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# Hidden in Plain Sight: How UK National Newspapers Report on Co-operatives

Anita Mangan

How do UK national newspapers report on co-operatives? Is there media bias and are co-operatives neglected in mainstream journalism? This article analyses the general coverage of co-operatives across UK national newspapers in 2020 to understand how co-operatives are presented to the public. The research is based on two key questions: how often are co-operatives reported on in UK national newspapers; and what kinds of stories feature co-operatives? Results show that co-operatives remain virtually invisible in mainstream newsprint. Only 640 pieces are published with just 32 stories featuring co-operatives in any great depth. These can be categorised using four themes: high profile business; features; personality-driven journalism; and community activism. Based on these themes, the article makes three points about the UK national newspaper coverage: co-operation is never explained; co-operation is associated with 'other' people such as foreigners or the poor; and co-operation is politicised. The article concludes by arguing that because co-operatives continue to be a marginal presence in UK national newspapers, co-operative journalism and journalism about co-operatives is needed now more than ever.

Co-operatives often suffer from invisibility, even when they are successful. In the UK, for example, the co-operative economy has a combined turnover of £39.7 billion, membership nearing 14 million, and 7,237 co-operatives spread across every sector of the economy (Co-operatives UK, 2021). Despite these successes, however, the general public has little or no knowledge of co-operative principles, values, and models. People might be familiar with The Co-op or The Co-operative Bank as high-profile businesses and 'high street', familiar brands, but this does not necessarily translate into an in-depth understanding of co-operatives. The invisibility takes many forms: education focuses on mainstream, for-profit business models (Mangan, 2014); professionals, advisors, and business owners can be unaware of co-operatives (CECOP, 2013); and the history and communal memories of local co-operatives often die out as communities change over time (Rodgers et al., 2015).

Of significance for this special issue of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* is the coverage of co-operatives in mainstream media. The special issue asks how co-operatives are treated in the media, suggesting that they are often neglected. Mangan and Byrne (2018) explore this issue in relation to the UK national news coverage of the Co-operative Bank (2011-15), comparing reports in *The Guardian* and *The Observer* with those in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*. Surprisingly given their different political leanings, the newspapers' coverage was broadly similar and fell into five themes: customer service stories; standard financial reporting; personality-driven journalism; stories driven by public relations; and political coverage. Most of the articles were framed using neoliberal values. Thus, during the bank's 2013 financial crisis, newspapers simplified and sensationalised the story, producing good copy but in a way that undermined public understanding of, and confidence in, alternative governance structures.

This article builds on and updates the Mangan and Byrne (2018) study by exploring how co-operatives were reported on in the UK national newspapers in 2020. The research is based on two questions:

1. How often are co-operatives reported on in UK national newspapers?
2. What kinds of stories feature co-operatives?

Rather than focusing on a particular co-operative or doing a comparison between a small number of newspaper titles, the aim was to analyse the general media coverage of co-operatives across UK national newspapers to understand how co-operatives are presented to the public. As newspapers are not bound by the same impartiality requirements as broadcast

media, the decision was taken to focus on newsprint only in order to capture a range of opinions and political stances.

The article is organised as follows. It begins with a brief discussion of the media's role in framing, justifying, and legitimising perspectives for the general public. This is followed by the methods section which explains how the data were gathered and analysed. Findings are presented using four themes: high profile business; features; personality-driven journalism; and community activism. The discussion makes three main points about national newspaper coverage: co-operation is never explained; co-operation is associated with 'other' people such as foreigners or the poor; co-operation is politicised, partly because it still carries the taint of association with the Co-operative Bank crisis of 2013. The article concludes by arguing that because co-operatives continue to be a marginal presence in UK national newspapers, co-operative journalism and journalism about co-operatives is needed now more than ever.

## **News Media and Neoliberal Perspectives**

The media play an important role in framing, justifying, and legitimising perspectives (Kuronen et al., 2005; Vaara & Tienari, 2002). In the UK, newspapers are seen to have a close alignment with right-wing neoliberal capitalism. For example, Berry (2016) charts the history of the UK press, noting a long history of hostility to trade unions, large-scale government, and social welfare. He argues that the emergence of press barons such as Conrad Black and Rupert Murdoch in the 1970s, coupled with the growth of public relations in the 1980s-90s, created conditions which favoured neoliberal perspectives. The growth in financial and business reporting in daily newspapers also prioritised economic and business agendas over social, political, or cultural ones. These processes were exacerbated by deregulation of the press and cost-cutting (Berry, 2016; Davies, 2009). Deregulation concentrated newspaper ownership, narrowing down the breadth of proprietorial and editorial voices. Smaller newsrooms meant that sources were not checked, and journalists came to rely on press releases and other newspaper stories for copy, meaning that a small number of stories could dominant the news cycle (Davies, 2009).

