

# A content analysis of the most popular online news portals in Croatia regarding child abuse

## Silva Capurso, PhD student

Doctoral Study Prevention Science and Disability Study,  
Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Zagreb, Croatia,  
mob: +385992436722, +385916348753  
email: capursi@erf.hr, silva.capurso@hrt.hr

## Summary

*In recent years, child abuse as a media content have become increasingly present in the media reports. In approaching this topic, the public interest prevailed over the best interest of child for years. In recent years, the approach is slowly changing and today, in Croatian online media more attention is being paid to children's identity protection.*

*Over the period of three months media contents of the most popular online news portals in Croatia – Index.hr, Jutarnji.hr, 24sata.hr, Net.hr and Vecernji.hr – regarding child abuse have been analysed.*

*The goal was to learn about the way the Croatian portals report on the child abuse, whether or not they take account of the rights of the child, and to explore whether the framing theory is applicable to the topic.*

*As part of this research, 50 articles – 10 from each of the involved portals, were analysed. The investigated features were: representation of domestic and foreign reports, approach to the subject, disclosure of child's identity, sensationalism, and representation of expert views. The results have shown equal share of domestic and foreign reports, and equal number of theme-based and case-based articles. A chi-squared test pointed to a significantly larger number of articles violating the rules on child protection compared to those complying with the said rules. When observing the domestic articles from Croatia only, we see an equal number of articles violating the rules and those complying with the rules. Four out of five most popular media portals violate child protection rules when reporting on domestic cases (in Croatia), while all five violate the rules when reporting on foreign*

incidents. Also, the number of articles incorporating expert views is significantly smaller than the number of articles not involving such views. Statistically, there is a significant difference in the level of sensationalism ( $\chi^2(4)=11.667, p<.05$ ) among different portals.

The obtained data are alarming and they point to the need for additional education of journalists and editors on child protection and the best interest of the child.

**Key words:** child abuse, rights of the child, online portals, media reports

## Sažetak

Zlostavljanje djece medijski je sadržaj koji je posljednjih godina sve zastupljeniji u medijskim objavama. U pristupu temi prednost pred najboljim interesom djeteta godinama je imao mogući interes javnosti. Posljednjih godina, pristup tematici se polako mijenja, pa se danas u hrvatskim on line medijima prije svega vodi računa o zaštiti identiteta djeteta.

U periodu od 3 mjeseca analiziran je sadržaj članaka na temu zlostavljanja djece, na najčitanijim hrvatskim online portalima: Index.hr, Jutarnji.hr, 24sata.hr, Net.hr i Vecernji.hr.

Cilj je bio saznati na koji način hrvatski portali izvještavaju o tematici zlostavljanja djece, osobito uzimaju li pri tom izvještavanju u obzir dječja prava, te istražiti je li teorija framinga primjenjiva na ovoj tematici.

U istraživanju je analizirano 50 članaka, po 10 sa svakog od uključenih portala. Istraživana obilježja bila su: zastupljenost domaćih i stranih objava, pristup temi, otkrivanje identiteta djeteta, senzacionalizam, te uključenost mišljenja stručnjaka u članku. Rezultati su pokazali da su podjednako zastupljene domaće i strane objave, kao i tematski pristup zlostavljanju djece nasuprot orijentaciji na individualni slučaj. Hi-kvadrat analiza ukazala je na značajno veći broj članaka u kojima dolazi do kršenja pravila o zaštiti djece od broja članaka u kojem se ta pravila poštuju. Ako su objave iz Hrvatske, podjednak je broj članaka u kojima mediji poštuju i krše pravila. Četiri od pet najposjećenijih medijskih portala u objavama krše dječja prava kada je riječ o hrvatskim slučajevima, a svi ih krše kada je riječ i o stranim slučajevima. Također, broj članaka koji uključuju mišljenje stručnjaka je značajno manji od onih koji takvo mišljenje ne uključuju. Također je pronađena statistički značajna razlika u senzacionalizmu ( $\chi^2(4)=11.667, p<.05$ ) između različitih portala.

Dobiveni podatci su upozoravajući i govore o potrebi dodatnog obrazovanja novinara i urednika kada su zaštita djece i mladih i njihov najbolji interes u pitanju.

