

Critically Analysing a Research Study on the Depiction of NHS Nurse Strikes in British National Dailies

Introduction: Aims, Objectives and Hypotheses:

In 2022, NHS nurses announced that they would be striking for better work and pay conditions across the United Kingdom. In their agenda, they announced that the strikes were aimed at rectifying decades long pay-cuts that have caused major personnel departures from the NHS resulting in risks to patient lives by were calling for a rise that is at least “5% above inflation,” (Royal College of Nursing, 2022). This has been one of the biggest industrial actions that the UK has ever seen, with the “number of days lost to strike action” being the “highest since the Thatcher era” (Partington, 2023).

The strikes have been a major news item since they began in December 2022 and have caused much debate within the media and the public. They also have the media industry divided in their reportage. The researchers of this pilot study set out to conduct a study analysing the British media’s approach towards the NHS Nurse Strikes taking place across England.

This essay will elaborate on the objectives of the research conducted and the resulting hypotheses that emerged. It will discuss the chosen methodology and then examine the findings of the research. Lastly, it will enumerate the limitations faced by the researchers and suggest some improvements that can be made based on those limitations.

The study was aimed at examining the depiction of NHS Nurse strikes in British news media across the political spectrum. The study was conducted to analyse the approach taken by the British media towards the representation of industrial action by making use of quantitative content analysis. The researchers wanted to understand whether the representation of industrial action differed across various newspapers based on their political affiliations. They also wanted to analyse how the representation differed based on whether a newspaper was left-

leaning (liberal) or right-leaning (conservative). The last objective of the study was to understand the impact of the reportage on the audience and readership of the newspaper.

From these objectives, three hypotheses emerged. The first was that the depiction of strike action differed based on whether the media organisation was supportive of the liberal or conservative ideologies. The second was that the liberal media was more likely to position itself as more supportive of the strikes, while the conservative media was more likely to position itself as more supportive of the government. The last was that the newspaper readership was affected to some effect by the manner of coverage of the story.

Review of Methodology and Overview of Findings:

As mentioned before, the methodology chosen to conduct the research was quantitative content analysis.

Roel Popping describes Content Analysis as “a systemic reduction of a flow of text to a standard set of statistically manipulable symbols representing the presence, the intensity, or the frequency of some characteristics, which allows making replicable and valid inferences from text to their context,” (Popping, 2017). This definition is expanded upon by Arthur Berger, stating that “Content analysis . . . is a research technique that is based on measuring the amount of something (violence, negative portrayals of women, or whatever) in a representative sampling of some mass-mediated popular art form,” (Berger, 1998) as cited by (Neuendorf, 2017)).

Thus, it can be inferred that the content analysis as a research method refers to the collection of data points (May & Perry, 2022) from sampled content (visual/textual/audio) to reach conclusions regarding the context in which the content was generated. These data points are classified into relevant categories for analysis based on a predetermined code that allocates the meaning to be derived based on the assumptions and hypotheses of a research project

(Denscombe, 2007, p. 237). The categorization of the data points and their frequency in the content analysed is used to make inferences about the research subject.

This means that the method places emphasis on frequency, replicability, and flexibility. It also ensures objectivity since it makes use of numerical data to make inferences from even textual sources (Denscombe, 2007, p. 254).

These are the reasons why the researchers decided to make use of this methodology for their study – the aims were to study the depiction of Nurse Strikes in British dailies, whether the political leanings of newspapers affected their reportage and whether the readership was affected by the reportage. The chosen newspapers included two broadsheets and two tabloids. The broadsheets were The Guardian and The Times, while the chosen tabloids were The Daily Mail and The Daily Mirror (Oxford Royale, n.d.).

The selection of the newspapers was based on their popularity, credibility, and their political affiliations. Based on research and surveys conducted by international research data and analytics group YouGov, “the Guardian is seen as Britain’s most left-wing newspaper, closely followed by the Mirror,” (Smith, 2017), while for The Times, “the majority of people consider the paper to be either slightly right of centre or fairly right-wing,” (Smith, 2017). “The Daily Mail is seen as Britain’s most right-wing newspaper,” (Smith, 2017).

