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## British Food Journal

UK print media coverage of the food bank phenomenon: from food welfare to food charity?

Rebecca Wells Martin Caraher

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# UK print media coverage of the food bank phenomenon: from food welfare to food charity?

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1426

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore how British print media have reported the emergence of food banks in the UK.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research uses the news database Nexis and focuses on the period since the global financial crisis in 2007 in nine national UK print media titles. The search criteria included mention of the term food bank at least three times in the newspaper article and a UK focus. This resulted in 190 usable articles from the newspapers.

**Findings** – There were no UK-focused newspaper articles before 2008 and few until 2012 when the number increased dramatically. A key theme in reporting was increasing numbers of food banks and users of them. The data most often cited were from the Christian charity The Trussell Trust which runs a franchise system of food banks. There were clusters of newspaper articles indicating a common source. Few of the articles used direct quotes from current food bank users. A “frame contest” appeared in 2013/early 2014 with newspaper articles reporting both changes in welfare provision and the proliferation of food banks as the reason for the increase in food banks and food bank use. Tensions emerged between three key sets of players: government ministers, church leaders and The Trussell Trust as the key provider of food banks in England.

**Research limitations/implications** – The authors only examined newspapers, the reporting in other media may be different.

**Practical implications** – The media reporting of food poverty and the use of food banks has the potential to influence public perceptions and policy.

**Originality/value** – This is the first study to look at how food banks are reported by the media.

**Keywords** Newspapers, Media, Food banks, Food policy, Food charity, Food welfare

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Food banks are a relatively new phenomenon in the UK and Europe, although they have long been a feature of the North American welfare landscape (Poppendieck, 1997, 1998; Riches, 1986, 1997a, b, 2002, 2011). In 2000, there was only one reported food bank in the UK (Hawkes and Webster, 2000). In the face of global economic austerity the numbers using food banks are spiraling (Lambie, 2011; DeSchutter, 2013).

There are two main providers of food banks currently in operation in the UK. The Trussell Trust, a Christian charity, is the largest single provider of food banks because of its franchise system of operation. It franchises its models to local groups allowing them access to food supply sources and the use of publicity materials, a corporate logo and training to set up a food bank. Its franchised network is expanding by three food banks per week with the forecast that 1,000 food banks are required to satisfy potential demand (The Trussell Trust, 2014). In the 2008-2009 financial year The Trussell Trust served 26,000 people through its network. By the three months to the end of September 2013, almost 356,000 people received three days of free food from one of the 400 plus food banks in The Trussell Trust network (Lambie-Mumford, 2013; The Trussell Trust, 2014). Over 90 per cent of the food given out by The Trussell Trust



is donated by the public and every food bank recipient is referred by a professional such as a doctor, social worker or school liaison officer (The Trussell Trust, 2013). The second major provider is FareShare, which collects surplus food from supermarkets and shops and distributes it through 720 charities and organizations to families and individuals in need (FareShare, 2014). Its aims are to tackle the twin issues of food poverty and reducing food waste. FareShare was established in 1994 by the homeless charity Crisis under the name Crisis FareShare and the first depot opened in London. Over the next decade depots were opened across the UK, including Brighton and Edinburgh, using a social franchise model. In 2004, FareShare became an independent charity in order to support its growth and broaden its remit. In 2013, it provided food to over 1,000 charities serving 51,000 meals a day. FareShare feeds one million people every month, with an average of 60,000 people nationwide seeking help from the service every day (FareShare, 2014). It does not operate outlets but distributes to organizations that do, some of these might be food banks but others could be homeless charities, shelters or soup kitchens. Aside from these two providers there are many other food banks operating on their own either as independent charities or part of existing community groups. See Milestone Food Bank (Milestone, 2014) for an example of a group setting up a food bank for the Muslim community.

This growth in food banking in the UK is contextualized by a squeeze on food and fuel spending as families economies and a programme of welfare reform by the UK coalition (Conservative/Liberal) government. Statistics from the government show that the poorest groups have in the past four years traded down to discount supermarkets for cheap food and are now turning to food banks (Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, 2014). This is occurring as food prices increase alongside transport and housing costs while incomes remain static.

When the coalition government came to power in 2010 it launched what it called the “Big Society” (Blond, 2010; Norman, 2010; Willetts, 2010). This was seen as a move from the old politics of right/left to a more inclusive view of society in which communities are part of the solution to health and social problems (Blond, 2010). Food banks were seen as part of the “Big Society” initiative by the government referring, for example to The Trussell Trust as “a fantastic Christian charity” and as “the epitome of the Big Society” (Conservative Home, 2012). The Prime Minister also praised the work of volunteers in food banks in the UK Parliament in December 2012 as “part of what I call the big society” (HC Deb, 2012). This emphasis on charity as a solution to health and social problems coincides with a period of welfare reform and a neoliberal agenda on welfare in which the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, has recently capped welfare spending, commenting:

Britain should always be proud of having a welfare system that helps those most in need, but never again should we allow its costs to spiral out of control and its incentives to become so distorted that it pays not to work (HC Deb, 2014).

Both welfare reform and food banking in the UK are receiving media coverage. There has been some analysis of media reporting of poverty but as far as we are aware media reporting on food banks specifically has not been analyzed. Riches (1997c) criticizes the media’s role in the development of food banks in Canada, saying food banks:

[...] play a key role in the depoliticization of hunger as a public issue, particularly when they enlist the services of the media to support them in the food drives. In this way the media come to portray hunger and the work of food banks as just another charitable cause. This is precisely what government wishes to hear and it helps them promote their argument

that it is only in partnership with the community that the hunger problem can be solved (Riches, 1997c, p. 70).

