

New conversations about  
severe & multiple disadvantage

# Telling a different story

Understanding news media  
coverage of severe and  
multiple disadvantage

DHA Communications  
Lankelly Chase

New conversations about  
severe & multiple disadvantage

# CONNECTED

# TELLING A DIFFERENT STORY

Understanding news media  
coverage of severe and  
multiple disadvantage

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# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	06
Forewords	07
About this report	10
Key findings	12
Section One: What initial analysis of media articles tells us	14
Section Two: Media narratives presenting multiple disadvantage	24
Section Three: Other ways in which media frames disadvantage	34
Section Four: How news media construct disadvantage articles	40
Section Five: Journalists' views on covering multiple disadvantage	48
Section Six: Media Chains – sources and voices	52
Section Seven: Opportunities and recommendations	58
End notes & Appendix	66

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is dedicated to Chantal Benjamin-Badjie, a colleague who died before this research could be finished.

We owe a great debt of gratitude to the people and organisations who volunteered to be members of the steering group. The organisations involved are Agenda, Black Thrive, Centre for Criminal Appeals, Collective Voice, Common Sense Network, Crisis, Expert Citizens, Expert Link, Family Rights Group, MEAM, NEON, Open Book, Prison Reform Trust, Revolving Doors, SoundDelivery and Transforming Justice.

We would also like to thank the journalists and academics who gave up their time to be interviewed. The insights they shared helps to give a balanced and rounded account of all parts of the media landscape.

This has been a collaborative process, and we hope we have captured and reflected all contributions in this report.

# FOREWORDS



From members of the Telling  
a Different Story steering group



## Darren Murinas, Expert Citizens

The reason I wanted to get involved with 'Telling a Different Story' was so we could explore more positive ways of telling the stories of people facing severe and multiple disadvantage.

The media's main aim is to "sell a story", so if they start talking complexity and multiple disadvantages, then how easy it for them to sell that story?

As the CEO of Expert Citizens, I've been asked to share my personal story in local and national press and very often I get negative labels put on me to sell the story. For example, it's often ex-con, ex-criminal, former addict, former junkie, or former homeless guy instead of CEO or trustee.

In my experience, the media will largely talk about single issues which are often quite negative and focus mostly on criminal justice or mental health. Yet, the reasons why people experiencing mental health issues are caught up in the criminal justice system or sometimes why they end up homeless is because of poverty. However, the media don't often (or don't at all) talk about extreme poverty and how many adults and children are experiencing the harsh realities of it day to day.

There are a lot of people in the UK facing severe and multiple disadvantage, and quite often the press struggle to talk about complexity or multiple things at the same time. So, I am glad to see that one of the recommendations from this research is to work more closely with journalists and media outlets so that we can develop stronger ties and trust amongst each other. I am also interested in how we can explore and tell these stories in multiple ways while also investing in local, sustainable journalism.

## David Ford, Expert Link

Whilst Expert Link welcomes this report it does highlight some of the significant challenges faced by those with lived experience when attempting to get their personal stories heard or the complexity of their lives understood. It is evident that the responsibility to create the change that we desire does not just lie with the media. Responsibility for change sits with all of us, but in particular with the charities that support and represent those with lived experience. We hope that this report becomes the catalyst for the collaboration needed to create that change.

## Jude Habib, SoundDelivery

The research 'Telling a Different Story' brings to light the importance of the voices of those with direct experience in creating more nuanced stories around multiple disadvantage. It has highlighted the barriers that we see through our work at sounddelivery that charities and people with lived experience have of engaging with journalists including distrust, access, and lack of opportunities. But it also shows where there is potential for change through both the media and charities adapting the way in which they engage and collaborate with each other. This research is a jumping off point, a start of the conversation to build long term relationships and tell more stories around multiple disadvantage that reflect its complexity. It confirms to me that our work at sounddelivery to give a platform to people with direct experience is very much needed, and we look forward to applying some of this knowledge as we continue to connect the media and people with lived experience to have their voices heard. There will need to be a big shift to create a new narrative around multiple disadvantage in the media but we believe by building collaborative relationships between the media, charities working in this space and people with direct experience this can begin to happen.

## Carrina Gaffney, Lankelly Chase

We commissioned 'Telling a Different Story' to create a more in-depth, collective understanding of how, and why the media currently reports on severe and multiple disadvantage in the way that it does. Partly because we believe the media has a vital role in shining a light on the unequal distribution of power and in holding those in positions of power to account. Partly because at its best, it can be a platform that encourages us to try on different perspectives and create understanding and empathy between people. Also knowing that at its worst, it divides us.

A striking conclusion made in this report is that the majority of articles lacked the diversity of views and voices of people with direct lived experience of severe disadvantage. Coupled with an apparent lack of trust between journalists, people with lived experience and the charity sector, one of the most important recommendations is the undeniable need to form stronger and deeper relationships. If we can create empathy amongst ourselves, then it will make it easier to bring in distinctive voices, and different types of stories into mainstream media.

One of the other critical findings is that for now, most news media is focused more on reporting the symptoms rather than the systemic causes of severe disadvantage. Yet we know that for the most part, it is systems that keep people locked in cycles where they experience both severe and multiple forms of disadvantage.

This might be because this work is happening against a backdrop of unprecedented change within the media sector. I am not sure it really fully recovered from the economic downturn in 2007, with ad revenues shifting dramatically from print to online leaving gaping holes in previously lucrative revenue lines. One of the knock-on effects has been a need for media outlets to pursue digital impressions over deeper engagement and investigative journalism. Supporting investigative journalism is an area we are thinking a lot about at Lankelly Chase, whether at a local or national level as it is here that journalists can really speak truth to power.

This research was designed to reveal the media system to us all and not to spend time apportioning blame. Instead, we would like to use this as a catalyst for identifying where we can support the conditions for change to occur. Most importantly, there is an opportunity and a desire to ensure the media is more representative of all people who live in the UK and to invigorate and strengthen original, fact-based quality reporting.

Please join us in holding new conversations about how we can tell different, and more inspiring stories of how we are changing the systems that perpetuate extreme disadvantage.

# ABOUT THIS REPORT

**Telling a Different Story: Understanding news media coverage of severe and multiple disadvantage is a research inquiry conducted between January 2018 to March 2019. It explores how print and online news media report on severe and multiple disadvantage (SMD). In this report, SMD refers to the interlocking nature of multiple disadvantages such as extreme poverty, homelessness, discrimination, mental ill-health, substance misuse, violence and abuse and contact with the criminal justice system.**

It reveals to us how news media currently reflects the multiplicity of social disadvantage in its reporting, along with the relationships that exist between journalists, people with lived experience (of SMD) and people working in the wider charitable sector and journalist academics.

Several opportunities and recommendations have emerged out of this process. We hope they can contribute to creating the conditions for healthier relationships, a greater appreciation of ways of working and a more nuanced understanding of multiple disadvantage that will ultimately be reflected in the stories we read.

This is by no means an extensive list, but the research process focused on several variations on search terms broadly connected to multiple disadvantage including children (facing SMD); criminal justice; drug and alcohol; extreme poverty; homelessness; mental health; violence and abuse.

The process included:

- The establishment of a steering group made up of people from across the third sector including people with lived experience of SMD
  - Interviews with leading journalism academics and journalists working across print, broadcast and online platforms
  - Quantitative analysis of more than 8,000 online news articles gathered over a three-month period from the BBC Online, BuzzFeed, Daily Mail, Daily Telegraph, The Guardian and Vice
  - Tonal analysis of articles
  - Qualitative and discourse analysis of articles
  - A two-week contemporary research period to understand broader media construction of articles referencing disadvantage
  - An exploration of findings emerging from the two-week study
- (See Appendix Page 76 for full methodology)
- The following report reveals the findings of this inquiry.

# KEY FINDINGS

**This inquiry reveals three main points; firstly, that news media is mostly concerned with the symptoms rather than the root causes of social disadvantage. Secondly, it references some disadvantages significantly more than others and thirdly, there is a selection of pre-determined narratives that are used as a framework for reporting on them.**

Some of these pre-determined narratives act as barriers to people understanding the interlocking nature of multiple disadvantage. Others present opportunities to share evidence of how this happens and give a platform to people who can share stories of what life is really like.

Interviews with leading journalists reveal possibilities for encouraging the media to tell a different story about social disadvantage. By working differently with each other, those interested in creating a shared understanding of multiple disadvantage can turn the tide towards media coverage which promotes a fuller and less simplistic view of the issues and people affected.

Our key findings include:

- **Almost 63% of news articles related to single rather than multiple disadvantages**
- **'Multiplicity' seems to get a bad press compared to 'singularity'**
- **When the media does reference multiple disadvantages, it is simplistically**

- **Most of the articles which reference multiple disadvantages are not actually about disadvantage per se**
- **Articles that reference multiple disadvantages do not connect them together**
- **In general, the voices of people with lived experience of multiple disadvantages are missing from their own stories**
- **There is a lack of empathy in these stories**
- **In news media coverage there is a lot of blame directed towards individual, institutional and systems level failure**
- **There are a series of preconceived narratives used to frame multiple disadvantage**
- **Some key broadcast media are actively challenging common negative narratives**
- **Institutional failure narratives provide opportunities for promoting new understanding of social disadvantage**
- **Major policy issues can provide momentum for stories across all media**
- **Online news media present valuable platforms for amplifying the voices of people with lived experience of SMD**
- **There is a lack of mutual trust in both the media and charitable sector but there is appetite for people to work together to change this**

# What initial analysis of media articles tells us



## Overview

Initial statistical analysis of articles referencing the various forms of disadvantage researched shows how some receive a great deal more coverage than others. A stark finding is that extreme poverty and homelessness are barely referenced. This suggests that these issues scarcely receive any media coverage.

The sample also shows that news media is more likely to reference single issues rather than report on the complexity of people's lives who are experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage. This prompts the question of whether the media is merely reflecting broader siloed systems?

