

The Impact of Political Stance on UK Newspaper Coverage of Child and Family Social Work

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that news coverage of the social work profession plays an important role in influencing public opinion, and can damage staff morale if negative, affecting recruitment and retention of staff. Relatively little research has been done to ascertain how factors such as political stance of news outlet influence the way social workers are portrayed. The focus of this research is how child and family social workers are portrayed in eight UK national newspapers between 2018 and 2021 and whether the political stance of the newspapers influenced this. All mentions of social workers in 257 articles from eight major UK national newspapers were coded as either positive, negative, or neutral portrayals. Each article was also categorised for the social work topic it was reporting on. Quantitative analysis of the data found that the political stance of the newspaper was associated with the type of social work it reported on and there was a significant difference in the rate of both positive and negative mentions according to political stance, with right-leaning newspapers having a higher rate of negative mentions than left-leaning and left-leaning papers having a higher rate of positive mentions.

Keywords: broadsheet, child protection, child abuse, news, politics, tabloid

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Background

Research has found that media reporting of social work is influenced by the ownership of news organisations and that newspapers can represent particular political views (Rosen, 1999; Mendes, 2000, 2008; Swisher, 2003). Mendes (2000) conducted research on the impact of media reporting on child protection policies in Victoria, Australia. This showed the influence of media ownership and political loyalty on newspaper style in case studies of two daily newspapers, *The Age* and *Herald Sun*. Mendes highlighted differences in tone between *The Age*, owned by Fairfax Press, and *Herald Sun*, controlled by Rupert Murdoch and supportive of Australia's centre-right Liberal Party. Mendes's view was that as a result of media ownership and political loyalty, social workers, who serve as a symbol of the welfare state, were the target of their attack. Mendes did not describe his method, so the number of articles and timeframe are unclear. In later work, Mendes (2008) theorised that the stance of the New Right (economically liberal and socially conservative) was reflected in the British media's unfavourable portrayals of social workers. He examined how the media set agendas, influencing short-term public opinion.

Such unbalanced representations of social work in the media imply that little is understood about the reality of social work, its complexity and the multiplicity of tasks and responsibilities (Kagan, 2016). From reviewing the existing research on newspaper portrayals of social work, it is understandable why many in the profession believe social work has been unfairly singled out by the media, which has painted a skewed and unfavourable picture focusing mostly on child protection failures (Franklin and Parton, 1991, 2001; Mendes, 2001; Zugazaga *et al.*, 2006).

However, several studies throughout the years have presented a more balanced perspective on these views (Mawby *et al.*, 1979; Aldridge, 1990; Cordoba, 2017). Offering an Irish perspective, McNulty (2007) claims there is a positive aspect to media coverage, insofar as it has been an integral part of educating society on the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. Mendes (2008) also argues that media efforts contributed to the development of more effective and practical child protection laws and procedures in Australia. A 1987 media campaign influenced major restructuring of child protection services in Victoria, including a large increase in resources (Goddard, 1990).

It is evident that negative opinion of social work has been present for as long as social work roles have existed. In the UK, an association between the negative stance of press reports and a 'crisis of hegemony' in British society was made by Winter (1992). Following the Second World War, the social democratic paradigm saw the UK state seeking to reduce inequality and broaden opportunity through focusing on a welfare state and full employment. This came under greater scrutiny when the New

Right rose to prominence in the 1970s. A Thatcherite New Right philosophy of neo-liberalism emphasised the importance of the market and the individual's right to freedom. According to Winter, this ideology highlighted the purported failure and 'evils' of state intervention and the social democratic programme, implying the British way of life was in moral and economic danger. Those in social work roles were quickly demonised as one of the main products of the social democratic agenda, who were also often perceived as unaccountable. The New Right further questioned the interventionist approach of those workers who were seen as removing the rights and responsibilities of parents, the church and the wider community (Franklin and Parton, 1991). Winter (1992) argued that this ideological shift was conducive to negative news representations of social work.