By legitimising neoliberal interpretations of the events, editors and proprietors can play a significant role in shaping public opinion and creating common narratives. For example, in coverage of the financial crisis (2007-08), subsequent recession, and austerity policies, UK national newspapers framed the events and political decisions in economic terms, meaning that individuals were reduced to 'economic actors' rather than people or citizens who were struggling (Temple et al., 2016). The crisis was framed as a public spending deficit, rather than private debt, with the previous Labour government blamed for the crisis, and austerity presented as beneficial (Berry, 2016). This creates significant silences where alternative perspectives are neither presented nor discussed, thus shaping public opinion to accept neoliberalism as the norm (McDonagh, 2019; Preston & Silke, 2011). In such cases, dissenting voices and alternative interpretations are often pushed to alternative media spaces (Barros & Michaud, 2020), exacerbating their invisibility to the general public.

A final point to consider is the growth of business reporting in daily national newspapers, particularly the ways in which business activity is presented and legitimised. Early research by organisation scholars on business news reporting focused on how stories were presented, justified, and legitimised to the public (Kuronen et al., 2005; Vaara & Tienari, 2002). For example, by studying mergers and acquisitions in Finland, Vaara and Tienari (2002) demonstrate that a rationalistic discourse predominates in the media's reports. The events were framed in narrow economic terms, which presented the decision-making as driven by 'the business case' rather than wider societal considerations. Zhu and McKenna (2012) extend this approach by charting the complex interplay between rational and nationalistic discourses in their study of a failed international merger. They demonstrate how nationalistic rhetoric in the media played a role in delegitimising the proposed takeover. Finally, Murray and Nyberg (2020) explore legitimisation strategies from the perspective of corporate public relations and

lobbying, demonstrating how businesses use the media to promote favourable coverage, often on contentious issues, or to influence public policy. This last study points both to the power of the public relations sector in a depleted newsroom (Davies, 2009) and the unchallenged proliferation of neoliberal perspectives in the media (Berry, 2016).

Although these studies represent a small portion of research on how business news is framed, they point to a predominantly economic narrative, which prioritises managerial voices. Such a dry economic narrative means that social, political, and community values are frequently sidelined in the press, especially in times of economic crisis (Temple et al., 2016). The narrowing of voices and perspectives creates a standardised national narrative, with heroes and villains (Hartz & Steger, 2010), winners and losers. In turn, this perpetuates the UK news media's long history of stigmatising individuals and groups (McArthur & Reeves, 2019), particularly the poor. By framing news reporting with an overarching neoliberal perspective, the media helps to normalise and legitimise specific business practices, at the expense of alternative modes of organising. As such, it is little wonder that co-operatives might suffer from invisibility in the UK national press. In what follows, UK newspaper reports on co-operatives from January to December 2020 are analysed, to explore whether such marginalisation continues to be the case.

## Methods

This article is based on a tradition of analysing media reporting to learn about organisations and organising (for example: Barros & Michaud, 2020; Hargie et al., 2010; Hartz & Steger, 2010; Kuronen et al., 2005; Luyckx & Janssens, 2020). Empirical data for this paper were gathered using a similar method to that developed in Mangan and Byrne (2018): the focus was on UK national newspapers (weekday and weekend) to include broadsheet and tabloid journalism, daily stories, and opinion pieces, as well as a range of political perspectives. As newspapers are not bound by the same impartiality requirements as broadcast media, the decision was taken to focus solely on newsprint stories in the expectation that a broader set of stories and opinions about co-operatives might emerge. To get the widest possible set of results, the search term 'co-operative' was chosen. The date range of 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020 was used to explore how co-operative stories are covered across the year and to see whether co-operatives featured in reporting on Covid-19.