Further analysis also raises important questions about the extent to which media coverage promotes an understanding of multiple disadvantage in any situation or with any disadvantage. What has been revealed is a series of caveats which affect the way we read articles which do reference several disadvantages.

The following section looks at how news media covers disadvantage in general, how it covers multiple disadvantage and, finally, looks beyond the statistics to build an understanding of what actually happens within media articles featuring multiple disadvantage:

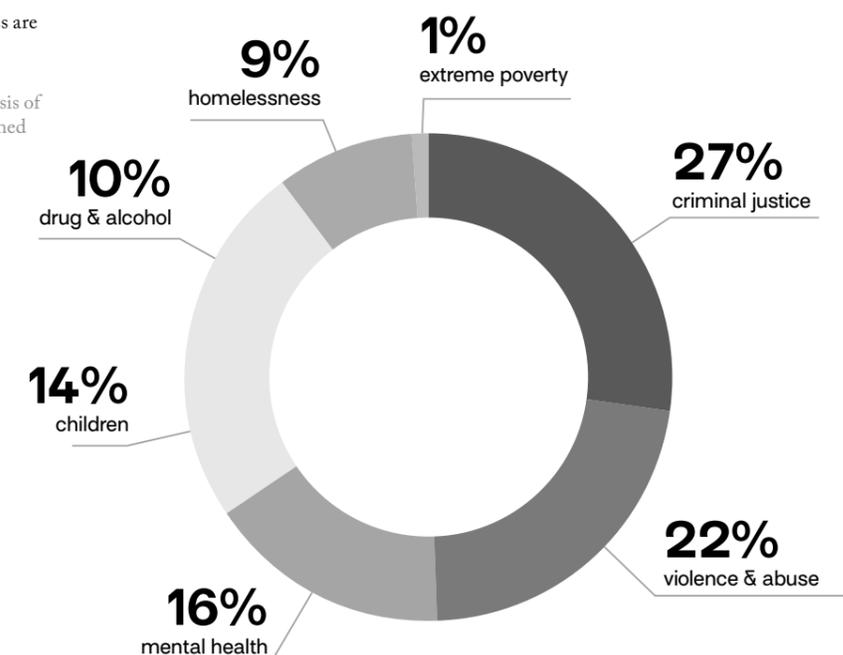
**“Simple stories confirm people’s beliefs – ‘they are not like us.’”** Steering group member

## How media covers disadvantage in general: What we found

Figure 1

Which social disadvantages are most referenced?

Source: Quantitative analysis of online news articles published over three months



### The media pay more attention to criminal justice and least attention to extreme poverty

Analysis of the 8,192 articles generated in the three-month study shows that criminal justice is more frequently referenced than any other of the areas. The extent of this differs depending on the source: for example, 1,916 of the 4,117 Daily Mail articles in the entire sample referenced criminal justice (almost half) whereas 388 out of all 1,232 Guardian articles (under a third) did the same.

In contrast, extreme poverty only received 1% of references across all articles, even though one senior national journalist told our researchers that they believe poverty lies at the heart of much disadvantage. For those wishing to report a more complex account of social inequality, this raises the question of whether journalists working within news media are encouraged, or able to report on root causes rather than the symptoms of this inequality.

**“We in the media can do more by highlighting lives that people lead rather than the lives that we think they lead. If you give a more accurate representation, then others will feel more willing to come forward.”** Journalist

**“There is a big question for me about what we expect journalists to do. We now expect them to be educating the public and get behind our view of the world. How realistic is that?”**

**Steering group member**

### Children facing multiple disadvantage appears to attract the most nuanced coverage

More than 93% of articles referencing children also mentioned additional areas. The most common combinations being children and violence and abuse (645 articles) and children, criminal justice and violence and abuse (515 articles).

One assumption which could be made is that children are often seen as 'victims' and adults as 'perpetrators' in relationships even though the adults themselves may be facing abuse or have come into contact with the criminal justice system. This is coupled with an earlier observation that the media is more interested in specific areas such as criminal justice and violence and abuse.

**“You like to feel that you can keep on at something and keep it in the spotlight and that is the best you can hope for.”** Journalist

**Figure 2**

The most common disadvantage combinations (in descending order) out of a total of 8,192 articles gathered over the three-month study period

Source: Quantitative analysis of online news articles published over three months



### Mental health is frequently covered in isolation

Mental health is the third most referenced area at 16%, and it is more likely to be covered by itself. The study shows that 65% of mental health articles do not reference any of the other disadvantages.

Interviewed journalists noted that effective mental health campaigns and the involvement of celebrities have increased both public and media interest on the subject in recent years. One of the senior broadcast journalists interviewed said they had 'moved on' from covering mental health stories since they first identified the subject as underreported some years ago because more news media were now covering it. They no longer felt it needed their help to spotlight the issue.

### Homelessness gets limited media coverage and is reported in isolation

The second least reported area of disadvantage is homelessness at 9%.

Further study of the samples shows how homelessness and people who find themselves homeless are also least likely to be featured in combination with any other disadvantage.

The lack of 'multiplicity' is unusual given the extent to which homelessness is often regarded as both a symptom and a cause of other disadvantages. Whatever the underlying factors for this lack, the finding helps explain some of the challenges in trying to raise the profile of homelessness as an issue – especially when attempting to link it with other disadvantages and broader systemic causes and solutions.

### How media 'covers' multiple disadvantage: What we found

#### The media rarely reports on the complexity of people's lives

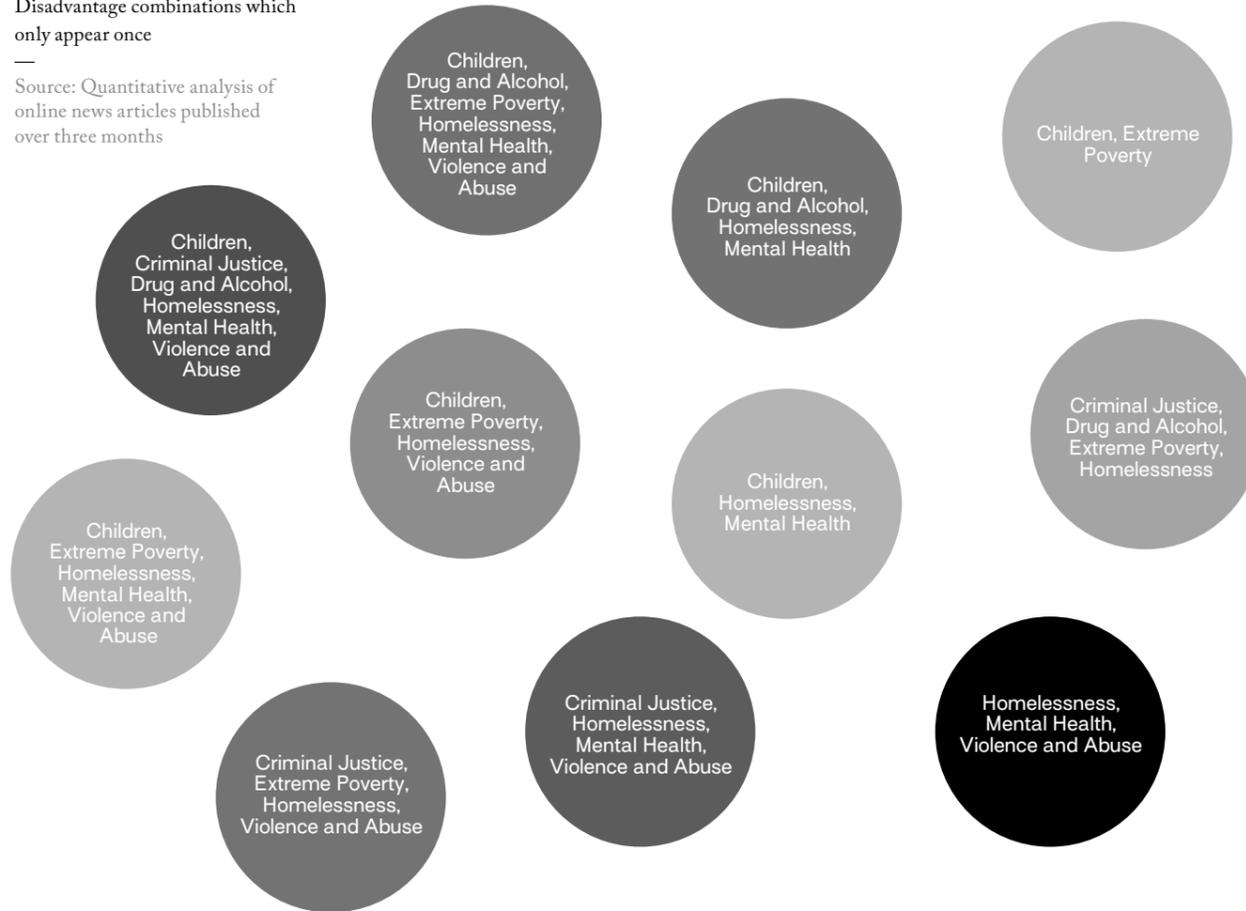
Within the 8,192 articles, 63% (5,161 articles) referenced only one area of disadvantage. Moreover, when the media does reference multiple disadvantage, it errs on the side of simplicity. This is shown by the fact that 1,782 articles referenced two disadvantages and just 1,091 featured three or more combinations. Further analysis shows how a total of 11 combinations occur only once in the total amount. Extreme poverty appears in six of these 11 combinations and homelessness appears in 10 out of all 11 combinations.

Only mental health is presented in greater singularity.

**Figure 3**

Disadvantage combinations which only appear once

Source: Quantitative analysis of online news articles published over three months



## Beyond the statistics: What we found

Simple statistical analysis helps develop a broad understanding of media coverage of multiple disadvantage. However, this only tells a partial story when it comes to understanding media treatment of multiple disadvantage, for the following four reasons:

### Articles referencing disadvantage are rarely actually 'about' disadvantage per se

Discourse analysis of 100 articles taken from the three-month sample reveals that for many articles, the disadvantage references were often incidental. One of the many examples was a story titled 'Middle-aged mums are a liability behind the wheel'.<sup>1</sup> The story fulfilled the mental health and criminal justice search terms but

was actually an article about traffic accidents involving women. Another example, 'Video of Wonder Woman carer taking down knifeman'<sup>2</sup> fulfilled search terms for children, criminal justice, mental health and violence and abuse but was a story about a woman who intervened when seeing a man attack his mother with a knife.