More recently in the UK, Dowler and Lambie-Mumford (2014) see the media as a key driver of emerging political discourse on food banks:

The Government has not yet developed policy responses to increased growth of food aid uptake through growing numbers of food banks in the UK, the political discourse is partly being shaped in response to growing media coverage, which increasingly includes Comment and editorials (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2014, p. 17).

The mass media play an important role in the process of defining a social problem and influencing directly or indirectly the policy process (Buse *et al.*, 2012). They have the power to “set the agenda” for audiences by promoting certain issues over others (Cobb and Elder, 1972) or by “framing” or “angling” an issue in a specific way (Goffman, 1986; Entman, 1993, 2007) – for example referring to “poor people” rather than “people on welfare” elicits a different response from readers (Iyengar, 1996, p. 61).

When information is supplied to reporters by an external source via, for example a press release, it often comes with an in-built frame that reflects the work and “business” of the source and is unlikely to be objective (McQuail, 2010). When the media report competing frames from sources in disagreement with each other, what is called a “frame contest” can be said to be underway (Lawrence, 2004; Entman, 2003). This “frame contest”, pitting one source against another, can be used by the media to create news stories. Some critics have seen this “he said/she said journalism” (Cunningham, 2003; Schiffer, 2008) as a way of showing impartiality or objectivity on the part of the journalist. However, they warn it can lead to a lack of critical analysis in reporting issues. News media can also explicitly or implicitly assign responsibility for the causes and solutions to social problems – these can in turn inform judgement and action on the part of citizens and policymakers (Iyengar, 1996; Kim and Willis, 2007; Baumgartner and Jones, 2009). Who is said to be responsible for food welfare is a key issue here. In a study on broadcast media portrayals of poverty in the US Iyengar (1990) noted:

How people think about poverty is shown to be dependent on how the issue is framed. When news media presentations frame poverty as a general outcome, responsibility for poverty is assigned to society-at-large; when news presentations frame poverty as a particular instance of a poor person, responsibility is assigned to the individual (Iyengar, 1990, p. 19).

In contrast, a recent study of poverty in the UK media reports concern at a general lack of coverage of poverty. McKendrick *et al.* (2008) found that reporting of poverty was largely peripheral with explanation of the causes of poverty particularly absent. In addition they found that in news coverage “there was a conspicuous absence of the voices of those in poverty themselves from much of the reporting” (McKendrick *et al.*, 2008, p. 31).

Bearing in mind current literature on media agenda setting and coverage of poverty, this exploratory study aims to fill a research gap by mapping newspaper coverage of food banks in the UK. It seeks to chart an emerging frame contest between key sources arguing over the causes of rising food bank use. We document the proliferation of newspaper articles on food banks and a series of newspaper articles with a common source. Additionally, we aim to chart media discourse around the reasons for burgeoning food banks and the portrayal of those who use them. To the best of our knowledge no similar work has been undertaken in other countries. While there is some mapping of the characteristics of media reporting on poverty, we have found none on food banks.

## Methods

There were six stages of iteration:

- (1) initial scan of the literature and development of research questions;
- (2) agreement on sampling strategy;
- (3) identifying emerging themes;
- (4) developing a coding frame;
- (5) coding the newspaper articles; and
- (6) analysis.

UK print media  
coverage of the  
food bank  
phenomenon

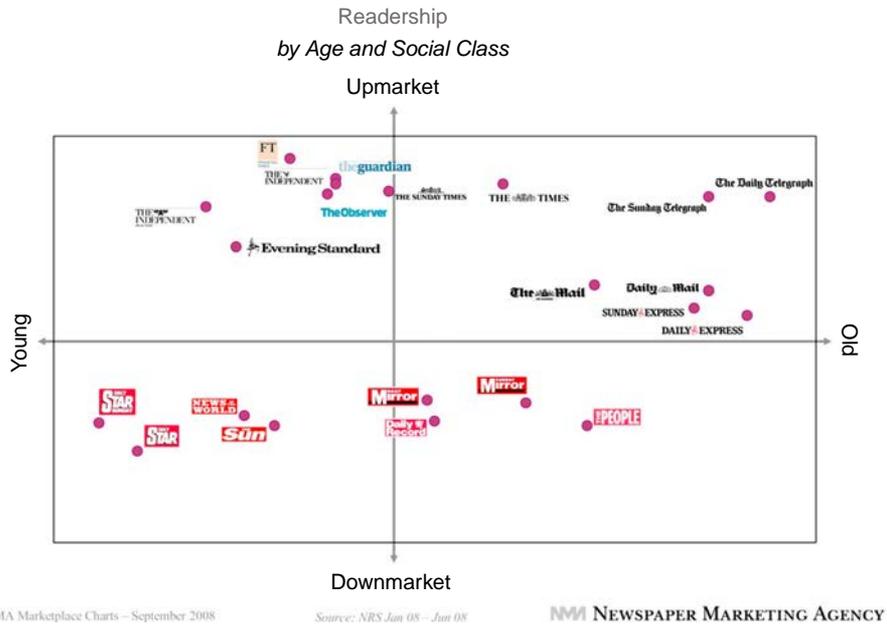
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As part of the literature search we carried out initial scoping and test research using the UK national broadcaster, the BBC's web site, using "food banks" as the search term (BBC, 2014). This allowed us to test and refine some of the key methodological and theoretical issues within a relatively small and coherent database and to define our research questions:

- RQ1.* What are the trends in reporting of food banks in UK national newspapers? When did food banks in Britain become a feature of national newspaper reporting and what is the level of reporting across national newspapers?
- RQ2.* How is the existence of food banks in Britain framed by national newspapers? The scoping exercise using the BBC web site revealed that food banks in modern Britain were sometimes portrayed as shocking, almost exotic. Did this "shocking" frame appear in the newspaper articles?
- RQ3.* How are the causes and solutions of food bank use reported? Since the literature revealed a tendency for newspapers to assign responsibility for the causes and/or solutions of social problems, how do UK national newspapers frame the causes of and solutions to food bank use?
- RQ4.* Are users of food banks quoted?