Gathering the data was done in a series of steps using the LexisNexis Library News database (<https://www.lexisnexis.com>). The initial search on the term 'co-operative' was filtered by the label 'UK National Newspapers', yielding 69,186 results. These also included entries where the alternative spelling 'cooperative' was used. The date range 01/01/20 to 31/12/20 was applied (1,768 results) and then duplicate entries were hidden (1,722). This gave a list of 16 UK national newspapers (see Table 1).

The results in Table 1 show the raw data generated by the search engine. Each article was checked to remove further duplicates (for example, where online, early, regional, and international editions had the same byline, content, and date). This step also removed outlier stories that used the word 'cooperative' to describe behaviour rather than co-operatives as an organisational form. This last step was interesting in the sense that it showed how broadly newspapers refer to the concept of co-operation without necessarily being interested in co-operatives. Common categories included: crime ('co-operating with the police'); politics (countries adopting a 'co-operative attitude' in relation to various political developments); online gaming (reviews of games with 'co-operative gameplay'); and astrology ('friends will be co-operative').

Table 1: Total number of published articles January to December 2020

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>With Duplicates</b>	<b>Duplicates Hidden</b>
The Guardian	337	337
The Times	348	329
The Independent	205	204
telegraph.co.uk	189	187
The Daily Telegraph	122	118
The Sunday Times	122	110
The Mirror (Daily Mirror and The Sunday Mirror)	106	103
The Sun	81	78
Daily Star Online	66	66
The Express	43	43
Daily Record and Sunday Mail	42	42
The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday	42	42
The Observer	26	25
The Sunday Telegraph	22	21
The Sunday Express	12	12
The People	5	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>1768</b>	<b>1722</b>

Finally, as significant overlap occurred between the online and printed version of *The Daily Telegraph*, they were merged. This left a total of 640 stories, spread across 15 sources (see Table 2). The top three newspapers to report on co-operatives, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and *The Daily Telegraph* (including telegraph.co.uk) are daily broadsheets published Monday to Saturday. These accounted for over half of the sample (358 out of 640). The other entries consisted of a mixture of broadsheet and tabloid titles, published daily, Sundays, online and in newsprint.

Table 2: Final selection of published articles January to December 2020

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Final Selection</b>
The Guardian	134
The Times	120
The Daily Telegraph and telegraph.co.uk	104
The Independent	74
The Sunday Times	33
The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday	29
The Mirror (Daily Mirror and Sunday Mirror)	26
The Sun	26
Daily Record and Sunday Mail	21
The Express	19
The Observer	18
Daily Star	15
The Sunday Telegraph	12
The Sunday Express	7
The People	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>640</b>

To analyse the data, each newspaper's corpus of articles on co-operatives was read and ordered by month to determine the frequency of stories across the year (see Table 3, below).

June had the fewest articles (35), while October had the most (75). The second half of the year featured more stories (364) and the top five newspapers featured at least one article per month. After establishing the frequency of coverage, each article was then assigned three descriptive codes. The first noted the newspaper section (for example: news, business, politics, travel, culture), while the second noted the article's main theme (for example: retail, money, food and drink, Covid-19, opinion). The final codes noted whether co-operatives were the main subject of the article ('in-depth'), if they were mentioned in part of a larger story ('factual') or included as trivia or novelties ('random').

From this initial sorting, four key themes emerged: high profile business; features; personality-driven journalism; and community activism. The next section will explore each of these themes in turn, before moving on to the discussion and conclusions.

## How UK National Newspapers Report on Co-operatives

In general, reporting on co-operative business is a marginal concern for UK national newspapers. Of the 640 articles published during 2020, only 32 featured co-operatives in any great depth. The majority of these appeared in three newspapers: *The Guardian* (8), *The Times* (7) and *The Guardian's* sister paper *The Observer* (6), which is published on Sundays. There was no overall theme to these articles, however, as they included reports on community activism, letters to the editor, negative opinion pieces, and reports on international development. Most articles on co-operatives fall into the 'factual' category, where co-operatives are mentioned in connection to a larger story but the co-operative itself is not the main focus. An example of this type of factual mention is the reporting on coronavirus in Danish mink farms: both *The Mail on Sunday* (Bucks, 2020) and *The Independent* (Olsen, 2020) reported that 40% of global mink production is from Kopenhagen Fur, a co-operative of 1,500 Danish breeders, but that is the only mention of co-operatives in the article. In other words, they are a point of interest but not the main concern.