The selected newspapers also enjoy high circulation. As per a 2022 report by The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, digital¹ subscribers of the newspapers were as follows: The Times – over 400,000 paid subscribers ((Kersley, 2022), as cited by (Newman, 2022)), and The Guardian – over one million paid subscribers (Newman, 2022). As per media auditor ABC’s reports, The Daily Mail has 91,149 paid digital subscribers (ABC, 2023) and The Daily Mirror has 10,758 active digital views and a print circulation of 277,550 per issue (ABC, 2023).

The researchers decided that the content to be analysed would include articles and their headlines from all four newspapers. The unit of analysis was chosen to be keywords that made repeated appearances in the news articles and the headlines. The analysis work was divided between the team of five researchers with four researchers perusing articles for keywords from one newspaper each and one researcher working on analysing the headlines of articles related to the NHS Nurse strikes in all four newspapers. For analysing the impact on readership, the four researchers working on articles also studied comment sections of the newspaper (where possible) to note the frequency of keywords repeated from the corresponding articles.

The analysis was conducted on all articles and headlines published between January 18, 2023 and February 18, 2023. The start date was chosen because it was the first day of industrial action in 2023 and was from when strike action would take place in England only. The end date, February 18, 2023, was chosen because it marked one month of news reports on NHS Nurse strike action from the chosen date and was one day after planned action on February 17, 2023. Each researcher analysed about 50 articles per newspaper that were published in the month between January 18, 2023 and February 18, 2023.

Upon preliminary collective analysis of articles published in the four newspapers, it was noted that the keywords used in relation to the strikes differed by newspaper. Therefore, “NHS Nurse Strikes,” was chosen as the common keyword for the purpose of gathering the related articles from each source. Besides this, keywords were selected separately for each newspaper based on repetition in the articles. This meant that there was a diversity in the types of keywords used by each source – some keywords were used by all while some were unique to a particular newspaper.

As a result, keywords were selected based on this definition decided upon by the researchers before the commencement of the study: any word that was referential to the strikes or the nurses and the NHS, and was used in a manner related to them or descriptive of them.

Thus, according to the principles of quantitative content analysis, each keyword became a unit of analysis. Deriving meaning from the keyword in quantitative terms “involves a process of ‘coding’ the data” (Denscombe, 2007). Bryman’s Social Research Methods suggests that text is “coded in terms of subjects and themes,” (Bryman, et al., 2021, p. 277), and listed in a form called the coding schedule based on definitions enlisted in a coding manual (Bryman, et al., 2021, p. 280). The coding schedule (for sample, see Appendix 1) for each newspaper article was divided into the following five categories (with the first column dedicated to the keywords): scale of positivity, overall repetitions in articles, overall repetitions in comments, attitudes towards the NHS, and attitude towards the government. The schedule looked different for headlines (since the analysis was conducted for all newspapers collectively in that case) but shared two common categories, i.e., attitudes towards the NHS/government². Three categories, i.e., scale of positivity, and attitudes towards NHS/government made use of contextual inferences made by the researchers using definitions laid down in the coding manual (see Appendix 2) agreed upon before the research commenced.

The keywords were rated based on the scale of positivity of their usage in reference to the strikes in the context of the articles and comments: they were coded “negative” if they depicted the strikes negatively and so on. A similar scale was used for the Attitudes towards the NHS/Government.

A comprehensive analysis of the general findings provided these answers to the hypotheses proposed at the beginning of the study:

1. Yes, the depiction of strike action by nurses differed based on whether the newspaper was supportive of liberal or conservative ideologies.
2. The research was conclusive that the conservative media was supportive of the government while the liberal media was supportive of the strikes.

3. Based on the quantitative analysis conducted and repetitions of keywords used in the articles in corresponding comments, it can be said that the newspaper readership was affected to some effect by the manner of coverage of a story.

Since the work was divided by the researchers in the group, this researcher can more accurately share the specific findings of their contribution to the research on articles published by the Times.

