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Still the ‘trusty anvil’?: media perspectives on adoption reform in England

Abstract

Although media influence has long been recognised within adoption, there has been relatively little research into the nature of coverage. This article focuses on press articles from five national daily newspapers and their Sunday sister papers in the years 2010-14. This broadly coincides with the period of coalition government and the focus is on its reform programme. Findings reveal strong support for the government’s reform programme, its rationale within child welfare and many of its specific measures, but additionally divisions between newspapers, with critical comment found almost entirely within one pairing.

Particular themes developed are those of excessive bureaucracy and politically motivated opposition to adoption. Race and ethnicity emerge as the most frequently covered issues, dominated by critique of barriers to transracial adoption. Principal themes are often developed with inaccurate, misleading or exaggerated reporting, which in turn raises the question of how adoption agencies might respond to this.

Key words: adoption reform; media; bureaucracy; political correctness; race and ethnicity; international adoption

With its combination of ‘human interest’ and intersection with contentious social and political issues, adoption has always held the capacity to generate ‘newsworthy’ stories. In turn, sections of the media have taken a keen interest in adoption and there are well-known examples of policy influence. However, to date, there has been very limited analysis of media coverage, including of adoption policy, the focus of this article.

Attention to media treatment of social work has been more extensive, characterised by a strong focus on children and families and a fairly unremitting hostility towards social workers, likened by Franklin (1998:4) to a ‘journalistic blood sport’. While this may partially reflect the power of ‘bad news’ and the often distressing or tragic nature of the events involved, analysts have argued that a common element is ‘the opportunity to disparage social workers’ (Franklin and Parton, 1991:8). This has been explained as politically driven, with (a right wing) media regarding social work as contributing to welfare state dependency, imbued

with ‘political correctness’ and representative of the ‘loony left’ or its legacy (Alridge, 1999; Gaughan and Garrett, 2012; Warner, 2014). However, it has also been argued that social work agencies’ failure to engage effectively with the media has added to their vulnerability and negative public image (Fry, 1991; Galilee, 2005; Conservative Party Commission on Social Workers, 2007; Stanfield and Beddoe, 2013). Moreover, as Jones (2012) contends, it would be wrong to engage in a parallel demonisation of media organisations and journalists who may legitimately believe that their reporting is exposing bad practice and rendering state agencies accountable.

Press influence on adoption policy has often been noted, whether in New Labour’s interest in adoption reform being revealed as in part a response to the Daily Mail’s campaigning (Garrett, 2002), or the more recent example of the Times newspaper’s commissioning of Martin Narey to write a report on adoption and his almost contemporaneous appointment as the government’s adviser on adoption. Strongly critical reporting of adoption has mirrored that of child protection, providing in the words of Douglas and Philpot (2003:170), a ‘trustworthy anvil’ on which to beat social work. This commentary can be seen to have grown during the 1990s as critique of ‘political correctness’ became more prominent (Franklin, 1998) and by the mid-2000s, Allen (2007:9) observed that ‘adoption has been well and truly captured by the political and media worlds’. Despite this powerful presence, relevant research has been scant, with notable exceptions the treatment of international and domestic adoption in the US (Jacobson, 2013; Potter, 2013) international adoption in Spain (Anzil, 2013) and portrayal of adopted children in Britain (Maxwell and Cooke, 2014).

Beyond ‘academic’ interest, it is pertinent to consider the impact of media reporting on adoption. Here too, there has been limited research, notably on either audience interpretations or consequences. At a macro policy level, it is reasonable to assume significant influence, both in the examples given above and sometimes from negative reporting which has seemed

to weaken government enthusiasm for adoption (Biehal et al, 2010). Drawing from wider literature on child protection, it can be argued that the media contribute significantly to agenda setting, problem framing, resource allocation and climate and may indirectly shape practice (Franklin and Parton, 1991; Gough, 1996; Ayre, 2001). Anzil (2013) has argued that coverage serves to promote ‘collective imaginaries’ regarding the nature and operation of adoption, while both Jacobson (2013) and Ali (2014) have found evidence of media influence over perceptions and choices of prospective adopters.

