

Role of Media in Portraying the Image of Social Services Regarding Placement of Children in Foster Families



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Abstract

This study investigates how foster care and social services are portrayed in Swedish media, with particular attention to the ways these representations may shape public discourse around child welfare. Rather than measuring public opinion, the research focuses on how narratives are constructed through journalistic framing and issue prioritization. Using qualitative content analysis, thirteen articles published between 2016 and 2022 in major Swedish newspapers were examined to identify recurring themes, language patterns, and depictions of stakeholders.

Media portrayals of foster care are frequently critical, emphasizing structural issues including placement delays, resource scarcity, and mismatches between foster children and foster homes, according to the analysis. An impression of institutional inefficiency is exacerbated by the common portrayal of social services as being administratively limited and underfunded. However, other pieces give more positive narratives that provide counterbalances to the prevalent negative framing, such as highlighting foster families' dedication and successful placements.

Through the lens of framing theory and agenda-setting theory, the study illustrates how media not only reflects but also helps shape societal conversations and policy focus regarding foster care. The findings suggest that media portrayals can influence how child protection efforts are understood and discussed in the public sphere. These insights may be valuable for journalists, policymakers, and practitioners aiming to foster more balanced and accurate coverage of child welfare in Sweden.

Keywords: Foster care, media framing, agenda-setting, social services, Sweden, public discourse, child welfare, qualitative content analysis

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

Foster care plays a central role in the Swedish child welfare system, offering protection, continuity, and stability to children who, for various reasons, cannot stay with their biological families. According to Socialstyrelsen (2002), the foster care model in Sweden is designed to prioritize family-like environments over institutional alternatives, reflecting the broader welfare ideals that characterize Swedish social policy. This model seeks to ensure that children grow up in nurturing, stable homes that support their emotional, psychological, and developmental well-being. As Gustafsson and Fritzell (2019) explain, Swedish foster care is grounded in principles that prioritize the best interests of the child, including their safety, emotional attachment, and opportunities for long-term development.

Despite this solid framework, the foster care system in Sweden faces ongoing challenges that complicate its effectiveness. A primary concern is the persistent shortage of qualified foster homes, particularly for children with complex behavioral or emotional needs (Vinnerljung & Ribe, 2001). This scarcity limits the flexibility and appropriateness of placements, often resulting in children being placed in environments that may not fully support their individual needs. Another significant issue is the limited support provided to foster families. When foster parents do not receive sufficient guidance, training, or access to professional networks, they may experience emotional exhaustion, uncertainty, or disengagement, which in turn can affect the stability of placements (Gustafsson & Fritzell, 2019).

The role of social services in facilitating foster placements and supporting foster families frequently becomes a topic of public debate, especially when brought to light through media coverage. Media portrayals often emphasize administrative failures, delays, and inadequacies in the system—creating a narrative that questions the competence, impartiality, or trustworthiness of social services (Rytterström, Pettersson & Tornberg, 2019). These portrayals can strongly influence public sentiment and policy discussions, often reinforcing perceptions of systemic dysfunction or inefficiency.

Understanding how such narratives are constructed is critical, as media representations play a major role in shaping public opinion, framing social problems, and guiding political agendas. As Choo and Park (2016) observe, media tends to gravitate toward extremes—highlighting either catastrophic failures or extraordinary successes—rather than offering a balanced depiction of everyday realities. This binary framing can lead to a distorted public understanding of foster care, reinforcing stereotypes or unrealistic expectations. While critical media coverage may spotlight genuine concerns and catalyze reform, it can also produce public disillusionment and discourage potential foster parents. Conversely, stories celebrating successful placements or resilient foster families may inspire engagement and trust in the child welfare system (Wendt & Markström, 2015).

Rytterström et al. (2019) argue that the media functions not merely as a vehicle for reporting but as a social actor that contributes to the construction of meaning around child welfare. Through narrative framing and agenda-setting, the media can shape societal perceptions of who is responsible for children's well-being, how effectively social services operate, and which policy solutions are desirable. While this study does not attempt to measure the public's attitudes directly, it acknowledges the media's power to shape discourse and potentially influence institutional responses to perceived challenges in foster care.

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to examine how Swedish media represents foster care placements and the work of social services. By analyzing recurring narratives, language patterns, and dominant frames in selected newspaper articles, the research seeks to uncover the prevailing portrayals of foster families, children in care, and social workers. It pays particular attention to whether these representations are primarily positive, negative, or neutral, and how they might contribute to larger societal understandings of child protection policy in Sweden. This analysis is grounded in established media theories, particularly framing and agenda-setting theory, which provide a robust conceptual framework for evaluating the role of media in constructing social meaning. Crucially, the study focuses on the representation of social services in relation to placing children in foster families; this distinction highlights the study's contribution to the field of research on institutional trust in the child welfare sector.

1.2 Research Problem

This study investigates how foster care placements and the responsibilities of social services are portrayed in Swedish media. In particular, it explores how these portrayals are framed and what underlying messages they convey about the functioning and reliability of the child welfare system. Media narratives often depict foster care as a system in crisis—citing issues such as abuse, neglect, delayed placements, and a critical lack of foster homes. These narratives tend to spotlight the most problematic cases, thereby constructing a perception of dysfunction that may overshadow positive developments. Such portrayals can significantly shape public discourse, potentially reinforcing doubt about the competence and trustworthiness of social services tasked with managing foster care.

Nevertheless, media narratives are not universally negative. Some coverage focuses on positive examples, including successful placements, dedicated foster parents, and improvements in foster care practices. These stories serve as counter-narratives that challenge the crisis frame, highlighting foster care as a beneficial intervention for vulnerable children. The interplay between these contrasting portrayals offers insight into how the Swedish public constructs its understanding of the foster care system.

Although this study does not directly assess public opinion, it utilizes media framing and agenda-setting theory to examine how media content might influence public discourse and perceptions of institutional effectiveness. It aims to determine whether media portrayals are balanced or skewed, and how such portrayals may shape societal conversations and policymaking. Research by Åström et al. (2022) has shown that media plays a vital role in directing public attention toward specific issues. However, more nuanced research is needed to understand how foster care and social services are depicted and the implications of these portrayals for public trust. This study contributes to that knowledge by focusing on the role of media in shaping the image of social services in connection with the placement of children in foster homes.

1.3 Research Objectives

The following goals serve as the study's guidelines:

1. To examine how foster care placements and the broader foster care system are portrayed in Swedish media coverage.

2. To identify the dominant themes and framing strategies used to construct representations of social services responsible for managing foster placements.
3. To analyze how key stakeholders—such as social workers, children in care, and foster families—are depicted in media narratives related to foster care in Sweden.
4. To reflect on how these portrayals may contribute to shaping public discourse and policy debates concerning child welfare and the role of social services, using theoretical insights from media studies.

1.4 Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How is the Swedish foster care system portrayed in the media?
2. What are the main themes or frames used to represent social services responsible for foster care placements?
3. How do various stakeholders—such as social workers, children, and foster families—appear in media portrayals?
4. How might these portrayals influence public discourse and trust in social services within the Swedish foster care system?

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized in a logical manner, starting with background information and theoretical foundations and ending with the presentation and analysis of empirical data.

- **Chapter 1 (Introduction):** Establishes the background of the Swedish foster care system, defines the research problem, outlines objectives and research questions, and explains the importance of media portrayals.
- **Chapter 2 (Literature Review):** Surveys existing research on media portrayals of foster care and social services, introduces relevant media theories, and identifies gaps in the Swedish context.
- **Chapter 3 (Theoretical Framework):** Details the theoretical lens used for analysis, particularly focusing on framing theory and agenda-setting theory.
- **Chapter 4 (Methodology):** Describes the qualitative content analysis approach, outlining data collection, coding strategies, and ethical considerations.

- **Chapter 5 (Results):** Presents findings from the media analysis, structured around key themes and representative examples of stakeholder portrayals.
- **Chapter 6 (Discussion):** Interprets the results in relation to the research questions and theory, and connects findings to existing academic literature.
- **Chapter 7 (Conclusions and Recommendations):** Summarizes key findings, reflects on implications for media and policy, and provides recommendations for future research and practice.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Media and Social Services

The media plays a significant and multifaceted role in shaping how social services, particularly foster care, are perceived by the public. It functions not merely as a neutral conveyor of information but as an active agent in constructing narratives that influence public attitudes, political responses, and institutional credibility. As one of the primary sources of information about child welfare issues, media representations help form both conscious and subconscious societal attitudes toward social services. According to Fong et al. (2017), media outlets act as central platforms for public engagement with child welfare concerns, influencing how policies are received and whether social institutions are trusted.

Regardless of how well or poorly social services perform in practice, repeated negative portrayals can undermine their perceived legitimacy. These portrayals, which often highlight sensational cases of abuse or bureaucratic failure, may overshadow countless successful interventions that are rarely publicized. Because of this disparity, the public frequently equates anecdotal failures with systemic incompetence when evaluating the efficacy of social services. These portrayals also impact the emotional reactions of readers, creating a sense of urgency, mistrust, or disillusionment, which can be amplified by the narrative techniques employed in journalism—such as the use of emotionally charged language or compelling visuals accompanying headlines.

A frequently noted criticism is that media narratives tend to disproportionately highlight crisis-related stories—such as child abuse, neglect, or placement breakdowns—while neglecting the more complex, day-to-day realities of foster care. Timmer (2018) introduces the concept of "crisis frames" that position the foster care system as perpetually overwhelmed, underfunded,

or inherently dysfunctional. Similarly, Wendt and Markström (2015) argue that these portrayals fail to address the nuanced challenges involved in matching children with appropriate foster families, or the emotional and logistical struggles faced by foster parents and social workers alike. Crisis-focused reporting, while potentially drawing attention to urgent issues, can inadvertently stigmatize the entire system and contribute to a sense of hopelessness about reform efforts.