**Ključne riječi:** zlostavljanje djece, prava djece, on-line portali, medijski izvještaji

## Introduction

According to the Regulation of children's media privacy protection of the Ombudsman for Children in the Republic of Croatia (2009), the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, the Convention on Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantee the protection of the right to a family and home, freedom, reputation, honour, which includes protection of human, in particular child's intimacy. Furthermore, there are many Croatian laws that regulate the issue of children's media privacy protection. For example, Electronic Media Act stipulates that programme contents that seriously harm the physical, psychological or moral development of children and young people must not be published; Aiming to protect the privacy of juveniles and avoid publicity that may adversely affect their development, the Juvenile Courts Act, prohibits any reporting on their court proceedings and court decisions without the approval of the court, while the Criminal Code stipulates that whoever, in relation to another, asserts or disseminates a falsehood which can damage his or her reputation shall be punished by a fine or imprisonment.

Although media have contributed to raising awareness of the importance of protecting the rights of the child and raising the standard of protection of children's rights in Croatia, there is a number of examples of media reports directly violating the children's rights (Jelavić, 2009). Market competition has led to a change in editorial policy of both Croatian and European media. The priority is being given to the personal impressions and emotions. Such editorial policy resulted in the highest readership rates ever but also in the highest rate of professional misconduct in publishing the stories in which the young people commonly appear as parties involved in some negative incidents (Kanižaj, 2007; Kanižaj, 2009).

Media commonly represent children in two roles – as protagonists of advertisements, prompting the purchase of the advertised product or as protagonists of incidents (violence, abuse, misconduct, etc.). Despite all the regulations guaranteeing the protection of children in media, the citizens have been increasingly reporting infringements of the children's rights. The parties reporting the infringements usually complain about disclosure of child's identity, harm being caused to child's dignity, and children being exposed to potentially harmful media contents (Jelavić, 2009; Kanižaj, 2009).

The most profitable and the most popular part of media content concerning children commonly invades child's privacy and intimacy, with journalists revealing, directly or indirectly, the identity of a child who is victim, perpetrator or a witness of violence (Jelavić, 2009). With having its identity disclosed – by full name, initials, family information and/or family circumstances, by quoting child's words, talking about the child and/or by showing photographs, the child is being exposed to reactions of community to the published content and thus re-victimised (Gabelica Šupljika, 2009).

Undue invasion of privacy and intimacy of children is considered ethically and morally inadmissible, but due to readership and viewership ratings such texts are published and they have become a factor of competitiveness on the market (Zgrabljčić Rotar, 2009). Violation of the child's right to privacy is particularly evident in the stories regarding peer violence in schools. Such events can be reported about day by day, giving all the details of the incident, the place, and indirectly or directly mentioning the child and the family circumstances. Journalists often obtain such information directly from parents of the victim of violence, who deem that the school failed to protect their child (Jelavić, 2009).

Child abuse means "all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship or responsibility, trust or power" (WHO, 2006; in Bilić, Buljan Flander & Hrpka, p. 2, 2012). Croatian data suggest that between 14% and 16.5% of children are being physically, emotionally or sexually abused, while 2.5% of children are being neglected (Bilić, Buljan Flander & Hrpka, 2012). Media are interested in information on any form of child abuse, and for years, when reporting about it, they have been giving the preference to public interest over the best interest of the child.

In this paper we will present the content analysis of news articles on child abuse published in the most popular news portals in Croatia. We will also check whether there is any change in the approach to this topic, whether the Croatian online media are mindful of protection of child's identity i.e., whether there is any difference among the portals with respect to this particular issue. The paper relies on so-called *framing theory*, which explains the frame against which the journalists make selection and process information (Weaver, 2007). According to this theory, the choice of information to be published as news depends on individual interpretative norms of journalists and editors, and their experiences i.e. it depends on individual interpretation of social reality (Čengić and Mijić, 2007). For this reason, it is realistic to expect that different portals (with different journalists and editors) would also have a different approach to covering the topic of child abuse.

This research has two objectives. A practical objective is to gain an insight into information, which the general - unprofessional - population is exposed to and to learn how the most popular Croatian portals cover stories on child abuse, and whether, in doing so, they take account of the rights of the child. Achieving this objective may point to the need for additional education of journalists about the rights and children's privacy protection. A theoretical objective is to investigate whether the framing theory is applicable to this topic and to Croatian online news portals. These objectives will be achieved by addressing two fundamental research problems. The first objective will be achieved by determining the incidence of certain features in news articles (representation of domestic v. foreign topics; approach to child abuse – individual case vs. a social problem; infringement of the rights of the child by disclosing their identity; presence of sensation-

alism; and expert views in news articles on child abuse) on the whole sample, and by individual portals.

The second objective will be achieved by establishing difference in the incidence of above-mentioned features among the analysed portals.

This research is based on two basic hypotheses:

H1: Due to market competition and changes in editorial policy of Croatian media, the assumption is that, despite the existing rules and raising awareness of children's rights, some news articles will be infringing the rights of the child.