Negative press coverage of child and family social work in the UK has been seen as far back as the death of Maria Colwell in 1973, which the press and public deemed to be preventable (Butler and Drakeford, 2011). The Beckford (Blom-Cooper, 1985) and Cleveland (Butler-Sloss, 1988) inquiries of the 1980s were also believed to be of interest to the media, as they highlighted errors and failings that supported the wider New Right critique of the welfare state, which the conservative newspapers were in support of. Most such inquiries criticised social workers for over-intervention, but the 'Cleveland Affair' of 1987 was the first reported story of over-intervention rather than under-intervention. This led to social workers being reported to be 'fools and wimps' for failing to protect children using authoritative intervention but also 'villain and bully' for high levels of intervention and unnecessary care placements (Lonne and Parton, 2014).

Although several studies have been conducted that analyse the portrayal of social workers in the media, little research has specifically investigated the impact of the political stance. There is a particular dearth of research into the impact this has on UK reporting. Wroe (1988) is an isolated UK example. This author noted a discrepancy between newspapers in terms of how positive their reports of social work were, finding that The Sun (populist tabloid, associated with the political Right) reported most negatively on social work and focused on providing drama, a victim, and a culprit. The Guardian (centre-left broadsheet) was noted as being the least critical of the profession.

Winter's (1992) research was a content analysis of 60 UK newspaper articles on the 1991 Orkney sexual abuse scandal, published between 28 February 1991 and 20 April 1991. This suggested the media portrayed social workers as incompetent and authoritarian, aligning with New Right ideas that the family should be preserved by reducing social work intervention. It should be noted, though, that Cleveland (Butler-Sloss, 1988) and Orkney (Clyde, 1992) were outliers, and the more typical

scenario of child protection scandal has been calls for more intervention, not less.

More recently in the UK we have seen the deaths of Star Hobson on 22 September 2020 and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes on 17 June 2020, coming on top of earlier high-profile UK cases, such as Victoria Climbié and Baby P (see Elliott, 2020). Both 2020 deaths featured deliberate violence to children (Star aged one year and Arthur six years) by step-parents, during the Covid pandemic (Curtis, 2022). It has been argued that current professional challenges, such as heavy workloads and a lack of funding, mean that professionals do not have the time, space and understanding they need to act effectively, leading to societal disappointment and an increasingly unfavourable perception of social workers (Legood *et al.*, 2016; Ravalier *et al.*, 2021).

Most previous research on media portrayals of social work or social workers has focused on 'whole texts' (e.g. Warner, 2014; Hughes and Houston, 2019). A more recent study by Leedham (2022), however, focuses more specifically on the language used. Instead of exploring the general themes of articles, Leedham coded specific mentions of social workers as positive, negative or neutral and analysed the language used to portray social workers. She adopted a total population sampling technique by compiling all UK newspaper articles in a three-month period that featured the term 'social worker(s)'. She employed the methodology of corpus linguistics, which involves computer software exploration of a corpus of text. She found neutral mentions to be the most prevalent category (69 per cent), followed by negative mentions (25 per cent) and positive (6 per cent). Leedham did not set out to compare different newspapers in terms of their political stance or any other characteristics and she notes this as a future research need. She argued that investigating how negatively the press portrays social workers and using language analysis to examine the nature of this negativity has the potential to better inform the public and the media about the difficulties the field faces and lessen the inclination to place blame.

To summarise, a review of relevant literature shows there is not a great deal of research focusing on news media representation of social work, and most of the relevant studies were conducted in the 1990s and 2000s. There is no recent research on how the political stance of newspapers affects portrayal of social work.

In light of this, we replicated some of Leedham's (2022) approach. Our study assumed that the media is important, through its authority as an information source and its influence on public perception, as argued by Reid and Misener (2001), Franklin and Parton (2014) and Searle and Patent (2013). These authors have argued that media coverage directly contributes to the climate of fear, blame and mistrust commonly experienced by the social work profession. This assumption has influenced the construction of the research questions:

- RQ1: What are the proportions of positive, negative, and neutral mentions of child and family social workers in UK newspapers?
- RQ2: Does the political stance of a newspaper affect the way it portrays child and family social workers?