Analysis of the likely sources of articles referencing multiple disadvantage discussed further in Section 6, reinforces this idea of the incidental nature of media references to the subject matter. The analysis shows that news articles referencing multiple disadvantage are often reactive and respond to events or court hearings, or they are about celebrities or criminals, rather than setting out to promote understanding.

There are some journalists consciously trying to 'level the playing field' for people who are otherwise underrepresented in media coverage (see Section 5). Such coverage is the exception rather than the rule and most articles which reference multiple disadvantage have other news priorities.

### Articles referencing multiple disadvantage do not connect them

Articles which reference multiple disadvantages are rarely reporting how or why they are connected. Indeed, the research team sought to create a sample of 100 articles from a sub-sample of 400, to explore common narratives. However, they reverted to the original 8,192 sample due to a lack of enough connection between the referenced disadvantages. This is explored further in Section 5.

### Articles frequently lack the voice of people with lived experience

Very few pieces are empathetic to or feature the voices of people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage.

During the two-week contemporary study carried out in November 2018, researchers looked at 24 articles referencing the impact of Universal Credit. Six articles (four Guardian and two BBC) carried direct quotes from those affected, including people who had considered taking their own lives or turning to prostitution and who faced extreme poverty. The other articles either failed to reference the effects on people at all or relied on indirect quotes or third parties such as politicians and charities or volunteers, to report about the impact on the lives of people facing multiple disadvantage.

### People with lived experience of multiple disadvantage are sometimes distorted by the media

Even when people with lived experience are included, their stories are often distorted by 'built-in' media narratives. A Daily Mail article<sup>3</sup> analysed during our two-week contemporary study illustrates the point. The article featured numerous disadvantages (criminal justice, homelessness, domestic abuse and drug abuse) and, to some extent, connected them. However, in reality, the piece was about the declining circumstances of model and reality TV star Katie Price. It followed a specific recognisable type of media narrative which is discussed in more detail in the next section.

**“People in the voluntary sector have no idea about the volume of information that journalists are processing every day. They need to make content packages that are focused on what we need.”** Journalist

**Media narratives used  
to present multiple  
disadvantage**



## Overview

**We used discourse analysis techniques to understand how news media frames multiple disadvantage and discovered a series of built-in narratives or pre-existing frameworks into which it fits or places stories.**

The prevalence of these pre-determined narratives suggests that consumers of media often receive oversimplified and, at times, distorted stories because the more complex version has been forced to fit into one of them.

Our research also shows that different archetypes appear to impact on people facing particular combinations of disadvantage. This can present difficulties when trying to promote a greater understanding of how complex real life actually is.

However, findings show that this does not always have to be the case. Closer analysis of key narratives, specifically those which highlight institutional or systemic failure, hints at opportunities for encouraging greater understanding of multiple disadvantage by working with built-in media discourses rather than trying to challenge these embedded frameworks.

Such opportunities may lie in harnessing specific individual narratives which, like the institutional failings discourse, have resonance across the political and media spectrum, or in piggy-backing less dominant discourses which feed into and overlap with the more dominant ones.

The following findings are based on analysis of 100 articles selected from the three-month sample on the basis that they were explicitly about people facing multiple forms of disadvantage or were about the connections between disadvantages more generally.

The sample articles included coverage from most of the target media. However, articles referenced here are drawn mainly from the Daily Mail and The Guardian because the two outlets provided the best examples of the different narratives.

## Institution failure narratives

### Institutional Failings narrative

Examples:

“Judge delays sentencing paedophile so he can go on holiday.”<sup>4</sup>

“We do not necessarily need new laws. I just want to see the existing ones applied.”<sup>5</sup>

“There were so many failures and missed opportunities to safeguard Archie but because the concerns were raised by myself – his father – they were dismissed.”<sup>6</sup>

Characteristics:

- Common narrative which focuses on how our existing institutions, public services and democratic processes have failed people which in turn has made their lives worse.
- Argues that failure is a result of bureaucratic negligence, poor decision making or a lack of resources or does not explicitly identify failure source, rather than inherent problems in the system.
- Can appear mixed in with more systemic narratives.
- Appears in both left and right leaning media but varies significantly in different ideological incarnations. For example, the Daily Mail tends to focus on institutional bias (against men or towards wellbeing of offenders) whereas The Guardian will emphasise how public service funding cuts have resulted in institutional failings.
- Can be identified in relation to all areas researched but varies in the extent to which it explores links between multiple disadvantages which, arguably, are exacerbated by institutional failings.

**“The question is: ‘which bit do we think is changeable and where can we place some pressure? Where can we make the most impact?’ ”**

Steering group member

**“There are no explicit editorial policies that mitigate against coverage of multiple disadvantage. It is more “chaotic” than that.”** Journalist

**“Where readers are feeling comforted by the ‘othering’ that we do, deep relational conversations between people would change how we relate to people and where we get our comfort from.”**

**“Charities need to come at things more from the newsworthy angle rather than the worthy angle.”** Journalist

# Individual failure narratives

## The Disadvantage Entertainment narrative

Examples:

“One resident said she was shocked when she saw a male sitting on a grave with his trousers down injecting himself in his thigh in full view of everyone.”<sup>7</sup>

“Heavily pregnant mother-of-two from Skegness jailed for glassing man so hard he lost his eye.”<sup>8</sup>

Characteristics:

- A common way in which people facing multiple disadvantage are presented in the media, particularly in the Daily Mail.
- Stories touch upon multiple forms of disadvantage and often as experienced by the same person but do not generally explore the links. There are exceptions, with connections made between mental health, violence and abuse and criminal justice but these are presented negatively. For example, a person who has become violent and committed crimes as a result of their mental illness. As such the person is presented as someone to be feared.
- Stories are intended to shock for entertainment value.
- **The implication is that those featured are responsible for their own circumstances.**

## The Tall Poppy Syndrome narrative

Example:

“Mentally ill local football star fights with and shot dead by police.”<sup>9</sup>

Characteristics:

- A variant of the Disadvantage Entertainment narrative, this time directed specifically at people previously in positions of authority, wealth, fame or other success.
- Commonly connected to addiction, mental health and criminal justice.

## The Upstanding Citizens against Bad People narrative

Example:

“The street life officer for the enforcement team has dealt with nine incidents of abandoned property from people sleeping in the cemetery over this period. A total of 213 needles have been removed from the cemetery over this reporting period.”<sup>10</sup> Volunteers undertake various works in the cemetery and a community payback team helped with the clearing of cutbacks created by the volunteers.”<sup>11</sup>

Characteristics:

- Often accompanies Disadvantage Entertainment and paints a similar picture of inexplicable and shocking behaviour by people who are presented as irredeemable.
- More emphasis on ‘othering’, by creating an opposition of ‘good citizens’ like the volunteers.
- Particularly common way of featuring some disadvantages including homelessness, drug and alcohol use, criminal justice and combinations of all three. It often conflates the three, suggesting that people who are homeless are understood to be addicts and involved in criminality. There is no effort to distinguish between these dimensions.

## The Vigilantism narrative

Examples:

“You suspect that not all of them are actually homeless... that’s extremely troubling... The police are doing their best, but I’d like to see more done to root out the con artists.”<sup>12</sup>

“Charities have expressed concern about an ‘open season’ on the homeless after recent controversies that included tough language by police and political figures as well as a vigilante campaign.”<sup>13</sup>

Characteristics:

- At extreme end of ‘Upstanding Citizens’ narrative with people facing multiple disadvantage presented as a threat to rest of the community which existing authorities and institutions are unable to address.
- Suggests that people facing any form of disadvantage are ‘pretending’ for personal gain.
- Encourages citizens to take direct action against these ‘fake’ people.
- Mainly seen in this sample in relation to homelessness but the rise in hate crimes against BAME children and people with disabilities (as reported elsewhere in other articles in sample) can potentially be understood in this context.

## The Redemption narrative

Example:

“The former Atomic Kitten star looked the picture of health and happiness, having beaten her own demons thanks to positive thinking and exercise.”<sup>14</sup>

Characteristics:

- Allows people who have faced multiple forms of disadvantage to talk about their experiences in their own words.
- Is broadly sympathetic but does not tend to explore how systemic factors may have contributed to their problems.
- Is a relatively common narrative, but generally reserved for celebrities.
- **Commonly featured with addiction and mental health but also sometimes with children who have been impacted by the experiences of the parent.**

## Mothers and people from BAME backgrounds appearing in personal failure narratives

The size of the discourse analysis sample makes it hard to make statistically valid generalisations about the relationship between media coverage and demographical characteristic features of those featured.

However, the research found other patterns at play within personal failure narratives that particularly focused on stories about women and mothers. Examples include ‘Defiant mum who was found nine times over limit in parked car blames episode on stressful motherhood’<sup>15</sup> and those quoted earlier: ‘More prison time for ex-Army mother’<sup>16</sup> and ‘Heavily pregnant mother of two from Skegness’<sup>17</sup> articles. In this case, it is noted in small print that the woman became pregnant awaiting trial.

Similarly, there was disproportionate representation of Black and Minority Ethnic individuals in these narratives – the targets of the ‘More prison time for ex-Army mother’ and ‘Mentally ill football star’ stories, amongst others, are black.

