

## Chapter 9 News media representations of health and illness

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### **Abstract:**

The news media plays an important role in shaping social knowledge and attitudes, including regarding health and illness. This chapter explores how the news media's reporting of health and illness has been addressed from applied linguistic and discourse analytical perspectives, which broadly rest upon two core concepts that are outlined in detail: 'representation' and 'discourse'. A brief overview is provided of prominent approaches and areas of focus in discourse-based studies of news media representations of health and illness. The chapter then presents a case study that demonstrates how an increasingly popular discourse analytical approach, corpus-based critical discourse analysis, can be applied to study news media representations of a health and illness topic. Specifically, the chapter draws on keyword, concordance and collocation analysis to explore how UK national newspapers report on pharmaceutical treatments for dementia between 1st January 2021 – 24th January 2024. It examines how different treatments, social actors and dementia are represented, alongside considering the implications of these representational choices. For example, analysis finds that the articles tend use hyperbolic linguistic practices that vilify dementia, victimise people diagnosed and valorise pharmaceutical treatments as society's hope, which is linked to news values and to wider social practices such as prioritising pharmaceutical treatments over alternative sources of support to help people to live fulfilling lives with the condition. The chapter then concludes by reflecting on key research trends and possible directions for future research.

### **1. Introduction**

The media, in all its forms, presents information about the world to the world. Topics relating to health and illness, which are often eminently and self-evidently 'newsworthy', are frequently the subject of media texts (Seale 2003). The news media in particular has been found to be a powerful shaper of knowledge and social attitudes (Lynott et al., 2019), with the potential to influence both individuals' health-related behaviours and policy-level decisions concerning population health (Atanasova and Koteyko 2017). For these reasons, and more besides, media texts represent a prominent area of focus in discourse-based studies of health and illness representation. This chapter explores how a prominent and influential type of media—specifically, news media—contributes to societal representations and understandings of health and illness topics.

Studies of news media coverage of health and illness span a wide range of disciplines and, accordingly, incorporate a plethora of contexts, concepts, theories and analytical frameworks, the full range of which it would be impossible to cover in a single chapter. As such, we explore how this topic has been addressed from discourse analytical and applied linguistic

perspectives, which rest, broadly, on two core concepts: representation and discourse. These concepts are discussed further in the next section, alongside a brief overview of approaches and areas of focus that have gained particular prominence in discourse-based studies of news media representations of health and illness. In Section 3, we present a case study that demonstrates how an increasingly popular approach to discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, can be applied to study news media representations of a health and illness topic (specifically, pharmaceutical treatments for dementia). Finally, Section 4 reflects on the major trends in this area and considers possible directions for future research.

## 2. Discourse, representation and health-related news media

The starting point for this chapter is the understanding that it is never possible for any event, social actor, or group to be described in a completely impartial, accurate, and comprehensive way (Fowler, 1991). This includes, importantly, descriptions of topics relating to health and illness (e.g., the notion of ‘health’ itself, illnesses, people experiencing illnesses, treatment for illnesses, the social actors involved in such treatment, and so on). Media texts, then, offer necessarily partial representations of such phenomena. Representation is defined by Hall (1997, p. 61) as

the process by which members of a culture use language [...] to produce meaning. Already this definition carries the important premise that things—objects, people, events in the world—do not have in themselves any fixed, final or true meaning. It is us—in society, within human cultures—who make things mean, who signify.

This definition draws focus to several important features of representation that are worth considering here, especially since these are consistent with the kinds of assumptions that typically guide discourse-based studies of representations of health and illness. The first point to note is that representations are accomplished through ‘language’, defined broadly by Hall as ‘any system which deploys signs, any signifying system’ (1997, p. 61). Importantly, Hall’s definition applies to forms of communication—or ‘signifying systems’—that include language, but that can also incorporate other forms of semiosis, such as sound, image, and so on.

