

Who is leading the debate? Comparing representations of the public, politicians and experts in newspaper coverage of COVID-19 policies in the UK

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Abstract

This article presents a critical discourse analysis comparing linguistic representations of the public, experts, and politicians in UK newspaper reporting on COVID-19 policies. The analysis focuses on 120 articles published between 2020 and 2022, sourced from four national newspapers representing a cross-section of political leanings and formats. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of references and quotations suggest that the public is primarily represented as a collective entity, with functional references, rather than as distinct individual actors. Although the public is the most frequently mentioned among the groups considered, their engagement is mostly conveyed through emotional expressions of vulnerability, with little representation of individual voices. In contrast, politicians are depicted as individuals with far greater agency. Public health experts, meanwhile, are represented as having a marginal role in influencing policy decisions. The analysis of quotations demonstrates that the stances expressed towards policies in direct quotations consistently align with the ideological orientations of the newspapers across all three social groups. In newspapers with distinct left- or right-leaning biases, direct quotes tend to show greater levels of policy disagreement than in more moderate publications. Given that news discourse has been found to strongly influence public perceptions of public health policies, we suggest that the public might be better served by newspaper coverage of health crises which counters the trend of prioritising political biases over evidence-based conclusions. Moreover, featuring the perspectives of the public more prominently in such coverage might enhance positive policy engagement from some sections of the public.

Keywords: Public health communication, Critical discourse studies, Social actor representation, News media, COVID-19

1. Introduction

Concerning almost every dimension of health and well-being (Rimal and Lapinski 2009), public health communication can be defined as “the use of communication techniques and technologies to (positively) influence individuals, populations, and organisations for the purpose of promoting conditions conducive to human and environmental health” (Maibach and Holtgrave 1995: 219). Despite its declining status in recent years (Baker et al. 2013), the news media remains a prominent channel of public health communication, including in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Coleman et al. 2020). While discourse-based studies have been carried out on news media representations of COVID-19 and related topics (e.g., Al-Ghamdi 2021; Brookes 2021; Kania 2022), research in this area has yet to contrast the representations of distinct groups of social actors, which could feasibly shape how the roles and responsibilities of those groups, in the context of the pandemic and wider public health emergencies, are perceived and understood. The present study critically examines how social actors are represented in UK newspaper coverage of COVID-19 policies. Following a review of relevant literature on news discourse and public health communication, we outline the materials collected and the methods employed for this analysis. The findings are presented in Section Four, followed by a discussion of the implications and significance of the results in Section Five.

2. Literature review

News discourse concerning health issues is not only widely consumed but also has the potential to significantly influence health-related behaviours among the public. The way such issues are framed in the media can shape public perceptions of policies, particularly those related to public health, which in turn can affect the success of such policies (Coleman et al.

2011; Rubin et al. 2010). For example, in a controlled experiment, Coleman et al. (2011) found that when news coverage of health issues included information on context, risk factors, prevention strategies, and societal attributions of responsibility, it led to greater reader support and more positive attitudes towards such measures, compared to coverage that simply placed responsibility with individuals. Similarly, Rubin et al. (2010) demonstrated that the extent of UK media coverage during the swine flu outbreak significantly influenced public concern, predictions of vaccine uptake, and flu-related behaviours. These studies highlight the critical role of news media in shaping public perceptions and influencing actions with regard to (infectious) diseases and their related public health policies.

Many discourse-based studies have been carried out on news media representations of COVID-19 and related topics (e.g., Al-Ghamdi 2021; Brookes 2021; Kania 2022). Several have focused on representations of phenomena other than social actors, such as looking at strategies of representing fear and hope in Saudi Arabian newspapers (Al-Ghamdi 2021) and the evaluation of different naming choices of COVID-19 in UK newspapers (Kania 2022). Research on representations of social actors is less common, when it does occur primarily focusing on the portrayals of vulnerable groups. For instance, Fraser et al. (2020) highlight the misrepresentation and undervaluation of older people in COVID-19 public discourse, advocating for greater support for and social-inclusion of the elderly. Meanwhile, Brookes's (2021) analysis of British press representations of people with obesity during the pandemic showed how the stigma associated with obesity became compounded in this context, with such individuals being responsibilised for an ailing healthcare system that was under particular strain due to COVID-19.

To our knowledge, research in this area has yet to compare the representations of distinct groups of social actors in the context of public health crises. Yet such a focus is warranted, as discursive portrayals of different groups in the media can profoundly shape their perceptions

of their own roles and responsibilities, as well as the perceptions of them by others. Such perceptions of personal responsibility and risk can, in turn, influence health-related behaviours (e.g., vaccination uptake; Wilson and Marcus 2001; Bults et al. 2011).

Responding to this current gap in the literature, this study critically examines the representation of social actors in UK newspaper coverage of COVID-19 policies. Using a critical approach to discourse analysis guided by Van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor network, we examine the referring strategies and quoting strategies used in the representation of three groups (politicians, experts, and the public). Our analysis considers the frequency and types of representation that can be observed in a sample of newspaper articles reporting on COVID-19 government policies, published by four UK newspapers which each represent a distinct cross-section of format and political leaning (discussed more in the next section).