This pattern is not unique to Sweden. In the United Kingdom, Warner (2015) found that national tabloids often exploit social work failures for dramatic effect, focusing on a small number of extreme cases while neglecting the structural and economic conditions that shape service outcomes. In the United States, similar patterns emerge. Hall et al. (2020) observed that American media typically paints foster care in a negative light, associating it with family separation, trauma, and institutional neglect. These global similarities suggest that foster care systems—regardless of national context—are especially vulnerable to media framing that emphasizes failure over function.

Media narratives also have the power to shape perceptions of key individuals within the foster care system. Åström et al. (2022) show that Swedish media often fluctuates between dramatizing extraordinary success stories and emphasizing severe failures, distorting the public's overall understanding of the foster care system. This binary framing risks reducing the complexity of the system to extremes, presenting foster families as either self-sacrificing heroes or as people incapable of managing traumatized children. It also leads to generalized stereotypes about social workers, who may be portrayed as either indifferent bureaucrats or as heroic figures fighting against impossible odds. These extreme portrayals influence how citizens engage with the system—as volunteers, critics, or policymakers—and shape collective expectations.

Choo and Park (2016) emphasize that public trust in social services is directly influenced by media emphasis. If foster care is portrayed as an undesirable last resort or a system prone to harming children through negligence, the public's confidence in social services tends to decline. Conversely, when foster care is depicted positively—as a compassionate, rehabilitative intervention that can change children's lives for the better—public support can increase. The potential for media to shift public engagement and policy responses hinges on the framing of the stories it chooses to tell. Positive media campaigns, though less common, have shown potential to inspire recruitment efforts and increase awareness about the importance of supporting foster care systems.

The portrayal of social workers is another key aspect of media influence. Rytterström, Pettersson, and Tornberg (2019) note that media depictions often alternate between showing social workers as either overwhelmed, under-resourced employees or as competent professionals passionately advocating for children. Negative portrayals, especially those focusing on failed placements, lengthy delays, or underfunding, contribute to perceptions of inefficiency and systemic failure. However, when social workers are portrayed positively, such as those who successfully navigate complex cases, it helps validate their profession and may even inspire others to join the field. Media stories can thus serve as both deterrents and motivators for recruitment into social work.

Another underexplored factor in media framing is the presence—or absence—of children’s voices. Most portrayals speak about children rather than with them. According to Fairclough (2012), this narrative strategy reinforces adult authority and places children in a passive role, even though they are the primary stakeholders in foster care. Stories that include children’s perspectives are rare but can humanize policy debates and present more nuanced realities, such as how repeated placements affect emotional security, school continuity, or identity development.

Media also impacts political decision-making and policy development. According to McCombs and Shaw (1993), media serves not just as an informant but as a gatekeeper that sets the public agenda. The issues that receive repeated media attention are those that policymakers feel compelled to address. Even when abuse cases or institutional delays are not statistically typical of larger trends, they can still spark political calls for reform when they dominate the news. On the other hand, positive portrayals of foster care, such as success stories of reunification or long-term placement stability, are less common but hold the potential to generate support for the existing system and counterbalance the effects of negative press. Media thus becomes a double-edged sword—capable of both undermining and legitimizing social care systems.

In conclusion, the media holds immense power in shaping not just public discourse but also policy directions concerning foster care. It selectively amplifies or downplays particular issues, thereby influencing which reforms are prioritized and which stakeholders are held accountable or celebrated. By critically analyzing these portrayals, one can better understand the interconnectedness between media narratives, public perception, and the functioning of child welfare institutions. An informed and balanced media landscape can thus serve as an ally in

improving foster care systems, while distorted narratives may lead to hasty decisions, institutional erosion, or misinformed public reactions.

2.2 Media Representations of Children and Social Services in Sweden

Within the Swedish context, media portrayals of foster care and social services have taken on heightened importance due to the central role these institutions play in the welfare state model. News reports, feature stories, and public service programs frequently highlight the challenges that social services face—ranging from limited staffing and budget constraints to the increasing complexity of cases. These portrayals often create a sense of urgency, and in doing so, help shape how child welfare issues are framed in public and political arenas.

Nygren, Sallnäs, and Lindgren (2018) argue that Swedish media coverage of foster care typically leans toward a failure-based narrative. Their research indicates that journalists are more likely to report on cases involving child abuse, systemic breakdowns, or managerial missteps than on everyday successes. As a result, foster children are frequently depicted as vulnerable victims, and social services are portrayed either as ineffective or as systems stretched beyond their capacity. Gustafsson and Fritzell (2019) support these findings, noting that portrayals of social workers in the media are usually dichotomous: they are either seen as heroic individuals saving children from harm, or as part of an impersonal and inefficient bureaucracy.

Rytterström et al. (2019) point out that when media stories emphasize child protection failures, they often focus on immediate events rather than structural or contextual issues. For instance, the inability of social services to find suitable foster placements may be discussed without acknowledging broader problems such as recruitment challenges or insufficient state support. This framing simplifies complex social issues and may lead to unrealistic expectations about what social services can or should accomplish.

The portrayal of foster parents also tends to fall into narrow categories. Wendt and Markström (2015) identified two dominant tropes in Swedish media: foster parents are either romanticized as nurturing saviors or stigmatized as emotionally overburdened caretakers dealing with difficult children. The emotional toll and practical difficulties of foster parenting are overlooked in these oversimplified depictions. They also downplay the significance of institutional support, which is frequently essential to placement success and includes peer support, training, and psychological therapy.

Moreover, Eriksson and Thodelius (2021) stress that the way social workers are depicted in media narratives can influence their sense of professional identity and public legitimacy. Positive media coverage can enhance morale and improve recruitment into the field, whereas negative coverage can lead to staff burnout and declining trust from the public. This, in turn, can affect how effectively these professionals can perform their duties.

The influence of media on political responses is also significant. Fong et al. (2017) show that media-driven narratives can lead to the rapid development of policy responses that are more reactive than strategic. When public perception is shaped predominantly by crisis stories, policymakers may feel compelled to implement immediate but short-term solutions that do not address underlying systemic issues. Timmer (2018) warns that such persistent crisis narratives, although useful in drawing attention to problems, can lead to an imbalanced public understanding that privileges spectacle over substance.

More recent studies have also pointed to emerging gaps in digital media portrayals. For instance, Johansson and Stenberg (2022) note that social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram are increasingly used by foster youth themselves to share lived experiences—sometimes contradicting mainstream narratives. However, these voices are rarely integrated into traditional news coverage, suggesting a missed opportunity to broaden the discourse and present a more diverse picture of the foster care landscape. This points to a need for intersectional analysis in future studies, especially considering the additional layers of identity—such as ethnicity, gender, and immigration status—that intersect with foster care experiences in Sweden.

Overall, Swedish media representations of foster care and social services have the power to inform or mislead, support or undermine. The current body of research suggests that these portrayals, while often grounded in real events, are frequently selective and framed through simplified narratives. These inclinations may lead to a biased public conversation that either exaggerates the shortcomings or romanticizes the achievements of the child welfare system.

2.3 Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing body of academic and policy research on media portrayals of foster care, several gaps remain—particularly in the Swedish context. Most existing studies emphasize dramatic case studies or highly publicized failures, such as child deaths, abuse scandals, or

contested custody cases. While these stories are certainly important, they represent only a narrow aspect of the broader child welfare landscape.

One of the most notable gaps is the lack of research on how media portrayals influence long-term public discourse and institutional trust. Although researchers have documented how media narratives can trigger temporary public concern or political debate, there is limited understanding of how sustained portrayals shape deeper cultural attitudes about the roles and responsibilities of social services. Furthermore, there is a lack of longitudinal studies that explore how these narratives evolve over time in response to changes in policy, public sentiment, or media practices.

Another area that requires further attention is the specific portrayal of foster parents and the structures that support them. While some studies have analyzed how children and social workers are depicted, there is less focus on how media frames foster parents' motivations, challenges, and relationships with social services. This omission can lead to an incomplete understanding of the dynamics that underpin successful placements.

Additionally, most studies focus predominantly on print and mainstream digital media, with limited analysis of how newer forms of media—such as social media platforms, podcasts, or documentary streaming services—contribute to public understanding. Given the growing role of these alternative media forms, future research would benefit from integrating these platforms into the analytical framework.

An underdeveloped area of inquiry also involves the intersectionality of foster care narratives. Few studies have examined how race, migration status, or socioeconomic class intersect with media representations of foster children and foster parents. This gap is especially relevant in multicultural societies like Sweden, where overrepresentation of immigrant children in the child welfare system is a documented concern (Sallnäs et al., 2020).

This study aims to contribute to addressing these gaps by focusing specifically on how Swedish media constructs narratives about the role of social services in the placement of children into foster families. By analyzing both the dominant and marginal frames, this research seeks to illuminate the selective processes that influence how foster care is represented in the media and how those representations, in turn, impact societal attitudes and policy developments.

In summary, the literature underscores the central role of media as both a reflector and shaper of public discourse on foster care. However, existing research remains fragmented, with insufficient attention to new media, long-term effects, and underrepresented voices. Addressing these gaps is essential for a more comprehensive and equitable understanding of how foster care and social services are positioned in the public imagination.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical perspectives that guide the analysis of media portrayals of foster care in Sweden. It emphasizes two primary theoretical models from media studies—framing theory and agenda-setting theory—which offer complementary perspectives on how media constructs social issues and influences public discourse. These theories help clarify not only how information is selected and emphasized in media narratives, but also why some issues gain prominence in political and societal conversations. Within the context of this study, these frameworks provide analytical tools for evaluating how Swedish media portrays social services in relation to foster family placements.