Language, then, serves as a primary means of representation, often utilised alongside other forms of communication. Researchers specialising in linguistics and discourse analysis typically analyse representations through the lens of the underlying discourses that shape them. Discourse analysis is a prevalent approach across multiple humanities and social science disciplines, engaging those with a focus on language and textual analysis, such as linguists, psychologists, philosophers, and cultural theorists (Mills, 1997). Subsequently, the concept of discourse is defined in many ways, offering a somewhat perplexing array of interpretations to newcomers (Baker, 2023). Scholars exploring media representations often embrace a social constructionist perspective on discourse, suggesting that such discourse shapes societal perceptions and even experiences of various phenomena (Burr, 2015). This perspective is particularly influenced by Michel Foucault, a historian and notable

poststructuralist thinker, who described discourse as ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). This perspective of discourse—as not merely stretches of language use but also frameworks for organising knowledge and practices—aligns with Hall’s insights on representation. Alternatively stated, no reality exists independently of discourse, as our perceptions and experiences of everything in the world are, to varying degrees, both enabled and limited by the discourses through which we represent them. Consequently, the discourses that news media outlets employ to depict health and illness not only mirror but also influence how societies perceive and judge those phenomena.

While Foucault's theories on discourse are widely recognised, they have been critiqued for their abstract nature. Foucault's interest lay more in exploring the implications of discourse (particularly in terms of power and control) than providing concrete advice for linguists on identifying discourses within texts. Linguists and discourse analysts guided by poststructuralist accounts of discourse (such as Foucault’s, but also others’) thus frequently adopt what might be termed a ‘dual focus’. This involves looking at discourse as two forms of ‘practice’ simultaneously: (i.) as linguistic practice (i.e., as ‘contextually sensitive written and spoken language produced as part of the interaction between speakers and hearers and writers and readers’) (Candlin et al., 1999, p. 321); and (ii.) as a form of social practice (i.e., ‘as ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social/institutional practices’) (Candlin et al., 1999, p. 323).

To exemplify this approach within a media context, discourse in the press involves not only the language used but also the social practices prevalent in and around newspapers as a genre. Researching these social practices could entail examining the activities associated with the production and consumption of newspapers, such as the employment of printing technologies, recruitment of journalists, implementation of investigative techniques for gathering news, and the processes established to manage complaints regarding articles. It also includes exploring the motivations and envisaged audiences of the news producers (Bell, 1984) to discern the rationale behind chosen discourses, and evaluating how such representations might impact the communities involved. Moreover, discourse can be examined through how journalists construct newspaper texts—how articles are organised relative to each other to compose a newspaper edition, the structural elements of articles (such as headlines, leads, and body paragraphs), and the utilisation of language in terms of both content and linguistic elements to ‘create’ news. In this context, how news values (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Bednarek and Caple, 2017) favour certain subjects or perspectives, along with the adoption of specific linguistic terms like ‘exclusive’, might be considered. We will return to ‘news values’ shortly.

The third and ultimate point about Hall’s definition of representation that we wish to emphasise is Hall’s (1997, p. 61) attribution of agency for creating representations to ‘members of a culture’ who craft the discourses—that is, the languages—used to communicate about the world. The term ‘members of a culture’ encompasses a wide array of social actors and institutions involved in the origination and subsequent reshaping and

contextual adaptation of these discourses. Health and illness are certainly no exception in this regard. Thus, this chapter's focus, news media, is merely one venue for such representations, and the discourses about health/illness are generated and absorbed across numerous contexts, each likely influenced by its specific cultural and contextual factors.

The contextual variability of discursive representations serves as a poignant reminder of an initial point made earlier in this chapter—that media representations are not clear windows into society but are instead decidedly biased narratives shaped by 'a number of competing forces of differing strengths and directions' (Iggers, 1999, p. 100). These 'competing forces' encompass contextual factors at both the sociocultural and institutional levels (e.g., editorial practices) as well as textual features and constraints, including the modes of the texts and the linguistic grammars of the languages in which the discourses are articulated (Fowler, 1991).

An important consideration in the creation of news media—and a significant 'competing force' for analysts to take into account—is the target or imagined audience. Reporters' and editors' understandings of who constitutes their audiences shapes the selection of what is presented as 'the news', alongside influencing the tone and style of presentation, including how a story is constructed as being newsworthy. Relevant to this process is the concept of news values, which Richardson (2007, p. 91) defines as 'the criteria employed by journalists to measure and therefore to judge the "newsworthiness" of events'. News values, he continues, are 'meant to be the distillation of what an identified audience is interested in reading or watching, the "ground rules" for deciding what is merely an "event" and what is "news"' (ibid.). Using these ground rules, journalists select, order and prioritise the collection and production of news. While the 'ground rules' of news values 'may not be written down or codified by news organisations [...] they exist in daily practice and in knowledge gained on the job' (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001, p. 261).