# System failure narratives

## Deep Systemic and Structural Change narrative

Example:

“After the Toronto attack, there should be a debate about toxic masculinity and the issues of identity and rage that turn so many men towards violence... the misogyny and inadequacy... characterise a far broader and deeper problem that helps to explain male violence.”<sup>18</sup>

Characteristics:

- Deep appreciation of the connections between disadvantages and the high probability that people face multiple disadvantages.
- **Recognises institutions, systems and structural factors as perpetuating severe and multiple disadvantage.**
- Prioritises the voices and agency of people facing multiple disadvantage.
- Relatively rare within mainstream media.
- Contains structural and systemic analysis.
- Questions taken-for-granted norms and behaviours.
- Highlights how collective action has already created positive systemic change.
- **Presents systemic change as beneficial to everyone in society.**
- Potentially appears in relation to all combinations of disadvantage.

## Systemic Problem narrative

Example:

“The work of Alana House in guiding women like Anna away from crime was rightly commended... it shows how women’s centres can achieve what prisons cannot – working with other services in the community to turn lives around.”<sup>19</sup>

Characteristics:

- Shares much in common with Deep Systemic and Structural Change narrative but less emphasis on the voices and agency of people themselves.
- Understands and emphasises correlations between different disadvantages.
- Sees aspects of existing institutions and wider systems to be causing or exacerbating problems.

## Rights-Based Discourse narrative

Examples:

“Leilani Farha, the UN special rapporteur on housing said residents’ rights to safe and secure housing might have been breached. Miss Farha felt that Grenfell residents were ‘not being treated like human beings’. Britain could have breached its human rights obligations over the Grenfell Tower inferno, the UN housing investigator has suggested.”<sup>20</sup>

Characteristics:

- Uses the language of human rights to discuss multiple disadvantage.
- **Argues that people facing multiple disadvantage have had their fundamental human rights violated.**
- Shows how aspects of existing institutions and systems are leading to this violation of human rights.
- Can be found in conjunction with all levels of institutional, structural and systemic analysis.
- Particularly prominent in relation to homelessness and housing.

## Experiences of the Voiceless narrative

Example:

“When I was a kid, I was as kind hearted a child as you can possibly imagine... what happened to that child is so horrendously wrong...I went through 18 months to two years of deep, deep depression...” child sexual abuse survivor<sup>21</sup>.

Characteristics:

- Rare within media coverage.
- Focuses on the lived experience of people facing extreme disadvantage and people who are rarely heard in media. Our sample included interviews with various groups including child refugees, care leavers who suffered sexual abuse, sex workers, rough sleepers and crack users, amongst others.
- Tends to include vivid and searing accounts of extreme suffering told in an individuals’ own words.
- Shows connection and overlap between disadvantage.
- A significant feature is often the weakness of systems and institutions.
- Use of this narrative often has explicit political objectives (to win support for change).

## Appeals for Nuance and Consideration of Context narrative

Examples:

“Child sexual abuse victims do not belong to one class.”<sup>22</sup>

“Few homeless families have high support needs... They do not need Housing First, just an adequate, affordable home.”<sup>23</sup>

Characteristics:

- Appears as an ‘outlier’ narrative, disrupting claims about correlations between disadvantages, but does not reject the multiple disadvantage frame.

“One intervention is: where do we ‘get’ hope? Because there are stories and there are journalists and examples of where it [coverage] is done differently, and that can’t be lost.” Steering group member

“We turn the people we report on into victims which deprives them of any agency in a situation. How do you report poverty without making the poor look pathetic? Is it not a problem with an easy solution.”

Journalist academic

**Other ways in which  
media frames  
disadvantage**



## Overview

The previous section shows how multiple disadvantage is reported within a range of preconceived narratives, all of which are likely to influence readers' perceptions in different ways.

In this section, we share findings from the analysis of the tone of articles. Results suggest two key points; firstly, that tone can influence how we receive, and what we think about, a broad subject matter and the people who might appear in an article. Secondly, when there is coverage of multiple disadvantage, it is unlikely to engage the reader because at best, it is reported in a neutral tone, and this is unlikely to create empathy.

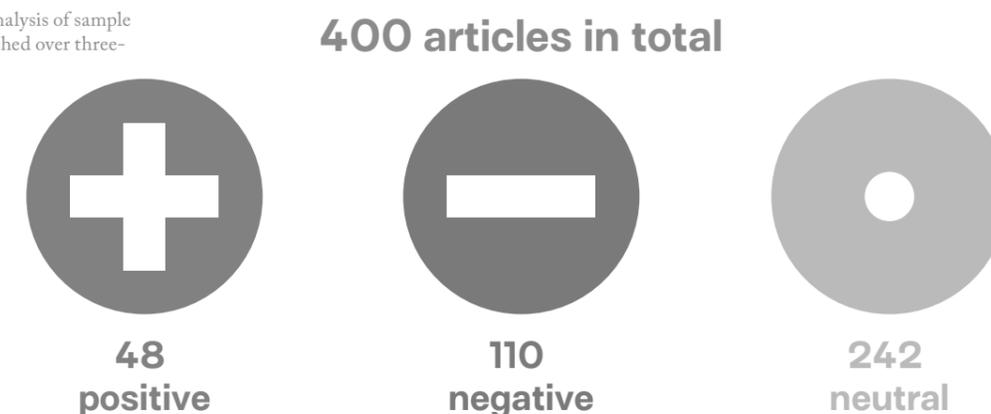
### Analysis of article tone: What we found

The research programme assessed the tone of a total of 400 articles from the three-month sample, reflecting the same media and disadvantage composition of the larger sample. It categorised these articles as either positive, negative or neutral according to the way in which they reflected a disadvantage and the person or people associated with it.

Figure 4

How is disadvantage framed by the media

Source: Tonal analysis of sample of articles published over three-month period



#### There is a lack of empathy in coverage

Out of the 400 articles, just 48 (12%) were positive. So, while the statistical study of content covered in Section 1 revealed that few articles connect the relationships between disadvantages, tonal analysis goes further to suggest that coverage also often lacks empathy for the people who appear in them.

#### Most articles are presented in a neutral tone

Indeed, 242 of the 400 articles analysed were judged to be neutral. This finding may reinforce the previous observation that most articles featuring most forms of disadvantage do so incidentally.

#### Some disadvantages are disproportionately presented in neutral or negative light

Some disadvantages are more likely to be presented in a negative light than others with the starkest example being articles that reference children facing multiple disadvantage. Out of a total of 95 articles 47 were neutral, 36 were negative and only 12 were positive. This reinforces the previous observation that children do not 'disadvantage' themselves and that the negative tone is more likely to reflect a lack of empathy for the adults who are responsible for the children's situation, rather than the children themselves.

**“Sometimes you read something and you are just happy that isn't you... so there is a certain thing which is 'shameful joy' which brings you comfort... and that is quite relevant.”** Steering group member

### **Mental health appears to be disproportionately presented in a positive light**

Mental health is more likely than any of the other areas to be presented in a more positive light. Out of the 48 positive articles, a total of 21 reference mental health. In other words, mental health is not only more likely to appear in 'isolation' than other disadvantages, it is more likely to be presented empathetically. As such, mental health could be a useful starting point for future efforts to develop broader narratives.

### **'Multiplicity' seems to get a bad press compared to 'singularity'**

As our study of content shows, news media does not 'do' multiplicity. Tonal analysis suggests that on the rare occasions when this does happen, news media is unlikely to promote a positive (appreciative) understanding of the challenges people face.

The study found that articles which reference multiple disadvantage are more likely to be presented in a negative context than those which reference a single one. Indeed, more than half of all the negative articles referenced multiple disadvantage compared to 14 of the 48 positive ones.

### **Further analysis of media narratives: What we found**

Section 2 showed how it is possible to identify a series of different narrative frames through discourse analysis of media coverage. The same analysis is helpful in giving a more nuanced view of the tonal results featured above and highlights:

#### **A common story type which connects mental health and violent, abusive and criminal behaviour**

Discourse analysis shows that when it does appear in combination with the other areas, it is not presented empathetically. Instead, the narrative presents mental illness as the cause of this harmful behaviour and casts those affected by it in an extremely negative light.

#### **Some narratives 'other' particular areas of disadvantage**

We found individual failure narratives which 'other' people facing homelessness, drug and alcohol misuse and criminal justice issues or a combination of them. These narratives can have demographic variations, including one which shows a preference for stories which feature women, and, particularly, mothers. A story about a couple charged with child abuse makes the point with the emphasis in its headline: 'More Prison Time for ex-Army mother in child abuse case'<sup>24</sup> (see below in the following Section).

**“There needs to be closer connection between the community and reporters and news outlets and more trusting and understanding.”** Journalist

# How news media construct disadvantage articles



## Overview

**A two-week contemporaneous media study in early November 2018 looked closely at coverage across a wide range of media to build an understanding of the broader frameworks and factors which the media uses to construct stories which feature multiple disadvantage, beyond the use of the narratives already identified.**

Findings reinforce headline observations from our discourse analysis, showing how the key narratives we identified play out over a broader range of media within a more confined subject area and timeframe (two weeks as opposed to the three months of our larger sample).

These findings echo comments made by journalists interviewed who stated the importance of policy as a critical driver of coverage. In doing so, these findings highlight the need for charities to make the most of policy-related opportunities to get messages out.

The findings also show that some positive coverage is generated by online media such as Vice and BuzzFeed. There is also a role for news organisations like the BBC to challenge some narratives which would otherwise inhibit understandings of multiplicity. These provide signposts for charities looking for more natural allies.

## What we found:

**The ‘Disadvantage Entertainment’ narrative operates across a range of short-form news media**

Where discourse analysis highlighted the prevalence of the Disadvantage Entertainment narrative in the Daily Mail, for example, our two-week study found examples of this narrative in a broad range of short-form media.

One example, featured in both The Sun and the Daily Mirror,<sup>25</sup> told the story of a family of four from East Yorkshire who were about to be evicted from their temporary local authority accommodation. The story presented the local authority as uncaring and bore hallmarks of an institutional failure narrative but combined it with strong elements of disadvantage entertainment narrative, giving a range of disadvantages (violence and abuse, mental health issues and potential homelessness) without linking them. It encouraged readers to ask, ‘can you believe people really live and behave like this?’ while at the same time placing at least some of the blame on the mother of the family.