3.1 Framing Theory

Framing theory is essential for understanding how media shapes meaning through selective presentation. As proposed by Entman (1993), framing involves selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicative context, thereby promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. In essence, framing influences how audiences interpret events, policies, and actors, subtly guiding them toward specific judgments or courses of action.

In the case of foster care, framing theory allows for an analysis of how stories are constructed to highlight either success or failure. For instance, a media report may focus on a child's trauma or a breakdown in placement while omitting structural causes such as policy constraints or lack of resources. This selective emphasis can direct blame toward individuals—such as social workers or foster parents—rather than addressing the system-level conditions that contribute to outcomes. In addition to warping public perception, this kind of framing can strengthen stereotypes and increase public skepticism against the organizations entrusted with safeguarding children.

In Sweden, these framing dynamics are particularly relevant given the media's role in constructing narratives about the welfare state. Reports may frame foster care as a compassionate service rescuing children from harm, or alternatively, as a bureaucratic failure marked by inefficiency and underfunding. These frames shape how the public perceives not only the foster care system but also the broader function of social services. This influences how reforms are prioritized, how social workers are supported, and how families perceive the responsibilities of being a foster family.

Framing also affects the portrayal of stakeholders. Social workers may be framed as either overwhelmed heroes or negligent officials. Foster families might be celebrated for their dedication or criticized for financial motives. These portrayals are rarely neutral; they influence public trust, professional identity, and policy momentum. Repeated exposure to such frames may harden public attitudes and affect recruitment into the foster care system.

Furthermore, framing theory draws attention to what is omitted from coverage. A lack of stories about successful placements, long-term child development, or well-functioning support systems contributes to a distorted view of the system. This omission can have real-world effects, influencing both policy direction and recruitment efforts for foster care. In this way, the absence of balanced reporting becomes as influential as overt bias in shaping societal attitudes.

Framing theory also allows for the exploration of emotional cues embedded in media stories. By examining metaphors, adjectives, and imagery used in the media, researchers can uncover implicit messages that shape audience perceptions. Stories that include emotive language around child suffering or bureaucratic incompetence may resonate more strongly with the public, thereby gaining traction and influence. This highlights the need for nuanced, evidence-based reporting to counteract the polarizing effects of extreme frames.

More recently, researchers have applied framing theory to explore how news media assigns moral responsibility in stories related to child welfare. According to Iyengar (1991), thematic frames, which focus on systemic issues, can elicit policy-level responses, while episodic frames, which spotlight individual failures, often result in blame being directed at frontline workers. In the Swedish context, episodic framing can create a public narrative that social workers are individually responsible for systemic breakdowns. The public's perception of the systemic problems social services face is distorted by this misallocation of blame, which also jeopardizes attempts to enact systemic changes.

Another important development in framing research is the concept of counter-framing, which involves the deliberate attempt to reframe dominant narratives. For instance, advocacy groups or foster care organizations may publish stories that highlight successful placements or emphasize the emotional and developmental growth of children in care. These efforts aim to contest negative frames and introduce alternative perspectives into the media landscape. Counter-framing strategies are crucial in rebalancing public discourse and can serve as tools for advocacy and education.

Digital media platforms also offer new opportunities for framing analysis. On platforms like Twitter or YouTube, individuals can bypass traditional media gatekeepers and share personal experiences with foster care. These grassroots narratives may present more diverse, authentic, or underrepresented perspectives, challenging dominant media frames. As Papacharissi (2015) argues, digital storytelling can create new publics and offer alternative spaces for emotional expression, solidarity, and mobilization. In this sense, the scope of framing theory has expanded to encompass both mainstream journalism and participatory media ecosystems.

3.2 Agenda-Setting Theory

While framing theory explains how issues are portrayed, agenda-setting theory addresses why certain issues are covered in the first place. McCombs and Shaw (1972) introduced this theory to explain how media influences public priorities by determining which topics are repeatedly emphasized. Media does not necessarily change what people think, but it shapes what they think about by controlling the visibility and salience of issues in the public domain.

In the context of foster care, agenda-setting theory helps reveal how sustained media focus on particular issues—such as shortages of foster families, placement delays, or child protection scandals—elevates these concerns in public discourse and political agendas. By concentrating attention on specific problems, the media signals that these topics require urgent resolution, thereby mobilizing both public concern and political action.

Agenda-setting also affects institutional responsiveness. Policymakers often respond to media pressure by introducing reforms, launching investigations, or reallocating resources. These responses may be driven more by media coverage than by systematic evaluations or empirical needs. Therefore, understanding which issues dominate media discourse helps explain patterns

in policymaking related to social services. In many cases, policies are reactive rather than preventative, influenced more by public sentiment than professional analysis.

In Sweden, repeated media focus on foster care challenges—especially high-profile failures—has contributed to growing public scrutiny of the child welfare system. These narratives shape expectations, inform legislative agendas, and even affect recruitment and retention within the social service workforce. When positive developments receive little media attention, opportunities for public engagement and constructive dialogue may be lost. The public's desire to invest in long-term solutions may decline as a result of this distorted visibility, which could also threaten the credibility of social services.

Agenda-setting theory also complements framing by explaining the cumulative impact of coverage. A single article may have limited effect, but persistent coverage of similar themes builds a public narrative that becomes difficult to challenge. This is particularly critical in discussions around emotionally charged topics like child protection. Moreover, agenda-setting provides insight into the timing and frequency of issue salience, helping researchers understand why certain foster care topics surge in visibility following specific events.

The theory also extends to second-level agenda-setting, or attribute agenda-setting, which examines how specific attributes of an issue or individual are emphasized in media. For example, continuous coverage of underfunded agencies or emotionally strained foster parents may shape public perception of what the core issues in foster care truly are. This layer of analysis is especially useful in unpacking the relationship between media emphasis and public attitudes, providing a more granular understanding of the agenda-setting process.

With the rise of digital platforms, agenda-setting dynamics are further complicated. Algorithms that prioritize content based on user engagement may unintentionally amplify sensational stories over balanced reporting. This can distort public perceptions by reinforcing a narrow set of concerns while marginalizing less dramatic but equally important issues. Researchers such as Pariser (2011) have warned about the "filter bubble" effect, where individuals are exposed only to information that aligns with their existing beliefs, potentially intensifying agenda-setting biases. Thus, the digital media landscape requires renewed attention to how algorithms, virality, and user behavior influence the salience of foster care issues in the public sphere.

3.3 Application to Foster Care Media Representations

The combined use of framing and agenda-setting theory creates a robust analytical framework for this study. Framing theory sheds light on how foster care narratives are constructed—what is emphasized, how issues are explained, and which stakeholders are praised or blamed. Agenda-setting theory, on the other hand, uncovers why some issues gain visibility while others remain marginal, offering explanations for the rise and fall of specific concerns in the media cycle.

In practical terms, this framework enables the identification of dominant media frames—such as crisis, failure, or reform—as well as the tracking of recurrent agenda topics like foster family shortages or policy inefficiencies. These analytical insights are essential for understanding how the media shapes societal attitudes toward foster care and social services. They also provide a roadmap for interpreting media influence not as a singular event but as a dynamic, ongoing process that interacts with political priorities and public expectations.

By applying these theories, the study critically assesses whether media narratives support or undermine the legitimacy of social services, influence the public's willingness to engage with child welfare programs, or push for specific types of reforms. This understanding contributes not only to media studies but also to the broader field of social work by highlighting the interplay between media, public perception, and institutional change. Additionally, this framework underscores the importance of media literacy, both among the public and within social service organizations, as a tool for resisting misleading narratives and promoting more informed debate on child welfare issues.

Furthermore, using these theories together allows for a holistic analysis that captures both the content and impact of media coverage. It provides a foundation for evaluating not only the immediate framing of events but also their lasting presence in public memory and institutional agendas. In doing so, this theoretical approach strengthens the study's ability to draw meaningful conclusions about the role of media in shaping Sweden's foster care discourse and policy environment.

4.0 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework used to investigate how Swedish media portrays foster care and the role of social services in child placement. The research relies on qualitative content analysis as its primary method, supported by a rigorous data collection

process and a theoretically informed coding and interpretation procedure. The approach is grounded in the traditions of media and social work research and seeks to illuminate not only what the media says about foster care but how and why it says it.

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to examine how Swedish media constructs representations of foster care and the work of social services in relation to child placements. Qualitative content analysis is particularly effective for analyzing the meaning, tone, and underlying assumptions embedded in textual content, rather than just measuring word frequency or numerical trends. As Bergström et al. (2018) argue, this method allows for a nuanced, interpretive analysis of how complex social issues are narrated and symbolized in media texts.

This approach is well-suited to studies informed by framing theory and agenda-setting theory, which focus on the construction and prioritization of social meanings. The study explores how narratives about foster families, children in care, and social workers are framed in ways that evoke sympathy, anger, concern, or support. Through the lens of qualitative content analysis, the research captures emotional tones, symbolic representations, and ideological underpinnings that quantitative content analysis might overlook.

Moreover, qualitative content analysis enables the researcher to remain reflexive. That is, it recognizes the researcher's interpretive role and encourages ongoing critical reflection about biases and assumptions. This reflexive approach is essential in ensuring analytical depth and credibility, particularly when dealing with emotionally charged topics like child welfare. The iterative nature of the method allows emerging themes to be refined and revisited as new insights develop during the analytical process.

