends. For the moment, however, the patterns identified within these particular time periods require some unpacking in terms of what they reveal and their potential implications surrounding root causes of violence against women, and we stress that significant change in news framing does not equal sufficient change.

### *Underreporting of Previous Violence*

Despite changes in reporting of previous relationship violence over time, less than one-fifth of the news articles in the more recent years reported any previous relationship violence. While our sample of 79 articles from the later time period is relatively

**Table 6.** Logit Estimates of Time Period on News Frames.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4					
	Reports IPV		Perpetrator-excusing		Victim-blaming		Reports premeditation					
	Coefficient	Odds	Coefficient	Odds	Coefficient	Odds	Coefficient	Odds				
1998-2002 [Reference: 1975-1979]	2.28***	(.64)	9.75	-2.03***	(.54)	0.13	-0.87	(.54)	0.42	0.26	(.52)	1.30
Trial coverage [Reference: Incident coverage]	1.92**	(.60)	6.81	3.41***	(.48)	30.15	2.78***	(.57)	16.12	1.45**	(.48)	4.25
Toronto Star	-0.43	(.73)	0.65	0.87	(.56)	2.39	0.59	(.53)	1.81	-0.76	(.55)	0.47
Toronto Sun [Reference: Globe and Mail]	-0.23	(.80)	0.79	-0.19	(.63)	0.83	-0.90	(.65)	0.41	-0.24	(.61)	0.78
Article Length	0.02	(.02)	1.02	0.05**	(.02)	1.05	0.05**	(.02)	1.05	0.01	(.02)	1.01
Former (Ex- partner) relationship reported	0.93	(.70)	2.54	0.42	(.58)	1.52	-1.13*	(.56)	0.32	1.04*	(.50)	4.25

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

small, this represents the entire news coverage about intimate partner homicide within the *Toronto Star*, *Toronto Sun*, and the *Toronto Globe and Mail* during 1998-2002. We do not know specific rates of a previous history of violence for the cases that were the subject of these news articles. However, 2005 data from Statistics Canada indicate that a history of violence was reported in 56% of male-perpetrated spousal homicides,<sup>16</sup> similar to the proportion found in earlier years (Dauvergne & Li, 2006). This roughly 40% gap between empirical data surrounding actual cases and reporting rates within news coverage suggests that a history of violence still often remains unreported in the news. It may be that this is partially a result of the under reliance on appropriate authorities for violence against women as news sources which will be discussed further shortly. Furthermore, because previous violence may not have been reported to police, the actual gap between rates of intimate partner homicide with a history of violence and reporting of previous violence in the news is likely even higher. There were also no articles in this sample that specifically stated that a history of violence was unknown, uncertain or did not exist, suggesting that journalistic inquiry into prior history of violence is not, in practice, a routine part of news framing of intimate partner homicide. This is problematic because intimate partner homicides are, more often than not, the “final act” in a long history of violence that culminates when a male abuser kills his female partner (Johnson, 1996, p. 179). News coverage is the primary means for disseminating information regarding homicide; reporting if and when there was a known history of violence may encourage questions about how this killing could have been prevented and highlight the way in which social structures continue to condone and allow violence against women to persist.

### *No Notable Changes in Premeditation Over Time*

Premeditation is a new concept included in analysis of news reporting of intimate partner homicide. However, we believe there are theoretical as well as empirical reasons to explore the presence of this variable as part of how intimate partner homicide is represented. For example, premeditative elements of these homicides are important to consider in relation to the “crime of passion” stereotype that pervades sociocultural understandings of intimate partner homicide. Identifying premeditation indicates that the killing was not a spontaneous and unpredictable act of love gone awry, but rather was an act of lethal abuse that followed previous actions such as obtaining a weapon or writing a suicide note. Reporting premeditation is another avenue through which public understandings of intimate partner homicide may be shifted to the broader context of the homicide (and its potentially preventable nature) instead of the act in isolation. Like a prior history of violence, looking for evidence of premeditation helps us to understand that intimate partner homicides, more often than not, do not occur out of nowhere.