3. Materials and methods

As noted in the previous section, we aim to compare the representations of politicians, experts and the public, focusing on four UK national newspapers (*Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, *The Mirror* and *The Times*). These newspapers were selected due to their distinct intersections of political stance and format. Specifically, using UK national newspaper circulation figures (<https://reurl.cc/MX50Dv>), we identified the 'most read' newspaper representing each of the following cross-sections of political stance and format: right-leaning tabloid (*Daily Mail*); right-leaning broadsheet (*The Times*); left-leaning tabloid (*The Mirror*); and left-leaning broadsheet (*The Guardian*).¹

We used the online news repository offered by the data analytics service, *LexisNexis*, to collect articles for each newspaper. Using the 'advanced search' function, we stipulated that articles should contain at least one mention of *covid** OR *coronavirus* OR *corona virus* (the

asterisk acts as a wildcard representing any string of characters, which meant our search captured uses of ‘covid’ but also terms such as ‘covid-19’ and ‘covid19’, etc.). To ensure that the articles we retrieved did indeed discuss policies relating to the pandemic, we also stipulated that they should contain one or more mentions of the following terms: *quarantine*, *vaccin**, or *face mask*. In this way, our analysis could focus on reportage around policies which required members of the public to take personal action and change their behaviours (i.e., quarantining, getting vaccinated, and wearing masks). These can be contrasted against policies such as ‘lockdown’, which was more uniform and – at least, *prima facie* – less dependent upon individual choice. Finally, since the newspapers we focused on provided international coverage of the pandemic, to help ensure that the resulting articles discussed policies in the context of the UK we also stipulated that they should mention *UK* at least once. We sampled articles published between 1st March 2020 to 1st March 2022. We selected this span as this reflected the time-period within which COVID-19 policies were active in the UK.

We sorted the resulting articles by ‘relevance’ in *LexisNexis* (based on the search terms described above). For each newspaper, we downloaded the top 10 ‘most relevant’ results for each of the three policy topics, in each case performing a manual check to ensure that the articles were indeed relevant to our purposes. This approach was adopted to balance the coverage of each policy topic across the sampled newspapers, while ensuring that the data was of a size amenable to qualitative analysis (while also permitting some quantification to get a sense of overall patterns). While *LexisNexis* offers the facility to rank search results by relevance to the query, our manual assessment found some discrepancies in this ranking, as some of the top-listed articles had only a tangential relevance to the targeted policies. Also, our condition stipulating that articles should mention ‘UK’ was not, alone, sufficient to ensure this national policy focus, as some articles primarily discussed policies in Europe and

the US. We therefore undertook a manual review and filtered out such cases. Our final dataset comprised 120 articles (10 articles for each of the three policy topics, across each of the four newspapers).

We then undertook a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the representations of social actors in the articles. CDA can be considered as comprising a set of approaches to discourse analysis which synthesise close analysis of linguistic choices with theoretically informed accounts of context (Fairclough 1995, 2015). Broadly, CDA research aims to elucidate the ways in which discourse (re)produces social practices and legitimises certain ways of acting and being over others, including the social practices associated with health and illness, including the COVID-19 pandemic (Mahlberg and Brookes 2021). CDA is an interdisciplinary research movement (Van Dijk 1995) that comprises a range of analytical approaches. Since the aim of the present study was to compare the representations of different social actor groups, we drew upon Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Network (hereafter, SAN). SAN is a summary of linguistic strategies that a communicator could employ when representing individual and collective social actors through discourse (see Figure 1).

<FIGURE 1>

Based on SAN, and using the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti, we manually coded the referring and quoting strategies used to represent the three social actor groups of interest. The first step of our manual coding involved delineating the identities of the social actors mentioned in the texts, categorising these as a politician, an expert, or a member of the public. Certain entities, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), which possess roles encompassing both professional knowledge and policy rollout, were allocated dual identifiers (i.e., expert & politician). Third-party actors in boundary-spanning roles, such as transport

union representatives or law enforcement personnel enforcing mask mandates, presented unique categorisation challenges. While such third-party actors certainly warrant future exploration, this study primarily addresses what might be considered ‘core’ members of the three groups under focus.

We then identified the strategies of reference consistent with SAN (Figure 1). We also analysed the use of ‘we’, ‘you’ and ‘they’ in direct quotes. For direct quotes,² we assessed their expressed stance toward the discussed policies. To ensure clarity and to manage ambiguous cases during annotation, we categorised stances into three distinct classes: ‘pro’, ‘neutral’, and ‘con’. A quotation is categorised as ‘neutral’ if it is primarily informational, relaying details about the policies without any apparent evaluation, or if it does not directly address the policy being discussed. Quotations categorised as ‘pro’ include those cases which provide supporting evidence for the policies being discussed or which explicitly express agreement with them. In contrast, the ‘con’ designation captures expressions of disagreement or concern with a policy. The first author undertook the coding, and the second author checked the codes for plausibility.