Our analysis identified key actors, who had voices and were represented in the media discourses. Since McKendrick *et al.* (2008) reported a notable lack of voices of those in poverty we analyzed and focused on the newspaper articles in our sample to see if users were quoted and developed sub-categories to see what was reported, for example their experience, their political opinion or their stories.

Using the Nexis UK archival database (LexisNexis, 2014), an online resource allowing the content of local, national and international print and online media titles to be searched, we developed a sampling strategy. We chose to focus on national UK print media titles as this has been used by others to explore newspapers with a range of readership profiles and political orientations (Seale *et al.*, 2007; Hilton *et al.*, 2010). UK newspapers are divided into tabloid (sometimes called "populist") and broadsheet (sometimes called "serious") newspapers with distinct readership profiles (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2014; Newsworks, 2014; National Readership Survey, 2014). For example as shown in Figure 1 *The Guardian* has a high proportion of middle-aged ABC1 (high income/third level education) readers while the tabloid *The Sun* has a high proportion of younger C2DE



**Figure 1.**  
Newspaper readership by  
age and social class

**Source:** Newspaper Marketing Agency (2008), cited in Hilton *et al.* (2010), p. 945

readers (low to middle income/second level or no formal education qualifications) (Newsworks, 2014).

In addition, the UK press operates across a partisan or polarized model (Rowbottom, 2010) in which a range of views are provided by a number of media outlets. During election periods some newspapers openly support a particular party and this can change from one election to another. However, some newspapers are staunch supporters of the right-wing Conservative party (*Daily Mail*, *Daily Telegraph*) while others consistently support the left-wing Labour party (*Daily Mirror*) or are left leaning and support either the left-wing Labour party or a Liberal party (*The Guardian*, *The Independent*) (Butler and Butler, 2000, 2006).

In this study, newspapers were used over online press coverage since they are published irreversibly and in an easily accessible format (Cooper *et al.*, 2011). The sources were nine national daily newspapers with their Sunday counterparts: *The Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*, *Daily Star* and *Daily Star Sunday*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph*, *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, *The Independent*, *The Independent on Sunday*, *The Mirror* and *The Sunday Mirror*, *The News of the World*[1], *The Sun*, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*. We chose to exclude the *i-Independent* as it only began to be published in 2010 and the mid-market tabloid *The Daily* and *Sunday Express* as coverage of this title in the database is patchy and there would have been little coverage for 2006-2008. We searched using the term “food bank!” (which also returns variants such as food banks, food banking, food bankers) in the body of the newspaper article, specifying it had to appear at least three times.

Our initial search period was from 1 January 2006 to 1 January 2014 since this would capture the rise in food banks in Britain since the economic crisis of 2007/2008. This search identified 329 newspaper articles. However, increasing the search period

by six years (from 1 January 2000 to 1 January 2014) only increased the number of newspaper articles identified by one (to 330) while including all articles published since 1993 (first result 21 December 1993 to 29 January 2014) returned 11 more newspaper articles ( $n = 341$ ).

These 341 articles were exported into text files and printed and read by both researchers. We removed duplications, including national editions over regional and latest editions over earlier editions. We excluded articles about food banks from countries other than the UK, letters from readers and a small number of articles that were not substantially about food banks leaving us with a final sample of 190. The newspaper articles reported in this study are, in the main, not reported by journalist but by newspaper of publication. The exception to this is where we have used direct quotes from an article, the author is fully cited. The full list of 341 articles and 190 articles are available on request as data files from the authors.

The data were used to generate themes. Both of the researchers read all of the newspaper articles to identify initial codes (Altheide and Schneider, 2013; Saldana, 2013). According to our research questions, similar codes were clustered together to form categories, redundant codes were removed. From these clusters of codes or categories we identified themes and these formed the basis of our coding frame (see the Appendix). Each researcher then took a sample of the same 50 newspaper articles and coded them; working together to check and validate each other's coding and making adjustments to the coding frame. One of the researchers then coded the remaining 140 newspaper articles. We analyzed both the manifest (explicit) and the latent (implicit) content of the texts (Altheide, 2002; Neuendorf, 2002; Hilton *et al.*, 2010). In this case, we defined the manifest content as identifying information about the newspaper articles, for example the date of publication, the title of the newspaper they appeared in, the length in words and the author. This information was put into an Excel spreadsheet and analyzed for trends in reporting. The latent content was defined as themes, frames and discourses which emerged from the coding process and was qualitatively analyzed by both researchers.

## Results

As noted above our analysis was based on themes derived from our data which are set out in the coding frame (see the Appendix). For reporting purposes we have coalesced and reordered these themes.

### *Trends in reporting*

As noted above our initial search identified 329 newspaper articles (1 January 2006 to 1 January 2014). However, expanding the search by six years (from 1 January 2000 to 1 January 2014) only increased the number of articles identified by one to 330 while searching back as far as 1993 returned 11 more articles ( $n = 341$ ). Many of these earlier articles were about food banks in the USA and New Zealand.