Neither versions of the story tried to give any context to broader systemic issues around working poverty (both mother and partner were in work). Nor did they examine issues which defined their chaotic lifestyles or do anything to ask what support the family might need to change their seemingly declining circumstances.

The pieces serve as a reminder that media narratives can work in complicated ways, in this case implicitly combining both individual and institutional failure.

**“Charities don’t ‘get’ newsworthiness, and, also, news might not be what they want covered.”**

Steering group member

### **Othering of mothers is widespread too**

The discourse analysis finding that mothers frequently appear to be the subject of certain types of disadvantage narratives is reinforced by the eviction story (above) and a Sunday Mirror article which also appeared during our two-week contemporaneous study. The report said that it was ‘lifting the lid’ on a sex worker’s dangerous life on the streets in South Wales and was headlined “Prostitute sits back and smokes crack as daughter goes off with punters”.<sup>26</sup> Unusually, the article did not give an age for the daughter, but we are told the mother is in her 50s and are clearly intended to think that the child is a minor.

### **Local media appears to be a common source of stories which promote particular narratives**

Our two-week study highlights the role that local media plays in providing stories which promote particular narratives to the national press. The Yorkshire eviction story, the sex worker article and an article<sup>27</sup> about a Merseyside mother who ‘does not want to wake up’ because of her benefits struggle all appear to have been supplied to national media via local press. Knowledge of where the original news story has come from (supply chain) may be useful in identifying effective mechanisms which encourage more sophisticated coverage in the future.

**““We find the world scary so we seek explanations for why it is scary. Explanations based on complexity are difficult for mass media so they provide us with simple explanations which are typically: ‘Who is to blame, whose fault is it that the world is scary?’”**

**Steering group member**

## **Disadvantage Entertainment narratives are also characterised by an absence of charity involvement**

None of the stories referenced carried quotes from relevant charities. Yet, if they were included in the process, it could mean journalists gain more useful facts, a better understanding of the systemic context and greater empathy towards the people they are writing about.

The situation highlights a challenge faced by charities working with the media. The interviews with journalists, mostly from broadcast and long-form media, reveal some frustration with what they see as 'over-protective' charity press and PR teams. However, the prevalence of the disadvantage entertainment narrative in shorter media forms means charities may be cautious about working with them.

## **Key broadcast media is actively challenging common narratives around race**

The two-week study highlighted ways in which certain media platforms, principally the BBC, work to challenge narratives around race.

In one example, the white rapper Professor Green was interviewed on Good Morning Britain to talk about knife crime. Later he posted on Instagram that his interview had been too short, and he was unable to make the critical point that knife crime was not solely a black issue. He went on to say there was 'institutional racism' within some media and an agenda to restore racially motivated police stop and search powers.

His social media comments were then picked up by the BBC which, in an example of the 'Appeals for Nuance' narrative, ran an online story<sup>28</sup> in which he made the point that knife crime is about white people too and was linked to poverty.

Professor Green was previously the victim of a knife attack and so may be seen to be better placed than many to comment. The fact that his comments were picked up by the BBC makes a useful point about the power of social media and the value of both celebrity and lived experience.

In a separate piece,<sup>29</sup> the BBC again appeared to challenge narratives around ethnicity and disadvantage. One example featured an elderly black woman who won a Daily Mirror Pride of

Britain award after running a soup kitchen for homeless people in Oxford. The piece focused on her as a hero and her motivations to do the work, rather than reducing her to a bit-part in her own story.

## **Online media provides a platform for the promotion of race and LGBT+ issues**

The same November 2018 study hinted at the vital role online media such as Vice, BuzzFeed and Huffington Post UK play in providing a platform to discuss discrimination, whether that be race, gender or class.

One example from the Huffington Post<sup>30</sup> featured a blog inspired by a Stonewall report about depression amongst the LGBT+ community. And in BuzzFeed, there was an exclusive report about a government consultation into the treatment of intersex people.<sup>31</sup>

Vice meanwhile highlighted the experiences of LGBT+ asylum seekers, sympathetically showing how they had experienced both physical abuse and systemic Home Office failures. The long-form piece<sup>32</sup> also explained that charities working with those affected are so stretched that they had insufficient time to find case studies, but nonetheless featured quotes from an asylum seeker from El Salvador with lived experience of these issues.

The Vice immigrant narrative contrasts sharply with a Sun story,<sup>33</sup> again inspired by an Instagram posting, which shows photographs of Albanian men flaunting machetes alongside luxury cars. The reader is told that they are responsible for organised crime in the East End of London and that they are the children of immigrants who arrived in the UK as asylum seekers in the 1990s.

## **“Some media outlets don't want to create different stories.”**

**Steering group member**

## **“Relationships between charities and journalists get disrupted when you have a positive experience of coverage or when you have friends who are journalists... and it is particularly helpful if you are based in London.”**

**Steering group member**

### **Major policy issues can provide momentum across all media**

Over the two-week study period, we saw how a major policy issue – the roll-out of Universal Credit – impacted on coverage of multiple disadvantage. There were articles by outlets spanning short-form print like the Sunday Mirror, longer-form media such as The Times, the BBC, and other online media.

The following articles illustrate the diverse ways in which different media present the same policy, even where there is implicit agreement that it is wrong:

- A Huffington Post piece, 'Some Days are Bleak',<sup>34</sup> worked as a 'wraparound' story for several story strands and was inspired by comments from a Salvation Army food bank worker in Preston. One strand covered a critical Work and Pensions Select Committee report criticising the impact of benefit sanctions, while another was inspired by a Trussell Trust report showing a 13% rise in use of food banks as a direct result of Universal Credit.
- A front-page picture and caption in The Times<sup>35</sup> showed people queuing outside an Oldham foodbank. The piece calls the benefits freeze 'immoral' and warns the government that it will suffer at the next election if it fails to act.
- BBC Radio 4 Today feature<sup>36</sup> inspired by a Panorama investigation into the Universal Credit 'crisis'. The piece used statistics obtained by Freedom of Information to show the rent arrears of benefit claimants. It empathetically presented the case of a North Wales claimant, a single dad who gave up work to look after

his young son. The piece suggests broader systemic issues were at play, with local authorities warning that the new benefit was simply shifting costs from central to local government.

- The Sunday Mirror piece featuring a Universal Credit claimant from Merseyside, as part of the Mirror's campaign to end Universal Credit.<sup>37</sup> As highlighted earlier, the mother talks about her struggle to feed her children and is quoted saying she sometimes 'does not want to wake up'. Interestingly, this article attracted hundreds of comments with mixed sympathies from readers.

## **“With the PIP\* issue we worked with a small charity to do an eight-minute piece. It worked because we got the great case studies. It was satisfying and the charity felt we had done it well.”**

**Journalist**

\*Personal Independence Payment

# Journalists' views on covering multiple disadvantage



## Overview

**Comments from journalists interviewed for this research revealed a range of different personal and professional motivations for wanting to explicitly cover multiple disadvantage. They highlighted a variety of other factors – from policy to personal experience – that drive coverage.**

They also identified a clear set of challenges which news media commonly faces when attempting to report on multiple forms of disadvantage.

### Motivations of reporters

Journalists shared both personal and professional motivations for wanting to cover multiple disadvantage. One interviewee spoke of how they were driven by their own family's experience of both poverty and mental ill health. Others talked about professional motivations. One said: "It is important we give a voice to those that don't have one in the public sphere. It is not about doing good in the world, but about access to the media for those that don't naturally have it." Another saw their role as: "To positively influence conversations about disadvantaged

communities so that they can get a fair hearing."

One other journalist took a different view, suggesting that all news journalists are ultimately interested in news and breaking stories: "It is what we are all interested in. It is what makes journalists tick."

### The drivers of coverage

Beyond personal motivations, journalists said drivers for coverage of severe and multiple disadvantage were often outlet dependent. However, the editorial policy was not necessarily a determining factor, with many saying there were no explicit editorial policies that might mitigate against coverage of multiple disadvantage – 'it is more chaotic than that'.

Journalists did agree with the finding in the previous section that government policy was a significant driver of much coverage, with policy debates and initiatives (such as major announcements around Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payments) playing a big part in story generation.

Within all relevant stories, however, journalists said that there needed to be a news driver and that news is governed by what people want to read. One journalist simply said that news editors were not interested in what they called 'worthy' stories. They added: "'Sociologic' magazines go out of business!"

### Straightforward narrative versus complex story

Almost without exception, all journalists spoke of the challenge of telling complex stories within the constraints of time and space available to them, and the demands of a media geared towards simplicity. There had to be a straightforward narrative, whatever the challenge of the story. In a paper like The Sun, one person said, "you were always fighting for space, so you had to make the most of literally every word – whatever the story."

Journalists often said they cannot do justice to the complexity of everyone's lives. One said: "Whenever you read anything that you really want to know about, and you read journalism on that subject you will find it wanting. You don't go to journalism to understand complexity."

Another journalist said that too many newsrooms operated on the theory that bad news sells best yet anecdotally cited research that shows people are interested in positives and success stories. There were different views on this subject. Several journalists said that audiences needed to 'be told' why they should be interested in stories about disadvantage. Others said audiences would always be concerned if they were presented with a human-interest story – if the medium allowed sufficient time and space to tell that story.

# Media Chains – sources and voices



## Overview

**We looked at 50 articles taken from our three-month sample to consider the possible inspiration for coverage, the likely ‘chains of production’ involved and the extent to which views and people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage were presented.**

We looked at 50 articles taken from our three-month sample to consider the possible inspiration for coverage, the likely ‘chains of production’ involved and the extent to which views and people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage were presented.

