

Media and Social Work

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Definition

It has been well established that the media helps shape public concerns about social problems and specifically about the issues with which the social work professions contend (Franklin and Parton 1991). Whilst social work is variously represented in the media as being about the protection of the vulnerable, social work is also concerned with promoting the rights and interests of marginalized and vulnerable groups (General Social Care Council 2011 GSCC hereafter). Research in this field suggests that media representation would have us believe that social workers only protect, and not always very well (Franklin and Parton 1991).

The 'social work' which is defined in media constructed discourses, social workers will quickly come to realise, is just that, - a media construction. Social work education encourages students to embrace knowledge about the profession, society and the people they work with from their engagement with a broad range of academic disciplines, rather than from the media – however influential it may be.

The social work profession is primarily accountable to the people who use social work and care services through the requirement for their registration with the GSCC. Social workers are also accountable to their employers. Both the GSCC and its apparent successor, the Health Professions Council (HPC) regulate the way in which confidential information is reported and investigated by the media. There are certain

precautionary measures which social workers need to be aware of related to the engagement of the media and social work practice. The confidential nature of the information - and the rights of people using social services to have their personal information protected - makes communications with the press in relation to specific cases a difficult task. This usually comes within the remit of a press or communications officer, rather than being the responsibility of an individual social worker.

It is nonetheless important for the profession to have some understanding and awareness of the way in which social work and social workers are represented both *in* and *by* the media, and to have the tools to question these perceptions and challenge the 'common sense' arguments which newspaper and broadcast editors promote about social issues and their causes and remedies. It also needs to be acknowledged that the growth in media forms creates opportunities for the social work profession to promote itself.

Key points

- The media play an important role in constructing social work and social workers.
- These constructions are often linked to failings which have been highlighted in public inquiries.
- Social workers are multiply accountable and thus need to carefully align themselves in accordance with their professional regulatory body and their employers in matters concerning media reporting of cases.

- On certain issues the media are well situated to lead the public awareness campaigning element of social problems.
- Social work is challenged to engage with a wide range of evolving media.

Discussion

The news media, social work and child abuse

Aldridge (1990) urges us to acknowledge that, “media organisations are driven by considerations of costs and profits” (p.612) and suggests that, “...social work’s bad news provides sex and violence in abundance” (p.617), the bread and butter, arguably, of the press media. It is also clear that the press inculcate immediacy and drama which, “slant the selection of stories towards the more sensational ” (Ayre 2001 p.889).

Media interest in social work and specifically child abuse can be traced back to the death of Maria Colwell in 1973. Media constructions of social work are often linked to failings which have been highlighted in public inquiries or, as in the case of the Cleveland crisis, the press and broadcast media actually leading the public awareness campaigning element (Aldridge 1990; Kitzen 2000). Franklin and Parton (1991) argue that, “child abuse inquiries have been the major triggers of media interest as well as their primary focus” (p.12). In the Cleveland public inquiry into the way in which children were removed from their parents, the press reporting of the issues was discussed in an entire section of the published report (Franklin and Parton 1991) which criticised the press for their role in continuing the crisis.

In the media reporting of the Beckford, Carlile and Henry cases the media:

“... constructed an extremely negative stereotype of social workers which presented them as incompetent, non- judgemental and indecisive individuals ... extremely reluctant to intervene in the private realm of family life even to protect children from a suspected abusing adult” (Franklin and Parton 1991, p.14).

These media constructions gain valuable currency in the aftermath of child deaths and social work itself arguably comes to represent all that is wrong with public services, whilst social workers are represented as being all that is wrong with social work. Media reports often stereotype and provide simplistic but enduring constructions which do little to reflect the complexity and uncertainty which characterises social work practice.

Broadcast television and social work.

The television broadcast media also play an influential role in portraying the profession and its workforce. Social work and social workers have been represented in television drama serials many times over the last forty years or so (Henderson and Franklin 2007). Social workers tend to be depicted ambiguously i.e. as both intrusive and neglectful and, more explicitly although less frequently, as incompetent bungling pseudo-professionals - as the following examples illustrate.

