Feature Article Coverage of Australian Out-of-Home Care: Portrayals and Policy Reform

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Portrayals and Policy Reform

What impacts do print media feature articles have upon policy development in the troubled environment of child protection, particularly out-of-home care? What sorts of stories are in feature articles? How are the complex issues and outcomes that bedevil these systems portrayed? And which stakeholder's voices are privileged or marginalized? These were the questions that drove our study of coverage of child abuse and neglect in 10 major Australian newspapers during 2008-2009, a period of significant national and state policy transformation. In essence, we were interested in identifying the areas receiving primary attention in this highly contested policy arena, in particular the portrayals in feature articles.

Australian print media is dominated by tabloid reporting of short stories that tap into community outrage about harm to children. Lonne and Gillespie found that this reporting over-emphasizes criminal matters, mainly sexual and physical abuse, and largely disregards neglect by conflating all maltreatment. Further, it individualizes these issues whilst simultaneously ignoring the influential structural factors such as poverty and race. Here we will examine the coverage of out-of-home care in lengthy broadsheet feature articles, with a particular focus upon the issues identified, how these were constructed and portrayed, and their potential impacts upon the policy debates and outcomes that were occurring at the time.

The Australian Policy Environment 2008-2009

Government inquiries have driven much of the organizational, legislative and policy change in Australia child protection, with 42 federal and state initiated inquiries undertaken between 1997 and 2013. The majority of these enquiries have been initiated due to the exposure of system failures and scandals, and child deaths. During our 18-month study period in 2008-2009, many major events occurred, including the ramping up of the Northern Territory's Emergency Response (NTER), a controversial national and territory government intervention to protect children that targeted disadvantaged Aboriginal communities

and involved police, welfare, health and military personnel. South Australia's Mullighan Inquiry into children in state care as well as the sexual abuse within Indigenous communities on the APY lands took place and led to significant changes to the child protection department. The Wood Inquiry into child protection services in New South Wales (NSW) was initiated and reported, outlining major system-wide reform.

Additionally, a number of highly publicized child deaths resulting from abuse and neglect occurred, sparking five state/territory specific inquiries. There was also ongoing, increasing exposure of abuses within out-of-home care institutions (often faith-based). Further, the Austrian Fritzl case involving the prolonged imprisonment and sexual abuse of a daughter was broadcast globally, and police exposed a number of large international internet child pornography groups.

During this period the country started moving toward an early intervention and prevention policy framework, culminating in the Council of Australian Governments' 2009 adoption of the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children* that signaled a major policy shift away from statutory investigations. Despite these broad policy changes, the numbers of children in out-of-home care continued to rise dramatically. The number and rate of children per 100,000 in out-of-home care has doubled in the past decade and, even more alarmingly, it has doubled in the past five years for Indigenous children. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has shown that as at June 30th, 2000 there were 16,923 children in out-of-home care and by 2012 this had risen to 39,621. In the study period more children were admitted each year to out-of-home care (12,240 in 2011-12) than were discharged from it (9,304).

Lonne and Gillespie found that, taken overall, Australian print media had a major role in better informing the public about maltreatment, bringing attention to scandals and system failures, and building support for reform. In nearly all the inquiries outlined above, the media was a key player in publicly exposing the failures. Public investigations and inquiries are rarely instigated without the media

galvanizing public and political pressure. The Australian media has a large impact on public understandings of, and attitudes toward, child abuse and neglect; however, it has also been criticized for misrepresenting the actual incidence of the various types of maltreatment in Australia, and media coverage of sensational and newsworthy events of abuse and system blunders. For this reason it is important to investigate how the issue of out-of-home care is represented in the lengthy feature articles by print media, and how these might influence public opinion and, consequently, policy development.

Our Approach to Examining Feature Article Coverage

Our starting point in this analysis is that language and representation matter, particularly when these representations are amplified through forms of communication in the public sphere. How issues are represented by the mass media is a central component of political legitimation that can work to make policy reform more palatable. The way in which media texts are constructed to signify the world, its processes and relations can be thought of as the ‘ideational functions’ of language. The print media play key roles in constructing and reproducing dominant discourses about social problems like child abuse, neglect and state responses to these problems, such as out-of-home care. They can also challenge conventional or common sense understandings and this is often the stated purpose of more in-depth feature articles and investigative journalism’s role in representing more complex and nuanced understandings of major policy issues.