We found that, although articles came from a range of sources, the majority fell into one of two types:

1. Ones that were reacting to news events and, as such, part of the daily churn of news. These typically tended to treat disadvantage incidentally and were not generally interested in the people affected for any deeper consideration within a systemic context. Examples included: ‘Homeless man steals a truck full of beer and leads police on a high-speed chase’,<sup>38</sup> ‘Second year Bristol physicist, 20, dies suddenly’,<sup>39</sup> ‘Man enters Dundee housing office with knives and bizarre pictures.’<sup>40</sup>

2. Articles inspired by charities or statutory agencies (statements/reports, etc.) rather than news events, and which placed disadvantage more centrally within the story. They were more likely to appear in longer form print media, BBC or online news sites. For example, ‘Children in care being ‘pinged’ around schools and homes’, says report’,<sup>41</sup> ‘Andy Burnham – Safe housing should be a human right’,<sup>42</sup> ‘Telford grooming ‘tip of the iceberg,’ says solicitor’.<sup>43</sup>

This division of sources is interesting, not least because it gives us another way of understanding the sheer number of articles which reference multiple disadvantage but don’t connect them, i.e. by suggesting that they are articles driven by news events.

## What we found:

**The daily churn of events driven news is responsible for many articles referencing multiple disadvantage**

The interviews with journalists and observations from our two-week news analysis highlight the importance of policy as a driver of articles. However, it is clear the simple daily churn of events, such as death and crime, and court reports of those crimes are responsible for a large number of these articles. This was approximately 40% of this sample. The sample suggests these are likely to be articles which typically neither connect the disadvantages or root the story in a policy or system failure narrative.

**Articles are more likely to come from news agencies and other news organisations**

26% of all articles came from news agencies, and only 10% came from charities.

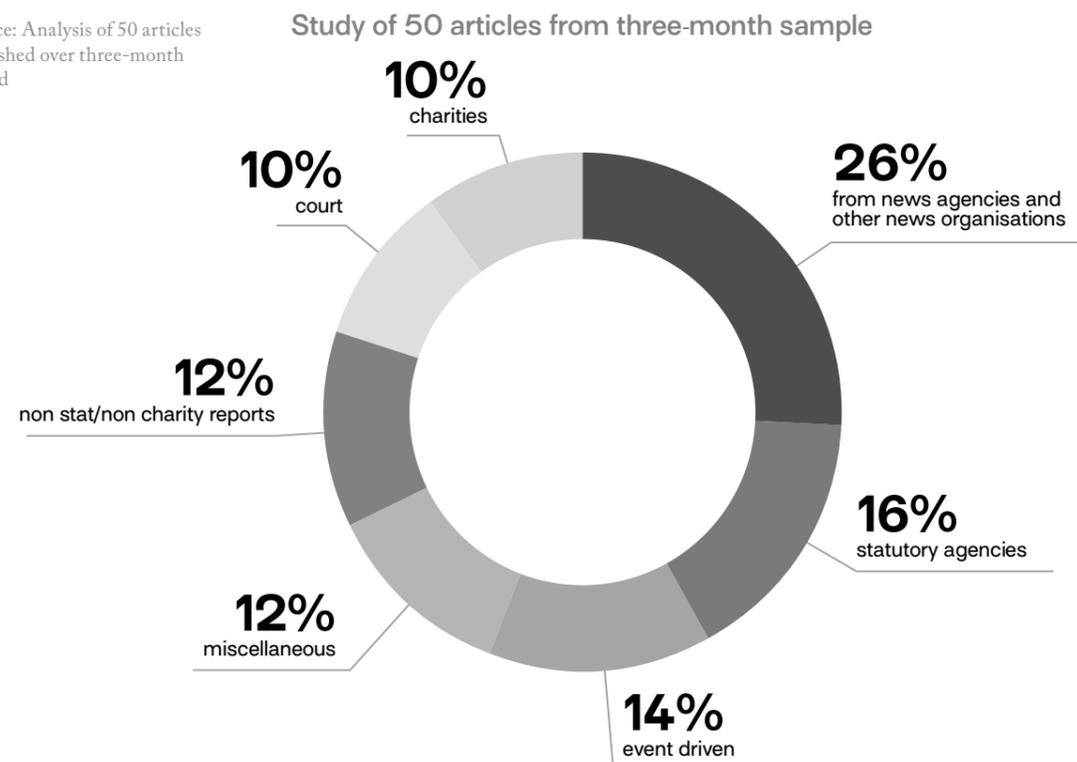
Of the five articles generated by charities, all appeared to have been inspired by NGOs such as Amnesty International, the Refugee Council, Feantsa (a European housing NGO) and The Victim’s Rights Campaign.

This raises the question of whether the disproportionate presence of international over domestic charities is normal?

**Figure 5**

What inspires news stories about multiple disadvantages?

Source: Analysis of 50 articles published over three-month period



### **Informal news sources can positively impact on coverage**

The 'miscellaneous' category shown in Figure 5 included a wide range of 'informal' news sources which show how individuals, even if they are operating within their own institutions (statutory bodies, media, and charities), can influence news of multiple disadvantage. For example, the articles in this category were inspired by an MP's personal campaign on a sex for rent issue,<sup>44</sup> a social worker challenging Sunday Mirror coverage of the Telford child sex abuse case<sup>45</sup> and the personal experiences of BuzzFeed's LGBT+ editor marking the 30th anniversary of Margaret Thatcher's Section 28 policy.<sup>46</sup>

Such articles perhaps represent a further, positive narrative in which individuals can use their positions within systems to inspire personal but positive and nuanced coverage.

### **People with lived experience find alternative platforms**

Our analysis has highlighted gaps in the opportunities that people with lived experience have to present their own stories and views within the media. The discourse analysis reveals a paucity of articles featuring lived experience of any kind and the quantitative analysis shows the marginalisation of, in particular, people facing homelessness and people experiencing extreme poverty.

Our two-week contemporaneous study set out to find the places where people with lived experience do find a platform to speak. Over this period, the research found the first-person accounts from LGBT+ asylum seekers<sup>47</sup> (Vice); survivors of knife attacks<sup>48</sup> (BBC); rape survivors<sup>49</sup> (Vice); staff subject to abuse by businessman Phillip Green<sup>50</sup> (The Guardian); a 15-year-old poverty campaigner<sup>51</sup> (Vice); a person with lived experience of homelessness and drug use<sup>52</sup> amongst others (Vice) and someone suffering from mental illness<sup>53</sup> as a result of anti LGBT+ discrimination (Huff Post UK).

Significantly, these articles included people from UK regions as well as London. Interestingly, the research found online articles which appeared to have involved journalists travelling to Lancashire and as far north as Dundee to interview people.

The two-week exercise highlighted three key points: firstly, although both BBC Online and The Guardian reach large audiences, many of the platforms referred to are still growing their audiences. This means the reach of some articles featuring lived experience will be limited.

Secondly, the journalists interviewed who are working for online outlets suggested there is a deliberate policy of reporting on the stories of more marginalised groups. By creating their own news agendas, they help to distinguish these platforms from the mainstream and therefore avoid competition with the big titles.

Thirdly, although we found some examples of articles quoting people with lived experience, mainstream media coverage which connected multiple disadvantage was generally fronted by people with traditional positions of status and influence. There were posts such as government ministers (Tracy Couch on gambling addiction), bishops (the Bishop of St Albans on the same story), radio DJs (Paul Gambaccini on his wrongful arrest for child abuse), pop stars (Will Young on use of the word 'gay') and charity CEOs (various).

**“Is ‘severe and multiple disadvantage’ too hard for us all to live with?”** Steering group member

# Opportunities and recommendations



## Overview

# Conversations with journalism academics and leading national journalists, including several social affairs correspondents, suggest valuable pointers for those interested in promoting more nuanced news coverage of multiple disadvantage.

A mutual lack of trust was a key theme of these conversations. Charities who have had negative experiences dealing with some parts of the media may not be surprised by this. Still, it is useful to note that it can work both ways, with journalists themselves sometimes distrusting specific charities.

The interviews did demonstrate a willingness amongst crucial media figures, including those likely to be responsible for the 'non-incident' articles described in Section 5, to work more closely with the charity sector to nurture relationships built on trust.

This may pose an initial challenge if, as the steering group sessions suggested, that charities themselves tend to 'other' the media. If this is currently mainly the case, the sector itself needs a different approach and to recognise which outlets and journalists they feel they can trust and develop relationships with.

The charity sector will also need to broaden who it works with beyond journalists – who already report on the root causes of multiplicity – if it wants to address the challenges highlighted in this report. Interventions through particular media narratives and journalist training courses could provide useful starting points for this.

## Opportunities highlighted by this research

### Cultivating trust between the media, charities and people with lived experience

Comments by several journalists hint at a perceived lack of trust between media and charities. It is often the larger charities which are the source of media distrust.

During the interviews, one journalist revealed that they spoke to a senior charity worker at length but then were told they could not use the valuable information provided and would have to rely on a written statement from the CEO. Their comment exemplified what appeared to be a concern shared by several journalists: "There is a weird over-PRing of things. It was over the top and those that don't do that get better coverage."

Although the research has noted that key narratives, such as Disadvantage Entertainment, are often characterised by the lack of charity involvement, journalists' comments suggest a need for the sector to take a less simplistic approach to the media. One possibility is learning to better distinguish between the different types of media outlets and supply chains. Another is to use the more useful systemic narratives in case studies that are shared with the media.

As has been noted, the issue of trust works both ways. Some charities are clearly trusted much more by the media than others, with journalists recognising the positive media work of, in particular, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Howard League for Penal Reform and the Trussell Trust.

Another journalist is clear that trust comes from mutual understanding, and said it needed to be cultivated between the media and people facing multiple disadvantage. They suggested creating opportunities for bringing journalists together with charities, so this mutual trust could emerge: "There needs to be closer connection between the community and reporters and news outlets and more trusting and understanding."

One other journalist said that the sector mustn't assume there are specific editorial policies in place that influence coverage of social issues. They also argued for people working in the charitable sector to continue approaching journalists. They said that some issues would not have enjoyed media coverage if organisations had been put off from approaching key media in the first place.

### **Focusing on the ‘magic formula’**

During interviews, journalists regularly stressed the importance of good quality case studies. A few mentioned having experienced factual inaccuracies in case studies, and one respondent even talked about a preference for working with smaller charities because they made great case studies more accessible to them.