Upon comprehensive coding, we employed the Code Co-occurrence Table function in ATLAS.ti. This feature not only illustrates the frequency of the simultaneous appearance of selected code pairs, but also provides a view of the specific contexts in which they jointly appear. This approach facilitated a dual quantitative and qualitative examination of social actor representations in the data. Specifically, using ATLAS.ti we juxtaposed the referring and quoting strategies, assessing these in the context of both the represented social actor groups and the particular newspapers in which they appeared. For quantitative comparisons, we counted each strategy instance within an article as a single occurrence. Percentage calculations were then determined based on the number of articles, out of a total of 30 in the target newspaper, that contained at least one instance of the strategy in question.

The findings are reported in the next section. Following this, in Section 5 we relate the observed representations (and trends therein) to the discursive practices associated with each newspaper and consider their possible implications in terms of the socio-cultural context of the pandemic (which both gave rise to and was, in turn, shaped by such coverage (Fairclough 1995, 2015)).

4. Findings

Following the process of manual coding described in the previous section, we first considered the distribution of mentions of each social actor group across the newspapers. Table 1 below shows, for each social actor group, the percentage of articles within each newspaper subsample that contain at least one mention of a member of that group.

<TABLE 1>

As Table 1 indicates, mentions of the public are ubiquitous, as this social actor group appears at least once in every article in the data (i.e., with mentions occurring in 100% of the articles for each newspaper). The frequency of mentions of politicians and experts, on the other hand, shows some variation, and on the whole the politicians appear in a larger number of articles than the experts. In fact, the experts appear in the smallest number of articles for each newspaper, except for *The Times*, where their distribution is tied with that of the politicians.

While the information in Table 1 might suggest that the public plays a central role in the newspapers' coverage of COVID-19 policies, the distribution of mentions is just one perspective, and one that does not tell us anything about how those groups are actually talked about in the coverage. One way we can come closer to such a view is by considering how often members of each group are quoted in the coverage, since quoting, rather than merely

referring to, a social actor constitutes a means by which journalists can provide a platform for the perspective of that actor (see, for example, Richardson 2001, 2007).

4.1. Quotes across social actors and newspapers

Table 2 below shows how often members of each social actor group were quoted in the articles for each newspaper. To aid comparison, we have expressed these figures as percentages. For instance, the politicians were quoted in 66.67% of all articles from the *Daily Mail*.

<TABLE 2 >

In contrast to the seeming centrality of the public to the coverage (which we might have inferred from their ubiquitous mentions across the articles, as suggested by Table 1), Table 2 indicates that this group is quoted least often in each newspaper. While there are differences in how often the politicians and the experts are quoted, these differences are relatively slight; the politicians are quoted in an average of 60.84 per cent of the articles, while the experts are quoted in an average of 58.33 per cent. Members of the public, on the other hand, contribute quotes in just 16.67 per cent of the articles (on average).

In exploring the kinds of perspectives that were articulated through quoted speech, we then proceeded to consider the stances expressed towards COVID-19 policies in quotes from each group and across each newspaper. We first quantified the number of articles that exhibited ‘pro’, ‘neutral’, and ‘con’ stances within their quotations. This information is displayed in Table 3, as absolute numbers and percentages of the occurrences.

<TABLE 3>

Table 3 suggests a clear distinction between left- and right-leaning newspapers, with the right-leaning publications demonstrating a higher inclination towards quoting speech that expresses agreement with government policies around COVID-19. In general, the quoted speech from right-leaning newspapers exhibits a higher rate of policy support, with pro-policy quotes comprising 47.73% of the quotations in *The Times* and 40.00% in *Daily Mail*. This is in contrast to their left-leaning format counterparts, *The Mirror* (43.90%) and *The Guardian* (34.15%). This trend is consistent when examining specific rates for the politicians, the experts, and the public; the rates of ‘pro’ policy evaluations in *The Times* and *Daily Mail* consistently exceed those in *The Mirror* and *The Guardian* for these groups.

Additionally, a comparison between the more ideologically polarised newspapers (*The Guardian* and *Daily Mail*) and the more moderate ones (*The Mirror* and *The Times* - see Smith 2017), reveals that the moderate publications demonstrate a predilection for greater policy agreement and display lower rates policy dissent (at least in directly quoted speech). As illustrated in Table 3, the direct quotes in both *The Mirror* and *The Times* consistently exhibit higher rates of pro-policy evaluations (in direct quotes) compared to those in their more ideologically polarised counterparts, regardless of whether we consider overall statistics or percentages specific to the three social actor groups. The findings indicate a clear trend: moderate newspapers are more inclined towards policy agreement and feature less policy dissent in their direct quotes, while more ideologically polarised papers exhibit a noticeable tilt towards greater policy disagreement.