The Study

The press coverage below focuses on the coalition government’s adoption reform programme and is drawn from a wider database of adoption articles in five national daily newspapers (plus their Sunday sister papers) for the years 2010-14. The key criterion for article inclusion was that direct reference was made to the reforms either in general terms, or to at least one specific reform measure. Articles were also included where they formed part of a suite focusing on the reforms – e.g. where reportage of reform to the law on ethnicity and adoption was accompanied by an article on this topic. The requirement for direct reference would clearly serve to exclude some coverage of related topics (for example child protection or looked after children) but this was seen as necessary to ensure some manageable parameters. Articles were accessed via the LexisNexis database, which makes full text available but not original layout or pictures. The five newspaper pairings were as follows:

Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday

Times/Sunday Times

Guardian/Observer

Sun/Sun on Sunday

Daily Mirror/Sunday Mirror

and were chosen to offer a spread in terms of the newspaper market (quality; mid-market; red top/tabloid) and political leanings. In analysing content from different outlets, their internal diversity must be acknowledged, whether due to the perspectives of individual writers or the nature of the article as an editorial, op-ed, feature, column or news reporting. However, it is also the case that newspapers are highly attuned to their readership (Fowler, 1991) and this relationship ensures that judgements of ‘newsworthiness’ are typically operationalised in accordance with newspapers’ readership demographics and political agendas (Richardson, 2007).

The primary research question was to gauge the extent and basis of press support for (or opposition to) adoption reform, both in general (the desire to increase and accelerate adoption) and specific measures. Articles were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) which works to reduce data through a combination of quantitative and qualitative (interpretive) coding. The main aim was to provide an overview of coverage, although there are inevitably a number of themes that would subsequently merit closer scrutiny.

Findings

[insert Table 1 here]

Table 1 show the total number of adoption reform focused articles with the respective Sunday newspaper contributions in brackets. In all, 361 stories were identified, representing 23 per cent of all adoption stories during the period. As can be seen, slightly over half of these came from the Times stable, reflecting the daily paper's central campaigning role and representing 35 per cent of its adoption coverage. The corresponding figures for the tabloid Sun and Mirror were 13 and 7 per cent respectively (and these were typically much shorter articles). For all papers, the time trend was broadly similar with a sharp spike and peak reached in 2011 (when there was a reform focus in almost half of all articles) followed by steady decline. Of the 361 articles, 216 were categorised as wholly focused on (at least some aspect of) adoption reform, whereas the remainder comprise a spectrum from adoption reform as a major, through to relatively minor, element.

Franklin (1998) noted that reporting of social work was characterised by a core of prolific journalists but also with many single articles and this was replicated here. Approximately half of by-lined articles were sole contributions. Two journalists stood out in terms of the volume of outputs, the Daily Mail (hereafter Mail)'s Steve Doughty (responsible for 22 articles in total) and the Times's Rosemary Bennett with 61 articles and several further joint authorships. The closeness of the Times's relationship with Martin Narey was apparent in his writing 11 articles for the paper in addition to being extensively quoted.

Stances on reform

Articles were analysed first, in terms of whether they were largely 'opinion' pieces (including editorials or columns) or reporting (notably facts or the opinions of others) and second in terms of support for reform. The latter is clearly easier to discern in opinion pieces but was also often implicit in the selection of facts/opinions for reporting and their 'framing'. Overall,

coverage was strongly supportive of reform. Of 134 opinion pieces, 99 (74 per cent) were identifiably supportive, 27 (20 per cent) were critical, with the remainder evenly balanced. Of more ‘factual’ reporting, over 80 per cent of the 227 articles were framed essentially in a supportive way, typically by highlighting perceived problems within the adoption system and setting out the government’s attempts to address them. Only 6 per cent of these articles were framed as critical of the reforms, with 13 per cent broadly neutral/balanced. Included within the ‘factual’ grouping were 39 articles that drew significantly on the experiences of members of the adoption triangle. With a few exceptions, these were almost entirely supportive of reform. They included personal accounts of adoption and adoptive family life from government ministers, Michael Gove and Edward Timpson, and involvement in reforms such as adoption parties or fostering for adoption. A small number of articles focused on adopted adults, almost all involving transracial adoption to which we return below. Most, however, recounted the experiences of the assessment process from ‘belligerently aggrieved’ (Garrett, 2017) (prospective) adopters, with a particular trope of being driven abroad by the failings of domestic adoption.

Framing adoption reform

The major frames for stories (to be discussed further below) were reflected both in general contributions which combined key themes and more focused treatments. The dominant themes were of a system which was bureaucratic and deeply imbued with ‘political correctness’, resulting in adoptions that were too few and too protracted. Adoption numbers framed 32 articles, and reflected the ebbs and flows over the period. The bureaucratic nature of the adoption system provided the main focus for 37 articles, while related issues of poor local authority performance (and the associated ‘naming and shaming’) and rejection or

deterrence of adopters were central in a further 25 and 10 articles respectively. Adoption support was the main focus of 17 articles. By far the most frequently mentioned issue, however, was that of race and ethnicity, referred to in over 200 articles and the primary focus in 56. The wider umbrella term of ‘political correctness’ can be seen as the main frame for 30 articles and appeared or was implicit in many more.