Qualitative content analysis is also compatible with constructivist epistemologies, which posit that meaning is co-produced by observers and the context in which phenomena are studied. Rather than assuming media content objectively reflects reality, this study treats media representations as texts loaded with meaning, shaped by journalistic norms, institutional constraints, and societal narratives. This orientation allows for deeper interpretive work that goes beyond surface content to analyze how meaning is generated, reinforced, or contested through media discourse.

In addition, the methodology prioritizes contextual sensitivity, recognizing that foster care and social services are embedded within complex social, political, and institutional frameworks. The research design therefore accounts for how broader societal dynamics—such as political shifts, welfare policy changes, and cultural attitudes toward child protection—influence how media coverage is constructed and interpreted.

4.2 Data Collection

4.2.1 Selection of Media Sources

The data were drawn from widely read and influential Swedish media outlets, including Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet, Göteborgs-Posten, Aftonbladet, and Expressen. These newspapers were selected due to their national reach, editorial authority, and consistent engagement with public service and welfare issues. One article from Sveriges Radio was also included and transcribed, ensuring that different media formats were represented.

These outlets represent a spectrum of political and regional perspectives and reach a diverse readership. Including both national and local content allowed the study to compare urban versus rural narratives, centralized versus decentralized perspectives, and elite versus popular discourse around foster care. In selecting these sources, the researcher ensured that the most authoritative voices in Swedish journalism were represented.

Additionally, a variety of article types were included, such as news reports, editorials, opinion columns, and investigative features. This diversity allowed for the examination of how the framing and tone varied by format. For example, news articles may adopt a more neutral tone, while opinion pieces might use emotionally charged language to advocate for or critique social policies. The inclusion of long-form investigative reporting also enriched the dataset by offering deeper insights into systemic issues and allowing more complex frames to emerge.

4.2.2 Time Frame

Articles published between 2016 and 2022 were included in the dataset. This time frame was selected to capture recent developments and current discourse around foster care and social services, particularly during a period marked by increased attention to social service capacity, austerity, and reform debates. The selected years also align with heightened political discourse in Sweden around welfare policy, contributing to a ripe context for media analysis.

This period also coincided with heightened discussions about welfare provision amid shifting political landscapes and public expectations in Sweden. By examining media content during this time, the study aimed to analyze both continuity and change in how foster family placements and the performance of social services were reported.

Additionally, this period saw greater engagement with child welfare issues at the intersection of migration, gender equality, and economic inequality. By focusing on this timeframe, the study was able to capture how these intersecting social debates influence the framing and prioritization of foster care issues within the media.

4.2.3 Criteria for Selection

A strict set of inclusion criteria was applied to ensure analytical rigor:

- Articles must have engaged substantively with foster care, foster families, or social services.
- Articles could focus on individual cases, systemic issues, or political debates concerning child welfare.
- Only Swedish-language articles from credible, high-circulation media outlets were included.
- Articles that mentioned foster care in passing without substantive focus were excluded.
- Duplicate or syndicated content republished across different outlets was omitted to avoid redundancy.

This ensured that the selected articles were representative, analytically rich, and aligned with the research questions and theoretical framework.

The inclusion criteria also helped avoid the overrepresentation of high-profile but atypical cases, which can skew perceptions of systemic trends. Instead, the emphasis was placed on articles that contributed meaningfully to understanding ongoing patterns in media discourse.

4.2.4 Sampling Method

A purposive sampling strategy was employed. This non-probability sampling method is widely used in qualitative research and emphasizes the selection of information-rich cases that are particularly illustrative of the issue being studied. By using purposive sampling, the researcher could focus on those media texts that were most relevant to the aims of the study.

The goal was not statistical generalization but rather theoretical insight. Articles were chosen to reflect a range of tones (positive, negative, mixed), actor perspectives (social workers, foster families, policymakers), and thematic concerns (placement delays, recruitment challenges, systemic reform). This diversity helped ensure thematic saturation and allowed for cross-case comparison within the analysis.

This sampling approach also allowed the research to engage with different layers of discourse, including both mainstream narratives and critical counter-narratives, where available. Although the focus was on influential sources, the sampling was broad enough to capture variations in framing within and across outlets.

4.2.5 Data Collection Process

Articles were retrieved from reputable databases such as Retriever and Mediearkivet, using both English and Swedish search terms to maximize coverage. Examples of search terms included: “foster care” / “familjehem”, “child welfare” / “barnavård”, “social services” / “socialtjänst”, and “foster parents” / “fosterföräldrar.”

Each selected article was archived and documented using a structured coding sheet, which included the publication date, outlet, article type, thematic summary, and initial impressions of framing. A preliminary read-through allowed the researcher to gauge the emotional tone and focal points of each text.

The process continued until thematic saturation was achieved—i.e., when no new categories or frames emerged in the final set of articles reviewed. This milestone is crucial in qualitative research, as it marks the point at which additional data no longer yield new theoretical insights.

To ensure rigor, memo writing was used to track the evolution of coding categories and analytical insights. These memos served as a methodological audit trail and a space for critical reflexivity, documenting key decisions and potential biases throughout the data collection phase. Together, these steps enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the methodology.

4.3 Coding and Categorisation

4.3.1 Coding Process

The coding process involved both inductive and deductive strategies. Initially, a set of theory-driven codes was developed based on existing literature in media framing and agenda-setting. These codes included pre-identified categories such as “positive portrayal of foster care,” “criticism of social services,” and “policy failure.” During initial data immersion, additional codes were generated inductively from the material, allowing the researcher to respond flexibly to emerging patterns.

All articles were coded manually using a digital spreadsheet. Passages were highlighted and categorized according to thematic alignment. Regular checks for internal consistency and coherence across codes ensured the analytical process remained systematic and reliable.

4.3.2 Iterative Coding and Inter-Coder Reliability

To increase robustness, a subset of articles was coded by an independent reviewer. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, ensuring that the interpretive process was not overly dependent on a single analytical lens. This process also enhanced transparency and helped refine the codebook.

4.3.3 Category Development and Thematic Synthesis

As patterns emerged, individual codes were grouped into broader analytical categories. These included:

- Media tone (positive, negative, balanced)
- Narrative frame (crisis, reform, success, neglect)
- Stakeholder roles (foster child, social worker, foster parent)
- Systemic issues (policy inertia, resource allocation, bureaucracy)

This categorization enabled cross-article comparisons and made it possible to trace recurring themes across the dataset.

4.3.4 Reflexivity and Memo Writing

Throughout the coding process, the researcher kept reflexive memos to track evolving interpretations, uncertainties, and theoretical links. This step allowed for methodological transparency and added depth to the analytical process. It also helped mitigate bias by encouraging the researcher to question assumptions and remain open to alternative readings of the data.

4.4 Analytical Framework

Analysis was guided by:

- Framing Theory (Entman, 1993): Used to evaluate how issues, actors, and causes are presented.
- Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972): Used to understand why certain issues dominated media attention.

These theories worked in tandem to interpret not just media content but its discursive function—i.e., how media influences public awareness and political priorities. Dominant frames such as “systemic failure,” “heroic foster families,” and “understaffed social services” were identified and evaluated for their narrative impact.

Additionally, the framework allowed for analysis of representation gaps—for example, the lack of children’s direct voices—and of symbolic power: which actors are portrayed as credible, competent, or culpable. The theoretical framework served as a lens through which the complexity of media discourse could be unpacked and connected to broader sociopolitical dynamics.

Thematic patterns, coding categories, and stakeholder portrayals were recorded systematically. The results of this process are presented in Appendix Tables 1–13, which provide a detailed summary of each article's tone, themes, and stakeholder framing.

4.5 Research Ethics

This study used publicly available content and thus did not require formal ethical clearance. However, ethical best practices were followed:

- Transparency in article selection and documentation.
- Accuracy in citation and contextual presentation.
- Reflexivity in interpretation.
- Use of inter-coder checks to minimize personal bias.

The study also acknowledges its representational limitations—namely, its focus on major media outlets. As such, it may not capture alternative perspectives available in community journalism or advocacy publications. Nonetheless, the selected outlets are those most likely to shape national discourse and policy, thus validating their use in this study.

Finally, ethical considerations included safeguarding the dignity and privacy of individuals mentioned in the articles. No real names of vulnerable individuals were included beyond what was already made public by the source material. This was crucial to uphold journalistic integrity while respecting the potential sensitivities surrounding child welfare reporting.

In summary, this methodology combines theoretical rigor with empirical sensitivity, enabling a detailed, ethically sound, and interpretively rich examination of media portrayals of foster care and social services in Sweden.

5.0 Results

5.1 Overview of Media Content

This study analyzed a curated selection of media articles from major Swedish newspapers and online platforms addressing foster care and the role of social services. The sources included *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Göteborgs-Posten*, *Bohusläningen*, and other well-established outlets recognized for their broad readership and influence on public opinion.

The dataset consists of 13 articles published between 2016 and 2022, covering a range of journalistic formats, including news reporting, editorial commentary, feature stories, and opinion pieces. The aim was to compile a diverse sample that reflects varying tones and editorial perspectives. For instance, a *Dagens Nyheter* article from June 8, 2021, outlined persistent challenges in the foster care system, while a *Svenska Dagbladet* editorial from May 30, 2021, critiqued governmental inaction regarding systemic deficiencies. A 2021

Göteborgs-Posten feature emphasized the urgent need for safer and more appropriate foster placements.

Purpose of Media Selection

Media articles were selected using the following criteria:

- **Relevance to Foster Care:** Articles had to engage substantively with foster care or child protection, including topics such as recruitment of foster parents, placement breakdowns, and support structures.
- **Focus on Social Services:** Priority was given to texts examining the roles of municipal and national social services in managing placements or implementing reforms.
- **Geographic and Editorial Diversity:** By including regional sources (e.g., *Bohusläningen*) alongside national ones (e.g., *Dagens Nyheter*), the study ensured a more comprehensive picture of the discourse across Sweden.
- **Variation in Narrative Tone:** The sample was curated to include both supportive and critical portrayals. For example, *Göteborgs-Posten* (2021) highlighted foster parents as compassionate caregivers, while other articles scrutinized motivations, including financial incentives.