Considering the stances expressed by the different social actor groups, the politicians consistently exhibit minimal policy disagreement (25.87% on average, compared with 36.40% from the experts and 48.86% from the public). This trend persists even when quotations from both ends of the political spectrum are considered. Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that the media predominantly operates in service of political power structures,

mobilising support for the dominant interests that oversee state affairs. This might help to explain the general alignment of the politicians' stances with dominant media narratives. However, expressions of policy stances by the experts and the general public are comparatively negative. The negativity of the public's quotations is especially pronounced in three of the four newspapers. The experts' quotations are more negative towards the policies in the left-leaning compared to right-leaning newspapers, which we might expect given that the policies being evaluated were issued by the right-leaning Conservative government (of which left-leaning newspapers are broadly critical, and right-leaning publications broadly supportive).

4.2. Referring strategies across actors

This section of the analysis considers the linguistic patterns regarding *how* the three social actor groups are referred to in the articles in our data. Table 4 shows the referring strategies employed in references to each of the three social actor groups.

<TABLE 4>

For the public, compared to the other two groups, the referring strategies most frequently applied include genericisation, physical identification, informalisation, aggregation, relational identification and abstraction. The public is frequently cast as passive recipients of pandemic guidelines. Nearly all generic references in the articles pertained to the public, who are typically referred to as “people”, “everyone” or “the public” (as seen in Example 1).

Example 1 (*Daily Mail*, 29/04/2020):

Ministers have been coming under growing pressure to provide clear guidance on the use of face masks amid hopes it could encourage the public to go back to work and help get the economy back on track.

Genericisation is commonly paired with aggregation (e.g., “millions of Britons” in Example 2), emphasising either percentages or specific numbers of those affected by some aspect of the pandemic. Complementing this, physical identification (e.g., “22 per cent of those aged 18-24”) provides details regarding, for example, age or physical vulnerabilities (e.g., respiratory conditions). Such unique referring strategies could be argued to place the public in a relatively subsidiary role, framing them primarily as passive victims of the virus or as adherents to pandemic guidelines, rather than framing them as active ‘voices’ in the debates played out in the articles. Only in a few cases are members of the public portrayed with an active voice, serving to either advocate for policies or illustrate the consequences of non-compliance (see Example 3).

Example 2 (*Daily Mail*, 07/03/2021):

One of the big questions over face masks is, if they are so effective and millions of Britons have been complying with the rules on wearing them since last summer, how come the second wave of Covid-19 over winter was so devastating?

Example 3 (*The Mirror*, 31/12/2021):

Bridget Jackson, 29, said on Facebook she doesn't "prioritize fear over life" in a number of social media posts about her stance against mask mandates and the Covid vaccination. But the mum-of-three fell ill last month, asking Facebook friends for prayers and advice for "lung exercises" that she could do.

The public’s vulnerability is repeatedly stressed in the articles. In line with the use of physical identification, which usually co-occurs with genericisation, relational identification is used to

construct the public in terms of familial relations, especially elderly grandparents and young children (e.g., “...whose 96-year-old mother...” and “my five-year-old daughter” as shown in Example 4 and 5, respectively).

Example 4 (*The Times*, 02/02/2022):

Judith Nesbitt, whose 96-year-old mother is in a care home in the northeast, said the isolation had been heartbreaking. Her mother ate Christmas dinner alone in her room when she was in 14-day isolation.

Example 5 (*The Guardian*, 16/02/2022):

My five-year-old daughter got Covid the first time in August. We hadn't seen my dad and my family, since Covid started, for over a year. She felt really bad, saying “Now I can't see grandad”.

It is worth noting that although in rare cases the politicians and the experts are subject to relational identification, these relations are mostly professional and within these two actor groups, such as spokespeople or advisers being linked to politicians. Another strategy in this category is the use of individualisation. Although the public is mostly referred to in plural forms (linking to the common use of aggregation and genericisation in Table 3), they could also be represented as individuals. However, in these cases they appear as a family member (together with the use of relational identification) and their age-related vulnerability is stressed, as in phrases such as “96-year-old mother” in Example 4 and “five-year-old daughter” in Example 5.

Furthermore, the use of Association when referring to the public actors sometimes links two or more vulnerable groups together within the discourse, which in turn intensifies their

perceived vulnerability. For instance, Example 6 demonstrates how older people and healthcare workers, facing the waning protection rate of vaccination, are grouped together to underscore the collective vulnerability regarding the virus and the insufficiency of policy protections.

Example 6 (*The Times*, 25/08/2021):

The protection offered to older people and healthcare workers by Covid-19 jabs could be as low as 50 per cent by winter, a leading scientist has warned, after a finding that protection from two doses wanes "even within six months".

References to the public using *we* are predominantly found in opinion sections, attributable to reporters, or in quotations from members of the public. This trend, aligning with the notion of relational identification, often means that *we* exclusively refers to the public. However, there are also instances when the politicians and the experts use *we* in a more inclusive sense, encompassing both the public and themselves, particularly when urging policy compliance (explained in the Politicians subsection). This *we* often underscores the public's compliance with government directives, highlighting their dual role as both victims of the pandemic and subjects of the associated policies and regulations. For instance, in Example 7 the assistant head teacher is quoted as saying, "it has left us open to every danger going" in expressing a sense of collective exposure to risks among teachers and pupils, stemming from government mandates to open schools while students are unvaccinated.