Adoption by numbers

Statistical evidence was featured in 220 (61 per cent) of the articles to support key lines of argument. The most frequent citations are presented in Table 2.

[insert Table 2 here]

Given the overall support for reform, it is unsurprising that adoption figures were presented negatively or positively dependent on their scale and trajectories. The desirability of higher levels of adoption went almost entirely unquestioned. Errors and misleading presentation were not uncommon. One of the most important was the blurring of boundaries between adoption (in all its forms) and that from state care, with contemporary figures for the latter frequently juxtaposed with dramatically higher overall ones from the 1970s to demonstrate the ‘scandalous’ or ‘disastrous’ decline in adoption (but implicitly from care).

Britain has experienced a dangerous collapse in the number of children being adopted from care. In 1970, more than 20,000 children found permanent new families through

adoption. [overall adoptions] Last year, the number had fallen to just 3,200. [the figure for looked after children] (Bennett, 2011a)

In a small number of these cases, there is modest recognition of a changing climate in terms of illegitimacy and voluntary relinquishment (though no reference to relative/step parent adoption), but in a majority of cases, readers are simply left with the comparison. Such reporting was particularly prominent in the Mail and the Times, but also featured in the Guardian (Batty, 2011). It was accompanied by a narrative (following the Narey (2011) report) that links the fall strongly to social work practice, claiming an ‘anti-adoption culture’ or adoption’s ‘going out of fashion’ (Thompson, 2010; Doughty, 2011a). Blurring continued in contemporary reporting where Office for National Statistics figures for overall adoptions at historically low levels were ‘explained’ in terms of the barriers to adoption from care (e.g. Harding, 2011), when that form of adoption has been significantly higher in recent years than in the peak era for adoption numbers.

Another noteworthy feature is the frequent racialisation of statistics, whereby general movements are linked to the ‘ban’ on transracial adoption or its ‘lifting’ – ‘Adoptions hit 20-year record as mixed race rule is eased’ (Doughty, 2013) - despite little proportionate movement in adoption rates by ethnicity (Hill, 2011). Ethnicised breakdowns of adoption rates and timescales were frequently misreported, almost invariably to exaggerate disparities, for example, overstating Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) representation on the adoption register (Oliver, 2013). Reporting of delays was the most prolific example, with over 20 articles (across almost all papers) referring to BAME children as a group taking three times longer to be adopted. The relevant statistic was that the adoption of Black children took approximately 40 per cent longer than for white children (for mixed race children the figure was 10 per cent, while for Asian children adoptions were quicker) (Department for

Education, 2011). These reports included a Times (2011a) editorial playing on the idea of Barack Obama as a potential mixed race adoptee in Britain, in which readers are told that he would have probably waited three times longer than a white peer. Importantly, on the question of adoption rates, in none of the articles was there any questioning of what might lie behind any disparities – such as different routes out of, or within care – and both the presumed cause (the ‘ban’ on TRA) and consequence (children languishing in care) went unchallenged (Owen and Statham, 2009).

Red tape and delay

The related themes of excessive bureaucracy and placements delayed or denied were central to characterisation of the adoption system as, in the Times’s oft-repeated term ‘broken’. In an interplay between press and politicians, bureaucratic elements or hurdles were regularly described as ‘absurd’, ‘ridiculous’, or ‘ludicrous’. Reporting of reforms correspondingly highlighted the dynamism of politicians as they ‘sweep away’ or ‘rip up’ petty rules, and ‘tear down’ barriers. The rapid rise of adoptions between 2011 and 2014 was regularly hailed as evidence that this de-bureaucratisation was taking place (Bennett, 2012a; Doughty, 2014).

Where specific delaying factors were mentioned, the court system was cited in several articles, but the most frequent references were ‘rules’ relating to ethnicity, class, age, smoking or obesity. Thus, in media and political critique, the themes of bureaucracy and ‘political correctness’ were often coupled and intertwined (Mooney, 2011).

Franklin (1998) reported that coverage of social workers was more consistently negative than social services agencies, but this was not found in the present study. Both local authorities and social workers were described in, for the most part (and with the partial exception of the Guardian/Observer’s more balanced coverage) similarly negative system terms - (e.g.

‘grotesque farce’, Times 2011b, ‘close to obscene’, Times 2011c). The narrative of an ‘anti-adoption’ culture in social work was developed through the twin themes of favouring care in birth families ‘at any cost’, while being ‘unwelcoming’ of prospective adopters and frequently rejecting them for trivial or politically motivated reasons (Thompson, 2010).