Methods

Research design

This cross-sectional study's aim was to provide an overview of the depiction of social workers in the press over the four years studied. The time period (1 January 2018 to 1 January 2022) was decided on by searching for articles initially within a timeframe of one year, from 1 January 2021 to 1 January 2022, and by adding a year at a time to the search until it was felt that a manageable number of articles was discovered. The size of the study had to be manageable for a Masters-level research project, as the first author was a social work student at the time (now a qualified practitioner). The time frame yielded 2,512 articles initially but after the inclusion criteria were applied and duplicates removed, the final sample was 257 articles. It was deemed important to include articles as recent as possible to ensure the research was current, as the literature review suggested a lack of up-to-date research in this area.

Sampling and data collection

Nexis UK, an online database of newspaper articles, was used to search for and collate articles referencing social work. This database has been widely used by other researchers in content-analysis studies of newspapers (Soothill and Grover, 1997; Leedham, 2022). Eight nationally circulated newspapers were examined. These were chosen based on the papers' well-known political leaning and by type of newspaper, in order to collect a diverse sample. Although both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers were included, their inclusion was for the purpose of creating a more diverse sample and potential differences between broadsheet and tabloid reporting were not explicitly explored. Left-leaning national newspapers included were the *Guardian* and *Observer*, and the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror*. Right-leaning newspapers included were the *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph*, and *Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*. Daily and Sunday counterparts were grouped together and treated as one title. This included grouping the *Guardian* with its sibling paper the *Observer*.

Once the news outlets were chosen, the sample of news articles was identified in Nexis UK. The search term 'social work*' was used for

each of the national newspaper sources. Although this study focuses on the practitioners rather than the profession, searching for ‘social work*’ allowed for different variations of the word such as ‘social worker’ and ‘social workers’. Nexis UK also allows users to ensure a specific term is included in the articles shown. The term ‘child*’ was used, as the study was specifically focused on child and family social work. Some previous research has looked at social work as a whole, also including social work with adults. Although child and family social work and adult social work have a shared professional qualification, there is a possibility that they may be reported on differently, in light of media preoccupation with child protection (Franklin et al., 2001), hence the more specific focus.

Inclusion criteria were articles discussing social work with children and families, or the practice of these social workers, whereas Leedham (2022) had a wider scope of the portrayal of all kinds of social workers. Articles were not deemed relevant if discussing what a social worker had done in their private lives, with no relevance to their practice, or if the article merely had a social worker commenting on some element of an unrelated news story. News articles, editorials and features were all included in this study; however, articles that appeared to be advertisements such as by local authorities’ social services, or articles promoting fostering, were not included for analysis as this was paid-for recruitment material. Visual images were not considered. Although these have an important impact on readers, and are included in some media research, only a minority of stories had associated images so we decided to focus only on the consistent element of written content.

To reduce the possibility of researcher bias, the articles were downloaded with newspaper name omitted and therefore only included the title of the article and the article text. The original list of articles with the newspaper they came from was kept and once the analysis was complete the article was cross-referenced with the original list to identify its original source.

Content analysis

As previously noted, much of the available research on the topic of newspaper portrayal of social work considers whole texts either through systematic studies of articles (Mendes, 2000, 2008) or through ratings of whole texts (Reid and Misener, 2001). Our study had two parts. We used whole texts for categorising the overall topic or theme of the article, to consider whether the type of social work generally discussed might vary by political stance. We also focused on specific references in the text to social workers—what we term ‘mentions’, following Leedham (2022), to see if these were positive, neutral or negative. Mentions can appear several times in one article. The terms ‘social worker’ or ‘social workers’ were searched for, using Microsoft Word, in each article that

met the inclusion criteria. Each use of either of those terms was located and, following Leedham (2022), the sentence including those terms was extracted, along with the sentence before and after—this group constituted a mention. There were instances where there were multiple mentions in the three sentences, though there were no instances of more than one mention in a single sentence. Each mention was considered individually, regardless of whether it also formed part of another mention group. As noted earlier, Leedham's (2022) study used corpus linguistic software to identify mentions rather than manual extraction, as in our study. All mentions were copied into Excel and the first author manually coded these as positive, negative, or neutral, following Leedham (2022) and also Reid and Misener (2001) who coded headlines in this way. The rate of mentions per article was calculated (see next section). Visual images were not viewed so did not influence coding.