Between December 1993 and January 2014 a total of 190 newspaper articles about food banks in Britain (mentioning the term food bank at least three times) were published in the nine newspapers included in this study. There were no newspaper articles before 2008 and few until 2012 and 2013 when the number increases dramatically (see Table I and Figure 2).

As shown in Figure 3 (articles over time by month) there were peaks in coverage which coincided with key events, for example around the introduction of major welfare/benefit reforms in Britain in April 2013 and leading up to a Parliamentary Debate on food banks in December 2013. Particularly, noticeable peaks occur over the

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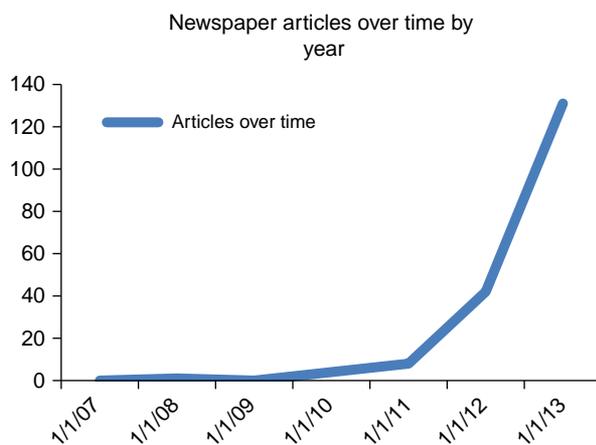
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**Table I.**  
Number of newspaper  
articles by year

| Date | Number of articles |
|------|--------------------|
| 2007 | 0                  |
| 2008 | 1                  |
| 2009 | 0                  |
| 2010 | 4                  |
| 2011 | 8                  |
| 2012 | 42                 |
| 2013 | 131                |

**Note:** Newspaper articles from 2014 in the sample do not appear as they represent an incomplete year (1-29 January only)

**Figure 2.**  
Trends in reporting  
food banks in the UK  
over time by year

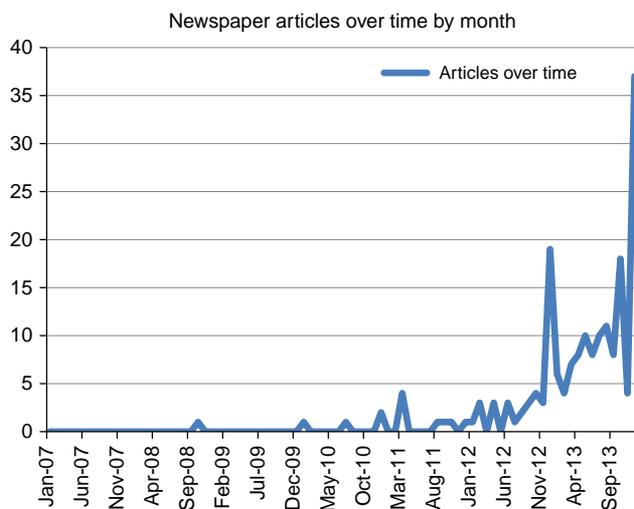


**Note:** Newspaper articles from 2014 in the sample do not appear as they represent an incomplete year (1-29 January only)

Christmas period of both 2012 and 2013 – many of these newspaper articles are driven by a sense of Christian care and appeals for compassion and/or donations over the Christmas period.

Few of the newspaper articles appeared on the front page ( $n = 10$ , 5.2 per cent[2]). These ten front page newspaper articles were all published between December 2012 and December 2013 – with a high proportion appearing in *The Independent* newspaper (70 per cent,  $n = 7$ ) and the rest (30 per cent,  $n = 3$ ) appearing in *The Guardian* ( $n = 1$ ) or its sister Sunday newspaper *The Observer* ( $n = 2$ ). Article length ranged from 81 words to 5,762 words with an overall median count of 540 and a mean of 677. Tabloid newspaper articles had a markedly lower median word count of 339 compared to the broadsheets, which had a median word count of 678.

Three newspapers stand out as publishing more articles on food banks than others (see Table II). The majority were published in the tabloid left-leaning *Daily* and *Sunday Mirror* ( $n = 63$ , 33 per cent) perhaps due to its sustained anti-government cuts campaign and an associated appeal and campaign for donations. A proportion of these appeared in the regional Northern Irish edition of *The Daily* or *Sunday Mirror* ( $n = 13$ ). The left-of-centre *Guardian* also publicized an appeal and with its sister Sunday paper *The Observer* published 49 articles (26 per cent). As noted above, *The Independent*



**Note:** Newspaper articles from 2014 in the sample do not appear as they represent an incomplete month (1-29 January only)

## UK print media coverage of the food bank phenomenon

1433

**Figure 3.** Trends in reporting food banks in the UK over time by month

published more front page articles on food banks than any other publication. Fewer articles appeared in newspapers associated with the political right, which might be considered to be supportive of the Conservative-led coalition government, *The Daily/Sunday Telegraph* ( $n = 8$ , 4.2 per cent), *The Sun* ( $n = 8$ , 4.2 per cent) and *The Daily Mail on Sunday* ( $n = 7$ , 3.7 per cent).