Example 7 (*The Times*, 03/01/2022):

Beth Collins, assistant head teacher at the Laurels primary school in Worthing, West Sussex, told the BBC she felt that "once again primaries have been forgotten", saying that as primary pupils were unvaccinated "it has left us open to every danger going".

Another feature of the representation of the public actors is that they are marginalised in policy discussions. As Table 4 indicates, *you* and *they* tend to be used predominantly in references to the public, typically appearing in the context of quoted speech of the politicians and being used to stress the necessity of following policy instructions (as in Example 8), as well as in quoted speech from the experts expressing scientific knowledge regarding the virus, policies and preventative measures (as in Example 9).

Example 8 (*Daily Mail*, 25/07/2020):

John Apter, chairman of the Police Federation, which represents rank-and-file officers, said: Police officers are yet again adapting to a new set of unprecedented laws and guidelines...if you are not wearing a face covering then you are not coming in.'

Example 9 (*Daily Mail*, 12/07/2020):

Epidemiologist Prof Keith Neal, from the University of Nottingham, says this is nonsensical. The mask is to stop you spreading it - you can't infect yourself if you are already infected,' he says.

The linguistic representations of the politicians in the data can be contrasted against those of the public. The politicians are more likely to be portrayed as individuals (e.g., through relatively frequent use of individualisation), with their powerful social status evident in the use of formalisation (in 36.67% of the 120 articles) and semi-formalisation (57.50%), as well as in appraisal which defers to the status or authority of the actors (e.g., being appraised as “top”, “senior” and “chief”, as in Example 10).

Example 10 (*The Guardian*, 17/01/2022):

A senior source confirmed that the government was looking at ending mandatory self-isolation for positive Covid cases, saying it would be “perverse” to keep the measure in the long term.

Rather than being identified in terms of physical characteristics (as the public often was), the politicians are generally referred to in relation to their professional roles in the reporting (e.g., as ministers), sometimes being abstracted or objectivised (e.g., “the government” & “Downing Street”, as in Example 11).

Example 11 (*The Guardian*, 13/07/2020):

Johnson's comments came as Downing Street said the government has been acquiring new production capacity for masks and PPE, a sign that a rise in demand is anticipated.

These linguistic strategies highlight the media’s construction of the politicians as authoritative figures, thereby amplifying their perceived credibility.

When it comes to their references as *we*, *you* and *they*, the politicians are frequently referred to as *we* to give COVID-19 instructions, suggesting that they are the ones who lead the directions of the development of COVID-19 regulations and policies (e.g., “we’re recommending that ...”; “we’re expecting people to...”, as in Example 12).

Example 12 (*Daily Mail*, 25/07/2020):

She (the care minister Helen Whately) predicted that most people' would wear a mask voluntarily, telling BBC Radio 4's Today programme: We are expecting people to be reasonable about this.

The use of *we* would also include the public, to encourage adherence of policies. Sometimes the *we* would also involve the experts. In such cases, the quoted politicians could be viewed as claiming credit for research (likely carried out by researchers, and not them). For instance, in the Health and Social Care Secretary's words, "I'd urge everyone to take advantage of the capacity we have built up in tests" in Example 13, the deployment of *we* in such contexts, while linguistically ambiguous, potentially allows the politicians to claim or insinuate a direct role in the research, subtly overshadowing the actual efforts and contributions of the experts involved.

Example 13 (*The Guardian*, 13/01/2022):

"These two tests are critical to these balanced and proportional plans and I'd like everyone to take advantage of the capacity we have built up in tests, so that we can restore the freedoms to this country while we are keeping everyone safe."

The representations of the experts are rather homogeneous in the data. Specifically, through common use of objectivation (seen in 58.33% of the articles), functionalisation (63.33%) and titulation (60.00%), their expertise regarding the pandemic is often stressed in the reporting (e.g., see Example 14).

Example 14 (*The Mirror*, 06/06/2020):

A separate report from Public Health England PHE and Cambridge University, which estimates what the value is currently, put the North West on 1.01 and the South West on 1.00.

Yet, the linguistic choices suggest that the experts also hold a marginal role in influencing the final policy outcomes. Their involvement is predominantly framed through advisory remarks rather than decisive outcomes. For instance, the experts would only “suggest” a course of action, or otherwise are presented as disagreeing with current policies (e.g., “we don’t believe the mandate is the best approach to improving the level of vaccination” in Example 15), but in the reports’ framing, such advice is not implicated in the actual policy implementation. Instead, the experts are usually mentioned in abstracted terms, such as having “concerns” around certain policies (as Example 16).