Our feature articles were obtained from our database of 2710 stories discussing the topic of ‘child abuse and neglect’, created by searching the Australian and New Zealand Reference Centre database within ‘Factiva’, which contains all print media stories, using key search terms including child* (abuse*, neglect, protection or safety), pedophil* paedophil*, or parent neglect, harm and maltreatment (where * means ‘and derivatives’). These stories were published between 1 January 2008 and 30 June 2009 in ten major Australian newspapers – those with the largest readership in each of the six states and two territories, in addition to the national paper, *The Australian*.

Stories in this database containing the keyword ‘policy’ and which were greater than 1000 words in length were identified. Articles of such substantive length were considered to provide a more in-depth coverage of policy issues, and were therefore believed to be of greatest interest to both policy-makers and others engaged in policy debates. This left a total of 39 stories, ranging in word length from 1013 to 2144 words. The majority of the stories (87%, n = 34) came from *The Australian*, *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, all broadsheet newspapers.

Our approach to analyzing feature articles focuses on the role of metaphor, the construction of headlines and the role of transitivity, or who gets attributed as having agency in news media. Metaphors are important in everyday language and communication as a form of shorthand substitution. The metaphors used matters in terms of representing courses of action to perceived crises. In focusing our analytical attention on feature article headlines we are responding to the significance headlines are given in how readers respond to news. What comes first and last in a newspaper article is the most important in terms of the attribution of meaning.

In applying the tool of transitivity it is important to analyze which groups in social relations are attributed with having agency and what choices are made in voice (active or passive). These choices convey very different meanings. The aim in analyzing transitivity is to try to work out what social, cultural and ideological factors determine how an event or a social problem is signified. It is often the case, for example, as other studies have shown that children are constructed as voiceless victims of harmful acts of others in newspaper reports on child abuse and neglect. Conversely, structuring children as victims of ‘system failure’ can also work to obscure agency and responsibility. The word ‘system’ can work productively and progressively to highlight structural factors, such as poverty or power imbalances between adults and children, or it can work in a more regressive way to obscure acts of poor decision making on behalf of state officials and others in positions of authority. As Turnell and colleagues suggest, Western culture in general, and child protection agencies in particular, has been increasingly co-opted into

the myth that every risk is calculable, every problem solvable and every death is chargeable to some professional's account.

Portrayals of the Main Issues

Unsurprisingly, taken overall, the feature article coverage was detailed and critical in its orientation, primarily toward governments and policy makers. These lengthy articles focused upon system failings and the imperative for reform. A case example of an individual caught up in a system scandal typically featured in the top third of the article - a 'human face' sheeting home more serious examinations of underlying policy and program issues. Despite their length, the articles were lively, provocative and engaging in their style. Importantly, the local situation was often linked to national policy debates, with some solutions put forward alongside the critique.

You Placed the Child Where?

The controversial practice of housing children in commercial accommodation such as motels received significant coverage. Whilst the lack of appropriate out-of-home care accommodation was acknowledged to be "at crisis point" (*The Australian*, 05/02/2008, Line 6), the housing of children in motels was portrayed as a grossly inadequate response by governments who were roundly criticized for not using better alternatives. Reporting involved some of the most derisive language used in any of the stories, for example: "At risk children are suffering further damage by being dumped in motels because there aren't enough care facilities" (*The Australian*, 07/02/2008, Line 1), and "There are no outcomes, they just get babysat" (*The Australian*, 05/02/2008, Line 14). Such language taps into public outrage at a system that removed children from situations of inadequate care, but then failed to provide adequate care. Headlines cultivated public sympathy for children let down by the system, for example: "Alone and in limbo" (*The Australian*, 07/02/2008) and "No place to call home" (*The Age*, 23/05/2008).

The housing of children in motel rooms and other forms of residential care was identified as being a significant risk of psychological harm to children, with articles claiming that such children

received minimal stimulation, with one article reporting that a mentally ill child was “[stuck]...in a tired-looking holiday villa on Cairns’s northern beaches with an Xbox... [and had] little contact with anybody other than welfare workers” (06, Lines 5 and 7). The need for permanency planning policies for children in out-of-home care was discussed in a number of articles.