The most influential list of 'news values' was provided by Galtung and Ruge (1965), who identified twelve criteria employed by journalists to gauge the newsworthiness of events. These are usefully summarised by Richardson (2007, pp. 91–92) as follows: (1) frequency (daily news needs daily stories); (2) threshold (the scale or intensity of the event); (3) unambiguity (whether the event can be easily described); (4) meaningfulness (the cultural proximity to the story); (5) consonance (events people expect or want to happen); (6) unexpectedness (the scarcity or rarity of the event); (7) continuity (follow-up stories); (8) composition (a balance of stories across the paper); (9) reference to elite peoples; (10) reference to elite nations; (11) personification (about or directly affecting people); and (12) negativity (if it bleeds, it leads!). Recent studies, including that by Bednarek and Caple (2017), have emphasised the constructed aspect of news values, suggesting that these values not only influence which events are chosen for news coverage but can also be actively applied in the process of creating news.

Studies of health and illness representations in news media have employed a wide range of methodological approaches, with approaches such as frame analysis (Atanasova and Koteyko 2017) and content analysis (Reifegerste and Wiedicke 2023) finding particular popularity

within fields such as media and journalism studies and medical sociology. If we narrow our focus to discourse-based studies in this arena, we can see a dominance of critical approaches, foremost Critical Discourse Analysis (or CDA; Fairclough 2015). Alongside CDA, other approaches that have been gainfully applied to the study of discourse in this area include, but are not limited to, metaphor analysis (Wallis and Nerlich 2005), cognitive linguistic approaches (Knapton and Rundblad 2017), stylistic approaches (Price 2022), multimodal analysis (Brookes et al. 2018), and, particularly in recent years, corpus linguistic approaches (Brookes 2023). Such is the utility of CDA for interrogating the power structures that underpin and are propagated by media discourse, that these latter approaches have frequently been applied with techniques from CDA to explore health and illness representations in news media contexts.

As noted, the prominence of critical approaches to discourse in this area of research has the benefit of enabling analysts to scrutinise the power relationships that surround news media text production and consumption. In this way, rather than just describing the discursive content of the health-related messages transmitted to the public through news media, such studies have been able to uncover how such content might perpetuate (particularly harmful) ideologies. One recurring area of focus is the potential for news media coverage of particular health issues to amplify the stigma that surrounds them. An area of particular focus in this regard is mental health. For example, Balfour (2023) employed a combination of CDA and corpus linguistics to study the portrayal of individuals with schizophrenia in UK newspapers, revealing how these individuals are often stigmatised, for instance through repeated depictions of them as dangerous and as figures of horror. In a related vein, Wilkinson's (2019) examination of mental health representation in South African media identified a propensity for the coverage to 'Other' people experiencing mental illness by discursively distancing them from the 'norm' of those who do not face such challenges. In two separate studies, Brookes et al. (2018) using a multimodal approach to CDA, and Brookes (2023) employing a corpus-based approach to critical metaphor analysis, have shown how media depictions of dementia can stigmatise those diagnosed by presenting them in objectifying terms and constructing them as 'socially dead', all the while intensifying fear of dementia itself by characterising the syndrome as a violent 'killer'.

Another recurring theme emerging in (particularly critical) studies of news media discourses around health and illness is how neoliberal health agendas refract into, and are often 'pushed' by, such texts. Notably, Brookes and Baker's (2022) corpus-based CDA revealed how the UK press utilised fear appeals as a way of enjoining members of the public to assume individual responsibility for minimising their risk of developing obesity. In a follow-up study, Brookes (2023) found that such strategies intensified in obesity coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby individuals experiencing obesity and overweight were implored to lose weight for the sake of others in the country, and to 'save the NHS' (i.e., the UK's national public healthcare service). These studies also demonstrate how neoliberal discourses can intersect with stigma (here, weight stigma) in this context, as news media texts employ stigmatising discourses as a way of socially sanctioning those who do not (or are perceived not to) meet their responsibilities as 'responsible citizens' by effectively avoiding conditions such as obesity.