Example 15 (*Daily Mail*, 30/01/2022):

Speaking to The Mail on Sunday's Medical Minefield podcast, Professor Martin Marshall, chairman of the Royal College of General Practitioners Council, said:

We don't believe the mandate is the best approach to improving the level of vaccination.

Example 16 (*The Guardian*, 03/12/2021):

Savulescu also pointed out concerns. "The risks are public confidence in government but more importantly, liberty should only be restricted to the least extent necessary...."

Yet, when discussing actual policy implementation or modification, mentions of experts are scarce. Similarly, their contributions are also referred to, rather abstractly, as “efforts”, implying that their suggestions might not have actually translated into action or even influenced the policy design at all.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This paper has examined representations of the public, experts, and politicians in British newspaper reporting on COVID-19 policies, focusing on referring and quoting strategies. The public, despite being the most frequently mentioned of the social actor groups considered, is depicted mainly as a collective – and, at times, vulnerable – entity, with few opportunities to express their individual opinions through direct quotations. The politicians, on the other hand, are portrayed with significant agency, whereas the public health experts are represented in a way that marginalises their engagement in the policies. Quotation analysis revealed that the policy stances in direct quotes mirror the ideological leanings of the newspapers. Particularly, the newspapers with pronounced ideological inclinations display more policy disagreement than their more moderate counterparts (Smith 2017).

Despite being the most frequently mentioned group, the public is seldom directly quoted regarding their views on governmental instructions, being instead depicted as passive recipients rather than active participants in relation to the policies. Moreover, when they are mentioned, the public's physical and emotional vulnerability is frequently highlighted, with them accordingly being portrayed as sufferers of both the pandemic and of the government policies. There is also evidence that the public is somewhat 'othered' in being construed as the recipients of, rather than agents in, the policy initiatives.

In contrast to the representation of the general public, the observed pattern of the politicians and the experts being quoted more frequently could be attributed to their roles in public life; specifically, the requirement of them to be accountable for their actions and views. The mass media, including news media, can (and arguably, should) provide a platform for this accountability to be displayed. At this point, we should also consider that the diminished representation of public perspectives in our data could be a by-product of the pandemic

context itself, where the usual logistical challenges faced by journalists in accessing members of the public are likely to have been exacerbated. Access to the politicians and the experts, for quotes and so on, is likely to have been affected to a lesser extent than access to the members of the public during this time. To ascertain whether this was the case, future research could consider the extent to which the general public's perspectives feature in news reporting around other health-related topics, and then compare this to coverage during the pandemic.

Despite being less frequently mentioned than the public actors, the politicians are the most frequently quoted social actors. In the majority of cases, the news reports offer positive appraisals of these political actors, though there is also some variation respecting the newspapers' political orientations. While distinctions between the left- and right-leaning publications are not glaringly apparent, differences become clearer when we compare the more ideologically extreme outlets with their more moderate counterparts. In particular, while the former tends to amplify the experts' disagreements and reservations about policies, the latter more frequently features endorsements from the politicians. Yet across all newspapers, we found that those on the political right are generally more supportive of the (similarly right-leaning) Government's COVID-19 policies than their left-leaning counterparts are. Of course, while this might be the case for coverage of the policy areas we have considered, anecdotally we suspect that other Government measures – notably, 'lockdowns' – are much less popular with the right-leaning press. So, policy area is also a variable to bear in mind with respect to this argument, and one that is worthy of future study. This point notwithstanding, the newspapers' political allegiances do seem to have shaped, to an extent at least, how they evaluate the COVID-19 policies and the politicians responsible for them.

At this point, we wish to highlight what might be argued to be an insufficient emphasis on the experts' perspectives concerning COVID-19 in our data. The experts are the least frequently

mentioned groups of those we have considered. Furthermore, when the experts are represented, their portrayal often constrains their influence; Rather than being portrayed as critical decision-makers in the policy arena, they are predominantly depicted as mere ‘suggesters’ of possible courses of action. This side-lining of experts is not novel but reflects a broader, more protracted trend. The term “death of expertise” or “death of knowledge” (Sherry 2006) denotes an evolving scepticism towards recognised authorities in domains such as science and medicine (Nichols 2017). While the early 2000s marked a period in which British public sentiment accorded significant value to expert opinions, epitomised by the ascendancy of evidence-based policymaking (Young et al. 2002), more recent times have witnessed a notable regression in this regard. In the UK, this situation was reflected in (and perhaps, motivated by) an (in)famous claim from Conservative politician, Michael Gove, that “the people of this country have had enough of experts”. More broadly, factors contributing to the seeming devaluing of expertise include the recent surge of populism and the omnipresence of social media platforms, which have fostered communicative environments in which empirical evidence and personal opinion are often presented – and thus, potentially interpreted – as equivalents.

The way in which the experts are represented in our data could be viewed as reflecting this context. It might even be argued that the backgrounding of the role of experts that we have observed could have led to greater adherence to policies, should readers have held views towards experts that are as dismissive or even as disdainful as some claim them to be.