The assessment process was highlighted in many articles, especially in the Mail and Times and often drawing on applicants’ own testimony (Times, 2012a). These accounts critiqued assessment for its over-complex nature, intrusiveness and perceived ‘absurdities’ (primarily ‘political correctness’, but also concerns with health and safety and pets) (Bennett and Taylor, 2011a; Driscoll, 2012). Several contributions highlighted a climate of suspicion (‘treated like criminals’ (Polini, 2011) or ‘paedophiles’ (Thompson, 2010)), while others portrayed assessment in Kafkaesque terms (Sugden, 2010), with applicants facing ‘trick questions’ (Bennett, 2011b). Barnardo’s CEO Anne-Marie Carrie’s observation that ‘they wouldn’t let you adopt your own kids’ was widely quoted. There is, of course, no way of knowing the ‘accuracy’ of such reports, but perhaps more significant is how as a genre, they dominated coverage of adoption assessment.

Counter narratives were very much in the minority, although some ‘negative’ coverage would also include mention of ‘good’ local authorities or social workers. A few articles (almost all in the Guardian) showed ‘sympathy’ with local authorities, in particular the context of cuts and rising demand for services, while others recognised the difficult challenges faced by social workers (Muir, 2012). Greater exposure of social workers, for example through TV documentaries, appeared to generate a much more sympathetic picture of their work (Bennett, 2011c). This could also apply to the press themselves as in Midgely’s (2011) ‘ethnographic’ and nuanced treatment of adoption practice for the Times, which stood in stark contrast with the paper’s overall treatment. Other rare challenges

(again mostly in the Guardian/Observer) questioned the government's adoption drive and the consequences of speed and, contrary to majority reporting, suggested that there were genuine difficulties in finding adoptive families (Guardian, 2013).

In system terms, local authorities were (in approximately 20 articles) taken to task for their failure to seek adoptive families (sufficiently) through voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs). The former's presumed cost-saving rationale was widely critiqued as misguided in view of the potential long term savings (and child welfare gains) of adoption. In the context of their financial vulnerability, VAAs' good record of placement finding and support was rightly highlighted, if occasionally exaggerated (Times, 2010a). Crucially, they escaped the largely unrelenting criticism directed towards local authorities, including for 'political correctness', perhaps reflecting dominant press dispositions towards the public and third sectors (Douglas and Philpot, 2003).

Political correctness

Excluding race and ethnicity (discussed in the following section), 'political correctness' themes arose in a number of areas, and featured significantly in all papers other than the Guardian/Observer where the coverage was negligible. The core message was that 'politics trumps love' (Marrin, 2012).

Treatment of sexual orientation was very mixed, perhaps reflecting wider 'acceptance' of same sex adoption over time, but also the support of key actors such as Gove and Narey. However, there was also negative comment. The Mail was highly critical of the equalities legislation that had led Catholic adoption agencies unwilling to approve same sex applicants to close or split from the Church, and highlighted the negative impact on adoption (in one

instance using it to ‘explain’ falling adoption numbers) (Doughty, 2010). Three of the five papers quoted (without any comment) a couple who claimed to have been rejected as ‘too heterosexual’ (in addition to being white and middle class), but a Mail (2011a) editorial made the clearest connection:

meanwhile, the aforesaid politically-correct social workers, while eager to promote gay adoption, continue to disapprove of white couples adopting a child from a different ethnic background.

Reporting of social class showed an interesting paradox. On the one hand, it overwhelmingly confirmed the middle class nature of adoption, while also claiming a deep-seated bias against such applicants, who are put ‘at the bottom of the pile’ (Doughty, 2010). Significantly, there was no mention (or hint) of working class adoption within any of the 361 articles and the two tabloid newspapers showed no interest in any class discrimination. The Times (2011d), by contrast, noted that its readers had communicated ‘particular sympathy’ for those turned down because they were too white or middle class. Beyond regular claims that this was widespread, there were nearly 20 personal accounts (particularly in the Times and Mail) feeding a narrative of ‘decent couples’ with professional careers and nice homes being rejected (Sugden, 2010). The class position of applicants was also indexed in the context of alleged bullying by social workers (Doughty, 2011b), as was the political nature of the abuse, with references to the ‘crime’ of being (white) middle class (Sergeant, 2010) and social workers’ unwillingness to see working class children placed with middle class parents (Doughty, 2011c). Counter frames were extremely rare, with one Observer article (McVeigh, 2010) and Midgely’s report both making reference to some middle class applicants who struggle to come to terms with the demands of adoption for often maltreated and/or traumatised children.