Examples of positive mentions included social workers being depicted as concerned or helpful, having learnt from lessons, or the article acknowledging social workers as professionals and promoting support for social workers to do their roles effectively. Examples of negative mentions included social workers being corrupt or bullies, needing to learn lessons and social workers being ineffectual and not taking action. Examples of neutral mentions from the articles included describing the roles of a social worker and describing the impact of Covid restrictions on practice.

Each whole article from the final sample was also categorised by topic—i.e. the type of social work it generally discussed or the overall theme of the article. Five categories were identified.

The first author was at the time a social work student, so was likely to have a positive view of the role of social workers, which may have influenced how she coded the depictions. Reflexivity, and acknowledgement of positionality (Whitaker and Atkinson, 2021) were therefore important. Classification of each mention of social worker(s) as positive, negative or neutral was a subjective decision-making process. When coding the mentions as positive, negative or neutral the first author would initially read the mention along with the sentence before and after, and manually code these without considering external factors. She would then reread the sentence and consider which thematic category the mention fell under, and consider whether this changed the context of the mention and subsequently the coding of the mention. If she struggled to code the depictions as positive negative or neutral, then she asked herself how a layperson reading the depiction would view it.

The original coding was done by a single coder, as is conventional for a university degree. In helping to turn dissertation into journal article, the second author, who supervised the Masters research, coded a sample without seeing the first author's coding, to check agreement. A Kappa statistic was calculated, which allows for the possibility of chance agreement. The weighted version of this gives more credit for a closer

difference between raters, e.g. one rater positive, one neutral (rather than one positive, one negative). For the positive-neutral-negative coding, a systematic random sample of 20 per cent of mentions was double-rated and the weighted Kappa statistic was 0.698, suggesting substantial agreement. For the categorising of article topics/themes, an inter-rating reliability check was made on a systematic random sample of 20 per cent of whole articles and the unweighted Kappa statistic was 0.805, again indicating substantial agreement.

As the agreement was substantial, for the small number of mentions and articles where the raters disagreed, the original coding was not changed. It would have been inappropriate to have changed the coding of only those disputed instances that happened to have fallen into the 20 per cent sample.

Statistical analysis

It was important to account for the impact of varying word lengths on the number of mentions of social workers, because some newspapers have a distinctive reporting style, such as shorter articles in tabloids. To account for this variation, the rates of mentions per 10,000 words was calculated, for the positive, negative and neutral coding.

Three two-tailed independent samples *t*-tests were conducted. The first tested for an association between the rate of positive mentions of social workers per article and the political stance of the newspaper (left or right-leaning); the second repeated this for negative mentions and the third for neutral mentions. These tests were completed using MS Excel software.

Before completing the *t*-tests, we needed to ascertain whether the data sets had equal or unequal variances, due to left and right-leaning samples being different sizes. The variance was calculated for each data set (positive, negative and neutral mentions) using the Excel function = VAR.S. The tests for equal variance found that all three data sets could be assumed to have equal population variances, so use of an independent samples *t*-test could be justified.

With the coding of the social work theme discussed in the whole article (one of five different categories) a Chi-square test of independence was conducted, to explore whether the political stance of the newspapers was associated with theme of social work reports and also whether theme of article was associated with the likelihood of positive, negative or neutral mentions.

Results

As seen in [Table 1](#), there were 141 articles in left-leaning newspapers and 106 in right-leaning, with the number per newspaper title ranging from 7 to 80.

Table 1. Number of articles in the sample and total word count per newspaper.

Newspaper	Number of articles	Total word count of sample
<u>Left-leaning papers</u>		
The Guardian	80	66,917
The Observer	16	14,963
The Mirror (including Sunday counterpart)	45	27,926
Total	141	109,806
<u>Right-leaning papers</u>		
The Daily Telegraph	53	29,709
The Sunday Telegraph	7	2,658
The Daily Mail (including Sunday counterpart)	56	38,553
Total	106	70,920

What are the proportions of positive, negative, and neutral mentions of social workers in UK newspapers?