The success of organisations such as the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and Bureau Local, which were interviewed as part of this research, highlights the real value of getting the statistical as well as the case study elements right. They demonstrate journalists showing how their data gathering through Freedom of Information and other mechanisms had underpinned the success of stories on everything from people who have died from being homeless across the country to the incidence of immigration stop checks on Merseyside.

Some journalists talked about a ‘magic’ formula. This formula is a combination of evidenced statistics or data plus a high-quality case study. Therefore, an easy solution is for charities to fact check before sharing with journalists, which will also help with the earlier point about increasing levels of trust between people.

### **Putting multiplicity at the heart of the story**

All journalists interviewed spoke of the pressures of time and space, and the commercial realities that they face in their roles. This makes it more complicated when they try to promote complex stories about multiple disadvantage.

Some, particularly those working in shorter form journalism, said it was their job to simplify, not complicate. Others agreed that simple narratives were vital for coverage but suggested that the sector could strike a balance between this and multiplicity by making sure that it was at the absolute heart of the story.

One respondent even suggested that the intersection of homelessness, extreme poverty, substance misuse, violence and abuse, mental ill-health, contact with the criminal justice system and discrimination should be a rich source of news interest. “It is about showing how one issue is dependent or contingent on another.”

With this in mind, charities could take less of a singular focus in their own strategic communications and organisational narratives.

### **Developing positive narratives**

Our research identifies the media narratives that could be harnessed by charities to enhance understanding of multiple disadvantage.

One short-form journalist told researchers that narratives about system change have an intrinsic interest for the media because, by definition, they affect large numbers of people and so are newsworthy. The challenge for charities then is to prove the scale of the impact, possibly through techniques such as greater use of media of FOIs.

As noted earlier, the Institutional Failings narrative is commonly used as it has appeal across the media spectrum. It is worth exploring additional ways it can be adapted to feed into institutional and broader system-wide narratives.

### **Working more closely with online media**

Analysis of coverage in Huff Post UK, Vice and BuzzFeed, and conversations with journalists working for some of these titles, suggests the potential benefits for charities and community groups in engaging more closely with online news sites. Each of these outlets has a clear appetite for covering stories about multiple disadvantage.

Indeed, journalists suggest that covering the interests of otherwise marginalised groups is how they develop their own alternative news agendas away from the mainstream. As one journalist said: “FGM and homophobia wouldn’t have been covered (by the mainstream media) 20 years ago.”

### **Thinking and acting more locally**

Media outlets seeking to develop distinctive coverage away from traditional news sources and agendas are doing so, in part, by looking beyond London to the regions, as illustrated perhaps symbolically by Huff Post UK’s temporary move to Birmingham in 2018.

This decentralisation reflects aspirations of organisations such as Bureau Local for ‘communities to be the engine of our newsroom.’ The Bureau will convene local events and story circles between people with lived experience, local media journalists, charities and councillors in a collaborative way to help everyone listen to and understand each other’s perspective. This demonstrates there are already ways of working that create empathy between people, as well as stories.

### **Improving responses to the news agenda**

Some journalists also said the charity sector needs to be more agile and to get its position out fast when opportunities arise by making better use of piggy-backing other news. They also suggested remembering the impact of news deadlines and print schedules. Some expressed a willingness to have discussions with charities about more nuanced storytelling. There was also a feeling that press officers need to be more thoughtful in how and to whom they pitch a story: “People in the voluntary sector have no idea about the volume of information that journalists are processing every day. They need to make content packages that are focused on what we need.”

### **Promoting good practice in journalism training courses**

Conversations with journalism academics show how some university journalism courses are actively encouraging students to develop a sense of social responsibility and understanding in representing people from different backgrounds in their work. While such elements are thought to be reasonably rare amongst Higher Education courses, there is potential for exploring how this good practice can be highlighted and shared more widely.

# Recommendations

## Telling a Different Story: Understanding UK News Media Coverage of Severe and Multiple Disadvantage

research reveals how news media coverage currently rarely contributes to a positive understanding of multiple disadvantage.

It also reveals several opportunities that encourage us all to challenge and change this situation.

The following recommendations provide a starting point for this journey.

### RECOMMENDATION

#### 1 Develop a shared understanding

The charity and media sector including content providers need to adapt working styles. There needs to be more collaboration, openness and a shared understanding of both the problems and also the opportunities created by embracing change. One way of doing this is by having new conversations about telling a different story of severe and multiple disadvantage.

### RECOMMENDATION

#### 2 Create spaces to cultivate relationships

There is already significant experience and examples of some people in the charity and media sectors working closely together. This expertise should be pooled to form the basis of a coordinated programme of events and other initiatives which deepen relationships and nurture trust between the charity sector, people with lived experience, all journalists and media outlets.

### RECOMMENDATION

#### 3 Construct shared narratives that include root causes

Charities could develop, agree and implement shared narratives which reflect the root causes as to why people face multiple forms of disadvantage without detracting from any organisational focus. This could go further and involve shared campaigns which actively promote a more extensive understanding of severe and multiple forms of disadvantage.

### RECOMMENDATION

#### 4 Support best practice in journalism training

The charity sector should collaborate with, and support, Higher Education Institute media courses. This could encourage student journalists to look at the ethics of journalism, promote positive storytelling, systemic narratives and acknowledge the need of providing media space for people with lived experience to tell their own stories in their own voice. Part of this work could involve local media organisations and journalists entering the profession.

### RECOMMENDATION

#### 5 Develop a programme of support for charity communications professionals

Charity marketing and communications teams need more practical support. This support could be delivered through a combination of bespoke training courses developed in tandem with a suite of simple online toolkits. Content could include how to place multiplicity at the heart of stories; systemic narratives and strategic communications; writing compelling case studies; creating content in different forms; relationship building between journalists and people with lived experience; agile responses to emerging policies; the use of data including FOI requests.

# End notes & Appendix

# ENDNOTES

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- 2 Daily Mail, 31.5.18
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- 33 'Running Riot: Brazen Albanian gangsters in notorious Hellbana=ianz cartel brag about Lawless London drugs cash on Instagram', The Sun, 11.11.18
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- 50 'Philip Green allegations: 'It's not banter, it's a climate of fear', claim staff'', Guardian, 2.11.18
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- 53 'Quarter of LGBT+ people have witnessed discrimination from NHS staff while seeking treatment, poll finds', Independent, 8.11.18

# APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

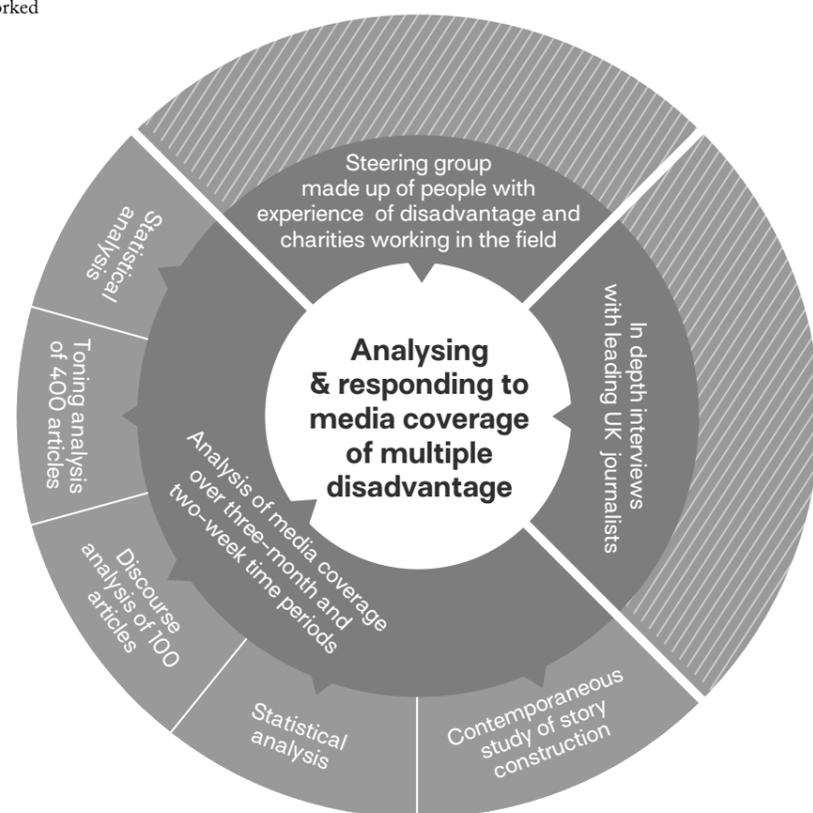
## 1. Structure of the research programme:

We set out to develop and deliver an iterative research process through which different strands of inquiry could come together to create a valuable and informed picture of the way in which news media understands and describes severe and multiple disadvantage (while accepting that media analysis of any kind is an imperfect science which rests on fundamental assumptions around search choices and definitions). The programme was made up of three main strands. From the outset, we sought to create a participative research process by establishing a steering

group composed of sector representatives and people with lived experience. The steering group gathered at key stages of the research process to feedback on findings so far and provide further input and formed the first of the three strands. The second research strand involved interviews with leading national journalists and journalism academics while the third involved analysis of media coverage collated over two time periods. Analysis of coverage included quantitative analysis of articles gathered over a three-month period, discourse analysis and tonal analysis of sub samples of the larger sample, and study of media construction of articles over a second, contemporary study period:

Figure 6

How the research process worked



**2. Selecting the disadvantages to study:** The study set out to understand media coverage of multiple disadvantage by selecting the following seven disadvantage areas as its focus: homelessness, extreme poverty, criminal justice, children, drug and alcohol, mental health, criminal justice and violence and abuse.