Single adopters were largely invisible within a near-universal language of ‘couples’ and there was only occasional attention within ‘case study’ accounts (Harris, 2011). They were, however, sometimes presented as victims of ‘political correctness’ (PC), (with the Mirror announcing a lifting of the bar against single adopters (Lyons, 2011)) and discrimination. It was never made clear why any such discrimination should be seen as ‘PC’, with its connotations of over-zealous pursuit of equality, and this might equally apply to age discrimination, declared ‘PC’ by Woolf (2011). Upper age limits were referred to in around 30 articles, often in tandem with smoking and obesity as barriers to adoption. The extent or context (or bearing on decision-making) of such ‘barriers’ was never made clear, while in the case of agency ‘age limits’, it is not known whether they are being applied to baby/infant adoptions or more broadly. In an ironic twist, the closest to a counter narrative in these areas came through recruitment-oriented features that brand them as myths (Gledhill, 2013).

As described earlier, coverage of religion was in part tied to debates on same sex adoption, notably in relation to Catholic adoption agencies but also fears of discrimination on the basis of (religious) views on homosexuality, or too great an emphasis on faith more broadly (Gledhill, 2013). Elsewhere, however, religion was often articulated with ethnicity as a barrier (a factor that ought to be a ‘relatively minor detail’ according to Narey (Moorhead, 2010)).

Racialisation

Noted above, race/ethnicity was the most widely covered single aspect of the adoption reforms, featuring in well over half of all articles (rising to over 80 per cent in the Mail). Given the long running controversy over ethnic matching and with repeal of the ‘ethnicity clause’ (requiring consideration of religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and

linguistic background in adoption decisions) a key part of the coalition's programme, this is perhaps unsurprising. Equally predictable in light of previous media stances was that coverage would typically be hostile to (perceived) adoption agency practices and strongly supportive of 'reform'. Roughly 90 per cent of articles fell into this category and in all papers other than the Guardian/Observer, this was almost universal.

The over-racialisation of statistics was noted earlier in respect of adoption rates and timescales, but was also evident in reporting of an Adoption UK survey:

*A quarter of would-be adopters are turned away on making their initial phone call to a local authority. **The reason for this?** More than one in ten such inquirers are told that their ethnicity does not match the children waiting to find a new home. (Times, 2011e) (emphasis added)*

Other reasons were scarcely discussed, while the figure was subsequently often misquoted as 10 per cent of all applicants being turned away on these grounds (e.g. Times, 2011f). Attacks on ethnic matching policies covered a wide spectrum. In a minority of cases, there was recognition of advantages or desirability (and hence 'good intentions') of ethnic matching, with the criticism directed at its rigid implementation (Narey, 2012). A variant of this was to acknowledge some historical value, but reject any contemporary relevance due to a multicultural, post-race society, or the complexities of 'super-diversity' (Sergeant, 2010; Marrin, 2011). Many articles, however, were fairly vitriolic regarding the attention given to race and ethnicity, the apogee of the 'absurd' and 'ridiculous'. Other than in the Guardian/Observer, there was negligible alternative discussion of issues surrounding race and adoption, with concerns and challenges often caricatured and airily dismissed (Doughty, 2010). With a few exceptions, law (and guidance) in this area were regularly misreported, typically as enshrining 'bans' on transracial placements (subsequently 'lifted'). The language

of ‘apartheid’ (referenced in 16 articles) was widely deployed to invert and obscure power relationships. Suitably de-contextualised in relation to issues of identity and culture, practices are then simply characterised as racist (Liddle, 2011).

Beyond widespread editorial and other commentary, the two main narrative forms related to white adopters and transracially adopted/fostered adults. In the former case, the dominant frame was of being ‘too white’ to adopt, in turn leading to international adoption (discussed below). A secondary line was of applicants with unusual minority ethnicities being turned away because of the improbability of them being ethnically matched with a child. Notably, there was negligible other discussion of adoption by BAME applicants, with the ‘shortage’ of adopters taken for granted. Experiential accounts from transracial adoptees were clearly divided by newspaper. While the Guardian included a small number of articles chronicling difficult experiences (e.g. Harker, 2010) and the Observer cited Feast and colleagues’ (2013) Chinese Adoption study as challenging the government’s reforms to downgrade the significance of ethnicity (Townsend, 2013), the remaining papers reported only positive stories (e.g. Rose, 2011).

‘We’ve got people flying...’

Discussion of international adoption (IA) was an important adjunct to that on race and ethnicity, appearing in 48 articles in total. Although there was occasional reference to British BAME applicants adopting from India (or in one case Uganda), the overwhelming focus was on ‘too white, middle class’ couples being driven abroad by an unwelcoming domestic adoption system. Prime Minister Cameron’s Conservative party speech - ‘We’ve got people flying all over the world to adopt babies, while the care system at home agonises about placing black children with white families.’ – was widely cited (e.g. Mail,

2011b) and coverage might easily have given the impression that this was on a larger scale than is the case. Whether intentionally or not, the main thrust was to pile pressure on the domestic adoption, variously described as ‘farcical’, ‘a travesty’ and ‘shameful’ (McIntosh, 2011; Polini, 2011).