There was a total of 772 mentions of ‘social worker(s)’ over the 257 articles. In the whole corpus, classifying the instances of ‘social worker(s)’ into ‘positive’, ‘negative’ and ‘neutral’ mentions gave 14 per cent of instances as positive ($n = 111$), 51 per cent of instances as negative ($n = 394$) and 35 per cent ($n = 267$) as neutral. It should be noted that there were some dominating cases reported on during the four-year time frame of the studied articles, namely the 2020 deaths of Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes (noted in the background section) that were reported on in 2021. The circumstances of these cases were likely to attract negative reporting about social work.

Does the political stance of a newspaper impact on the way it portrays social work?

Positive, negative and neutral mentions of social work

As can be seen in Table 2, the right-leaning newspapers mentioned social workers at a rate of 19.8 times per 10,000 words, whilst the left-leaning newspapers mentioned social workers at a rate of 17.6 times per 10,000 words.

t-Tests showed evidence of significant differences in the rate (per 10,000 words) of positive and negative mentions of social workers according to the publication’s political stance. The rate of positive mentions in the 141 articles in left-leaning papers (mean 11.05, SD 23.17), compared with the rate in the 116 articles in right-leaning papers (mean 4.15, SD 14.79) was significantly higher: $t(255) = 2.78$, $p = 0.006$. The rate of negative mentions in the 141 articles in left-leaning papers (mean 20.52, SD 26.16), compared with the rate in the 116 articles in

Table 2. Overall rate (per 10,000 words) of mentions of social work: Positive, negative, neutral and all.

	Positive	Negative	Neutral	All
Rate for all articles in whole corpus	7.94	26.29	21.61	18.61
Rate for left-leaning newspapers (all articles combined)	11.05	20.52	21.25	17.61
Rate for right-leaning newspapers (all articles combined)	4.15	33.30	22.05	19.83

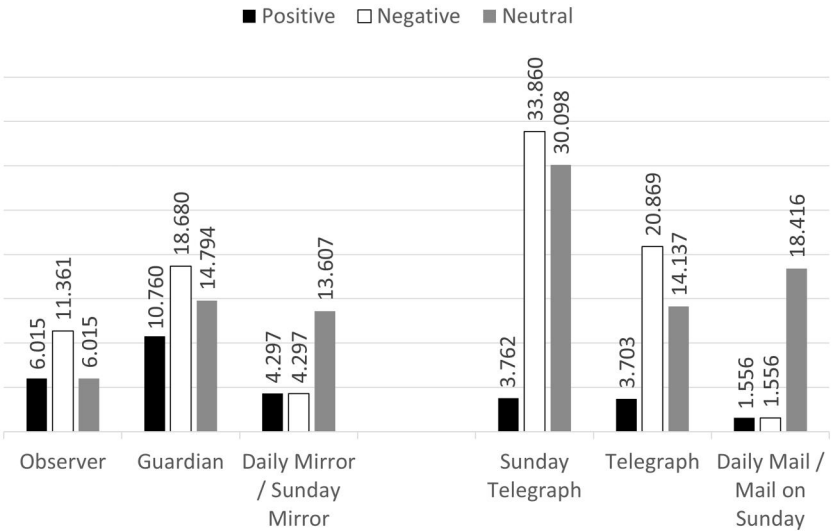


Figure 1. The overall rate per 10,000 words of social worker mentions in each newspaper: Positive, negative and neutral.

right-leaning papers (mean 33.30, SD 42.98) was significantly lower: $t(255) = -2.93$, $p = 0.004$. There was no difference between left-leaning (mean 21.25, SD 39.28) and right-leaning papers (mean 22.05, SD 40.00) in the rate of neutral mentions: $t(255) = -0.16$, $p = 0.87$. Figure 1 shows the rate of positive, neutral and negative mentions in each newspaper.

Topic of social work reporting

Generally, the findings confirm the assumption that the news media has a particular preoccupation with child abuse, particularly when resulting in a child's death. Each of the 257 articles were categorised by topic—i. e. the type of social work they generally discussed, or the overall theme of the article. Five categories were inductively created: fostering/adoption; child protection cases; child murder/deaths; factors affecting social work practice; and other social work.