The keywords used by The Times displayed a positive attitude towards the government 91.67% of the time. Of the keywords used to depict the strikes, 41.66% were used in a negative context, 50% were used in a somewhat negative context and only 8.33% were used neutrally. While most keywords had a balanced article-to-comment ratio, some keywords such as “Inflation” were used more times in comments than in the articles themselves (see Appendix 1).

Through this analysis of repetitions of certain keywords (Appendix 1), it is possible to conclude that The Times, a newspaper leaning towards conservative ideology, is supportive of the government in their reportage. This reportage also influenced their readership, as the same keywords made appearances in the comment sections of the analysed articles (see Appendix 1).

These findings match claims made by organisations such as The Canary co-op and The Labour List, in their articles related to the right-wing media’s depiction of the strikes: Conservative newspapers tend to conduct strike reporting through the lens of public inconvenience (Asquith, 2022) (Topple, 2022).

This researcher also concluded based on the content analysed that the anti-strike positioning by The Times was not only done through their usage of keywords and negative contexts, it was also conducted through the kind of editorial content being published in the

newspaper. The positioning in and the stance taken by the publication of certain editorial articles can be inferred as supportive of the research claims. However, these particular conclusions are suggestive of the need of a qualitative analysis of the chosen content and are further discussed in the next section on limitations and improvements.

Limitations and Suggested Improvements:

Quantitative content analysis provided the researchers with the right tools to tackle and prove their hypotheses. However, it comes with certain limitations.

The first of these limitations faced by the researchers, is that quantitative content analysis can be “potentially atheoretical,” (Bryman, et al., 2021). The hypotheses of the study are based on observations rather than a research question and theoretical analysis of available literature. It is possible to claim that the nature of the research itself is observational and that there was not a lot of academic discourse available for this topic.

Similar studies in the past have not been comparative of political ideologies or related to Nursing Strikes. The only related study this researcher could find was focused on gender bias in media representations of nursing strikes in the US between 1994-2014 (Soine & Schneider, 2022). Other studies on similar topics were conducted by news and commercial organisations, were more longitudinal or related to other professions. One cause of the lack of specific research related to this topic is that this is the first time in NHS history that nurses are striking.

Second, “content Analysis is sometimes criticized for lacking reliability,” (Stokes, 2013). Here, reliability refers to dependability of a study’s results and its validity is depicted by the replicability of the findings. To ensure reliability, Jane Stokes suggests asking “two researchers to code the same data and then to compare the results,” (2013). This was done by the researchers in this group initially. When the newspapers were decided upon, each

researcher conducted an individual study using their own coding manuals on their chosen newspaper (or the headlines for all newspapers).

In the end, consensus was reached regarding what the final coding manual should include based on suggestions made by this researcher and their group mate Ms Zili Zhou. The replicability and the reliability of the study is evidenced by the same conclusions being reached within the same study, by individual analysis of newspaper articles by different researchers in the group, and by the researcher conducting quantitative analysis on headlines in all newspapers.

To ensure even more reliability, this researcher suggests that the researchers could have employed a narrower definition of what is considered a keyword, and used less inferential schedules.

“Third, there is a danger that this approach reproduces the meanings used by authors in the first instance, as opposed to subjecting them to critical analysis in terms of the context of their production,” (May & Perry, 2022). This researcher suggests that her contribution to the entire study, conducted on The Times, would benefit from the usage of a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. “Quantitative Content Analysis tends to be deductive in approach,” (Bryman, et al., 2021, p. 272).

In reducing content to coded data points, the coding involves researcher bias and subjectivity – evidenced by the coding manual used. Some columns sectionalized inferential data to be reduced to numerical data points. This researcher had to use their own discretion (based on the decided upon manual) to discern keywords and conduct the analysis.

Thus, they suggest that both analyses types be used together to ensure a more critical analysis.

Notes:

- 1) The researchers accessed the newspapers digitally, hence the statistics provided are for digital paid/unpaid subscribers.
- 2) These two columns, i.e., Attitudes towards the NHS and Attitude towards the Government were borrowed, with permission, from the coding manual this researcher's group mate Ms Zili Zhou created for the headline analysis. All other columns were suggested by this researcher for the coding manual for articles.