In one of the richest countries in the world, children are languishing in local authority care while would-be parents travel to China and Eastern Europe to find children to cherish. (Times, 2010b).

There was almost no discussion of IA as a phenomenon, its motivations, merits or outcomes. Treatment focused mainly on negative process aspects, such as the high cost, government bureaucracy and the ‘hypocrisy’ of allowing BAME adoptions from abroad. Only in one story, featuring former MP Oona King, was there a call for more support for those adopting internationally (Barrow, 2011). Narratively, coverage focused on a small number of the ‘rejected’ (all now with reportedly successful international adoptions), some of whom had written books on their experiences and had become adoption reform campaigners. The stories often scored highly on newsworthiness, although there is a certain irony in their frequent and sometimes explicit messages that domestic adoption should be made ‘easier’ as it is said to be in other countries, with tales of hoaxes, narrow escapes from traffickers, and ‘races against time’ (Harris, 2011).

‘I said ‘Is she still available?’ The institute director said, ‘Yes, but hurry. Meet me at my house, 10pm tomorrow.’

‘As soon as I arrived, I was greeted halfway down the stairs by a social worker in tears, saying, ‘Thank God you’re here. Social services are coming to claim custody of the baby right now.’

Contextualising adoption – child protection, care and permanence

Understanding adoption is crucially dependent on its perceived place within the child welfare system, although as noted earlier, the material covered here comes only from discussions linked directly to adoption reform. References to child protection issues appeared in roughly a quarter (91) of all articles, with a clear majority framed in ways supportive to the reform programme. Key messages were that there should be more and speedier removals of children (with links to the value of early adoption), and that social workers are much too concerned with preserving (birth) families. Birth mother/parents' rights (supported by 'dubious' human rights law) were said to take precedence over children's and this was reflected in too many reunification attempts (cited in several articles) and an alleged desire to keep children in care 'in the hope' of family change (e.g. Thompson, 2010). Such persistent claims were more striking in the context of a rising rate of removals after 2008, as regular pronouncements of social worker aversion sat alongside reports of record care proceedings and a rapidly growing care population. In a link scarcely acknowledged elsewhere, the Guardian/Observer ran a number of articles focusing on the effects of abuse and neglect in relation to adoption support needs (e.g. Schifano, 2012a).

A relatively small number of articles critiqued the dominant view on removal, including some on the theme of 'forced adoption' (which was also reported outside of the adoption reform debates). Without fully endorsing its approach, the Observer (2014) referenced Featherstone and colleagues' *Re-imagining Child Protection* (2014), with its advocacy of stronger family support, as a counter to the government's drive to increase adoption. For its part, the Guardian cited recession, poverty and austerity policies as important contributory factors to a rising care population and offered critical commentary on the transfer of

funding from early intervention programmes to adoption (Butler, 2013). In a rare deviation from its core campaigning arguments, the Times (2012b) opposed a Select Committee call to lower the threshold for taking children into care, arguing among other factors that social workers had become too risk averse, that judgements of neglect and emotional abuse were too 'subjective' and that increasing removals would work against families seeking support.

References to the care system appeared in around 110 articles. These were overwhelmingly negative with three core messages. The first was that of poor outcomes – in education, employment, housing, crime and early parenthood – not phrased unduly pejoratively, but often arguably misleading in the comparisons drawn with adoption (Times, 2011g). A second important theme was that of instability, built on the pairing of children's homes (often presented as the alternative to adoption) and moves 'from pillar to post' between foster families. Third, the term 'languish(ing)' appeared in over 50 articles and could be seen as a defining characterisation of life in care (Marsh and Thoburn, 2002). The very widespread use of the term 'loving family/parents' was made virtually synonymous with adoption, with the corollary that they were unlikely to be found in the care system.

It is perhaps telling that some of the more sympathetic commentary on care came from Narey, but its 'improving' of life chances was always juxtaposed with the 'transformative' nature of adoption (Bennett and Taylor, 2011a). Elsewhere, in the Guardian, a small number of articles (including reporting of the Care Inquiry) articulated how an over-focus on adoption could work to the detriment of looked after children overall (Tapsfield, 2013).

Around 25 articles (mostly in the Times, with almost all others in the Guardian/Observer) referred to alternative forms of permanence. There was almost no direct discussion of long term/permanent foster care, although occasional references to finding 'good foster families' might be taken as such. Kinship care was mentioned in several articles, with coverage

reflecting different newspaper stances. The Times reported and endorsed Narey's somewhat negative view of 'dysfunctional families' and 'unsuitable' relatives and supported removing the presumption that extended family placement should be the initial preferred option after reunification (Bennett, 2011d). The Observer (e.g. 2013), by contrast, highlighted the danger of relatives being overlooked in a rush to adoption, and separately hailed the contribution of poorly supported kinship carers, and their frequent struggles to be allowed to care for children.