Table 3. Articles per topic in left-leaning, right-leaning and all newspapers.

		Child protection cases	Factors affecting social work	Fostering/ adoption	Other social work	Child murders/ deaths	Total
Left-leaning newspapers	<i>n</i>	19	37	27	27	31	141
	%	13.5	26.2	19.5	19.2	22.0	100
Right-leaning newspapers	<i>n</i>	27	2	26	22	39	116
	%	23.3	1.7	22.4	19.0	33.6	100
All newspapers	<i>n</i>	46	39	53	49	70	257
	%	17.9	15.2	20.6	19.1	27.2	100

χ^2 statistic comparing left- and right-leaning papers = 32.12 ($p < 0.001$).

Articles categorised in the theme of 'factors affecting social work practice' included 'Fears of new Baby P after social workers tell of overload' from The Daily Mirror, 'The Observer view on Britain's shamefully inadequate children's services; Cash-starved councils are being forced to cut the early interventions that might keep vulnerable children out of care' from The Observer, and 'More than 1,000 children referred to social services daily' from The Telegraph.

The category 'other social work' included articles such as 'Social workers drafted into schools to spot signs of abuse; Harm risk' by The Telegraph and 'Hard truths told in a gentle way: how life story books help adopted children; Life story books can help adopted children understand their past, but are often not prioritised by social workers' from The Guardian. The theme of 'other social work' also included any articles which did not fit into any other category, e.g. themes such as social work education and general assessments. Some articles did fit multiple thematic categories, and this did caused difficulties with categorisation. This was seen most frequently with articles discussing the death of a child. If an article mentioned the death or murder of a child, but this was not considered to be the presiding theme, it was categorised as something else, with the dominant theme of the article used to categorise it.

Table 3 shows that for the right-leaning newspapers the observed percentage of articles categorised as having the theme of 'child murders/deaths' was 34 per cent. The next largest category 'child protection cases' was 23 per cent of articles. Reporters for these right-leaning newspapers appear to be writing more articles on child murders and death than any of the four other categories. The smallest category theme for the right-leaning newspapers was factors affecting social work. Two right-leaning articles had this as their predominant theme, making up only 2 per cent of the overall right-leaning articles. For left-leaning papers, the largest category was 'factors affecting social work' (26 per cent), followed by 'child murders/deaths' (22 per cent). These findings

Table 4. Number and percentage of positive, negative and neutral mentions of social workers per article theme.

Article theme	Number of articles	Positive mentions (n and %) ^a	Negative mentions (n and %)	Neutral mentions (n and %)	Total mentions (n and %)
All articles combined					
Fostering/adoption	53	18 (14%)	76 (58%)	36 (27%)	130 (100%)
Child protection cases	46	13 (11%)	71 (58%)	38 (31%)	122 (100%)
Child murder/deaths	70	14 (6%)	142 (64%)	65 (29%)	221 (100%)
Factors affecting social work practice	39	48 (31%)	37 (24%)	72 (46%)	157 (100%)
Other social work	49	18 (13%)	68 (48%)	56 (39%)	142 (100%)
χ^2					84.40, $p < 0.001$
Total					772
Right-leaning articles					
Fostering/adoption	26	3 (4%)	42 (60%)	25 (36%)	70 (100%)
Child protection cases	27	5 (7%)	35 (50%)	30 (43%)	70 (100%)
Child murder/deaths	39	2 (2%)	83 (70%)	33 (28%)	118 (100%)
Factors affecting social work practice	2	1	0	1	2
Other social work	22	7 (9%)	35 (47%)	32 (43%)	74 (100%)
χ^2					23.88, $p < 0.01$
Total					334
Left-leaning articles					
Fostering/adoption	27	15 (25%)	34 (57%)	11 (18%)	60 (100%)
Child protection cases	19	8 (15%)	36 (69%)	8 (15%)	52 (100%)
Child murder/deaths	31	12 (12%)	59 (57%)	32 (31%)	103 (100%)
Factors affecting social work practice	37	47 (30%)	37 (24%)	71 (46%)	155 (100%)
Other social work	27	11 (16%)	33 (49%)	24 (35%)	68 (100%)
χ^2					56.43, $p < 0.001$
Total					438

^aAll percentages are row percentages.

echo previous studies of press portrayals of social work and show differences between left and right-leaning reporting.