Table 3: Newspaper articles per month January to December 2020

Newspaper	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
The Guardian	11	9	15	10	12	5	14	12	15	10	9	12	134
The Times	9	8	5	11	17	8	13	11	7	11	8	12	120
The Daily Telegraph and telegraph.co.uk	3	9	6	8	2	6	12	8	13	19	10	8	104
The Independent	3	4	6	6	3	3	7	3	4	12	13	10	74
The Sunday Times	3	1	4	2	6	2	1	4	3	1	3	3	33
The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday	3	3	6	1	4	2	0	2	1	2	2	3	29
The Mirror (Daily Mirror and Sunday Mirror)	2	0	2	3	3	3	2	4	1	2	2	2	26
The Sun	1	2	2	3	0	2	1	8	0	4	3	0	26
Daily Record and Sunday Mail	1	1	2	0	2	0	1	4	3	3	2	2	21
The Express	2	0	2	0	2	2	2	2	1	4	1	1	19
The Observer	1	2	2	1	2	0	0	2	1	2	3	2	18
Daily Star	0	1	1	2	1	0	0	2	5	2	0	1	15
The Sunday Telegraph	0	1	0	1	2	0	0	1	2	3	2	0	12
The Sunday Express	1	0	0	0	2	2	0	1	0	0	1	0	7
The People	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2
<b>Monthly totals</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>640</b>

In what follows, the 640 articles are discussed using four key themes: high profile business; features; personality-driven journalism; and community activism. These illustrate the wide range of co-operative businesses that exist, while simultaneously highlighting the paucity of coverage about co-operatives in the UK national press.

## High profile business

Most business stories related to well-known names on the UK high-street (i.e., a common name for an area's main shopping district, such as 'Main Street' in the US): specifically The Co-operative Group and The Co-operative Bank. The Co-operative Group (the Co-op Group) has a long history in the UK, dating back to the foundation of the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) in 1863 from the merger of a number of independent societies (Wilson et al., 2013). In 2000, the merger of the CWS with the Co-operative Retail Services led to the formation of the Co-operative Group which bills itself as one of the world's largest consumer co-operatives (Co-operative Group Ltd., n.d.). The Co-operative Group is owned by individual members and independent co-operative societies. It has 3,750 outlets around the UK, covering food, funeral care, insurance, and legal services. The Co-operative Bank (Co-op Bank) is not a co-operative but was part of The Co-operative Group until a financial crisis in 2013 (Mangan & Byrne, 2018). It no longer has any co-operative affiliations but has not changed its name.

Newspaper articles about the Co-op Group most typically featured in general reports about UK supermarkets, particularly how they were responding to Covid-19. For example, in March 2020, *The Guardian* reported that Asda and the Co-op Group had announced purchase restrictions to combat panic-buying and stockpiling (Sparrow & Campbell, 2020). A month later, *The Times* reported that Co-op Group faced a £200 million bill to cover the cost of hiring temporary workers and installing Covid-19 protective equipment (Jones, 2020). By October, however, *The Telegraph* was reporting that the group was anticipating increased sales thanks to lockdown restrictions (Foy, 2020).

Articles about the Co-op Group were largely neutral in tone and rarely featured interviews or explanations about the co-operative business model. One exception was an interview with Steve Murrells, chief executive of the Co-op Group, in the *Mail on Sunday* which referred to the Group's charitable spending:

The Co-op — by no means the wealthiest organisation but one with a history of community involvement — is handing £1.5 million to food banks, £4.5 million to other local causes and charities over the next two weeks (Craven, 2020, para 6).

While approving of the donations, the article failed to make the link between community involvement, membership, and the consumer co-operative's business model. Furthermore, not all the coverage of The Co-operative Group was as positive as this piece. Earlier in the year, the *Mail on Sunday* had criticised sales tactics in Co-op Funeralcare (Walne, 2020). In September, an in-depth report by *The Daily Telegraph* revealed hard sales tactics, high mark-ups, and unprofessional behaviour in Co-op Funeralcare branches in south London (Adams et al., 2020).