H2: Given the framing theory, according to which the topics are selected and covered based on individual standards of the journalists and editors, the portals will differ in at least some of the analysed features.

## Methodology

**Sample:** A total of 50 articles have been processed. Google search engine was used as a source of research to access the top five most popular news portals via independent online tracking system <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/HR>. According to Alexa data these were: Index.hr, Jutarnji.hr, 24sata.hr, Net.hr and Vecernji.hr. An advanced search engine in Croatian language was used, showing the search results as per their relevance. In each of the mentioned news portal, the first ten articles published in the period from January 1 to April 1, 2018 containing the key word "child abuse" were selected.

**Features analysed:** Information on child abuse was used as a basic unit for quantitative content analysis (Skalski, Neuendorf & Cajigas, 2002).

Investigated features were: representation of domestic and foreign reports and features of the news articles, which include: approach to the subject, sensationalism in the content or/and headline, disclosure of child's or perpetrator's identity, and expert views.

**Approach to the topic** means the way in which the article was written i.e., whether it is focused on an individual incident or is child abuse presented as a general social problem, without specifying any particular incident (theme-based approach).

**Sensationalism** is about emphasizing scandalous parts and/or details of a story in the text or headline with the aim to provoke reader's interest.

Publishing any information that would enable readers to recognise the subject of the story is considered **disclosure of victim's or perpetrator's identity**. It includes name and surname of the persons concerned, initials, indicating name of the school or place of the school (especially if the place in question has one or few schools), indicating names of other parties involved in the incident, etc. Revealing the identity of the parties in a news article constitutes infringement of the rules.

**Expert view** feature suggests whether or not an expert view on the case or incident (e.g. by a child psychologist) was incorporated in the news article.

**Procedure:** Aware that some of the investigated features (such as sensationalism) will be difficult to assess, as they depend, to some extent, on personal perception of the person conducting the analysis (the thing that one person finds scandalous might not be perceived as such by another), the presence or absence of the features in the analysed articles was decided by a consensus of 3 persons who have read the articles independently. In cases where two out of three persons agreed that the observed features were present in the text, the article was considered to contain the observed feature and it was thus indicated.

**Data processing:** Data were analysed quantitatively through SPSS for Windows 21. Along with descriptive features (incidence analysis), a chi-square test was used to determine the difference and a more detailed contingency analysis to determine the difference among the portals by specific features.

## Results

A total of 50 articles from 5 different online news portals were analysed. These were: Index.hr, Jutarnji.hr, 24sata.hr, Net.hr and Večernji.hr. Ten articles from each portal were analysed. In table 1 we see the presence of analysed features in all articles included in this research.

Table 1. Presence of investigated features in the whole sample

		N	%
Representation of domestic and foreign articles	foreign	24	48
	domestic	26	52
Approach	Theme-focused	19	38
	Incident-focused	31	62
Sensationalism	No	20	40
	Yes	30	60
Identity disclosed	No	4	13
	Yes	27	87
Identity disclosed - domestic articles	No	4	29
	Yes	10	71
Expert view	No	35	70
	Yes	15	30

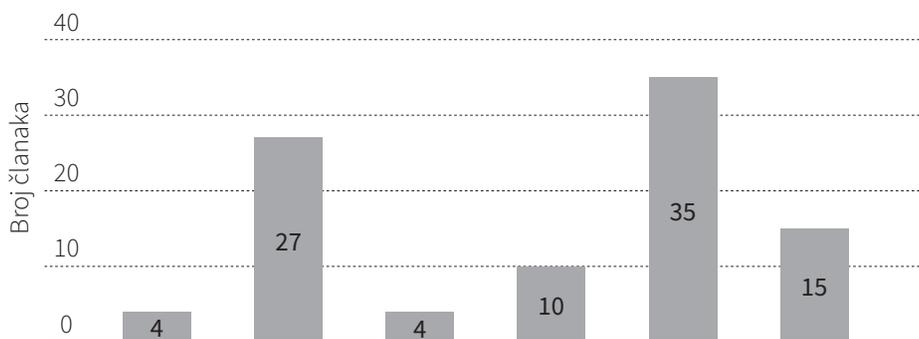
A one-sided chi-square test showed that child abuse stories from foreign and Croatian media were equally represented at the level of overall sample ( $p < .05$ ). Also, at the level of overall sample there is no statistically significant difference in the number of theme-

based v. case-based stories. The chi-squared test also showed that the number of articles containing sensationalism equals the number of articles that do not contain such elements ( $p < .05$ ).