Foster Care Crisis

Also receiving substantial media coverage was the closely related problem of the shortage of foster carers, who were depicted as being overwhelmed by “too many traumatized children” (*The Australian*, 15/07/2008, Line 50), and disillusioned with their role due to “inadequate compensation and a lack of training and support” from state departments (*The Australian*, 12/04/2008, Line 32). These problems led directly to the “rapidly diminishing” number of foster carers in Australia” (*The Australian*, 19/04/2008, Line 71), a situation that created significant difficulties in a child protection system underpinned by policies focused on risk minimization and the increasing removal of children. The absence of support for foster carers by state departments, and the lack of a consistent approach to the recruitment and retention of foster carers, was bluntly criticized in media coverage as having generated a foster care system “in crisis” (*The Australian*, 15/07/2008, Line 49). The significant problems with the foster care system were also emphasized in headlines using metaphors such as “Coming apart at the seams” (*The Australian*, 19/04/2008) and “Fostering trouble” (*The Australian*, 17/11/2008).

Adoption as an Alternative

In response to these foster care system problems, a number of articles raised the contentious and emotionally-charged issue of adoption – demonstrating the role of the media as a catalyst for discussion among policy makers and the public of important policy issues. Some articles were outspoken in their support for the implementation of adoption policies, arguing that children have a right “to live in a warm and loving home... [where] biological parents have blown their chance to provide a home themselves” (*The Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 91). One report even suggested that “a return to adoption could save

babies' lives" in the event that an out-of-home care placement was unavailable (*The Advertiser*, 15/03/2008, Line 27). Despite this, many of the articles acknowledged the "tensions" associated with the permanent removal of children (*The Advertiser*, 15/03/2008, Line 42), underpinned by historic federal government policies which mandated the forced adoption of Aboriginal children throughout much of the 20th Century, known as *the Stolen Generations*. However, whilst there were debates on the merits of adoption, no story presented adoption as a policy with any reasonable likelihood of being implemented.

Children's Outcomes from the Care System

The risks to children in state care received significant media coverage. Interestingly, there was less of a focus on physical or sexual abuse; rather, the coverage focused on psychological risks, for example: "Not knowing where you're going to be living in a few weeks or a few months from now, and not living with someone who knows and cares about you, can be very damaging for children" (*The Australian*, 26/04/2008, Line 19) and "By the age of eight or 10, many of these children are so damaged they can no longer stay in foster homes" (*The Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 7). The problems associated with a lack of permanency and consistency in out-of-home care placements were key topics of reporting, with the "devastating" effects (*The Advertiser*, 15/03/2008, Line 43) of multiple placements on children featuring prominently in many stories.

The overcrowding of children in both foster care and residential accommodation, underpinned by the paucity of appropriate placements, was also criticized in media coverage as having the effect of "retraumatizing children" (*The Age*, 14/03/2009, Line 35). The significant impacts of overcrowding on adolescents, who often have pre-existing mental health issues, were also highlighted, for example: "Troubled teenagers housed together by the state are often exposed to behavior that makes their problems worse" (*The Age*, 14/03/2009, Line 1).

Typically, when discussing the risks to children in state care a deep moral tone was adopted. This was clearly evident in discussions about the level of care provided to children in out-of-home placements, and whether this was so poor that children would really be better off with their biological parents. The

idea that children at risk of harm need to be removed from their families to “save them” (*The Australian*, 26/04/2008, Line 73) was criticized in light of the fact that governments appeared to be incapable of providing sufficient out-of-home care placements – in itself a risk to children. As one article put it “Children and young people who have been abused and neglected are vulnerable...and should not be abandoned to further abuse in a corrupt care system” (*The Australian*, 14/04/2008, Line 54).

However, the moral complexities within out-of-home care were highlighted by reports which argued that the removal of children was morally justified, for example, “Every child has the right to live in an environment that fosters their physical, emotional, social, educational and cultural development... [and] in some cases this means removing the child from their family” (*The Australian*, 15/07/2008, Lines 42 and 44). Hence, coverage tried to present the contested policy positions.