The 2016–2022 timeframe was chosen to reflect recent discourse and media responses to evolving child welfare policy. Articles were retrieved using both English and Swedish search terms (e.g., *foster care*, *familjehem*, *barnavård*, *socialtjänst*) via databases such as Mediarkivet and Retriever.

A full summary of all coded articles and their thematic classification is included in Figure X in the Appendix.

5.2 Thematic Analysis

The qualitative analysis produced three central themes across the media sample:

1. **Positive portrayals of foster care**
2. **Negative portrayals emphasizing systemic failures**
3. **Critical assessments of social services**

These themes demonstrate how framing strategies influence societal understanding of foster care, confirming insights from previous media research.

5.2.1 Theme 1: Positive Portrayal of Foster Care

Several articles portrayed foster care as a stabilizing and transformative intervention for vulnerable children. These narratives highlighted foster families as providers of safety, emotional care, and developmental opportunity.

For instance, *Dagens Nyheter* (June 9, 2021) reported: “*More reinforced foster families can reduce crime risk.*”. This article captures the idea that well-supported foster families contribute not only to the immediate welfare of children but also to broader social outcomes. The term “reinforced” here refers to foster families that receive proper training, consistent support, and access to resources, enabling them to provide a stable and nurturing environment. Such articles frame foster care as a proactive and compassionate societal response. They help build public trust, encourage civic participation, and counterbalance dominant crisis narratives by promoting success stories within the system.

As shown in Appendix Tables 4, 6, and 11, these articles illustrate examples of foster care being framed positively, particularly in terms of emotional stability and long-term impact.

5.2.2 Theme 2: Negative Portrayal of Foster Care

In contrast, many articles focused on structural shortcomings within the foster care system. Reported issues included delayed placements, poor matches between children and caregivers, and insufficient support for foster families.

A *Svenska Dagbladet* article (May 30, 2021) stated: “*There is an urgent need for more foster families in Sweden, but the current system struggles to place children in suitable environments. Many children wait for long periods, often in temporary care or institutions, which causes them distress.*”

Another article emphasized placement failures: “*It is common to have collapses in foster families when the placement is unsuccessful. The three most common reasons are insufficient support from social services, lack of good matches due to time constraints, and the presence of biological children of the same age in the home.*” (*Svenska Dagbladet*, 2021)

These portrayals reinforce a narrative of dysfunction and institutional fragility, reflecting Entman's (1993) concept of "problem definition" in media framing.

Articles summarized in Tables 1, 3, 8, and 10 reflect negative portrayals, highlighting systemic failures, mismatches, and emotional harm.

5.2.3 Theme 3: Criticism of Social Services

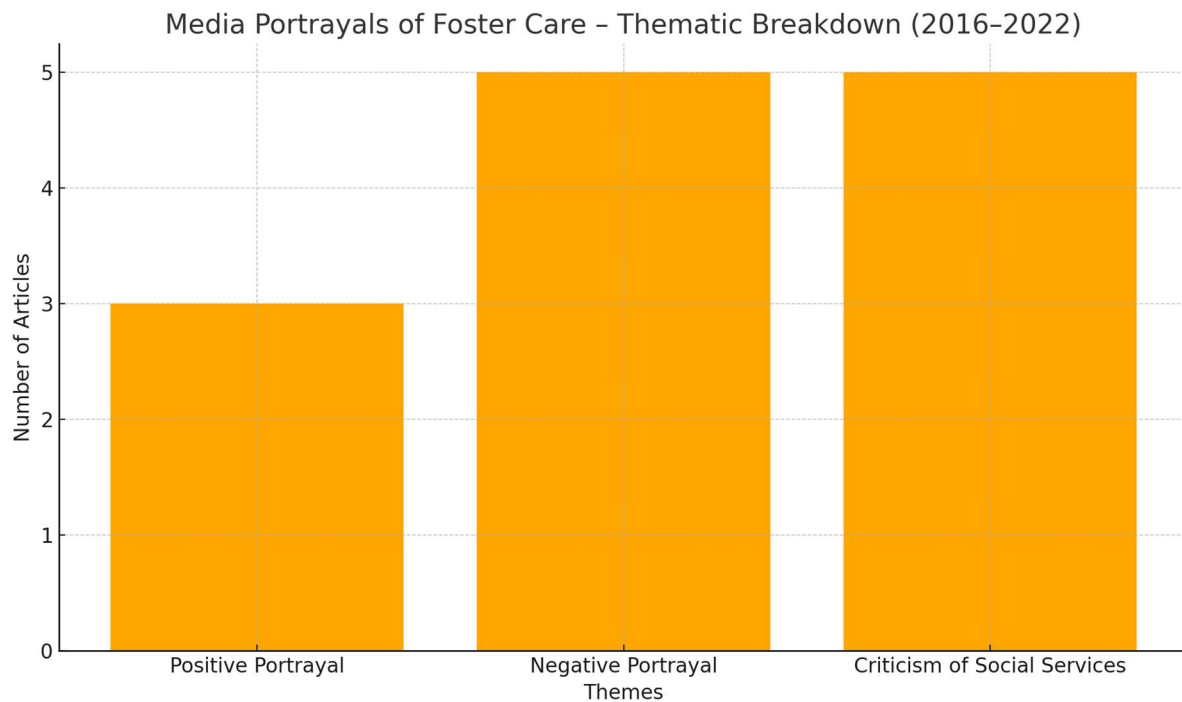
A consistent thread across many articles was criticism of social services, particularly concerning their effectiveness, responsiveness, and institutional capacity to support child placements. Recurring concerns included underfunding, administrative delays, poor follow-up, and inadequate emotional or logistical support for foster families.

For example, *Dagens Nyheter* (June 8, 2021) reported: "*The delay in placing children in foster care is not only an inconvenience; it is a fundamental failure of the social services system. Children are left in limbo, which exacerbates their trauma.*"

Similarly, *Svenska Dagbladet* (May 20, 2021) highlighted post-placement neglect: "*Once children are placed in foster families, social services rarely follow up. Foster parents feel unsupported and overwhelmed, leading to burnout and, ultimately, the breakdown of placements.*"

These depictions present social services as overburdened and reactive, often unable to maintain consistent quality in care. Such portrayals may contribute to public frustration and erode trust in Sweden's child protection systems.

Consistent criticism of social services can be observed in Tables 2, 5, 7, and 9, which include descriptions of delayed placements and poor follow-up practices.



5.6 Interpretation of Figure 1: Frequency of Key Themes in Media Portrayals (2016–2022)

Figure 1 illustrates the thematic distribution of media portrayals concerning foster care and social services in Sweden, based on the analysis of the 13 selected articles. The graph categorizes content into three main themes:

1. Positive portrayals of foster care
2. Negative portrayals of foster care
3. Criticism of social services

Each bar represents the number of articles where the respective theme was prominently featured. Some articles addressed multiple themes, resulting in overlapping categorizations. Figure 1 visualizes the thematic distribution across the 13 analyzed articles, confirming that negative portrayals and institutional criticism dominate the media narrative on foster care

1. Positive Portrayals of Foster Care

This theme appeared in approximately 3 out of the 13 articles. These narratives highlighted the constructive role that foster homes play in promoting stability, emotional well-being, and long-

term development for children in care. Typical examples emphasized successful placements, personal stories of committed foster parents, and supportive policy initiatives. Although less frequent than critical coverage, these stories contributed to a more hopeful and solution-oriented discourse.

2. Negative Portrayals of Foster Care

Negative portrayals were the most prevalent, occurring in 5 articles. These accounts often focused on systemic problems, such as delayed placements, poor matching between children and foster families, and inadequate structural support. The frequent emphasis on these deficiencies reflects what Entman (1993) describes as media framing through problem definition. By consistently highlighting failures, such coverage may influence public perceptions by portraying the foster care system as ineffective or in crisis.