News media texts thus often have an instructive agenda in their design, aimed primarily at (often subtly) prompting their audiences to manage and maintain their own health status (and that of their family's). A small yet significant body of research has focused on this instructive quality—and its likely effectiveness—in more explicit terms. For instance, Knapton and Rundblad (2017) explored how public compliance during crises might be influenced by the clarity and structure of media-reported advice. Using the 2007 drinking water crisis in the UK as a case study, they applied a cognitive approach to analyse the linguistic constructions of the crisis in media coverage, assessing these in terms of their potential impacts on public understanding of, and responses to, the advice given. The authors contended that certain linguistic choices in the coverage—namely, the use of passive voice, modality, and complex clause structures—were likely to significantly impact public comprehension and compliance with health and safety advisories during the water crisis. Specifically, by using epistemic modals and embedding critical actions within complex sentences, the media often presented essential advice as optional rather than necessary. According to their argument, this presentation was likely to reduce public urgency and, thus, the effectiveness of public responses.

In the next section, we demonstrate what a discourse analysis of news media representations of health and illness-related topics might 'look like'. Specifically, we present a corpus-based analysis of the representation of a dementia treatment, Lecanemab, in the UK press.

### **3. Case study: Press representations of a dementia treatment**

#### **3.1. Context: dementia, treatments and the news**

Dementia is widely understood as a neurodegenerative syndrome characterised by impaired cognitive function caused by a number of diseases that affect the brain (World Health Organization 2023). This case study focuses on the most common type of dementia, Alzheimer's disease, though we will refer to its hypernym, dementia, where appropriate. Individuals' symptoms and experiences with Alzheimer's disease are unique and fluid (Sabat 2018: 58). Likewise, its pathology cannot be neatly categorised. For example, scientific and clinical communities remain uncertain about the boundaries between diagnostic categories (e.g., between ageing and Alzheimer's disease), and the extent to which the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease can be connected to bio-physiological changes to the brain (e.g., older people can exhibit the pathological signs of Alzheimer's disease in their brains but *not* exhibit its symptoms) (Lock 2013). The causes of Alzheimer's disease remain debated, and although it currently dominates, the amyloid cascade hypothesis (essentially, that beta-amyloid [ $A\beta$ ] accumulates around brain cells, starting a chain reaction) is disputed (e.g., Ricciarelli and Fedele 2017).

It is useful to regard dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, as an intertwining of molecular, social, political and environmental factors (Lock 2013). This study addresses social discourses of dementia which, as discussed, have the potential to not only reflect but also *shape* the perceptions and responses of individuals, communities and societies. Existing research indicates that discourses of dementia and people with the syndrome are historically

negative, and likely normalise and contribute to the stigma and structural inequalities experienced by people with dementia (discussed earlier; see also Putland and Brookes 2024). A biomedical discourse remains the dominant means of approaching dementia, and this discourse often combines with others, such as the prioritisation of cognitive abilities and association of these with personhood, to present dementia in terms of loss of abilities and self (Van Gorp and Vercauteren 2012).

How dementia is reported in the news is important since, as we have seen, such texts provide a platform for popularising knowledge about phenomena and can help determine what is seen and thought about, alongside which social groups and actions are prioritised. It is thus notable that the voices of people diagnosed with dementia tend to be missing from news coverage (O'Malley, Shortt and Carroll 2022). For decades, potential dementia risk factors and treatments have been central to the news. Multiple tropes have been identified amongst (UK) newspapers, including a 'panic-blame' framework that catastrophises dementia (e.g., as worse than death) while also recommending individual actions to prevent or mitigate dementia (e.g., through diet or exercise) (Peel 2014). Dementia is regularly attributed agency (often as a killer), and the hope of fighting and defeating this enemy tends to be attributed to pharmaceutical advancements in finding treatments and an eventual cure for dementia; against this, people with dementia risk being reduced to their pathology and passive patients (Bailey, Denning and Harvey 2021; Brookes et al. 2018; Brookes 2023).