Children’s Mental Health

Difficulties associated with the provision of appropriate out-of-home care for children with mental health issues received extensive media coverage. In many cases, staff were portrayed as being insufficiently prepared to properly care for these children, particularly regarding suicidal tendencies; one report claiming that “...suicidal children have been left with access to knives and hanging points... [and] not given their medication” (*The Australian*, 05/02/2008, Lines 19 and 20). Children with mental health issues are significantly more likely than others to have failed placements, and the media coverage highlighted the intractable cycle of psychological damage that this can cause, for example: “every time a placement breaks down, it further damages their ability to form healthy relationships” (*The Australian*, 26/04/2008, Line 42). In light of this, governments were comprehensively criticized for the lack of a policy to address the issue of mentally ill children in state care, and for allowing them to “move around the foster care merry-go-round” (*The Australian*, 25/11/2008, Line 13) without any real attempts to provide therapeutic care. Again this example illustrates the power of metaphor in conveying a system that is not working as it should, namely, providing successful transitions.

Overrepresentation of Indigenous Children

The wholesale removal of Indigenous children into state care was discussed in many stories, and is particularly controversial due to historic Australian government policies mandating the removal of Aboriginal children. At the time of the reporting, Aboriginal children were being placed into state care “in far greater numbers than during the Stolen Generations” (*The Australian*, 24/11/2008, Line 1), and one state had “four times the number of [Aboriginal] children ... in state care [than] at the height of the Stolen Generations period” (*The Australian*, 25/11/2008, Line 5). This topic was reported with a tone of true alarm, for example: “there are deep concerns about a system that results in 10 times more Aborigines being removed from their homes than other children” (*The Australian*, 24/11/2008, Line 29). Reports asserted that the recruitment of Aboriginal social workers made little impact on these statistics. Whilst government policies moved towards improving the out-of-home care experience for Indigenous children, they did so with the Stolen Generations tragedy in mind. For example, the Aboriginal Placement Principle focuses on “keeping Aboriginal children near their country or the lands of their ancestors... to ensure the children [understand] their culture” (*The Australian*, 24/11/2008, Lines 34 and 36). Such policies were reported with cautious optimism.

Neglect: Pity or Punishment?

Another key policy issue covered was the debate about the removal of children at risk of abuse compared to those at risk of neglect. In neglect situations the reporting often suggested that parents ultimately have good intentions but require additional support in order to adequately care for their children. This was based on the belief that parents ‘know no better’, for example: “Today’s teenage parents grew up in homes with hardly any furniture or toilet paper or soap or toothpaste... [and] they don’t know what it means to make a child wash with soap in the shower or brush their teeth at night” (*The Australian*, 16/02/2008, Lines 19 and 20). Such reporting reflects the shift in policy paradigm from one of the punishment of parents through the removal of children, to that of early intervention and prevention. Indeed, many of these articles debated “prop[ping] up the birth parents” (*The Australian*, 17/11/2008,

Line 43) through programs designed to improve parenting skills, quarantine welfare payments and, thus, prevent neglect. However, there was some criticism of policies that “give parents almost limitless opportunities to change before decisive action is taken, [as] these are systems built on false optimism and...are dangerous for children” (*The Australian*, 12/04/2008, Lines 29 and 30).

Leaving Care

The transition of adolescents from state care when they reached adulthood and their care orders were terminated was also covered, highlighted by headlines such as “Separation anxiety” (*The Australian*, 26/04/2008). Many stories noted that the instability inherent in the out-of-home care system translated into dysfunction, chaos and insecurity in the lives of the young adults exiting state care – with “state care...the main precursor to homelessness” (*The Age*, 23/05/2008, Line 8), and out-of-home care also linked to increased rates of criminal activity, mental illness and drug/alcohol dependency in young adults. Indeed, many young adults exiting state care “have few, or no, life skills” (*The Age*, 23/05/2008, Line 20), and their poor preparation for life post-care was criticized in a number of media reports as being among the most serious failures of the Australian child protection system. One article noted that, in terms of the child protection system and the policies which underpin it, “short-term political thinking [is] very damaging for children” (*The Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 48).

Which is better, the Public or Private Sector?