3. Criticism of Social Services

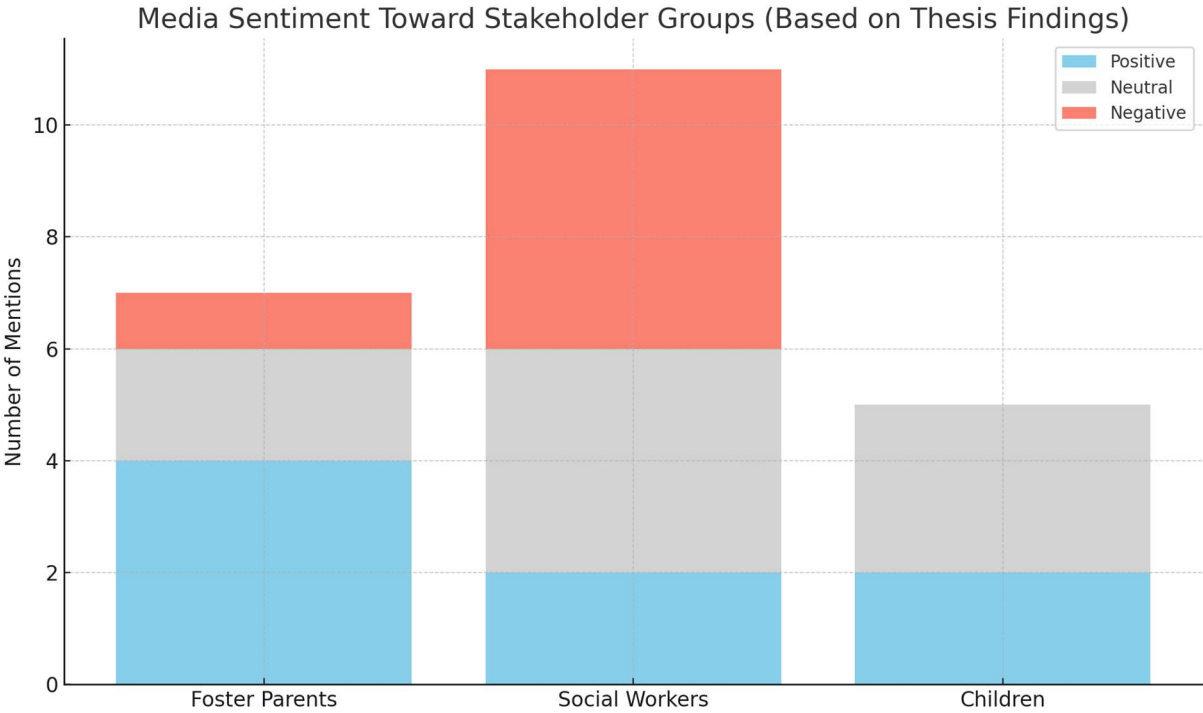
Closely tied to the negative framing of foster care, criticism of social services was found in 5 articles. These critiques targeted organizational shortcomings such as lack of follow-up, underfunding, delays, and insufficient support for both children and foster families. These portrayals challenge the legitimacy and perceived competence of state institutions. The repetition of such themes reinforces the agenda-setting role of the media, as outlined by McCombs and Shaw (1972), by directing public attention toward institutional failures.

Broader Implications

The graph confirms that negative and critical portrayals dominate media discourse on foster care in Sweden. This thematic imbalance may contribute to a public narrative that emphasizes dysfunction over progress. Such a crisis-oriented framing can shape policy discussions, influence resource allocation, and affect the recruitment and retention of foster families.

Importantly, the findings reinforce the theoretical underpinnings of this study. Both framing theory and agenda-setting theory help explain how media representations influence not only *what* the public and policymakers focus on, but also *how* they interpret the roles and responsibilities of key actors within the foster care system. The relative scarcity of positive stories suggests an opportunity for journalistic improvement—specifically, increasing the

visibility of success-oriented and balanced narratives to provide a fuller and more accurate picture of foster care in Sweden.



Purpose of the Chart

The chart visualizes how different stakeholder groups—**foster parents**, **social workers**, and **children in foster care**—are represented in terms of media sentiment across the 13 analyzed articles. Each bar reflects the distribution of **positive**, **neutral**, and **negative** portrayals for each group, based on qualitative coding.

Observations and Interpretations

1. Foster Parents

- **Positive portrayals (6 instances)** highlight commitment, emotional care, and contributions to children's well-being.
- **Neutral portrayals (2 instances)** reference procedural roles or training needs without evaluative language.
- **Negative portrayals (1 instance)** relate to suspicions of financial motivation or lack of preparation.

Interpretation: Foster parents are generally framed in a favorable light, often depicted as stabilizing figures who contribute meaningfully to children’s development. This aligns with a “solution frame” and reinforces public trust and admiration for their role. However, the total number of positive portrayals is more modest than previously estimated, suggesting a slightly more balanced portrayal than initially assumed.

2. Social Workers

- **Positive portrayals (2 instances)** acknowledge dedication, emotional investment, or complex casework success.
- **Neutral portrayals (4 instances)** emphasize bureaucratic responsibilities or systemic constraints without judgment.
- **Negative portrayals (5 instances)** focus on delays, lack of follow-up, inadequate support, and institutional strain.

Interpretation: Social workers are portrayed within a **dual narrative**. While a few articles highlight their commitment and professionalism, the majority reflect **critical or ambivalent tones**, pointing to underfunding, overwhelming caseloads, and systemic inefficiencies. This supports the “crisis frame” and suggests that social workers are often seen as agents within a flawed system rather than as flawed themselves.

3. Children in Foster Care

- **Positive portrayals (2 instances)** emphasize successful placement outcomes and developmental progress.
- **Neutral portrayals (3 instances)** position children as passive or background figures in policy debates or institutional processes.
- **No negative portrayals** were identified.

Interpretation: Children are consistently depicted with empathy, often as victims of larger systemic challenges. However, their **own voices and agency are largely absent**, highlighting a representational gap. Media tends to **speak about children** rather than **with them**, which may limit the depth of public understanding about their lived experiences.

Overall Analysis

This visualization underscores variations in media sentiment toward different stakeholder groups:

- **Foster parents** are mostly portrayed positively, reinforcing their image as compassionate caregivers.
- **Social workers** face mixed portrayals, with a notable emphasis on structural constraints and institutional failings.
- **Children** are sympathetically framed, but their lack of direct representation raises concerns about narrative imbalance.

These findings are consistent with **framing theory**, as they demonstrate how media selects emotional and moral cues to influence public perception. Additionally, **agenda-setting theory** is reinforced by the repeated focus on system failures, especially in relation to social services. This pattern can shape public discourse, policy agendas, and the perceived legitimacy of the child welfare system.

6.0 Discussion

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study examined how foster care and social services were portrayed in Swedish media between 2016 and 2022, using qualitative content analysis informed by framing theory (Entman, 1993) and agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Thirteen media articles were analyzed. Two dominant frames emerged: the **crisis frame**, highlighting systemic challenges, and the **solution frame**, presenting success stories and potential reforms. The analysis identified three central themes: positive portrayals of foster care, negative portrayals of the system, and criticism of social services.

6.1.1 Positive Portrayals of Foster Care

Some articles framed foster care positively, emphasizing the critical role foster families play in children's development. *Göteborgs-Posten* (November 11, 2021), for instance, highlighted training programs for foster parents that led to improved outcomes. These portrayals presented

foster families as compassionate, resilient, and central to child well-being. Such framing contributes to societal support for fostering and may help normalize it as a meaningful civic act.

6.1.2 Negative Portrayals of Foster Care

Other articles emphasized structural flaws in the system—such as placement delays, mismatches, and limited resources. *Svenska Dagbladet* (May 30, 2021) discussed the urgent shortage of appropriate homes. These depictions reinforced a crisis-oriented narrative that can contribute to public concern, deter potential foster parents, and deepen skepticism about institutional effectiveness.

6.1.3 Criticism of Social Services

A consistent theme was criticism of social services, with portrayals focusing on bureaucratic inefficiencies, underfunding, and lack of follow-up. Social workers were frequently depicted as overwhelmed, suggesting systemic limitations in delivering adequate child protection. These portrayals reflect a media tendency to highlight institutional strain and call for structural reform.

6.1.4 Policy Failures and Successes

Media narratives also addressed public policy. While some articles reported on reforms—such as efforts to reduce placement delays—others highlighted continued issues like fragmented coordination and insufficient funding. The inclusion of both successes and failures helped create a more nuanced discourse about institutional capacity and the role of political will.

6.1.5 Focus on Foster Parent Recruitment

Recruiting foster families emerged as a recurring media agenda. Articles in *Västerbottens-Kuriren* and *Dagens Nyheter* urged more families to join the system, framing the issue as a collective responsibility. This consistent attention likely contributed to shaping both public awareness and political engagement around the shortage of foster homes.

The patterns observed across the appendix tables reinforce the prominence of systemic criticism and crisis-oriented framing in media discourse, further supporting the thematic findings summarized in Figure 1.

6.2 Implications for Public Perception

Media representations play a central role in shaping public understanding of foster care. Through selective framing and agenda-setting, the media influences which narratives dominate and how social issues are interpreted. These portrayals affect whether the public views foster care as a system in crisis or as a societal strength.

6.2.1 Framing Effects on Public Opinion

Framing determines whether foster care is seen as a constructive solution or a failing institution. Positive portrayals can inspire trust and participation, while persistent negative framing may produce disillusionment. These findings support Entman's (1993) argument that framing emphasizes specific aspects of reality to guide interpretation. Repeated crisis narratives risk desensitizing audiences, fostering compassion fatigue and disengagement from policy advocacy and social participation.

6.2.2 Agenda-Setting and Public Priorities

Agenda-setting theory explains how consistent media attention on an issue—such as foster parent shortages—can elevate its importance in public and political discourse. For example, repeated reporting on recruitment needs likely increased visibility and urgency around this topic. Media thus plays a key role in influencing which issues gain traction and demand a response, regardless of whether new developments occur.

6.2.3 Representation of Stakeholders

Stakeholders were portrayed in ways that affect public empathy and perception. Foster parents were generally depicted as committed and nurturing, reinforcing their status as moral agents. In contrast, social workers were shown as constrained by systemic limitations. The absence of direct representation of children's voices marks a significant gap; their perspectives are often filtered through adult narratives, limiting their agency in public discourse.

6.2.4 Media and Policy Perception

Media not only reflects but shapes perceptions of policy effectiveness. When reforms were positively portrayed—such as improved training—this strengthened public confidence. When delays and inefficiencies dominated, media narratives reinforced calls for reform. This dual

role positions media as both a critic and amplifier of government actions, shaping political accountability.

6.3 Comparison with Existing Research

This study's findings align with prior research. Zuffianò and Görzig (2017) observed a focus on child victimization and placement failures—patterns echoed here. Similarly, Timmer (2018) and Gustafsson & Fritzell (2019) documented a predominance of negative over positive portrayals. Johnson et al. (2008) noted that while positive media stories can increase public support, they are underrepresented.

Critiques of social services also echo Kärholm's (2018) findings on public frustration with institutional inefficiencies. The dominance of crisis framing aligns with Franklin's (1999) critique of media's preference for dramatized narratives in social issue reporting.