When it was originally broadcast, the now classic *Cathy Come Home* (Loach 1966) provoked a storm of media and public interest. Questions were asked in parliament regarding the problem of children being taken into care because they were living in inadequate housing. This broadcast, along with the publication of Abel-Smith and

Townsend's (1966) *The Poor and the Poorest* attracted a largely supportive media response to housing problems in the UK post war welfare state. Whilst the importance of addressing housing and poverty issues were raised broadly sympathetically, the characterisation of the social workers was less so. In *Cathy Come Home* the social workers are depicted as both 'child-snatchers' and 'heartless bureaucrats'. This theme is also evident in the powerful Channel 4 film *Ladybird* (Loach 1994) which tells the story of a single mother who leaves a violent relationship and, following a fire in her home, has her children taken into care. In contrast the recent television (BBC1) drama *Exile* (Brocklehurst, 2011) tells the story of a family struggling under the pressure of caring for an elderly parent with dementia. There was, however, very little evidence of social work involvement depicted in this drama - the social worker and any social work intervention was conspicuous by its absence. In *Exile* when the female carer felt unable to continue caring for her father she was almost magically able to put him into immediate respite care. A dramatic and imaginative feat on the part of the writers no doubt, but one which certainly gives a false and altogether unrealistic impression of how carers and service users struggle to access social support when they need it without going through a sometimes lengthy process of referral and assessment.

Henderson and Franklin (2007) discuss findings from a study which charted the ways in which social care professionals were characterized in popular UK television drama. Whilst the portrayal of social carers was reasonably frequent, their role is largely peripheral, although many were depicted sympathetically – they were outsiders and remained as such throughout the programmes. Nonetheless, Henderson and Franklin (2007) remain optimistic about the opportunities for

promoting the social work profession. They argue that the television serial drama is, “an important cultural resource which could be targeted by those seeking to change public perceptions of the profession” (Henderson and Franklin 2007, p.151).

The Concept in Social Work Practice

Whilst there is undoubtedly an overemphasis on child abuse and social work in the media, this has a long history and it is not necessarily going to swiftly change. It might be better to ensure that efforts are directed at developing a critical perspective on the way in which the media constructs social workers and the profession.

Previously, it has been argued that social work needs to develop relationships with the press (Ayre 2001). Although generally supportive of this, Aldridge, as far back as 1991, argued that this is challenging given that the press is focussed on economic gain at the expense sometimes of presenting unbiased reports. However, it is clear that those agencies, who work alongside or in concert with the values of social work, use the media to promote social issues and raise public awareness and so it is important to remain attuned to the potential of relationships between social work profession and the media.

Social work educators increasingly draw on a range of media based resources to inform teaching including Social Care TV (SCIE 2011). These interactive resources illustrate the complexity involved in decision making which is clearly at odds with the simplistic and ‘common sense’ mantra which frequently characterises press reporting about social work. They are also valuable tools for students to engage with at an

early stage of their training. In the training of social workers multi-disciplinary working between other professionals including journalism can, “provide concrete strategies through which both social workers and journalists can collaborate in raising public awareness about socially vulnerable populations” (Stone et al. 2008 p.169). There is limited research into such collaborations, but there is little doubt that such initiatives are potentially helpful developments in social work education in the current economic climate.

More recently changes have led to the establishment of the College of Social Work (CoSW), which aims to promote the profession. A key communication strategy of the CoSW is to disseminate public information about what social work ‘is’ and who it works with - and to encourage social work professionals to promote good news stories about the work they do. This strategy was published in direct response to the recommendations made by the Social Work Task Force Reform Group (College of Social Work, 2011). *Community Care* magazine also ran a campaign to promote good news stories about social work (Community Care 2009) although there has been criticism that this tends to focus on child protection social work rather than the range of social work practice with adults and communities.

Finally it falls to the regulatory bodies to promote the social work profession and to individual social workers to align themselves and familiarise themselves with the communication procedures available to them. Social workers need to recognise that the media is an economic rather than a welfare enterprise and thus using the media critically is an important developmental objective for student social workers and new entrants to the profession.

Cross References: Communication, Ethics, Safeguarding Children, Political Context of Social Work

Suggested reading

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