**3. Selecting search terms:** The following search terms for each disadvantage area were agreed following discussion with Lankelly Chase and the appointed media monitoring agency:

Disadvantage area	Search terms
<b>Mental health</b>	"Mental Health" OR "Mental Illness" OR "mental ill-health"
<b>Violence and abuse</b>	"domestic violence" OR "domestic abuse" OR "violence against women" OR "sexual abuse" OR "sexual exploitation" OR ((Traffick* OR abuse*) AND (women OR children OR sexual OR domestic OR Child OR elderly OR girl)) "violence against women and girls", "VAWG", "gender-based violence", "street sex work", "street-based prostitution"
<b>Criminal justice</b>	("Prisoner" OR "offender" OR "probation" OR "reoffending" OR "offending behaviour" OR "rehabilitation" OR "recidivism" OR "prisoners" OR "inmates" OR "inmate" OR "offenders" OR Parole)
<b>Extreme poverty</b>	"State benefits" OR "welfare benefits" OR "destitution" OR "modern-day slavery" OR "modern day slavery" OR scroungers* OR "below poverty" OR "poverty line" OR (welfare AND (benefit OR benefits OR poverty OR poor)) "underclass" OR "yobs"
<b>Homelessness</b>	"Homeless" OR "homelessness" OR "rough sleeping" OR "beggars" OR "begging" or "sofa surfing"
<b>Drug and alcohol</b>	"Drug abuse" OR "substance misuse" OR ((addiction OR "recovery" OR addict*) AND (Drug OR Alcohol OR substance)) OR "alcoholic"
<b>Children</b>	"Child neglect" OR "child abuse" OR "child sexual exploitation" OR "child protection" OR "care leavers" OR "children in care" OR ("child neglect"~3) OR ("child abuse"~3) OR ("Child sexual"~10) OR ("Children abuse" ~5) OR ("Children sexual"~5) "foster care"

**4. Selecting target media:** The following media/platforms were selected for inclusion in the study: Daily Mail, Daily Telegraph, Guardian, BBC News Online, Channel 4 News, Panorama, Sky News,

# APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

Vice News, BuzzFeed, Facebook, Cosmopolitan, and Reddit. In selecting these media we made no conscious effort to reflect the England bias of national UK media or include titles solely published in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. However, articles published outside England which referenced disadvantage were included in our contemporary two-week study.

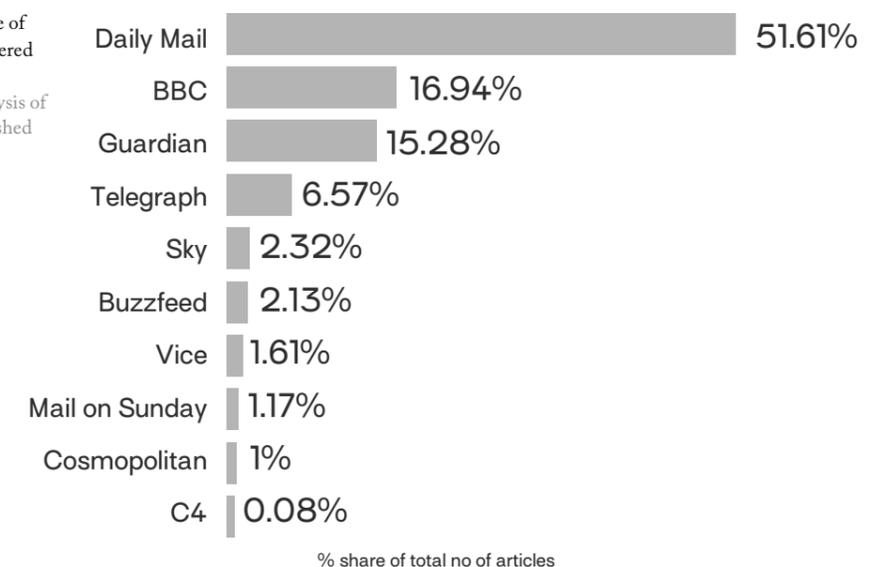
**5. Creating our three-month sample of media articles:** We contracted a media monitoring agency to collect online (written) coverage which referenced one or more of our search terms and which was published online over a retrospective three-month period from March 1st to May 31st 2018. The agency was able to access retrospective coverage from most of our target media (see below) and where this was not technically possible, we endeavoured to reflect that media's coverage elsewhere in our research (NB: online content from both Panorama and the Today programme was reflected in overall content from BBC Online). The three-month search generated a total of 8,192 articles with a total of 12,494 references and was broken down by media shown in Figure 7.

Although we did a further two-week contemporary search using the same search terms in November 2018, we took the view that the sample generated from the longer period would be more informative and reliable so used this to create the 'basket' of articles and references used for our quantitative analysis, tone and discourse analysis and studies looking at the likely source/origins of articles on multiple disadvantage.

**Figure 7**

Breakdown of media share of disadvantage articles gathered

Source: Quantitative analysis of online news articles published over three months



# APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

**6. Interviewing journalists:** We set out to interview a minimum of 20 leading national print, broadcast and online journalists likely to have an interest in social affairs and wrote personal invitations to more than 70 journalists working on UK national titles across the political spectrum. Invitations were issued in several waves after a slow initial response, widening the net later on to include non-specialist news journalists on national titles and specialist journalists on specifically Scottish and Welsh titles. (Interestingly, each wave of invitations attracted a progressively lower positive response rate which may suggest that, while the response from first wave was not what we would have hoped, we had succeeded in creating an optimum list of targets).

However, we succeeded in interviewing a total of 17 leading journalists including several senior BBC figures, leading journalists from ITN, The Times, The Guardian, Daily Mirror, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, journalists who work or have worked for online titles such as BuzzFeed and Vice and a freelancer who had spent significant amounts of their career on conservative tabloids. We accepted from the outset that the sample might be largely self-selecting, with a much better response rate from journalists on liberal titles/new media and those more likely to empathise with the aim of the research than those with less interest in social disadvantage. Despite our best efforts, we were unable to interview anyone from the Daily Telegraph or Daily Mail. We were also unable to get positive responses from the Welsh and Scottish titles targeted despite repeated efforts.

**7. Tonal analysis:** The media monitoring agency created a sample of 400 articles from the basket of 8,192 articles gathered, replicating the same % spread of articles per media and articles per disadvantage as in the larger sample. Definitions of positive, neutral and negative references were as follows:

**Positive tone:** articles that reflect the disadvantages and the individuals being discussed facing said disadvantage in a positive light. For instance it would discuss in a positive way the struggles that may have led to the disadvantage or the resources they are using to help overcome it.

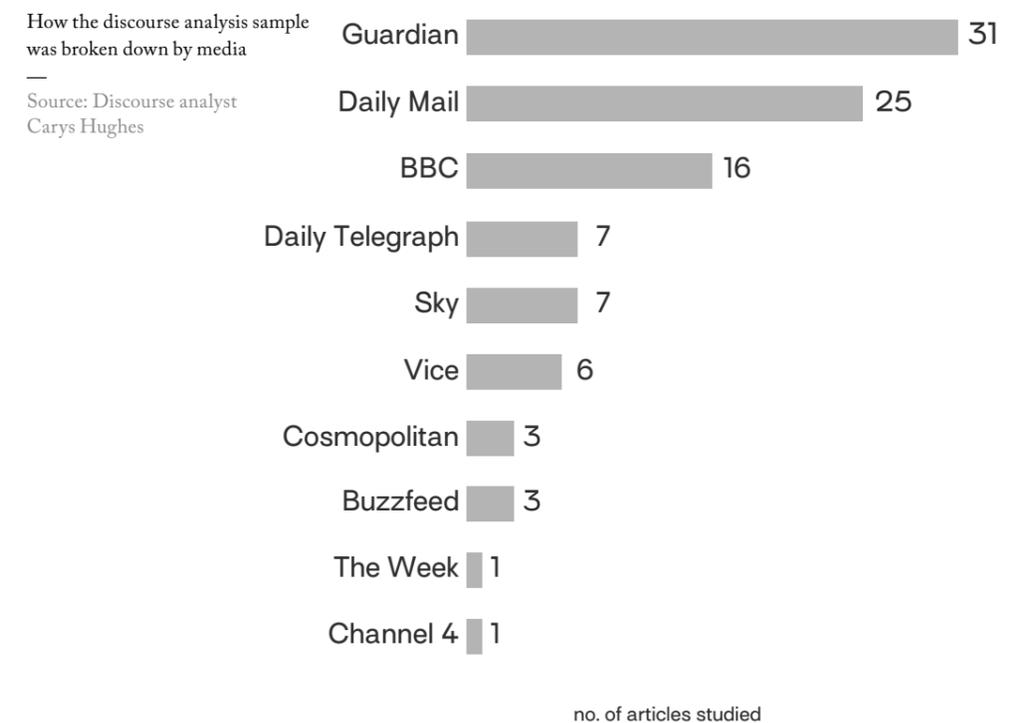
**Neutral tone:** articles that do not discuss the disadvantage or the individuals involved in an overly positive or negative way or in a passing manner.

**Negative tone:** articles that discuss the disadvantage and those involved as at fault or in a negative way affecting society. For instance if a homeless individual resorted to violence to survive and this was presented in a negative way this would be considered negative in tone, or if homeless people are discussed as lowering property value or other such negative connections.

**8. Discourse analysis:** We originally planned to create a sample of 100 articles for discourse analysis by drawing on the sample of 400 articles created for tonal analysis. However, as our findings make clear, a very large number of the sample of 400 articles which referenced multiple disadvantage simply did so in passing and, for this reason, were not suitable for use in discourse analysis. We therefore decided to look in the wider three-month sample, selecting articles purely on the basis of whether they were

likely to inform our understanding of narratives used by the media (we considered this more important than attempting to create a further subsample which ran the risk of failing to give us sufficiently robust evidence of the narratives at play in media coverage. The following illustration shows the breakdown of the sample by media:

**Figure 8**



# APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

**9. Media construction analysis:** We selected a two-week period in November to conduct a contemporary or 'live' study of media coverage referencing disadvantage so we could follow the evolution of relevant emerging news stories across different media (and within single outlets) and complement understanding from the discourse analysis by highlighting some of the broader frameworks used by media.

**CONNECTED**



**Lankelly Chase**