The Times (alone) reported on special guardianship in several articles. This was broadly in a measured way, recognising its value but pointing to issues such as its 'misuse' for younger children and concerns regarding those only 'distantly' connected to the child. There was, however, a clear message that the use of special guardianship orders should not interfere with the adoption reform process (Bennett and Taylor, 2011b).

Reporting the specifics of reform

The 361 articles contained fairly extensive coverage of specific reform measures. Unsurprisingly perhaps, given its campaigning role, the Times was disproportionately involved, contributing approximately two thirds of all such accounts. The most frequently covered aspect (providing the main focus for 25 articles and more widely referenced) was the performance regime of scorecards, league tables, and the 'naming and shaming' of councils with threatened loss of their adoption services to other local authorities, charities or private companies. The reporting was typically framed in an 'approving' way, although both the Times and Guardian did quote opposing views from local government

spokespersons, and one Guardian article referred to professionals' 'intense frustration' at 'ministerial grandstanding' (Butler, 2013).

Adoption support was widely covered, providing the main focus for 17 articles, and mentioned in almost twice as many. Most coverage was found in the Guardian/ObsERVER and Times and in significant measure, reflected their underlying positions. Thus, the campaigning Times focused largely on 'good news' stories, such as initiatives on parental leave/pay, schools admissions priorities and the Adoption Support Fund. There was relatively little emphasis on the 'difficulties' of adoption, whereas these challenges were placed centrally in a series of Guardian articles, including various personal accounts. These included contesting Narey's somewhat 'lukewarm' view of adoption support.

As an adopter I was dismayed to think that someone at the heart of the government's adoption policy did not seem to understand the vital role of adoption support.

(Schifano, 2012b)

Early permanence (fostering to adopt/concurrent planning) was the primary focus for 4 articles, but referenced in 26 overall. The reporting was generally very measured on the potential benefits and challenges, though with strong support for its expansion. Greater involvement of adopters in the matching process was also featured in several articles and mentioned more briefly in others, with the Times (2012c; 2012d) claiming some credit for this and the promotion of concurrency. Two long features in particular (in the Guardian (Hilpern, 2011) and Times (courtesy of journalist observation) (Rumbelow, 2013)) explored the workings of adoption parties/activity days, while adopter access to information on the national register was also covered, again in a considered way, notwithstanding the Times's 'parents to adopt online' headline (Bennett and Gledhill, 2013). Narey's proposals to de-emphasise the placement of siblings together and reduce

contact for parents of looked after children and those on placement orders featured in several articles in the Times. All were written by Bennett or Narey himself and unsurprisingly without any challenge or counter view offered. Finally, mention should be made of social impact bonds, which were reported by both the Times and Guardian (Bennett, 2012b; Gentleman, 2013), including via profiles of their main architect in the field of adoption, Jim Clifford, and endorsement by Narey. Reporting was broadly ‘factual’, but clearly supportive, with no questioning of the workings of ‘payment by results’ schemes.

Though never a part of the government’s reform programme, there was significant coverage of Narey’s proposal to encourage voluntary relinquishment for mothers with ‘unwanted’ children, drug addictions or chaotic lifestyles. Both the Mail (Doughty, 2011a) and the Times (2011h) were supportive of Narey’s ‘golden option’ recommendation and while both he and the Times were careful to distance themselves from a return to ‘coercive’ adoption, several articles in the Guardian argued that this proposal represented ‘turning the clock back’ and glossing over the pain felt by birth mothers (Moore, 2011).

Voice and representation

In any media analysis, the question of voice is crucial – who is able to express views and within what framing or context. Coverage of adoption reform broadly reflected established patterns. Papers themselves (especially the Times and less so, the Mail) represented powerful ‘institutional voices’, with strongly expressed opinions on the reform process. ‘Accessed voices’ (Hartley, 1990) were dominated by Narey (quoted in 79 articles and disproportionately in the Times) and government ministers – Gove (53), Cameron (45),

Loughton (43) and Timpson (23). Government voice was reinforced by significant input from the Department for Education (in 31 articles). These were followed by reporting from various adoption or children's organisations, but on a significantly lower scale. Excluding its connection with Narey, Barnardo's was still the most widely quoted organisation (39) with its Chief Executive, Carrie, the single most cited representative (21). This was followed by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (22), Adoption UK (19), Coram (13), Association of Directors of Children's Service (10) and the Local Government Association (10). The agenda was clearly set by the reform process (and wider critique of the adoption system), with other participants placed in response mode, and displaying (at least as reported) varying degrees of endorsement, defensiveness and resistance. The organisations most critical of (aspects of) the reform process were the British Association of Social Workers, Fostering Network and Family Rights Group, all of which tended to be quoted more in the Guardian/Observer than elsewhere.