We found little difference between the two time periods studied regarding news reporting of premeditative elements to the homicide and low reporting rates of about 15% overall. Given that intimate partner homicides have not historically been viewed as premeditated acts, but rather have been framed as “crimes of passion,” this is perhaps not surprising. Additionally, certain types of evidence of premeditation (such as the perpetrator obtaining a weapon or threatening the victim) may be information that is not known by police immediately or made readily available to journalists. While at this point we can only speculate as to the reasons for its relative absence, what is clear is that the reporting rates for premeditation within both time periods are quite a bit lower than found in some empirical research (Dawson, 2006; 41% of cases studied). Based on what we know from empirical research as well as understanding that the vast majority of intimate partner violence goes unreported, accepting news portrayals that intimate partner homicide is a tragic event that ‘just happens’ undermines long-standing feminist efforts to promote sociopolitical understandings of this violence.

### *The Significance of Declining News Reliance on Perpetrator Explanations*

Before unpacking our findings surrounding perpetrator explanations, it is important to reemphasize why these news frames are significant, and, more specifically, why they are potentially harmful as default representations of violence against women. We are not arguing that news frames that “explain” why the homicide occurred at the individual level are not accurate or relevant to explaining what has occurred. We do argue, though, that a reliance on such frames will likely preclude discussions of the broader social roots and solutions to this type of violence. Entman (1993) explains that news frames that fit easily into existing social schemata do not have to be made overly salient by the news to have an impact. Because individual explanations may often be the default explanation for the mass media and the general public attempting to understand these homicides,

news frames focusing on individual circumstances or qualities resonate as the seemingly natural explanation. The problem with this lies in where public scrutiny of the violence begins and ends. For example, a news article may report that a man killed his girlfriend because she threatened to leave him and he was intoxicated or that he was depressed and under a great deal of stress at work. While these elements may have been present and may, in fact, be risk factors for intimate partner violence, news coverage that limits explanations to individual qualities may entrench the public in a belief system whereby violence against women is seen as an inevitable outcome of high levels of stress in an intimate partnership and, therefore, unpreventable.

When explanations such as jealousy or drunkenness are represented as adequate for understanding why a homicide occurred, the impetus for asking deeper questions is missed. Such questions might be was there a history of violence or pattern of abuse in the relationship or were there any aspects of premeditation involved? By shifting the focus from "what he did to an excuse for why he did it" without additional social context (Bullock & Cubert, 2002, p. 491), the potential for the identification and response to intimate partner violence as a social problem loses out to a discourse of individual pathology. It is within this context that the significant decline in perpetrator-excusing news frames over time is promising. Dropping from one in two articles containing these news frames in the earlier time period to less than one in six in the latter period is important because it represents a decrease in individually pathologizing this violence and an opportunity to introduce discussion about systemic inequality and gender-based violence into the conversation.

Interestingly, two of the 12 articles from the later time period that contained perpetrator-excusing news frames were articles that linked the homicide to the fact that the perpetrator grew up in an abusive home which can be seen as less of an individualized explanation than any of the other news frames within this variable because it arguably recognizes the often generationally repetitive nature of male violence towards women. There are also a couple of other patterns worth noting. First, five of the 12 articles that used perpetrator explanations in the later time period contained suggestions of mental illness (most often depression), a higher proportion (42%) within the variable than in the earlier time period where 17 of 72 articles (24%) with perpetrator-excusing news frames used explanations of mental illness. One cannot assume that most depressed individuals are going to be violent towards others. Therefore, we argue that it is problematic to use depression as a main explanation for intimate partner homicide, particularly if that label is being applied after the homicide in tautological ways that identify the homicide as both the result of, and the evidence for, the depression. Second, a similar pattern was documented regarding news frames that the perpetrator "lost it" because the victim left, was attempting to leave, or may have been unfaithful. Of articles relying on individualized perpetrator explanations, approximately one-quarter of articles in both time periods employed the frame that the perpetrator "lost it." While men's "losing it" when their partner leaves or attempts to leave them can be seen as an extension of exaggerated patriarchal traits, this important connection is not made in individualized, episodic news coverage where violence against women sources and resources are lacking.