Appendix – 1 – Coding Schedule Sample:

Keyword	Scale of Positivity	Repetition in Articles	Repetition in Comments	Attitude towards the NHS	Attitude towards the Government
Escalation	2	c	d	1	2
Disruption	1	c	b	1	2
Cancelled	1	e	-	1	2
Pay	3	f	h	3	3
Inflation	1	e	l	2	1
Prolonged	1	a	a	1	2
Refuse	2	b	b	1	1
Hellish	2	a	a	1	1
Patient Lives at Risk	1	a	a	1	2
Giving in	2	b	b	1	2
Stand Firm	2	b	c	1	2
National Debt	2	a	a	1	2

Appendix – 2 – Coding Manual:

Schedule	Scale	Explanation
Scale of Positivity	1 - Negative	This depicts the level of positivity of the context in which a keyword has been used, in terms of both the way that it has been used in articles and comments.
	2 - Somewhat Negative	
	3 - Neutral	
	4 - Somewhat Positive	
	5 - Positive	
Overall usage in Article	a - 1 - 4; b - 5 - 8	This refers to the total number of times a keyword finds mention in all articles.
	c - 9 - 12; d - 13 - 16	
	e - 17 - 20; f - 21 - 24	
	g - 25 - 28; h - 29 - 32	
	i - 33 - 36; j - 37 - 40	
	k - 41 - 44; l - 45 - 48	
Overall usage in Comments	Same as above	This refers to the total number of times a keyword finds mention in all comments.
Attitude towards NHS	1 - Negative	This is what can be inferred about the contextual attitude towards the NHS based on keyword usage.
	2 - Positive	
	3 - Neutral	
Attitude towards Government	Same as above	This is what can be inferred about the contextual attitude towards the government based on keyword usage.
Last two schedules courtesy of Zili Zhou		

References

ABC, 2023. *Daily Mail Digital Edition January 2023*, s.l.: ABC.

ABC, 2023. *Daily Mirror January 2023*, s.l.: ABC.

Asquith, S., 2022. What the coverage of the RMT strike tells us about the unions and the media. *LabourList*, 24 June.

Berger, A. A., 1998. *Media Research Techniques*. 2 ed. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.

Bryman, A., Clark, T., Foster, L. & Sloan, L., 2021. *Bryman's Social Research Methods*. 2021 ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Denscombe, M., 2007. *The Good Research Guide for Small-Scale Social Research Projects*. e ed. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.

Kersley, A., 2022. The Times gained 1,000 new digital subscribers a day during first two weeks of Ukraine war. *Press Gazette*, 30 September.

May, T. & Perry, B., 2022. *Social Research Issues, Methods and Processes*. 5 ed. London: Open University Press.

Neuendorf, K. A., 2017. *The Content Analysis Guidebook*. 1 ed. London: SAGE Publications.

Newman, N., 2022. *Digital News Report 2022*, Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Oxford Royale, n.d. *Black and White and Read All Over: A Guide to British Newspapers*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.oxford-royale.com/articles/a-guide-to-british-newspapers/>

[Accessed 11 March 2023].

Partington, R., 2023. Number of days lost to strikes is highest since the Thatcher era. *The Guardian*, 14 February.

Popping, R., 2017. Online Tools for Content Analysis. In: N. G. Fielding, R. M. Lee & G. Blank, eds. *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, pp. 329 - 343.

Royal College of Nursing, 2022. *Strike action FAQs*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.rcn.org.uk/Get-Involved/Campaign-with-us/Fair-Pay-for-Nursing/Latest-updates/Industrial-action-FAQs> [Accessed 9 March 2023].

Smith, M., 2017. How Left of Right-Wing are the UK's Newspapers. *The Times*, 7 March.

Soine, A. & Schneider, J. R., 2022. Media Representations of Gender and Labour in Nursing Strikes, 1984–2014. *Media History*, 28(1), pp. 160-174.

Stokes, J., 2013. *How to Do Media and Cultural Studies*. 2 ed. London: SAGE Publications.

Topple, S., 2022. The right-wing media is already rabid about striking nurses. *The Canary Worker's co-op*, 25 November.