Negative coverage was also a feature of reporting about the Co-operative Bank. In the first half of the year, most stories were factual in nature, recording developments in the banking sector and product updates. By August 2020, however, broadsheets and tabloids alike were reporting on the bank's struggles: "The Co-operative bank is the latest firm to fall victim to the pandemic jobs bloodbath" (Phillips, 2020, para 1); "The Co-op Bank might be better named the shrinking bank" (Brummer, 2020); "The Co-operative Bank has promoted Nick Slape, its chief financial officer, to become its sixth chief executive in nine years" (The Times, 2020); and "Troubled Co-operative Bank in takeover discussions with private equity giant Cerberus" (Burton, 2020). These stories framed the bank as problematic, making particular reference to the bank's 2013 financial crisis and the travails of Paul Flowers, the bank's former chairman (see Mangan & Byrne, 2018). For example, in an otherwise sympathetic interview with Steve Murrells, chief executive of Co-op Group, the *Daily Mail* referred to the "so-called Crystal Methodist Paul Flowers, who was forced to quit amid allegations of drug use" (Sunderland, 2020, para 23).

Such references were not unusual. The *Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, and *The Sunday Times* all referred either to Flowers or the bank's financial crisis during their 2020 reports. From the overall coverage of high-street business, then, the casual reader would not learn anything about co-operative business models and values.

### **Features: travel and reviews**

An unexpected source of factual stories about co-operatives was found in travel writing and in food and drink reviews. Obviously, travel features were much reduced because of national and international lockdowns, but *The Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph* and *The Times* still published some travel writing. Many of these reports tended to present the co-operatives as part of the 'local colour': "Our first stop is Al Nour, a disabled women's cooperative that hand crafts contemporary embroidered linens, kaftans and other clothing" (Parkes, 2020, para 10); "the wine cooperative — Terraventoux — has understood everything about wine tourism. They've devised all sorts of wheezes to get you out into the vines" (Peregrine, 2020, para 13). Others treated co-operatives as a quirky feature of the local economy: "Today most (dive boats) are run as cottage industries; there may be a single owner or a co-operative, but not typically a big brand" (Rogerson, 2020, para 4). None of the features discussed the co-operatives in any depth.

Apart from *The People* and the *Daily Star*, most newspapers included some reviews of co-operatively produced food and drink. These features typically included factual information about wine, coffee, and chocolate produced by co-operatives. Many of them were driven by press releases (see Davies, 2009). On 28 June, for example, the *Sunday Express* and *Daily Mirror* both featured identical copy about Grenada's Organic Cocoa Farmers' and Chocolate-Makers' Cooperative being a 'game-changer' for local people. For some (*The Independent*, *The Observer* and *Sunday Express*), such PR-driven features were a significant proportion of their-reporting on co-operatives. Although, few of the articles offered in-depth explorations of co-operatives, they introduce readers to a wide range of co-operative businesses around the world.

### **Personality-driven journalism**

These articles were driven by celebrity stories and quite often introduced co-operatives at random. In the broadsheets, co-operatives were used to bring a humorous tone to news and opinion pieces. For example, *The Times* invited a wine co-operative to comment on the news that Kylie Minogue was to launch her own brand of French wine: "(they were) unsure whether Minogue will pull the region into a bustling new commercial era or tar their image with a tacky veneer of glitz" (Sage, 2020, para 3). In the right-of-centre broadsheets, the humorous tone was often at the expense of the co-operative model. For example, *The Daily Telegraph* speculated on taste, class, and race by asking whether "wearing £7000 of stealth-wealth hand smocking, hand stitched by a granny co-operative in Hastings" was more acceptable than giving a child a designer handbag (Armstrong, 2020). Similarly, in *The Sunday Times* James May opined that "You could revive British industry by making a Soviet style national bicycle factory that made one [type of] bike and call it the People's Bicycle Co-operative of Britain" (Rufford, 2020, para 8).

Unlike the broadsheets, co-operatives are not a source of humour for tabloid newspapers, but instead are presented as an unusual, albeit random, feature of a celebrity's biography. Thus, *The Express* mentioned that UK rock band Genesis "was always a writers' cooperative" (Thomson, 2020, para 19). Similarly, *The Mirror*, *The Sun* and *The People* all reported that actor Sean Connery's first job was as a junior horseman with St Cuthbert's Co-operative Society dairy. This snippet of news featured in news of his 80th birthday in August and featured again in his November obituaries.