While it is encouraging that perpetrator-excusing news frames declined significantly in more recent years, it is important to keep an eye on the patterns in reporting that have continued to appear within this larger news frame because their presence suggests that news representations of violence against women, and likely societal understandings of this violence more broadly, have a tendency to orient themselves around notions of individual pathology to the exclusion of social aspects such as the status of women in society and sociocultural norms allowing violence to continue.

Why might more recent news coverage of intimate partner homicide be less likely to rely on “why he did it” as part of the narrative? Intimate partner violence, originally identified under the label “domestic violence,” was named into existence as a social problem by the women’s movement of the 1970s. In earlier years, intimate partner homicide may have been regarded as more sensational because intimate partner violence was not often acknowledged or discussed in public forums; “intimate partner violence” as a social construct did not yet exist. Therefore, when men killed their female partners, newspapers may have jumped immediately to the task of “explaining why” to the public. Despite the fact that the earlier articles in our sample were from the late 1970s, it is likely that feminist labels of “domestic violence” were still on the fringes and had not yet found their way into mainstream media. By the late 1990s and early 2000, however, domestic violence had gained much more political and legal recognition. For example, many Canadian provinces passed protection order legislation between 1995 and 2003, geared towards cohabitant and/or dating relationships and encompassing physical and sexual violence as well as threats and stalking (Santos, 2006). Furthermore, historical events such as the 1994 U.S. Congress passing of the Violence Against Women Act, and the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995 were important indicators of shifts in political and legal consciousness surrounding domestic violence. In this way, domestic violence was more established in the social psyche and, thus, in media representations, although perhaps not exactly in the way violence against women advocates, researchers, and policy makers might have hoped. The notion that “it was a domestic” may, in itself, have become sufficient explanation for “why” the killing occurred. As such, drawing on individual factors or circumstances such as intoxication, jealousy, or suggestions of ‘accidental’ death to explain these homicides may have become less necessary from the perspective of journalists and readers. In short, intimate partner violence (the label for the problem) may have also become the explanation. What is problematic within this framework is that intimate partner violence remains framed as a terribly unfortunate/spontaneously occurring/“who could have seen it coming?” tragedy, with no further discussion of the broader social patterns surrounding this violence. To dramatically reduce male violence against women, it must be viewed by society as preventable with a focus on the sociocultural, political, and economic factors that continue to perpetrate and maintain this violence. Although a decline in explaining perpetrator news frames is somewhat promising, the shift to discourses of systemic violence against women cannot occur without increased diversity of news sources.

### *Overrepresentation of Criminal Justice Authorities*

There are many well-established experts outside of criminal justice professions working to address, analyze, and prevent intimate partner violence. Yet in our study, we found no articles from either time period that cited statistics on intimate partner violence or contained information on or from shelters, advocacy groups, or researchers on intimate partner violence. In large part, this is likely due to the continued (and increased) reliance on police and legal sources for information on these and other cases of violence. In addition to having an individual, case-specific interest in each homicide, police and legal counsel may be unwilling or legally restrained from commenting on factors such as previous abuse or premeditative aspects to the case. There is also a gendered aspect to newsmaking arising from who is used as a news source, however. For example, MediaWatch research found that Canadian daily newspapers infrequently referenced women as sources, experts, or newsmakers in general coverage, arguing, “the gender imbalance in sources is strongly related to the media’s long-standing focus on political and institutional authorities, who are still largely male” (Hackett & Gruneau, 2000, p. 188).

In the context of news reporting of intimate partner homicide, the absence of women’s and pro-feminist voices is both revealing and disturbing. Hackett and Gruneau (2000, p. 189) explain that

It is not unreasonable to conclude that violence against women is generally not a random or isolated act, but rather a pervasive social and political problem, rooted in the dynamics of largely patriarchal familial and social structures. By referencing a wider range of sources—including the oft-excluded perspectives of women’s advocacy groups—it is likely that a more textured and comprehensive view of violence against women would emerge in the news.