The Chi-square test of independence suggested a significant association between the political stance of the newspaper and the social work themes it reports on.

Table 4 shows the breakdown of positive, negative and neutral mentions per topic for left- and right-leaning newspapers and for all newspaper articles combined. It is clear from the table that for articles categorised in what could be considered less emotive topics, such as other social work, factors affecting social work practice and fostering/adoption, there seems to be more of a balance between the three categories of positive, negative and neutral mentions. Unsurprisingly for the articles discussing child protection cases or child deaths and murders, the coding of mentions is far less balanced. In the ‘child murder/deaths’ articles, 57 per cent of all mentions of social workers in the left-leaning

newspapers were negative and 70 per cent were negative in the same theme category for the right-leaning newspapers. The article theme/topic with the highest proportion of positive coded mention of social workers was factors affecting social work. This was true for the left-leaning papers (30 per cent of all mentions) and the right-leaning papers had only one article in this category so percentages are not meaningful. For all papers combined, under the category of factors affecting social work, 31 per cent of these mentions were positive and 46 per cent were neutral. Factors affecting social work was the only category where the number of positive mentions and the number of neutral mentions exceeded the number of negative mentions. Chi-square tests indicate a relationship between article topic and the categorisation of social worker mentions, for right- and left-leaning papers separately and also for the whole sample.

Examples of reports

Many of the articles outlined the errors made by social workers, possibly in an attempt to justify and strengthen the attribution of blame prevalent within the articles. Social work was not usually the main focus of the reporting; child deaths were often the reason for the article and social work was mentioned due to its association with the event. Perhaps because of this, little discernible detail was provided about what social workers actually do.

Quotation 1: Text from an article in The Guardian.

‘The reports criticise social workers’ overly optimistic assessments.’ –
The Guardian view on failures to protect children: the buck stops
where? Two reports about the circumstances surrounding the murders of
two children in Northamptonshire beg as many questions as they answer.
– 9 June 2019

Many of the articles portray social workers as careless and generally incapable of doing their duties. The profession is often considered to be built on social control (Franklin and Parton, 1991) and reporters frequently criticised social workers’ capacity to successfully carry out their social control duty by either overreacting or responding too slowly. Interestingly, The Guardian was the only newspaper to truly acknowledge the vilification of social workers by the media.

Quotation 2: Text from an article in The Guardian.

‘We are too ready to make social workers the perennial scapegoats when things go wrong’. – We need to protect all frontline workers; A mental health support worker on looking after patients without proper PPE and two parents concerned for their social worker and care worker children.
– 5 April 2020

The notion that social workers are professionals was mostly only presented by the left-leaning papers. This included any mentions of them being esteemed as knowledgeable or educated.

Quotation 3: Text from an article in *The Mirror*.

We also need to move the narrative away from social workers “stealing” children, to social workers being registered professionals holding the same status as teachers and police officers.’ – We need support and more funding. – 15 December 2021

The *Daily Mirror* criticised the narrative often used by the media when discussing social work.

Discussion

This research posed the question of whether the political stance of the newspaper would have an impact on the way it portrays social work, to address a gap in existing research. The results suggest that the political stance of the newspapers does in fact affect the way that it portrays social work. Articles in right-leaning papers had a significantly higher rate of negative mentions than articles in left-leaning papers and there was a significantly higher rate of positive mentions of social workers in articles in left-leaning papers than in right-leaning.

The prevailing negative representation of social work in the media was highlighted by the quantitative results overall. As previously mentioned, Franklin and Parton (1991) outline that in the UK the emergence of the New Right caused social workers to be demonised by arguing that liberal/left politicians and welfare policies have undermined and removed the rights and responsibilities of parents and the wider community. This ideology and conservatives’ view on the welfare state (Conservative Party, 2019) may attribute to the more negative reporting by right-leaning papers still seen in the UK today, although it is important to acknowledge that much of the reporting on child abuse cases is concerned with social work’s lack of intervention rather than excessive state intervention.