There were altogether 31 articles that reported on a particular case, and in 27 of these (87%), the identity of the child concerned was in some way revealed. Despite all the laws and rules on children's privacy protection, the identity of a child is not only occasionally revealed but it is also statistically more often revealed than not ( $p < .05$ ). Furthermore, out of a total 14 articles reporting about an incident in Croatia, 10 (71%) revealed the identity of the child concerned. When it comes to domestic stories, the chi-square test showed an equal number of articles that publish and those that do not publish identity of the child. Yet, we need to bear in mind the size of sample, which is significantly smaller when it comes to articles with case-based approach in Croatia. Possibly, on a bigger sample this difference could appear to be statistically significant i.e., suggesting that child's identity is being disclosed in a larger number of cases. Regardless of this, the fact that identity of children is revealed in half of the domestic articles analysed suggests a high incidence of rule infringement.

At the same time, the number of articles involving expert view on child abuse is statistically smaller than the number of those that do not include such a view ( $p < .05$ ). The results on disclosing the child's identity and involving expert view are more clearly presented in the chart 1 below.

*Chart 1. Disclosing child's identity and including expert view in the child abuse news articles*



These findings point to an urgent need for additional education of editors of media portals and journalists on the issue of children's privacy protection. According to the Regulation of children's media privacy protection of the Ombudsman for Children in the Republic of Croatia (2009, p. 5) inappropriate exposure to media may further traumatise children, negatively affect their development, cause negative reaction of their community, make their intimacy exposed to all, thus exposing them to a traumatising evaluation, unpleasant comments, and possibly compromising their safety. The difference

between individual news portals in the share of domestic and foreign articles has been tested against a two-sided chi-square test. The incidence of domestic v. foreign articles, by portal, is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Overview of the domestic and foreign news articles

	Portal				
	Index.hr	Jutarnji.hr	24sata.hr	Net.hr	Vecernji.hr
Strane objave	5	5	4	6	4
Domaće objave	5	5	6	4	6

There is no statistically significant difference in the number of foreign and domestic articles on child abuse published on different online portals ( $\chi^2_{(4)}=1.12, p>.05$ ).

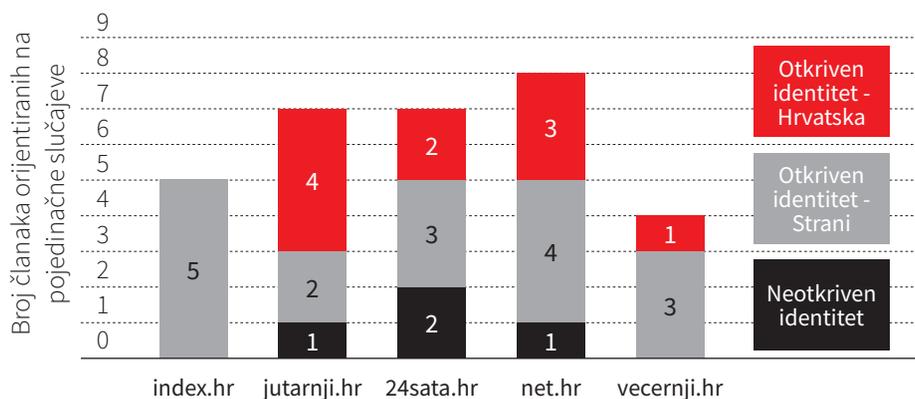
The incidence of other features, including approach to the topic, sensationalism, expert view and incidence of identity disclosure in child abuse articles, by portal, are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Incidence of observed features in the analysed articles, portal

	Feature					
	Theme-approach	Case-approach	Sensationalism	Identity disclosed	Identity disclosed Croatia	Expert view
Index.hr	5	5	5	5	0	5
Jutarnji.hr	3	7	10	6	4	1
24sata.hr	3	7	5	5	2	4
Net.hr	2	8	7	7	3	1
Vecernji.hr	6	4	3	4	1	4

In the observed period, Index.hr had the same number of theme-based (social problem) and case-based articles. By reviewing incidence only, we see a slight precedence of case-based articles over theme-based articles on Net.hr. The portals Jutarnji.hr and 24sata.hr also had slightly more case-based articles, and only Večernji.hr published more theme-based than case-based articles. In case of portal Index.hr, five case-based articles were actually quoting a foreign media. As for Jutarnji.hr, all child abuse articles were domestic stories, which more or less violated the professional rules and revealed the identity of victims or perpetrators of violence against children. In articles relating to Croatia, the portal Jutarnji.hr covered individual incidents, presenting all the details thereof, but not a single article contained an expert view – doctors, psychologists, hospital representatives or experts of the Child and Youth Protection Centre of Zagreb. The number of case-based articles and the share of infringements is shown in chart 2 below.