### Major themes

#### *Growth and drivers of UK Food Banks*

A major theme across the sample was reporting of increasing numbers of food banks and users of them. Data on food banks were often attributed to The Trussell Trust, making it a key “gatekeeper” (Shoemaker, 1991; McQuail, 2010) of this information. The increasing numbers of users over the sample period often drove the reporting, for example “Britain on the Breadline: families join food queue: More and more working people are relying on charity to feed their families” (*The Independent on Sunday* 19 October 2008), “Charity food parcels in Devon town rise tenfold” (*The Guardian* 15 March 2011) “Food Bank Users

| Newspaper                                    | Number of articles | Number of articles (%) |
|--|--------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Financial Times</i>                       | 4                  | 2.1                    |
| <i>Daily Star/Daily Star Sunday</i>          | 5                  | 2.6                    |
| <i>Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday</i>             | 7                  | 3.7                    |
| <i>The Sun</i>                               | 8                  | 4.2                    |
| <i>The Daily/Sunday Telegraph</i>            | 8                  | 4.2                    |
| <i>The Times/Sunday Times</i>                | 14                 | 7.4                    |
| <i>The Independent/Independent on Sunday</i> | 32                 | 16.8                   |
| <i>The Guardian/Observer</i>                 | 49                 | 25.8                   |
| <i>Daily/Sunday Mirror</i>                   | 63                 | 33.2                   |
| Total  | 190                | 100                    |

**Table II.** Reporting by newspaper

Treble in a Year” (*Mirror*, 26 December 2013) and “Ministers Hide Surge in Use of Food Banks” (*Sunday Times*, 3 November 2013).

Our data showed a number of clusters of articles clearly coming from the same source across the time period. These clusters all relate to the increasing numbers of food banks and food bank users. The articles in each cluster appeared around the same date across a variety of newspapers and used the same or similar quotes and data from the same sources. For example, the food bank in the town of Okehampton in the county of Devon in the South West of England features in three articles in three different newspapers on the same day (“Charity Hands Out Food Parcels to the Starving [...] of Devon” (*Daily Mail*, 15 March 2011), “Charity food parcels in Devon town rise tenfold” (*The Guardian*, 15 March 2011) “Food parcel lifeline for town where jobs are disappearing fast” (*The Times*, 15 March 2011). The same quote, from town councillor Kay Bickley is used in all three articles: “There has been a huge rise in people needing short term help. The people of Okehampton have pride and want to work but circumstances have led a lot of families into a devastating situation [...]” (Ellicott, 2011; Morris, 2011; de Bruxelles, 2011). All three articles also feature similar quotes from Mike Davies, an “organizer” of the food bank and Mary and Nick Wonnacott, Okehampton residents and users of the food bank. All three articles place responsibility for increasing food bank use on unemployment due to the recent closure of several businesses in Okehampton. All three say the number of people using the food bank has risen to 200 and all three mention that the charity running the food bank in Okehampton usually sends food parcels to Eastern Europe. Another cluster of articles appears on the 24 April 2013 (*Daily Mirror*, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*) which all report figures from The Trussell Trust showing a dramatic increase in food bank users. Similarly, on the 16 and 17 October 2013 five newspapers report figures from The Trussell Trust showing that more than 350,000 have visited food banks, a figure that has:

“trebled since the same period last year” according to *The Times* (Sherman, 2013)

“more than tripled” in *The Independent* (Morris, 2013a)

“tripled year on year” say *The Guardian* (Butler, 2013)

“tripled since April” says *The Financial Times* (Neville, 2013)

and “TRIPLED this year” according to *The Sun* (*The Sun*, 2013).

Alongside reporting burgeoning numbers of food bank users, the press speculated about drivers of the increase. Early in the sample two key actors, The Trussell Trust and the government Department of Work and Pensions, were reportedly in agreement and working together with job centres in England and Wales referring benefits claimants to food banks (“Jobcentre staff to hand out food vouchers”, *Guardian* 21 December 2010, “Jobcentres to send poor and hungry to charity food banks”, *The Independent on Sunday*, 18 September 2011). However, later in the sample a “frame contest” appears over what is to blame for the increasing demand for food banks. The Trussell Trust are frequently quoted placing responsibility on the UK government’s programme of welfare reform for the increase, while the Government Department of Work and Pensions is often quoted blaming the popularity of food banks on their increasing numbers and/or marketing activities (“IDS Refuses to Meet Food Bank bosses: Charity to help hungry too political says Tory” *Daily Mirror* 23 December 2013, “Charities Condemn IDS for Food Bank Snub” *Observer* 22 December 2013).

This “frame contest” develops into a personal contest with mentions of a rift between the Work and Pensions Secretary of State Iain Duncan Smith (IDS) and the head of The Trussell Trust Chris Mould. This coincides with the entry of a third actor in the form of church leaders (particularly from the Church of England) who begin to appear as a source criticizing the government, joining the debate about the causes of food poverty and the increase in food bank use (“Unholy row as IDS hits out at food Samaritans: Ex-Archbishop ‘Slur’ Fury”, *Daily Mirror*, 29 December 2013, “IDS Fury as Church says Benefit Cuts are Forcing Poor to Use Food Banks” *Daily Mail* 23 December 2013, “Bishops Issue Alert on Food Bank Britain” *Sunday Times* 22 December 2013). The Trussell Trust, the main provider of food banks in Britain is a Christian charity and reporting of church leaders at times appear to show that they welcome the opportunity for a chance to offer Christian charity to a wider group of people:

The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby, has signaled his concern about the proliferation of food banks.

He said the numbers would have been “unthinkable” 10 years ago. He said it was “a very sad fact that they’re there, but also it’s a great opportunity for the Church to demonstrate the love of Christ” (Morris, 2013a).