The presence of these “oft-excluded” figures as news sources in a story suggests that homicide between intimate partners is not an isolated event, but rather that these cases are linked to a wider social pattern of men perpetrating violence towards women, patterns that are maintained by gender inequalities. Beyond this, advocates, service providers, and researchers are also more likely to highlight crucial systemic features (such as a lack of social supports for women in abusive relationships) that contribute to potentially preventable deaths. The lack of research and advocacy perspectives, while perhaps consistent with other crime news coverage (e.g., Frost & Philipps, 2011), suggests that these femicides are understood as criminal acts but not as part of a larger pattern of violence against women. Moreover, understood through Tuchman’s (1978) notion of the symbolic annihilation of women in mass media, the absence of violence against women expertise and women’s voices in this news coverage is itself an instrument of oppression and contributor to systems of gender inequality.

Even if not used directly as news sources, including contact information for community resources such as women’s advocacy groups or shelters is significant because it draws attention to the fact that this violence is a societal problem requiring public intervention (Carlyle et al., 2008). A possible argument justifying the absence of



community resources may be that it is “not the job” of the news media to educate the public in such a manner. However, it is not unusual to see information and resources listed when news media cover social issues such as the spread of diseases such as SARS or H1N1, for example. If providing violence against women information and resources seems abnormal in the context of news coverage of this violence, this may indicate that intimate partner violence is not yet regarded as a public issue or a social problem. By failing to mention any sort of social or legal resources related to this violence, the news media “perpetuate the belief that intimate partner violence is an individual problem to be dealt with by the victim alone” (Carlyle et al., 2008, p. 181). The reality that advocacy groups were not used at all as news sources in this study suggests that news coverage of intimate partner homicide is not yet seen as a venue where these sources are necessary or appropriate. In addition to the missed opportunity for providing additional information and context surrounding violence against women, the absence of women’s voices is indicative of the way in which media platforms are often instrumental in reinforcing gender inequalities.

## Conclusion

News coverage of intimate partner homicide has changed in recent decades, but not sufficiently to represent this violence as part of a larger social problem of violence against women and entrenched gender inequalities. In our study, we looked at all male-perpetrated intimate partner homicides reported in three daily newspapers in Toronto, Canada within two separate time periods to explore changes following significant social and legal changes surrounding the violence against women movement. We found increases in reporting a history of intimate partner violence, yet these rates fall well below empirical rates of police-reported violence. In more recent years, news coverage was less likely to employ perpetrator-excusing or victim-blaming news frames. While these findings are encouraging, we speculate that this may be due, in part, to public acceptance that “domestics happen” and a consequential lack of journalistic need to rely as heavily on individualized explanations, although future research would need to investigate this possibility. We have argued that the complete absence of advocates, service providers, and researchers from news coverage is a key factor in the lack of sociopolitical context contained in news coverage of intimate partner homicide. Moreover, this absence of these voices plays a role in maintaining systems of gendered inequality. Looking at this news coverage as both reproducing and reflective of current public and newsmakers’ understanding of intimate partner violence, we see that there is still much work to be done.

In this regard, we suggest that future research and policy direction keep several points in mind. First, different geographical regions may have different patterns in news reporting; thus, our Toronto-based research findings may not generalize to the rest of Canada. Future research would benefit from conducting similar analyses in other regions of Canada, perhaps also focusing on rural/urban differences in reporting. Particular attention should be paid to Canadian studies surrounding how marginality is reproduced in news discourse (e.g. Gilchrist, 2010; Jiwani & Young, 2006). Second,

feminist efforts to increase the complexity and sociopolitical framing of news representations of intimate partner violence will need to engage with the news construction process. An initial starting point for policy intervention could be to follow the lead of the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WSCADV) and the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV). Both organizations have collaborated with journalists to create best practices' handbooks on news coverage of intimate partner homicide (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Ryan, Anastario, & DaCunha, 2006). Engaging a cross-section of stakeholders including journalists, researchers, and domestic violence advocacy groups in the creation of such a handbook is key step in improving news coverage. Finally, additional analysis regarding how race/ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation intersect in the news construction of intimate partner homicide is needed, both in terms of current representations as well as within the context of undertaking participatory efforts to reframe news coverage of intimate partner homicide.