However, such an argument is swiftly countered, at least at the political level, when we consider that politicians of the UK Government frequently reminded the public that their policies were being guided by ‘the evidence’ or even, ‘the science’. It seems, then, that the decision to foreground the role of politicians, and to concordantly background that of expert advisors, is likely to be down to other factors. Perhaps it is the case that politicians are

inherently more ‘newsworthy’, and that focusing on them, rather than on ostensibly more politically neutral experts, allowed the newspapers in our data to frame the policies in ways that furthered their own ideological agendas, at the same time presenting the world in a way that was consonant with their (imagined) readers’ political sensibilities (i.e., being more or less favourable toward the Government of the day). Whatever the case may be, our findings indicate that the political ‘battlelines’ along which the newspapers in our data operate largely endured during the pandemic. Thus, it seems reasonable to argue that an individual’s choice of newspaper is liable to have shaped – or at least reinforced – their views on and understanding of the pandemic as they were going through it, as well as, potentially, how they responded to it.

From a public health perspective, the influence of political allegiances on the newspapers’ reporting, while perhaps predictable, could be considered negative. Research from the U.S. during the COVID-19 period found that, due to the deleterious effects of political divides on public health policy endorsement, policy suggestions from impartial experts often enjoyed wider acceptance than those fronted by politicians (Flores *et al.* 2022). Thus, if this trend applied also to the UK, then newspapers foregrounding – rather than backgrounding – the role of experts in the design of COVID-19 policies could have conceivably led to greater ‘buy-in’ from the public regarding those policies. Clements *et al.* (2021) report that less than 40% of UK residents trusted the Government to base COVID-19-related decisions on scientific advice (this figure is much lower than in countries such as New Zealand and Norway, at over 70%). Thus, such an alternative style of reporting, which foregrounds, rather than backgrounds, the influence of experts in policy design, might have also led to greater public buy-in respecting COVID-19 policies and related public health initiatives.

When reporting on policies in public health emergencies, it is our view that the public would be well-served by news reportage that is more balanced in terms of the perspectives that it

airs. Politicians' views are, of course, important, and the news media has an important role to play in ensuring that such actors are accountable for the decisions they make, not least in contexts of (health) crises. However, the experts played a significant role in shaping, directly and indirectly, the policies that were arrived at and communicated by the politicians.

Furthermore, as discussed earlier in this section, the rise in trust in experts over politicians during the pandemic, twinned with the apparent erosion in public trust in political institutions (which was only accelerated in the UK by the revelations surrounding so-called 'Party-gate'), might have increased the 'buy-in' from some sections of the public regarding COVID-19 initiatives. Furthermore, research in the area of marketing and community networks has demonstrated that some individuals are more likely to trust and follow the advice of their peers compared to so-called authority figures (Sundar et al 2009). In this way, it might have also benefited some sections of these newspapers' readerships to learn of the perspectives of their peers, and not just authority figures, in terms of developing trust in COVID-19 policies, or at least to highlight further the lived reality of COVID-19. Such reporting could have offered, and offer in the future, means of countering discourses denying the existence of the virus, espoused for example by populist figures and other actors within the so-called anti-science movement.

Of course, such reporting practice presents a number of practical challenges (not least, as noted, concerning access), and it also raises ethical issues around which voices and perspectives are aired in such a context, as well as regarding the likelihood that news agencies might selectively air voices that are consistent with their (institutional) ideological positions. There is also a question to be asked regarding the role of mainstream and social media, and whether and how news media should integrate the perspectives of the general public into its reporting, particularly given the potential for social media content to contribute to and shape the landscape of public health discourse. Further research is needed to better

understand such challenges, and how these might be approached ethically and to the benefit of the public’s health in the future.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Table(s) with caption(s) (on individual pages)

Social actor groups	Newspapers				Average
	<i>Daily Mail</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Mirror</i>	<i>The Times</i>	
Public	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Politicians	93.33%	90.00%	76.67%	86.67%	86.67%
Experts	86.67%	83.33%	53.33%	86.67%	77.50%

Table 1. Percentage of articles containing at least one mention of each social actor group for each newspaper, ranked by average percentage.

Social actor groups	Newspapers				Average (%)
	<i>Daily Mail</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Mirror</i>	<i>The Times</i>	
Politicians	66.67%	56.67%	56.67%	63.33%	60.84%
Experts	70.00%	63.33%	43.33%	56.67%	58.33%
Public	23.33%	10.00%	20.00%	13.33%	16.67%

Table 2. Percentage of articles containing at least one direct quotation of each social actor group for each newspaper.