Chart 2. Share of articles disclosing child's identity by portal



By searching the key words 'child abuse', the violation of children's rights was observed – to a greater or lesser extent - in four out of top five media portals. Speaking of the quoted foreign articles, all portals have revealed the identity of children in some way. These data are alarming and suggest the need for additional education of journalists and editors about the protection of children and the youth and their best interest. Examples of the ways in which the child protection rules were violated are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Overview of news articles published on Jutarnji.hr for Croatia with examples of rule infringements

#### Jutarnji.hr

Identity of victim and offender has been disclosed, as well as the location, and the parents were described with their full name.

Place of residence, age of the girl and mother's job were revealed.

The place of incident and the age of children were disclosed (school children)

The name of association, age of the girl and duration of abuse, as well as details of the case were disclosed.

#### 24sata.hr

The name of the father and the name of the place were indicated.

Possibly, the child's identity was revealed, and the articles provided detailed description of the psychological condition of the child, as taken from medical records, and indicated the name of the clinic in which the child was treated.

#### Net.hr

In two articles, although the identity of the offender and the victim were not disclosed, it was clear where they come from.

Despite the initial difference in incidence of certain features, the chi-squared analysis has shown that these portals do not differ significantly by the approach to the topic, the number of articles involving expert view or by the number of articles revealing the iden-

tity of the child. The only feature reporting a statistically significant difference among the portals is the sensationalism incidence ( $\chi^2_{(4)}=11.667$ ,  $p<.05$ ). For this reason, the sensationalism was subject to an additional contingency analysis (Garcia-Perez and Nunez-Anton, 2003; Beasley and Schumacker, 1995;). According to this analysis, the only portal that showed a statistically significant deviation in the number of sensationalist-oriented child abuse articles was Jutarnji.hr. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Incidence of sensationalism by portal

Sensationalism Index.hr	Portal					
	Jutarnji.hr	24sata.hr	Net.hr	Večernji.hr		
Present	n	5	0	5	3	7
	%	25.0	0.0	25.0	15.0	35.0
	$\chi^2$	0.52	8.35*	0.52	0.52	4.71
Absent	n	5	10	5	7	3
	%	16.7	33.3	16.7	23.3	10.0
	$\chi^2$	0.52	8.35*	0.52	0.52	4.71

\*  $\chi^2$  is statistically significant at the level of 5%; adjusted by means of Bonferroni correction.

By proving a difference in one of the features on various portals, we partially confirmed the hypothesis that the choice – in this case, the way of presentation – depends on individual assessment by journalists and editors, which corresponds with the framing theory. Based on these findings we could say that Jutarnji.hr, more than other portals, puts the issue of child abuse into a sensationalist framework. The reasons for this may be the interpretative norms of journalists and editors or editorial policy which, based on the past experience, proved to be successful in raising the readership rate in this way. Although the portals reported no statistically significant difference against other features, it is possible that the larger sample and qualitative analysis of articles would have shown significant difference, which is also a recommendation for future research on this topic.

## Conclusion

As for incidence of individual features in the analysed articles published on the most popular online media in Croatia, the results have shown an equal number of domestic and foreign articles on child abuse, and equal ratio of theme-based and case-based approaches to reporting on child abuse. When it comes to case-based articles, the chi-squared analysis has shown that the number of articles violating the child protection rules is significantly higher than the number of articles complying with the rules. Looking at the individual cases from Croatia, there is an equal number of articles violating the rules and complying with the rules. Four of the five most popular media portals violate the rights of the child when reporting on child abuse cases in Croatia, and all five of them violate the rights of the child when quoting the incidents from abroad. At the same time, the number of articles on child abuse involving expert views is significantly smaller than the number of the articles not involving such views. Such findings confirm the first hypothesis of this research, and thus highlight the need for additional awareness raising of journalists and editors on this topic. Media reports on child abuse can have serious consequences on the public perception, but it can also discourage reporting such cases or even encourage the commission of such acts. This is why it is crucial to educate journalists and editors on covering child abuse stories and the role of media in informing the public about public health campaigns aimed at raising the awareness about the consequences of such behaviour.

Comparison of articles published on different portals against the analysed features has shown no statistically significant difference in the incidence of analysed features. Yet, sensationalism, as one of the analysed features, appears to be a statistically significant ( $\chi^2_{(4)}=11.667, p<.05$ ). Additional contingency analysis confirmed that portal Jutarnji.hr is by far more sensationalist-oriented than other portals when reporting on child abuse. This finding partially confirmed the second hypothesis, suggesting that different portals have different approaches to the theme due to the framing theory.

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