#### *Framing of UK food banks*

The existence of food banks in modern Britain was referred to as shocking throughout the sample period and across all newspapers in the sample. Terms such as “Dickensian”, “Breadline Britain” and references to the status of Britain as one of the wealthiest countries in the world appeared regularly. However, in earlier newspaper articles food banks are very much portrayed as an unusual, almost exotic feature of British society. For example, *The Sunday Mirror’s* article of 19 February 2012:

The Bread Line; Two New Charity “Food Banks” Open Every Week to Help Thousands of People who can’t Afford to Eat. But this is no Third World Country [...] This is Britain 2012 (Anderson and Paul, 2012).

In which the term food bank is so new it has inverted commas around it, or *The Observer’s* of 18 December 2011 which introduces readers to the idea of donating food items to a food bank:

The culture of food donation has been slow to take off in the UK. The soup kitchen has existed forever, but the idea of a network of food banks distributing surplus to address “food poverty”, a scourge of developed economies, has crept in during the last decade. In the past year they have taken off apace. Google and you will surely find a local initiative, from FareShare.org.uk to the faith-based Trusselltrust.org (Siegle, 2011).

By late 2013/early 2014 food banks have become a frequent feature in the media and the term no longer needs to be explained. Conveniently, concise it is often used in headlines and at times becomes shorthand for journalists seeking to evoke increasing poverty in the UK and a society in decline (“Food Bank Britain Kids So Hungry They Have to Steal Food” *Daily Mirror*, 16 December 2012; “Food banks are ‘sign of return to Dickensian world’”, *The Independent*, 6 May 2013; “Food Bank Britain: Life Below the Line” *The Observer*, 18 August 2013). This may explain the fact that newspapers that traditionally support the left of centre and opposition party Labour feature more frequently in the sample. While other models of food banks are occasionally mentioned (notably FareShare, a charity which redistributes surplus food from supermarkets and

the food industry) the overwhelming model presented is that of The Trussell Trust. Over the sample period this emphasis on The Trussell Trust as the model of operation and the source for data on food poverty and food banks deepened. While the workings of a Trussell Trust food bank are often alluded to (the referral system, the volunteer staff, the donations of food) its franchise model is rarely discussed and so critical analysis of food bank models is minimized.

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*Stakeholder voices*

The media reported the concerns of a number of different groups: volunteers, politicians, church leaders celebrities and activists. Current users of food banks appear in some articles as “case studies” but overall they are infrequently quoted – direct quotes from current food bank users appear in 20 per cent of articles ( $n = 38$ ). This supports previous research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (McKendrick *et al.*, 2008), which found that the voices of those experiencing poverty were absent much of the time in the UK media. This may be explained by unwillingness on the part of food bank users to be interviewed, unwillingness of food bank managers to give journalists access to them or unwillingness on the part of journalists to approach vulnerable food bank users. When users are quoted it is most often to explain their circumstances and/or express gratitude for the food they have received. Volunteers (some themselves former food bank users) at the food banks are interviewed and these are given a kind of proxy voice for the current food bank “client” – telling the stories of current users or telling their own story of how the food bank helped them in the past. Notable among former food bank users quoted is Jack Monroe (2014) who achieved celebrity status after having been a food bank user with a blog writing low cost recipes and cooking advice. She has gone on to become a published food writer and anti-poverty campaigner. She appears both telling her own story and as part of a campaign publicized by *The Mirror* newspaper to have a debate on food banks in the UK Parliament (“Society: Interview Jack Monroe: The face of modern poverty”, *The Guardian*, 24 July 2013; “100,000 sign our petition; Miliband calls debate as readers demand action on food poverty” *Daily Mirror*, 9 December 2013). Investigations, campaigns and appeals are a feature of the reporting with newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *The Sun* and *The Times* carrying calls for donations of food or money to food banks. As mentioned above *The Mirror* ran a sustained campaign in late 2013 asking readers to sign a petition (started by Jack Monroe) calling for food banks to be debated in the British Parliament. This debate was eventually held in December 2013.

Another group of interest is Conservative politicians, both in and out of government who feature making unsympathetic comments about food bank users. A frequent theme of these newspaper articles is that the poor are undeserving – they are unable to manage their personal finances, they are freeloaders abusing the service the food bank offers or they are opportunistically taking advantage of the burgeoning network of food banks offering free food. This was concentrated around a few individual MPs and former MPs. This was contrasted with the formal Conservative response, which was broadly supportive of food banks and volunteers as part of its initiative the “Big Society”. However, the media challenged the basis of this support by implying Conservative MPs were out of touch with their constituents and questioning their understanding and experience of food banks including whether or not they had visited one (e.g. “Centre visits off the menu for Cameron” *Daily Mirror* 23 December 2012).

## Discussion

The paucity of reporting on food banks in the UK in our sample before 2011 reflects the fact that there was only one food bank in existence in England in 2000 (Hawkes and Webster, 2000). Before 2011 food banks are framed by the UK press as an exotic feature of “foreign news” with most of the reporting focusing on food banks in the USA and New Zealand – both countries with longer histories of food bank establishment (Uttley, 1997; Poppendieck, 1997). The trends in reporting suggest that the media have moved from reporting food banks in the UK for UK citizens as a quite unusual, short term and emergency feature of the recession towards them becoming normalized and a routine long term feature of British food distribution system.

Why does this matter? As we noted in the introduction Graham Riches (1997c) says the media assist in the depoliticization of hunger as a public issue, particularly when they support appeals for donations. He goes on to say:

In this way the media come to portray hunger and the work of food banks as just another charitable cause. This is precisely what government wishes to hear and it helps them promote their argument that it is only in partnership with the community that the hunger problem can be solved (Riches, 1997c, p. 70).