A crucial policy issue highlighted was whether the responsibility for children in out-of-home care ultimately lay with government or the private and community-based sector. The responsible government departments in a number of states were roundly criticized for their ineffectiveness, with reports arguing that this placed children at risk of harm, a problem so significant that one headline reported, “Judge wants DOCS [Department of Community Services] removed” (*The Australian*, 25/11/2008). The policy shift towards greater use of private- or community-based agencies providing out-of-home care services was reported with qualified endorsement in the majority of stories, with articles suggesting, for example, “that

the private sector could not do a worse job than the NSW [New South Wales] Department of Community Services” (*The Australian*, 25/11/2008, Line 4). However, the risks associated with governments shifting accountability to private agencies was noted, some stories highlighting the potential for poorer outcomes for children, for example: “Children being cared for by private companies contracted by the DCS [Department of Community Services] are simply being babysat until they reach 18 and become somebody else’s problem” (*The Australian*, 05/02/2008, Line 11).

The National Framework

Another significant policy issue that received considerable coverage was the proposal for developing a national child protection framework, an ongoing collaborative initiative to introduce a public health model. Inconsistencies between various intra- and even inter-state child protection policies, which resulted in children being lost to the system when they moved between jurisdictions, were highlighted in the media coverage; one example being a family lost to child protection services when their mother moved interstate, the children eventually reappearing seriously neglected. One headline criticized state child protection systems for allowing these children to “[fall] through the cracks” (*The Age*, 26/06/2008). Such scandals gave the discussions surrounding the development of a national child protection framework a sense of moral urgency, with child abuse and neglect “a national emergency requiring a national strategy” (*The Australian*, 12/04/2008, Line 39). Indeed, this was one policy that was reported in a predominately positive tone, for example: “With a national child protection framework in development, carers hope the time is near for powerful change” (*The Age*, 14/03/2009, Line 2).

Inexperienced Staff and Risk

In addition to foster carers, other frontline child protection staff, particularly social workers, featured prominently in these feature articles, although not so much from their own voices. Inexperienced child protection staff were indirectly linked to the dramatic rise in the number of children in state care, with one article noting that, “Good decisions aren’t made by young people, under pressure” (*The*

Australian, 17/11/2008, Line 79). This was underpinned by problems with mandatory reporting that was reported as causing social workers to be “utterly overwhelmed by the sheer number of notifications” they received (*The Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 17), and where they “get to about half of all calls [and] the rest get noted, filed, and forgotten” (*The Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 26). Mandatory reporting, it was claimed, confounded the distinction between perceived and actual risk of harm to children – thus, the removal of children by inexperienced social workers became almost ‘precautionary’.

Lack of clarity by social workers as to what constitutes ‘acceptable’ risk of harm was raised, with nervous governments continuously altering policies and “lower[ing] the threshold for what is considered an acceptable risk” (*The Australian*, 26/04/2008, Line 75), resulting in ever-increasing numbers of children meeting the threshold for removal. This was further complicated by high-profile scandals where children known to departments were killed by their parents – including the horrifying cases of Dean Shillingsworth and ‘Ebony’ that resulted in inquiries and criminal charges. According to the coverage, all of this culminated in children being removed by social workers “who don’t necessarily believe they are at risk, but who are terrified that they’ll get blamed if anything happens to the children that have been reported to them” (*The Australian*, 17/11/2008, Line 5), particularly when “the death of a child known to child protection workers hits the headlines” (*The Australian*, 19/04/2008, Line 9).

Undervalued Heroes

Despite these significant issues, feature articles portrayed frontline staff, both foster carers and workers, in an overwhelmingly positive light. Many stories represented them as “heroic” (*The Age*, 14/03/2009, Line 27) and “amazing people” (*The Age*, 14/03/2009, Line 69), working day-to-day “On the front line of tragedy” (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11/02/2008, headline). The fact that frontline workers are generally “underpaid and under-valued... [and] surrounded by toxic politics” (*The Australian*, 17/11/2008, Lines 71 and 72), and also overwhelmed with both the type and volume of day-to-day work, was widely acknowledged. As diligent policy-implementers, frontline workers avoided the blame applied to policy-makers (primarily politicians) for the failure of policies such as mandatory reporting.