### **Community activism**

This final theme is the one that deals with co-operatives in greater depth, encompassing stories about community activism in the UK, global development, and co-operative advocacy in the letters pages. Of the 15 UK national newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, its sister



Sunday publication, were the outlets that covered these kinds of stories most frequently. This is unsurprising, given that both papers are considered to adopt a broadly left-of-centre position that is generally sympathetic to activism and alternative forms of organising. Other outlets, both broadsheet and tabloid, carried occasional reports.

Newspaper readers are a source of many of these articles. For example, *The Guardian*'s 'Other Lives' featured 16 obituaries, written by readers, that recorded a wide range of co-operative activism, in areas as diverse as medicine, the arts, housing, environmentalism, and regional consumer co-operatives. The letters page in *The Times* carried a readers' debate in late January about where and when the UK's co-operative movement began. Letters in *The Guardian* and *The Observer* featured advocacy from Co-operatives UK ("the obstacles to people moving from informal mutuality to a formal mutual body are now considerable" — Mayo, 2020, para 1) and suggestions for life after Covid-19 ("The future will have to promote human values, co-operative structures in industry and community solidarity" — Meadowcroft, 2020, para 2). While limited in number, the tone and tenor of these reader-driven pieces point to knowledge and activism that happens mostly outside the mainstream.

Most stories about community activism were filed under international news or global development. *The Guardian*, for example, featured a story about a women's fishing co-operative in Somalia with 70 members and 10 all-female staff (Hujale, 2020), while *The Times* reported on migrants in Italy who had set up a co-operative farm (Kington, 2020). The role of the co-operative in these success stories remained unexplored. In UK news, there were features in both tabloids and broadsheets about community activism. For example, *The Express* featured the growing co-operative pub movement (Hopps & Batstone, 2020), while *The Daily Record* reported on a crowdfunding campaign for a co-operative brewery on the Isle of Eigg (Dingwall, 2020). In *The Independent*, a feature on Stirchley, Birmingham, featured three worker co-operatives: Artefact, Loaf, and Birmingham Bike Foundry:

At Loaf, Martha expounds on the virtues of the co-operative business model that shares out the pay, workload, and decision-making between its nine members. It's a haven from the "horrible hierarchies" she's experienced in her earlier career (Smith, 2020, para 35).

As part of a larger piece about independent businesses, the article gave a rare voice to worker co-operatives. It was also unusual in that it mentioned co-operative business models and the principle of co-operation among co-operatives.

To summarise, with just 640 stories in 15 publications during 2020, co-operatives are an elusive presence in the UK national newspapers. The articles can be grouped into four themes: high profile business featuring The Co-operative Group and The Co-operative Bank; features such as travel writing and food and drink reviews; personality-driven journalism that used co-operatives to generate humour or illustrate unusual aspects of celebrity; and community activism, where co-operatives were linked to a wider interest in social justice and global development. Very few articles featured co-operatives as the main focus. Instead, they tended to be mentioned in passing. The analysis that follows considers three issues that emerge from this coverage: co-operation is never explained; co-operation is for other people; co-operation is political. The discussion concludes by considering the implications for *Co-operative News*.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This study began with two research questions: how often are co-operatives reported on in UK national newspapers and what kinds of stories feature co-operatives? The answer to the first question is that co-operatives continue to be a marginal presence in UK national newspapers. Of the 15 national news outlets, publishing between January and December 2020, there were only 640 articles that mentioned co-operatives. Of these 640 articles, only 32 gave more than a cursory mention to co-operatives. Within the 32 articles, only one report in *The Independent* (Smith, 2020) featured several (worker) co-operatives and discussed why co-operatives are

different to other business models and organisational forms. The answer to the second question is equally discouraging. The bulk of co-operative reporting related to high-street business stories about The Co-op Group and The Co-operative Bank, where the stories were driven by a predominantly neoliberal, economic narrative (Berry, 2016; Temple et al., 2016). Travel writing, food and drink reviews and celebrity-driven stories make up the remainder. Of the in-depth stories, these tended to be themed around community activism and featured contributions from readers or stories about the role of co-operatives in global development.