Discussion

In considering these findings, it is important to reprise the limitations of the study, including the absence of 'back stories' to content or close examination of the workings of the press. Additionally, there is an inevitably broad brush taken to the nuances of 361 articles and heterogeneity within particular papers. However, there are clearly discernible patterns in both overall coverage and the stances of each outlet.

Media texts are important for their normalising power, generating 'common sense' views of how things (in this case the adoption system) work and should work (Bloor and Bloor, 2007). Allied to this, they are important definers of deviance and its threats. Texts can also be

understood as sites of struggle, for particular individuals and groups to advance their claims and underlying perspectives. This research focused on coverage of the adoption reform process and it is clear that the dominant media stance was strongly supportive of the case made by Narey and the coalition government and of proposed reforms. In the case of the Times, this was an active campaigning role, for which it was regularly happy to claim 'victory'. Several articles sought to apply direct pressure, for example that social workers 'must obey' (Mail, 2012).

The view presented to readers was of adoption as (typically by far) the best option for looked after children and hence the importance of increased and quicker adoption. Attention was then focused on the many perceived barriers, which can be summarised as 'bureaucracy', inefficiency, and an anti-adoption culture rooted in 'political correctness' (above all on race). Implicitly and often explicitly, the interests of adopters are placed centrally, with children's interests tightly aligned. In narrative terms, both are cast as the victims, to the villainous social workers/local authorities and the heroic reformers (Reyes, 2011). By contrast, birth parents (usually mothers) are almost invisible, present implicitly only as 'abusers' other than in stories of 'forced adoption', where their individual or collective respectability is invariably emphasised. Contact in adoption is similarly marginalised, save for a small number of articles approving of reforms to reduce it. In this instance, as in many other facets of the debate, the influence of Narey can clearly be detected.

The coverage resonates with the observations of Triseliotis (1998) regarding the popularity of adoption with politicians and media, but their distaste for its 'regulation'. Then and now, the nostalgia for a 'golden age' of adoption is apparent. Nonetheless, the popularity of adoption is at odds with the often negative coverage thought to exist in some other countries (Potter, 2013; Maxwell and Cook, 2014).

Many of the features identified by critical media analysts are discernible in the depiction of adoption. In particular, there are clear boundaries drawn between ‘us’ (papers, readers, right thinking people and politicians) and ‘them’ (social workers and to a lesser extent judges). The Othering of social workers and adoption agencies (variously described as ‘mutton-headed’, ‘barmy’ and ‘cruel’) remains a vital element in this endeavour. This is also given a strong political flavour – in an inversion of Wacquant’s (2010) ‘centaur state’, social workers are portrayed as favouring undeserving birth families, while ‘spitefully’ discriminating against deserving applicants on the grounds of class and race. Intriguingly, none of the articles distinguished between child and family and adoption social workers, who are bracketed together as ‘hostile’ to adoption.

Given the paucity of counter narratives (themselves found almost exclusively in the Guardian/Observer), the logic and desirability of the reforms goes largely unchallenged. The collective effect of coverage is an unduly bleak portrayal of the adoption system, aided as has been shown, by a significant degree of misrepresentation (e.g. of statistics, law and policy) and exaggeration (particularly regarding ‘barriers’ to adoption). As noted earlier, when recruitment was being promoted through the media, both journalists and politicians regularly bemoaned the ‘myths’ deterring applicants, conveniently overlooking their own role in propagating them.

Few would, of course, dispute that the adoption system has its flaws, though it is unlikely that there would be a consensus within the adoption and child welfare worlds on the (in)accuracy of its media presentation. As with any consideration of media reporting, the question is raised as to whether adoption stakeholders could or should seek to influence coverage and how. There is little doubt that elements of the dominant narrative are strongly entrenched and may be difficult to change radically. However, there is clearly an appetite

for adoption stories within the media and evidence cited earlier that more ‘in depth’ treatment of adoption practice generates much more positive views, as crude stereotypes are broken down. Interestingly, in all accounts of assessment (and allowing for the fact that many may accept its over-bureaucratic nature), there are no articles offering any explanation of what issues are covered or why? There is also surely scope for more ‘rebuttals’ – for example, challenging what are almost certainly misrepresentations regarding grounds for rejections. Perhaps, at the very least, the anvil can be made significantly less trusty.

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