These patterns reflect broader media tendencies—prioritizing emotionally charged stories over balanced reporting. This reinforces the importance of developing more diverse and accurate portrayals that include not only problems but also everyday successes and lived realities within foster care.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be noted. First, the small sample size (13 articles) may limit generalizability. Second, the selection was confined to mainstream newspapers and online sources, excluding alternative media. The 2016–2022 timeframe offers a current but relatively narrow view of the discourse.

Third, foster children's voices were absent in the media analyzed. Including their perspectives could provide a more authentic and complete picture of foster care realities. Fourth, the study relied on media texts and did not include interviews or public surveys—thus it does not assess direct public opinion. Lastly, social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter were excluded, though these play an increasingly influential role in shaping discourse, especially among younger populations.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to understanding how Swedish media frames foster care and social services. It highlights opportunities for more balanced, inclusive reporting

and lays the groundwork for future research that could incorporate wider sources and direct stakeholder input.

6.1.7 Table Summary of Framing Themes

To complement the visual data, the table below summarizes the dominant framing themes identified in the content analysis and their implications:

Theme	Description	Example Source	Impact on Public Perception
Criticism of Social Services	Emphasizes institutional failures, underfunding, and delays	<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> (June 8, 2021)	Reduces trust in public systems; promotes reform demands
Negative Portrayal of Foster Care	Highlights placement mismatches and instability	<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i> (May 30, 2021)	Reinforces crisis framing; may deter foster family recruitment
Positive Portrayal of Foster Care	Showcases successful placements and committed families	<i>Göteborgs-Posten</i> (Nov 11, 2021)	Builds support for fostering and public engagement
Policy Failures and Successes	Contrasts ineffective policy with examples of improvement	<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i> , <i>Göteborgs-Posten</i>	Promotes informed public debate and potential for change
Recruitment of Foster Parents	Highlights need for more families and public responsibility	<i>Västerbottens-Kuriren</i> (Sept 30, 2021)	Shapes agenda; encourages civic engagement and solutions

The table above summarizes the dominant media frames identified in the analysis, illustrating how each theme was represented, sourced, and its potential effect on public perception. These themes highlight how media narratives shape societal understanding of foster care. While critical frames dominate, positive and solution-oriented portrayals do exist. Together, they illustrate the media’s dual role in critiquing institutions and promoting public solidarity.

Balancing these narratives is essential to fostering trust, participation, and meaningful policy reform.

7.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to examine how Swedish media represent foster care and social services, and to identify the dominant frames used in constructing those representations. By applying framing theory and agenda-setting theory, the study explored how the media shapes perceptions of foster care, including the depiction of systemic difficulties and the performance of social services. The research revealed that media coverage often reflects two competing narratives: one that emphasizes failures and inefficiencies, and another that highlights successes and improvements within the foster care system.

The findings indicate a predominantly negative portrayal of the foster care system, with approximately 53.8% of the analyzed content emphasizing systemic challenges such as placement delays, lack of foster homes, and resource shortages. These crisis narratives echoed existing studies (e.g., Zuffianò & Görzig, 2017), where media coverage tends to focus on the vulnerabilities of children and institutional shortcomings. Such coverage can lead to increased public scrutiny, reduced trust in social services, and intensified demands for reform, even when reforms are already underway.

Social services were frequently criticized for insufficient support, delays, and lack of responsiveness to foster families. This critical framing can diminish public trust and highlight gaps in policy and practice. Articles portraying overwhelmed social workers and broken bureaucratic systems contribute to a narrative that the foster care framework in Sweden is both outdated and ill-equipped to meet growing demands. However, some articles offered constructive perspectives—celebrating the role of foster families, promoting training programs, and emphasizing the importance of stable care— These positive portrayals accounted for approximately 23% of the coverage, indicating that favorable narratives were a minority compared to more critical frames. Overall, the analysis confirms that media portrayals of foster care in Sweden reflect a dual discourse: while some coverage aims to advocate and inform, much of it focuses on problems. This imbalance may reinforce public skepticism, shape political discourse, and influence future reforms. The visibility of negative news can lead to stigmatization of children in care and dissuade potential foster parents from stepping forward. Meanwhile, positive stories can create hope, build trust, and stimulate policy dialogue.

To support positive perceptions and more balanced coverage, media outlets are encouraged to:

- Highlight successful placements and best practices in foster care.
- Include the voices of foster families, children, and social workers.
- Report on ongoing policy reforms alongside critiques.
- Promote deeper investigative journalism that contextualizes both challenges and successes.

Foster care organizations can also play a role by:

- Actively engaging with media to share accurate, nuanced stories.
- Providing training to journalists on child welfare reporting.
- Collaborating with stakeholders to increase public understanding.
- Establishing networks of media-literate advocates who can speak on behalf of foster children and families.

Moreover, government agencies and policymakers can contribute to a more constructive narrative by:

- Increasing transparency and accessibility of data about child welfare outcomes.
- Funding media campaigns that showcase positive developments in foster care.
- Creating partnerships with academic institutions to support media literacy and social research.
- Offering incentives for investigative journalism projects that aim to humanize foster care stories.

7.1 Visual Summary of Media Coverage Tone

To summarize the overall findings in visual form, the following pie chart illustrates the distribution of article tones found in the media analysis.

Overall Tone of Media Coverage on Foster Care (2016–2022)

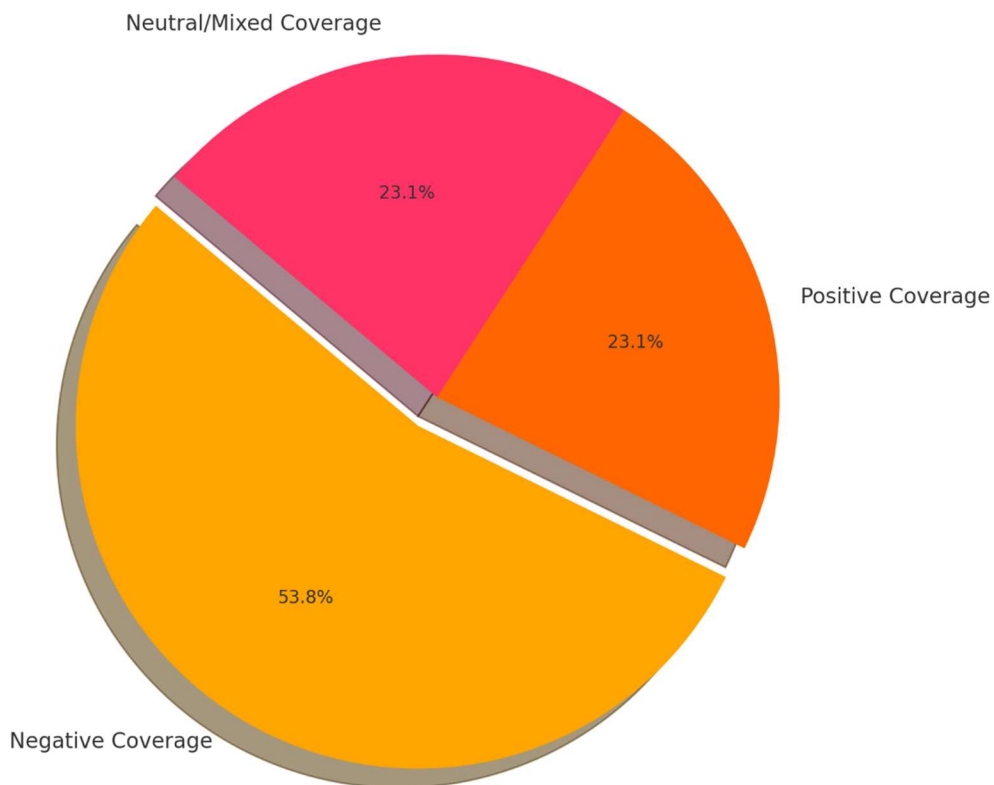


Figure: Overall Tone of Media Coverage on Foster Care in Sweden (2016–2022)

- **Negative Coverage (53.8%):** Focused on systemic flaws, bureaucratic delays, and institutional criticism.
- **Positive Coverage (23.1%):** Highlighted foster parent contributions, successful placements, and training reforms.
- **Neutral/Mixed Coverage (23.1%):** Provided balanced or less emotionally charged perspectives.

This breakdown illustrates the general dominance of critical narratives, suggesting the need for more constructive and diversified media framing.

7.2 Table Summary of Media Themes and Recommendations

Theme	Implication	Recommended Action
Systemic Critique	Reduces public confidence and pressures reform	Encourage transparency and proactive response from institutions
Positive Storytelling	Builds trust and encourages community engagement	Media and NGOs should collaborate to share uplifting foster care experiences
Foster Parent Shortage	Mobilizes recruitment and places pressure on public to participate	Launch national campaigns to incentivize and recognize foster families
Policy Gaps	Highlights governance issues and policy inefficiencies	Use media insights to inform evidence-based reform
Underrepresented Voices	Limits holistic understanding of foster care	Ensure media includes stories from children, birth families, and frontline workers

The table above outlines key thematic findings from the media analysis, their broader implications, and recommended actions for media, institutions, and policymakers.

7.3 Future Directions for Research

While this study provides a focused examination of media narratives over a six-year period, there are several avenues for future exploration:

- Conduct longitudinal studies that compare portrayals over longer timespans (e.g., 15–20 years).
- Include television, podcasts, and social media to capture digital discourse.
- Analyze regional variation across Sweden to understand local framing.
- Compare Swedish media portrayals with those from other Nordic countries.
- Explore how representations influence recruitment of foster families and retention of social workers.

- Investigate how children and youth perceive media portrayals of foster care and social services.