### **Acknowledgment**

The authors would like to express their appreciation to the anonymous reviewers for providing feedback on previous versions of this article.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Notes**

1. In addition to feminist efforts and growing public awareness of domestic violence, Stoltz (1999) explains that the Congressional drive to reach consensus and pass the VAWA at this time seems to have been driven at least in part by the high-profile killing of Nicole Brown-Simpson and the links this case had to the issue of ongoing domestic violence.
2. According to their website ([www.whiteribbon.ca](http://www.whiteribbon.ca)), the White Ribbon campaign is "the largest effort in the world of men working to end violence against women" and has campaigns running in over 55 countries. Other public awareness campaigns of the 1990s, such as the Body Shop's "Stop Violence in the Home" campaign launched in 1994, have likely contributed to increased awareness of intimate partner violence as a broader social issue.
3. <http://ywcacanada.ca/en/pages/national/history>. Accessed July 12, 2012.
4. "Star holds steady as the leader in GTA circulation". November 6, 2007.
5. List was compiled from data collected on previous projects by the second author of this study.
6. Both the *Toronto Star* and *Globe and Mail* databases display articles in digitized full-image version.
7. Time and resource constraints did not permit manually scrolling through every page of the *Toronto Sun* microfilm from 1975-1979 and 1998-2002. Instead, a manual search of

the microfilm was conducted for articles for 3 days after each homicide occurred, as well as the day before, day of, and day after any article was run in either the *Toronto Star* or the *Globe and Mail*. Before doing this, a 2-month time period was tested to determine if there was any day that the *Toronto Sun* ran an article when the *Toronto Star* or the *Globe and Mail* did not. We did not find this to be the case. All three newspapers consistently ran articles within 1 day of each other, presumably because this was when the newsworthy event (death, charges, trial, verdict, or sentence) took place.

8. There were three such cases in the years studied that resulted in a total of 15 articles.
9. Love-triangle killings include cases where a woman and her new partner were killed by her former partner or where a woman was killed by her former perpetrator and his new partner.
10. Individuals interested in obtaining a copy of the codebook and coding sheet used for this study should contact the first author.
11. "Thorncliffe Park man held on charge of slaying wife", *Toronto Star*, July 28, 1978.
12. "Abuser gets life term for killing wife", *Globe and Mail*, July 8, 1999.
13. *Initial coverage* includes initial reports on the intimate partner homicide incidents, follow-ups on these specific incidents, and reports on the state of police investigations (including the laying of charges). *Trial coverage* involves news reports on bail hearings, trial progress, trial verdicts, and the sentencing of perpetrators.
14. Victim-perpetrator relationship was coded as two separate variables that measured whether a "current" relationship was reported (yes/no) or a "former" relationship (yes/no). We did so because there were 41 articles that did not identify whether the victim and the perpetrator had a current or former relationship (but recall that we know they would have been one or the other from the data used to compile the list of cases). We coded these as dummy variables in order to retain maximum sample size, and also to examine whether reporting a specific relationship state was significantly related to our dependent variables.
15.  $\chi^2$  and multivariate analyses were conducted on the umbrella variables ("Excuses Perpetrator," "Blames victim," and "Reports premeditation") rather than on each specific category within the variable due to the small sample size. Descriptive findings for each category within the overall variable are presented in Tables 2-4.
16. Statistics Canada defines spousal homicides as those that involve persons in legal marriages, those who are separated or divorced from such unions and those in common-law relationships (Dauvergne & Li, 2006).

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