A similar viewpoint is expressed by Poppendieck (1997, 1998) in her work on food banks in the USA. Winne (2009) in his book on the US food system comments:

We must seriously examine the role of food banking, which requires that we no longer praise its growth as a sign of our generosity and charity but instead recognize it as a symbol of our society’s failure to hold government accountable for hunger, food insecurity and poverty (Winne, 2009, p. 184).

In the UK media our data show a move from viewing food banks as a feature of the informal state that was called the “Big Society” (Blond, 2010; Norman, 2010; Willetts, 2010) by the then new coalition government in May 2010 and as contributors to the alleviation of poverty to seeing them as part of the problem. This was reflected in a move by the food banks themselves to being more critical of government policies as welfare cuts bit deep and food bank users increased (London Assembly Health and Environment Committee, 2013; Greater London Authority, 2013; Lambie-Mumford, 2013). Our findings show this was also compounded by a series of stories, in late 2013 early 2014, which saw church leaders giving media interviews placing the “blame” on government policies for the growth and increase in referrals to food banks. All this reflects a move from food banks providing emergency food aid to small numbers of people, who are being failed by the formal state systems to one where the numbers keep growing and the base of users expands from those in receipt of welfare to include the working poor. This latter group is finding it hard to manage as wages remain stable but other costs including that of food rise (London Assembly Health and Environment Committee, 2013; Greater London Authority, 2013; Lambie-Mumford, 2013). This is reflected in the reporting, which documents five main reasons for food poverty: (1) food prices themselves; (2) personal debt/crime; (3) unemployment; (4) welfare crises or change; and (5) lowering of income relative to other costs. Media reporting on numbers (1) and (2) has receded with more emphasis on numbers (4) and (5) in 2013 and 2014.

The clustering of stories with a common source displays what is called “churnalism”. The journalist Nick Davies has described the term “churnalism” in which media reports are more or less rehashed versions of press releases supplied to journalists by external sources (Davies, 2009). Churnalism has been blamed by some on the “laziness” of journalists and by others on the pressures of a modern media in which reporters have to

write so many stories per week that they are forced to rely more and more on press releases for their copy. For his research Davies used the diary of a provincial reporter who wrote 48 stories in one week but only spent a total of three hours out of the office and spoke face to face to only four people (Davies, 2009). The clusters of stories in the current study often relate to the increasing numbers of food banks or food bank users. These newspaper articles most often feature data sourced from one group, The Trussell Trust, making them a key source and gatekeeper of information on food banks for the media. Indeed, analysis of the newspaper stories shows that the press coverage of the food bank movement in the UK is largely driven by The Trussell Trust. The Trust is the largest single network of food banks in the UK, so perhaps it is not surprising that it features so frequently in media coverage, but it does portray food banks as having one model of operation, though as was set out in the introduction there is another provider of food aid and many food banks operating outside formal structures.

There is a change in emphasis in media reporting of The Trussell Trust activities. This shows a move from seeing food banks in general and The Trussell Trust in particular as part of government welfare reforms and The Big Society (Conservative Home, 2012) to critical of the government changes that they say have driven people to food banks. This position is further reflected by the newspaper articles on the concerns of church leaders in 2014. This narrative is countered by government ministers and spokespersons placing the blame for the growth of food banks on the food bank “industry” movement itself. For example, the Minister in charge of welfare reform, IDS, is quoted saying the growth of food banks was predominantly a result of better “marketing” by The Trussell Trust and as reported in *The Observer* on 29 December 2013 went on to say:

I understand that a feature of your business model must require you to continuously achieve publicity, but I'm concerned that you are now seeking to do this by making your political opposition to welfare reform overtly clear (Cohen, 2013).

Contrast this with evidence of earlier collaboration between food banks and the government in an article about job centres and food banks early on in our sample. In this a “source close to” Duncan Smith is quoted as saying:

The secretary of state is very keen on this. We think there is a very valid place for schemes like these. Particularly with food banks, we should be looking at the ability of staff in jobcentres to (direct claimants to the charity), because it makes a difference to someone, and makes a difference to their lives (Lewis, 2010).

The newspaper reports on the developing personal argument between the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and Chris Mould of The Trussell Trust is played out in the media at the expense of a more critical analysis of the food bank model. Even when reporting is critical of the need for food banks, this is sometimes contradicted by appeals to readers to contribute food, time or money to food banks. Stories often take the perspective of “there but for the grace of god go I”, suggesting we are all vulnerable to the risk of becoming homeless, food insecure and ending up relying on charity. Within this narrative few alternative options are explored, such as more benefits, a more efficient benefits system or even one which recognizes food as a key factor.

In addition the stark difference in our sample between the large number of newspaper articles in the left-leaning UK press (*The Daily/Sunday Mirror* and *The Guardian*) and the small number from Conservative right-wing press (*The Daily Telegraph* and *The Daily Mail*) raises questions about media plurality in the UK. This reflects concerns about a highly concentrated UK media ownership (Wilks-Heeg *et al.*, 2012) resulting in a limited

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number of issues receiving coverage and a lack of diversity in UK reporting on issues such as food banks (Freedman, 2014).

From the data presented there is a framing of the food bank story not just in terms of the political leanings of newspapers but also in the way some issues are avoided. The good news element of food banks and the hard work of the volunteers are presented at the expense of the voices of users. Volunteers are often featured to provide a proxy user voice. This framing of poverty and people living in poverty has also recently been highlighted by a report on the way in which poverty has been conceptualized by the media (McKendrick *et al.*, 2008). Additionally, Seabrook (2013) in his book *Pauperland* highlights how reporting of poverty has an impact both on the subjects of the reports and in the way in which the public perceives the problem. A study from the Rowntree Trust found that the general public and politicians overestimated the amounts of money those living in poverty had available, whether welfare recipients or low-wage earners (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2008). In the same study amounts identified as a “reasonable income” were greater than those on low-income and in receipt of welfare were receiving. All this of course misses out the indignity of living in poverty from week to week (Safefood, 2011; Poppendieck, 1998).