There are three points that can be made about this coverage. The first is that co-operation is never explained to readers. Except for the article by Smith (2020), which introduced worker co-operatives and democratic governance as part of a wider article on regeneration, most articles about co-operatives do not explain their structure, principles, or values. Partly, this is because many of the stories feature high profile businesses, where the term 'co-operative' is treated as a brand name and of no additional significance. Thus, reports on the retail sector treat the Co-op as just another supermarket (for example: Foy, 2020; Jones, 2020; Sparrow & Campbell, 2020). This reflects the predominant neoliberal framing of business reporting, which silences or marginalises alternative economic models (Mangan & Byrne, 2018; Preston & Silke, 2011). Several studies have suggested that economic narratives are particularly prominent during a crisis (Berry, 2016; McDonagh, 2019; Temple et al., 2016) and reports about co-operatives during the Covid-19 pandemic support this view. Apart from a few references to the Co-operative Group's charitable donations during the pandemic (Craven, 2020), there was no reporting about co-operative resilience (Birchall & Hammond Ketilson, 2009) and how co-operatives could help to rebuild the economy. By never explaining the co-operative advantage (Mayo, 2015) to readers, the UK newsprint media were continuing to marginalise and silence co-operatives.

A second point is that co-operatives are routinely framed as organisations for 'other' people. Apart from reporting on celebrities such as Sean Connery, UK newspapers routinely framed co-operation as a pursuit for foreigners and the poor. The UK co-operative movement's 13.9 million members and 250,128 employees (Co-operatives UK, 2021) are glossed over in favour of a narrative that positions co-operatives in opposition to the 'normal' pursuits of the general public. Hence, reviews can praise the produce from French wine co-operatives or the cocoa farmers' co-operative in Grenada, but they do not link the high-quality produce to the co-operative business model, nor is there ever a suggestion that a similar model would work in the UK. This message of otherness is reinforced by global development stories which, even though they are often well-meaning, frame co-operatives as a tool of the poor (Hujale, 2020; Kington, 2020). As the poor are often stigmatised in UK newspaper coverage (McArthur & Reeves, 2019), this is another example of how media framing continues to marginalise and delegitimise co-operatives.

The final point relates to political positioning in relation to reporting on co-operatives. It is here that the neoliberal bias in mainstream UK newspapers is most apparent as coverage of co-operatives is often politicised, particularly in right-of-centre newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Telegraph*, and *The Times*. Opinion pieces in these outlets often position co-operatives as the preserve of left-wing zealots. Hence, in *The Sunday Times*, May's pro-cycling stance is reduced to musing about setting up a "a Soviet style national bicycle factory" and calling it "the People's Bicycle Co-operative of Britain" (Rufford, 2020, para 8). Similarly, in *The Telegraph* online, Lisa Armstrong's snide reference to a 'granny co-operative in Hastings' (Armstrong, 2020) manages to be both ageist and anti-co-operative in one short phrase. While these turns of phrase are meant to be humorous, they point to an underlying distrust of non-capitalist perspectives, alongside the normalisation of neoliberal values (Berry, 2016). In this sense, co-operative reporting seems to carry the taint of association with the Co-operative Bank crisis of 2013 where coverage of the bank's financial difficulties was politicised (see Mangan & Byrne, 2018). Except for *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, all the broadsheet titles referred to the bank's 2013 crisis, usually adding a spurious reference to the travails of Paul Flowers, the former chairman, for good measure (for example Sunderland,

2020). As Mangan and Byrne (2018) argue, this produces good copy, but does little to promote public understanding or trust in co-operatives.

To conclude, UK newspaper reports on co-operatives in 2020 make for light reading. While a superficial search of 'co-operative' would suggest some interest in the topic, newspapers more typically refer to co-operative behaviour, rather than co-operatives as an organisational form. The 640 published articles showed little understanding of, or interest in, the co-operative model, showing that co-operatives continue to be marginalised in the UK national newspaper landscape.

This special issue of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* asks why we should care about co-operative journalism and this study offers a clear example of why journalism needs co-operative-owned media *and* media about co-operatives. Firstly, co-operative-owned media add to the plurality of voices and reports in the public domain, countering the predominant neoliberal narratives in the national press. Secondly, media about co-operatives is needed to educate the general public about the value of co-operatives. This is part of Principle 5 (ICA, 2018) and is needed to counter the public's lack of familiarity with the co-operative model. Finally, the combination of co-operative-owned media and media about co-operatives would help raise the visibility of a movement which is currently hidden in plain sight.

## The Author

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