From a professional’s perspective, addressing the media scapegoating of social workers is important for social work. Franklin and Parton found that scapegoating ‘misdirects attention and obscures the possibilities for analysing the root causes of abuse’ (1991, p. 26). Perhaps the *Guardian*’s attempts at critically addressing the vilification and scapegoating of social workers may be an important step towards more accurate and reliable reporting on social work issues (although we note it is also possible for reporting to be negative and accurate). Wroe (1988) also found that the *Guardian* was the least critical of the profession. Some recognition of factors affecting social work, including the impact

of austerity, is welcome, albeit this category of articles was the least prevalent overall (but the most prevalent in left-leaning newspapers).

Limitations

Future research may seek to identify further possible differences between newspapers owing to them being either a broadsheet or tabloid paper—an issue not considered in our study. The sample only includes a selection of national newspapers, not all titles. This means that the sample is not representative of all UK newspapers. Another limitation of this study was that it focused on a specific type of social work reporting. Comparing the reporting of child and family social work with adult social work would be an interesting development to the current research.

There was often a sole mention of 'social worker(s)' in an article. However, those articles that portrayed social workers negatively overall tended to have multiple mentions of social workers, some of which may be individually neutral. Counting mentions rather than articles for the positive-neutral-negative analysis may therefore have augmented the impression of negative reporting.

The reporting was affected by two dominant cases—Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson—that were likely to attract negative reporting of social work. It would be important to repeat this research for a different time-frame that might be less dominated by a small number of shocking cases.

Future implications

Media outlets have a responsibility to engage with social services and social work professional bodies to seek a more informed view of the profession. In addition to this, there is room for social work organisations to proactively engage to help improve media coverage. Initiatives to improve how social work is portrayed in the media should be viewed as a component of maximising the profession's effectiveness (Reid and Misener, 2001). Whilst some journalists have urged the implementation of a proactive public relations strategy, social workers have argued that journalists lack the expertise to report on issues appropriately (Franklin and Parton, 1991). However, a lack of social work cooperation with press inquiries, a refusal to provide background material or the availability of reliable spokespersons to interview leaves the media with significant gaps in their story (Ayre, 2001). Training social workers and students to collaborate with the media in an ethical and balanced manner to highlight both the profession's difficulties and achievements could be helpful (Westwood, 2014).

British Association of Social Workers (BASW) (2022) has published guidance for journalists reporting on social work, aiming to shape more informed coverage. Journalists might produce a more objective report with less blame culture created if they are more aware of the difficulties and uncertainties associated with the role (Reid and Misener, 2001), which our research has shown receives relatively little coverage currently. A positive move is the BASW/Social Work Union award established in 2022 for media portrayal of social workers.

It must be noted that the media also comments on repeated and persistent errors in practice, highlighted in numerous serious case and child practice reviews over the years. Although much reporting by the news is negative and often defamatory, there can also be some important messages, about similar mistakes happening and the lack of learning from serious case reviews.

Concluding comments

The public has relatively little contact with social workers, compared with more universal public services, and so have been found to base their opinions on what they hear or read in the media (Revans, 2007; McCulloch and Webb, 2020). The negative discourse and blame culture that currently surround the profession are reinforced and perpetuated when social workers are portrayed negatively in the media, and this is highly likely to further affect current recruitment and retention difficulties (Local Government Association, 2023).

This research supports previous findings that news portrayal of social workers is fairly negative and argues that the political stance of a newspaper does impact on the way it reports on social work matters and depicts social workers.

Negative press makes social workers' problems worse by undermining their ability to build trust with those they are trying to help, in some cases subjecting them to abuse and threats on both a physical and emotional level. To guarantee that more people are aware of what social workers can do, or have done, to aid the most vulnerable, and to foster trust in a crucial profession, more accurate unbiased reporting on the role social workers play in any individual situation is necessary.

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