While the voices of food bank users were often absent in newspaper articles in our sample, visits to food banks either by journalists themselves or politicians and celebrities visiting them were often reported. In contrast to food bank users, church leaders, celebrities and politicians were regularly given privileged access to the media, writing invited columns and opinion pieces. Of these one campaigner stood out – Jack Monroe (2014) who as well as being reported on, has penned a number of columns critiquing the need for food banks and campaigning for change. However, the media’s fascination with Monroe means they have been able to use her as a proxy for current food bank users whose voices and opinions have not been heard.

## Conclusion

The reporting of food banks has shifted in the UK print media over time from something exotic and unknown to a regular occurrence. There is little critical analysis of the operation and even the need for food banks in the media, little question about other models or ways of delivering food and how to use food banks as the stepping stone to more fundamental and fairer changes (Saul and Curtis, 2013). This can be attributed to the changing newspaper landscape in the UK where falling newspaper circulation and readership combined with increasing competition from other platforms have put economic pressures on the journalism model. This has led to the demise of expensive investigative journalism and the failure of time-pressed journalists to properly interrogate issues such as food welfare (Lewis *et al.*, 2008).

Current criticisms of the government and its approach to welfare reform by church leaders are no more critical of the role of food banks. In fact many church leaders see them as an opportunity to re-engage church members in useful volunteer roles. Some critiques appear in the right of centre media who use a model of victim blaming, characterizing the users of food banks as undeserving. So what is the role of media? Is it to portray the situation as is, or to provide a more in-depth analysis of the causes and the possible solutions. Amartya Sen (2008), in talking of inequality, says we need to “make the world less unjust than attempting to articulate a grand theory of justice” in a similar vein we need media reporting which shows the public the way forward in tackling the problem by making them aware of the underlying reasons for the growth in food banks and exploring other possible solutions.

Opportunities exist for future research in the framing of stories and in the ways that “churnalism” is contributing to the development of single stream stories with an over-reliance on single sources. The views of journalists and how they report and portray food banks also offers possibilities for future research.

#### Notes

1. *The News of the World* ceased publication 10 July 2011.
2. This does not include the seven *Daily Mail* articles, which are not given page numbers in Nexis.

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### Coding Frame

| Article ID |  |  |  |  |
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|            |  |  |  |  |

1444

| Headline (Only first few words required) |
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| Publication |
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| Day  | Month | Year |

| Word Count |  |  |  |
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|            |  |  |  |

|  | Yes | No |
|--|-----|----|
| <b>Growth of food banks</b>  |     |    |
| Mentions increase in numbers of food banks   |     |    |
| Mentions increase in numbers of food bank users                                    |     |    |
| Data source: Trussell Trust  |     |    |
| Data source: Govt  |     |    |
| Data source: Other (define)  |     |    |
|  |     |    |
| <b>Framing of UK food banks</b>  |     |    |
| Shocking (Dickensian, like 3 <sup>rd</sup> World, we are a rich country)           |     |    |
| Complement to welfare (part of Big Society, supplements/replaces welfare)          |     |    |
| Other (define)   |     |    |
|  |     |    |
| <b>Drivers of food bank use</b>  |     |    |
| Mentions welfare/benefit changes or delay  |     |    |
| Mentions unemployment  |     |    |
| Mentions personal debt   |     |    |
| Mentions lack of personal financial skills   |     |    |
| Mentions personal problems (drug use, homelessness, crime, relationship breakdown) |     |    |
| Mentions food bank marketing/advertising   |     |    |
| Mentions opportunistic users (scroungers, cheats, benefit fraud)                   |     |    |
| Mentions bankers   |     |    |
| Mentions recession/economic downturn   |     |    |
| Other (define)   |     |    |
|  |     |    |
| <b>Alternative provision of food banks</b>   | Yes | No |
| Mentions food bank alternative   |     |    |
|  |     |    |
| <b>Political tension</b>   |     |    |
| Mentions tension between Church & Govt.  |     |    |
| Mentions tension between Trussell Trust & Govt                                     |     |    |
| Mentions tension between Labour and Govt.  |     |    |
| Other (define)   |     |    |
|  |     |    |
| <b>Appeal</b>  |     |    |
| Makes appeal for money   |     |    |
| Makes appeal for donations of food   |     |    |
|  |     |    |
| <b>Campaign</b>  |     |    |
| Mentions political campaign  |     |    |
| Mentions Mirror campaign   |     |    |
| Mentions other campaign (define)   |     |    |
|  |     |    |
| <b>Voice of user</b>   |     |    |
| Is current user quoted?  |     |    |
| Mentions personal circumstances/'story'  |     |    |
| Mentions political opinion   |     |    |
| Mentions solutions   |     |    |
| Other (define)   |     |    |

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**About the authors**

Rebecca Wells has a background in Food Journalism, producing food programmes for the BBC for some ten years. She is currently a PhD Candidate in Food Policy and Journalism, researching the ways in which media coverage interacts with food policy. Rebecca Wells is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [rebecca.wells.1@city.ac.uk](mailto:rebecca.wells.1@city.ac.uk)

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UK print media  
coverage of the  
food bank  
phenomenon

**1445**

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