However, whilst coverage identified frontline staff as key stakeholders concerning out-of-home care policy issues, they were not the primary active voices. Rather, those most often quoted, and by a significant margin, were the managers of private and community-based organizations such as the Create Foundation (which represents care leavers), the Australian Foster Care Association, and faith-based child and family support agencies. These individuals were portrayed as having expert knowledge of the issues surrounding out-of-home care policy debates. Academics and politicians, as policy-informers and policy-makers respectively, were the next most likely groups to be given an active voice.

Interestingly, five young adults who had transitioned through various out-of-home care systems were given an active voice and agency. Most feature articles included a personal narrative from a young person who had experienced state care, sharing the harsh realities they faced and, to some extent, the damaging effects of out-of-home care. Personal narratives typically included glimpses of the situations causing these children's removal from their families, as well as detailed accounts of their life in state care. Their testimonies were usually located in the first one-third of articles, and appeared designed to personalize the story, justify the need for reform and engage the public by drawing them into the policy debates. These stories also provided support for the negative portrayals of out-of-home care policies; indeed, the vast majority of the stories discussed policies in a negative tone, either because they had failed in their objective of protecting children, or had resulted in harm to them.

Portrayals and Their Implications for Policy Development

The portrayal of out-of-home care issues in Australian print media feature articles we examined here was noticeably different to the overall coverage of child abuse and neglect. The lengthy feature articles tended to focus on policy and system issues and failures in tones that were highly critical toward governments and policy makers. A key point made was that the care system was not meeting its social mandate to provide quality outcomes for maltreated children, and that substantial reform was imperative. Hence, these detailed policy critiques provided crucial support for a move to the National Framework's

public health model that emphasizes early intervention and prevention, rather than forensic investigations and removal.

On the other hand, Lonne and Gillespie identified in their study of the overall Australian print media stories about child abuse and neglect that whilst the community was well informed about this significant social problem, the coverage was brief, left out key details and misrepresented the situation by focusing on criminal matters and overstating the incidence of sexual and physical abuse and understating neglect, thereby ignoring the social structural factors at play. In particular, they found that the overall coverage did not tend to highlight policy issues although a generalized picture of system failure was sometimes shown, instead conflating child maltreatment and privileging the voice of police and other community claims makers, notably politicians. In their comparison of English and Australian print media coverage of scandals, Lonne and Parton found the issues were individualized and that the tone in England was much more outraged and punitive upon governments and staff than it was in Australia where a blaming and punitive tone was used to describe parents, paedophiles and Indigenous peoples. They found that whilst print media coverage was a positive influence upon system change, it also undermined public trust and reputation of the system.

What we have found here is that feature articles were different to the overall coverage, were usually written by broadsheet investigative journalists, and grappled with many of the complex issues at play while also capturing the voice of children and those impacted by system failures. Perhaps more importantly, their critical coverage and exposure of the range of problems bedeviling the system helped to build broad consensus for a substantive reform agenda. Lewig and her colleagues, and Humphreys and her colleagues, interviewed key policy stakeholders when they researched the child protection policy processes in two Australian states around the same period of our media examination. They found that formal research findings played only a small part in policy development, but that media coverage was an important influence that helped culture change of policymakers, supported reform agendas, and helped to build momentum for change at multiple levels. But coverage was also feared within defensive and risk-avoidant departmental cultures and this is understandable given the strident criticisms we found.

This is an important point for it identifies the significant tensions between key players in these systems, particularly the leadership, and the print media who have a responsibility to expose failure and injustice. On the one hand system reform is facilitated by increased transparency of scandals, and on the other hand it is hindered because public opprobrium can make these organizations defensive and risk avoidant just when reform agendas demand policymakers take risks to change things.

Further, feature article coverage highlights the negative impacts upon children in care whilst simultaneously giving voice to a range of policy and departmental critics, albeit mostly those who are agency managers/leaders. Finally, it places governments and departmental leadership under intense pressure to come up with instant answers to what can be endemic problems, and thereby contributes to ‘knee-jerk’ policy responses that may actually derail slower, yet more considered, reforms. Overall, we conclude that feature article exposés and critiques are crucial and supportive of reform, although there are uncertainties about their impact upon dynamic policy development processes. Despite the fear the print media can engender, they appear to be a ‘necessary evil’ for change – an irritant that is worth the pain because of the potential for significant gain.