Social actor groups	Newspapers											
	<i>Daily Mail</i>			<i>The Guardian</i>			<i>The Mirror</i>			<i>The Times</i>		
	Pro	Neu	Con	Pro	Neu	Con	Pro	Neu	Con	Pro	Neu	Con
Politicians	40.0 0%	31.4 3%	28.5 7%	29.6 3%	33.3 3%	37.0 4%	42.8 6%	39.2 9%	17.8 6%	46.6 7%	33.3 3%	20.0 0%
	14	11	10	8	9	10	12	11	5	14	10	6
Experts	44.4 4%	18.5 2%	37.0 4%	44.0 0%	12.0 0%	44.0 0%	38.4 6%	23.0 8%	38.4 6%	56.5 2%	17.3 9%	26.0 9%
	12	5	10	11	3	11	5	3	5	13	4	6
Public	18.1 8%	36.3 6%	45.4 5%	25.0 0%	0.00 %	75.0 0%	37.5 0%	12.5 0%	50.0 0%	75.0 0%	0.00 %	25.0 0%
	2	4	5	1	0	3	3	1	4	3	0	1
General	40.0 0% %	26.0 0%	34.0 0%	34.1 5%	26.8 3%	39.0 2%	43.9 0%	34.1 5%	21.9 5%	47.7 3%	27.2 8%	25.0 0%
	20	13	17	14	11	16	18	14	9	21	12	11

Table 3. Proportions of stances towards COVID-19 policy expressed in quoted speech (pro, neu(tral), and con), expressed as percentages.

Strategies	Public	Politician	Expert
we	38.33%	37.50%	24.17%
you	43.33%	1.67%	0.83%
they	70.83%	19.17%	10.83%
Aggregation	57.50%	1.67%	1.67%
Physical	91.67%	0.00%	1.67%
Relational	41.17%	10.83%	0.83%
Functionalization	72.50%	62.50%	63.33%
Formalization	5.83%	36.67%	35.00%
Informalization	5.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Semiformalization	15.00%	57.50%	50.83%
Titulation	8.33%	54.17%	60.00%
Generization	82.50%	4.17%	0.00%
Abstraction	26.67%	1.67%	4.17%
Objectivation	52.50%	76.67%	58.33%

Table 4. The use of referring strategies for the social actor groups.

Figures

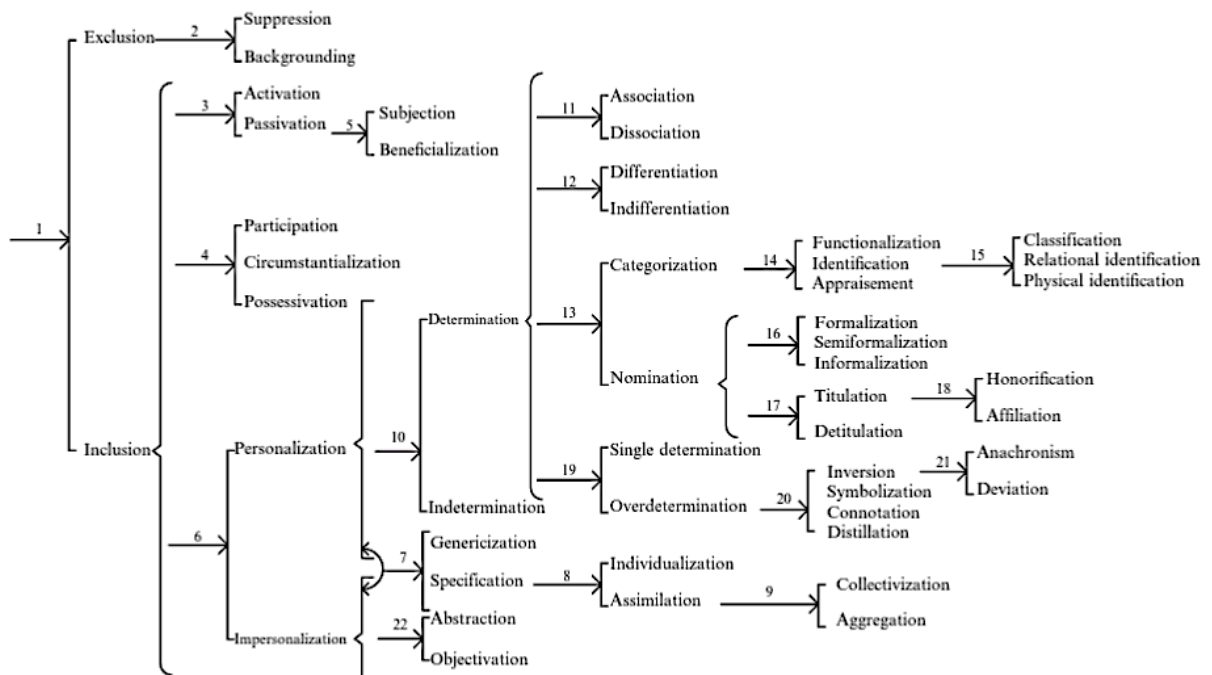


Figure caption

Figure 1. Social Actor Network (Van Leeuwen 2008: 52).

Endnote

1. We include under these umbrella headings each newspaper's online, Sunday and so-called 'sister' editions. Note that while *The Times* offers several editions—including those dedicated to Ireland and Scotland—this study solely focuses on its National edition.
2. Only direct quotations were included due to indirect quotations' ambiguity in the archive format.

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