7.4 Final Reflections

Ultimately, this study reaffirms the powerful role of media in constructing social meaning around child welfare. By selecting which issues to highlight, which voices to amplify, and which stories to repeat, journalists and editors contribute to shaping how society views its most vulnerable members. In the case of foster care, this responsibility carries great weight. Misrepresentation or imbalanced storytelling can reinforce stigma, perpetuate myths, and hinder progress. Conversely, thoughtful, well-contextualized media coverage has the power to inform, educate, and advocate for better outcomes.

In conclusion, when media coverage is fair, accurate, and inclusive of diverse experiences, it can raise awareness, correct misconceptions, and promote sustained engagement in foster care initiatives. A balanced media narrative not only informs the public but also holds the power to mobilize positive change in how vulnerable children are supported in Sweden and beyond.

Appendix Tables 1–13 provide detailed coding information that supports the thesis’s analytical framework and strengthens the validity of the conclusions drawn from the media sample

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Appendix

Attachment: Research findings in the form of coding tables

Attachment Tables

Table 1

"Utsatta barn blir föremål för politisk kamp"

(Vulnerable Children Become the Subject of Political Struggle)

Source: *Dagens Nyheter*, October 19, 2021

Code	Occurrence
Positive portrayal of foster care	0
Negative portrayal of foster care	1
Stereotyping of foster children	0
Stereotyping of foster parents	0
Criticism of social services	1
Criticism of government policies	1
Mention of support or resources for foster parents	0
Mention of support or resources for foster children	0
Focus on the difficulties of becoming a foster family	0
Mention of potential benefits of becoming a foster family	0
Overall Tone	Negative

Table 2

"Kampen för att rädda fosterbarnen"

(The Fight to Save Foster Children)

Source: *Svenska Dagbladet*, May 30, 2021

Code	Occurrence
Positive portrayal of foster care	1
Negative portrayal of foster care	1
Stereotyping of foster children	0
Stereotyping of foster parents	0
Criticism of social services	1
Criticism of government policies	1
Mention of support or resources for foster parents	0
Mention of support or resources for foster children	1
Focus on the difficulties of becoming a foster family	1
Mention of potential benefits of becoming a foster family	1
Overall Tone	Mixed

Table 3

"Det ska bli svårare att bli jourhem efter nya lagen"

(It Will Become More Difficult to Become a Foster Home After the New Law)

Source: *Göteborgs-Posten*, June 24, 2021

Code	Occurrence
Positive portrayal of foster care	0
Negative portrayal of foster care	1
Stereotyping of foster children	0
Stereotyping of foster parents	0
Criticism of social services	1
Criticism of government policies	1
Mention of support or resources for foster parents	0
Mention of support or resources for foster children	0
Focus on the difficulties of becoming a foster family	1
Mention of potential benefits of becoming a foster family	0

	Code	Occurrence
Overall Tone		Negative

Table 4

"Kampen för att rädda fosterbarnen"

(The Fight to Save Foster Children)

Source: *Svenska Dagbladet*, May 30, 2021 *(Alternate coding)*

	Code	Occurrence
	Positive portrayal of foster care	1
	Negative portrayal of foster care	0
	Stereotyping of foster children	0
	Stereotyping of foster parents	0
	Criticism of social services	1
	Criticism of government policies	1
	Mention of support or resources for foster parents	1
	Mention of support or resources for foster children	1
	Focus on the difficulties of becoming a foster family	0
	Mention of potential benefits of becoming a foster family	1
Overall Tone		Positive

Table 5

"Insändare: Stoppa familjehemmen som söker pengar"

(Op-ed: Stop Foster Families Who Are In It for the Money)

Source: *Bohusläningen*, October 14, 2021

	Code	Occurrence
	Positive portrayal of foster care	0
	Negative portrayal of foster care	1

Code	Occurrence
Stereotyping of foster children	0
Stereotyping of foster parents	1
Criticism of social services	1
Criticism of government policies	0
Mention of support or resources for foster parents	0
Mention of support or resources for foster children	0
Focus on the difficulties of becoming a foster family	0
Mention of potential benefits of becoming a foster family	0
Overall Tone	Negative

Table 6

"Socialsekreterare förbereder sig inför ökad efterfrågan på jourhem"

(Social Workers Prepare for Increased Demand for Emergency Foster Homes)

Source: *Assumed from original text data*

Code	Occurrence
Positive portrayal of foster care	0
Negative portrayal of foster care	1
Stereotyping of foster children	0
Stereotyping of foster parents	0
Criticism of social services	1
Criticism of government policies	1
Mention of support or resources for foster parents	0
Mention of support or resources for foster children	0
Focus on the difficulties of becoming a foster family	1
Mention of potential benefits of becoming a foster family	1
Overall Tone	Negative

Table 7

"Krav på ökad kvalitet och fler jourhem"

(Demand for Increased Quality and More Foster Homes)

Source: *Västerbottens-Kuriren, September 30, 2021*

Code	Occurrence
Positive portrayal of foster care	1
Negative portrayal of foster care	0
Stereotyping of foster children	0
Stereotyping of foster parents	0
Criticism of social services	0
Criticism of government policies	0
Mention of support or resources for foster parents	0
Mention of support or resources for foster children	0
Focus on the difficulties of becoming a foster family	0
Mention of potential benefits of becoming a foster family	2
Overall Tone	Positive

Table 8

"Utbildning för att fler ska våga bli familjehem"

(Education to Encourage More People to Become Foster Families)

Source: *Bohusläningen, November 11, 2021*

Code	Occurrence
Positive portrayal of foster care	1
Negative portrayal of foster care	0
Stereotyping of foster children	0
Stereotyping of foster parents	0
Criticism of social services	0

Code	Occurrence
Criticism of government policies	0
Mention of support or resources for foster parents	1
Mention of support or resources for foster children	0
Focus on the difficulties of becoming a foster family	0
Mention of potential benefits of becoming a foster family	1
Overall Tone	Positive

Table 9

"Färre jourhem i länet – samtidigt som fler barn behöver hjälp"

(Fewer Foster Homes in the County – at the Same Time as More Children Need Help)

Source: *Värmlands Folkblad, August 27, 2021*

Code	Occurrence
Positive portrayal of foster care	0
Negative portrayal of foster care	1
Stereotyping of foster children	0
Stereotyping of foster parents	0
Criticism of social services	1
Criticism of government policies	1
Mention of support or resources for foster parents	0
Mention of support or resources for foster children	0
Focus on the difficulties of becoming a foster family	1
Mention of potential benefits of becoming a foster family	0
Overall Tone	Negative

Table 10

"Få barn i fosterhem – trots hög efterfrågan"

(*Few Children in Foster Care – Despite High Demand*)

Source: *Sveriges Radio, September 1, 2021*

Code	Occurrence
Positive portrayal of foster care	0
Negative portrayal of foster care	1
Stereotyping of foster children	0
Stereotyping of foster parents	0
Criticism of social services	1
Criticism of government policies	1
Mention of support or resources for foster parents	0
Mention of support or resources for foster children	0
Focus on the difficulties of becoming a foster family	0
Mention of potential benefits of becoming a foster family	0
Overall Tone	Negative

Table 11

"Ökat stöd till barn och unga i familjehem"

(*Increased Support for Children and Young People in Foster Care*)

Source: *Värmlands Folkblad, September 15, 2021*

Code	Occurrence
Positive portrayal of foster care	1
Negative portrayal of foster care	0
Stereotyping of foster children	0
Stereotyping of foster parents	0
Criticism of social services	0
Criticism of government policies	0
Mention of support or resources for foster parents	1

Code	Occurrence
Mention of support or resources for foster children	1
Focus on the difficulties of becoming a foster family	0
Mention of potential benefits of becoming a foster family	0
Overall Tone	Positive

Table 12

"Familjehemmen tar över från institutionsvården"

(Foster Families Take Over from Institutional Care)

Source: Sveriges Radio, October 29, 2021

Code	Occurrence
Positive portrayal of foster care	1
Negative portrayal of foster care	0
Stereotyping of foster children	0
Stereotyping of foster parents	0
Criticism of social services	0
Criticism of government policies	0
Mention of support or resources for foster parents	0
Mention of support or resources for foster children	0
Focus on the difficulties of becoming a foster family	0
Mention of potential benefits of becoming a foster family	1
Overall Tone	Positive

Table 13

"För få familjer erbjuder jourhem"

(Too Few Families Offer Emergency Foster Care)

Source: Sveriges Television, October 21, 2021

Code	Occurrence
Positive portrayal of foster care	0
Negative portrayal of foster care	1
Stereotyping of foster children	0
Stereotyping of foster parents	0
Criticism of social services	1
Criticism of government policies	0
Mention of support or resources for foster parents	0
Mention of support or resources for foster children	0
Focus on the difficulties of becoming a foster family	1
Mention of potential benefits of becoming a foster family	0
Overall Tone	Negative

Figure X: Summary of Appendix Tables and Media Themes

Table No.	Content Summary	Main Theme
1	Negative portrayal of foster care	Negative
2	Criticism of social services	Critical
3	Negative portrayal of foster care	Negative
4	Positive portrayal of foster care	Positive
5	Criticism of social services	Critical
6	Positive portrayal of foster care	Positive
7	Criticism of social services	Critical
8	Negative portrayal of foster care	Negative
9	Criticism of social services	Critical
10	Negative portrayal of foster care	Negative
11	Positive portrayal of foster care	Positive
12	Mixed/Neutral portrayal	Neutral
13	Mixed/Neutral portrayal	Neutral

Figure X provides an overview of all appendix tables, summarizing each article's content focus and how it was categorized in the thematic analysis. This visual aids in understanding how patterns in tone and framing were distributed across the sample