Feature articles detail the iatrogenic outcomes of contemporary approaches, particularly for children and, as we have shown, these entail a diverse array of issues. For example, within a narrative of an overstretched system in crisis, the coverage exposed problems such as lack of placements and foster carers, overcrowded placements, the deplorable use of motels, lack of support for carers and children, particularly those experiencing mental health issues and transitioning to post-care arrangements, and the gross overrepresentation of Indigenous children and its attendant impacts on their families and communities. Links were made to inexperienced staff and risk-averse departments that were burdened down by mandatory reporting and other service demand pressures. Exposing these issues to the light of day may well reduce public trust and reputation, but it also builds public and political momentum for change.

Perhaps most importantly, the coverage of the poor life outcomes for children in care regarding their psychological, physical and emotional wellbeing, and their relations with their families and kin were

highlighted and serious questions asked: Are children better off being removed and placed into care? Or would they be better off at home if their families were provided with greater supports? Is adoption really a satisfactory way to address the spiraling numbers of children in out-of-home care? The coverage engaged readers with difficult and complex policy problems and did offer suggestions for changes within an overall critical stance about system failure.

Given the critical stance in these feature articles, and the punitive blaming that Lonne and Parton identified in overall print media coverage, it was encouraging here to find that feature articles did take a different tack toward neglecting parents, and frontline folk such as foster carers and child protection workers. Essentially, they were overwhelmingly positively portrayed as heroes who worked beyond the call of duty to prop up a bankrupt care system. Why then is the press often feared by them? We think this is in large part due to the dominant organizational cultures that are risk averse and defensive about failures and scandals, and being exposed publicly for incompetence that led to others' harm. Perhaps the primary focus for criticism upon the leadership group percolates throughout these departments and systems in a vicarious process? We suggest that these positive narratives about frontline heroes need to be utilized better for rebuilding departmental reputations and public faith? This will require a different approach to transparency and confidentiality and may potentially be perceived as threatening.

The coverage also privileged academics, politicians and sector agency managers, whilst also providing voice for some children in care, but in our view the continued absence of parents' voices is problematic as the coverage largely remains punitive and blaming toward them, and rarely engages with the social structural factors that are influential, particularly for neglect which is the dominant form of maltreatment. Giving prominence to service user voices appears to offer promise for public health approaches because it can potentially de-stigmatize them and positively portray their everyday life struggles, opening the way for humane neighborly support from the community.

The Take Home Messages about Feature Article Portrayals

We acknowledge that print media coverage of child abuse and neglect and out-of-home care is not the same everywhere. Our examination of Australian print media feature articles of out-of-home care has shown a range of benefits including exposure of many system failings and building momentum for reform. Whilst the coverage is deeply critical of policymakers and departments, it is also positive about the necessary frontline work that underpins protection of children. Despite some shortcomings, it does provide greater opportunities for the voices of services users, particularly children, than is found across the overall media coverage. Importantly, the coverage did grapple with the complexities and informed the public about the policy issues and options in ways that governments and departments were unable to successfully communicate to the community. Portrayals of a compelling narrative of system failure garnered broad community support for change.

In conclusion, we contend that feature articles like the ones studied here have much to offer the community and inform them well about system issues, outcomes and reform agendas. Further, they go some way to correcting the misrepresentations found in the overall print media coverage that centers on reductionist portrayals of criminal abuse which foster punitive approaches. Whilst not all print media readers wish to grapple with the complexities of social system reform, they nonetheless do support having functional systems and interventions that both protect children and minimize poor system outcomes.

Accountability and transparency are important principles in public administration, particularly when this involves the state intervening in family life. Hence, an active investigative media is a necessary component of reform and policy development in our out-of-home care systems. Whilst we make no claims about the generalizability of our findings for all jurisdictions, there nevertheless is likely to be some insights and benefits for others. Critical analysis of the issues bedeviling our systems, in our view, is essential if we are to have protective systems that respect children's rights and provide humane help to parents struggling to raise their children and ensure their health and wellbeing, now and into the future.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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Keywords: Child abuse and neglect; Child protection policy; Out-of-home care; Print media reporting; System reform; Media coverage; Media portrayals