At the time of writing, four pharmaceutical treatments are available in the UK to temporarily reduce symptoms of Alzheimer's disease and some other dementias (National Health Service 2023). Following their approval in the 1990's and 2000's, a "barren and grim" landscape for developing new therapies emerged (Hong and Bitan 2024: 1877). Since 2021, this has transformed with the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA)'s approval of anti-amyloid- $\beta$  therapies, which are significant for being the first approved therapies to target the underlying pathology of Alzheimer's disease, rather than its symptoms (ibid.). Prominent anti-amyloid- $\beta$  antibodies are Donanemab, Lecanemab and Aducanumab. At the time of writing, Aducanumab was discontinued and Donanemab was awaiting FDA approval. Meanwhile, Lecanemab was first granted accelerated approval, then full approval by the FDA in July 2023 to treat early-stage Alzheimer's disease, and was awaiting approval in Europe/the UK. Accelerated approval is controversial, as it makes treatments available without having to first demonstrate clinical efficacy. Lecanemab and similar therapies have been associated with significant side-effects, including headaches, worsening confusion, dizziness, visual disturbance, nausea, seizures and brain atrophy, and a small number of deaths have also been reported, all of which necessitates a considered exploration of the benefits and risks of such treatments (Hong and Bitan 2024).

Considering broader observations attesting to the news media's emphasis on biomedical and pharmaceutical developments, this case study attends specifically to the recent discussions of anti-amyloid- $\beta$  drugs (particularly Lecanemab) in national UK newspapers in the period 2021 to 2024. Comparing such coverage against more general UK newspaper reporting on dementia, we ask the following research questions:

- How do the articles represent different treatments, social actors and dementia?

- What are the discursive implications of such representational choices?

Next, we provide more detail on our data collection and analytical approach, before presenting our key findings and discussing these in relation to the broader context of dementia discourses in society.

### **3.2. Data**

Using the online news repository, *Lexis Nexis*, we compiled a specialised corpus of national UK newspaper articles that mentioned Alzheimer's disease or dementia and Lecanemab, through the following search query: *(Alzheimer's OR dementia) AND Lecanemab*. Since the earliest results occurred in 2021, we collected articles from the first day of 2021 until one day prior to when we began collecting data (i.e., 24<sup>th</sup> January 2024). Thus, the data spans just over three years (although most results are from 2023). Articles were collected from both national tabloids (*MailOnline*, *The Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*, *The Sun*, *The Express*, *Daily Mirror*, *thesun.co.uk* and *Daily Star*) and broadsheets (*The Times*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *I*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Sunday Telegraph* and *The Observer*). The data was cleaned to remove duplicates and so-called 'boilerplate' text that is included in the articles stored by *Lexis Nexis*. The resultant corpus contained 259 articles, totalling 212,971 words.

### **3.3. Analytical approach**

We analysed the data using a corpus-based approach to CDA. This enabled us to combine a quantitative focus on statistically salient linguistic features of the data with a qualitative exploration of how such features are used in textual context, and to consider how these might contribute to particular discourses. Our analysis was informed by Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional approach to CDA, which relates language use to wider social structures at three levels: (1) the texts themselves (here, considering how discourses may linguistically manifest in the news articles); (2) discursive practice (here, considering the practices of news production and consumption); and (3) social practice (here, being concerned with the capacity of discourses to both reflect and help to shape perceptions and responses to dementia in society).

In terms of corpus linguistic techniques, our CDA was driven by keyword analysis. Keywords are essentially words that occur with a significantly higher relative (or normalised) frequency in one corpus (known as the 'target') compared against another (known as the 'reference'). Typically, the reference corpus will represent some norm or benchmark for the kind of language under investigation. This ensures that the keywords obtained through this comparison will reflect language use that is, by dint of its markedly high frequency, characteristic for the texts in the corpus being analysed, relative to what might be expected of the more general genre or context of language use to which those texts belong. As such, this study used the Dementia News UK corpus as its reference corpus, since this contains national

newspaper articles about dementia from 2013–2022, totalling 9,174,651 words.<sup>1</sup> The top 20 keywords, ranked using the log-likelihood statistic, were selected as a means of focusing the case study on the most distinctive linguistic features of this newspaper sample (see Table 9.3). This is a somewhat arbitrary cut-off but was one that provided a manageable number of keywords for this short analysis while, as noted, reflecting the most characteristic forms of language use in the data.

The keywords were then analysed in context using the concordance function, which essentially displays all the occurrences of a particular search term (in Table 9.1, this is for the keyword “disease”) along with a user-determined number of words that occur to its left and right. A range of sorting options are available to the analyst and each individual concordance line can be selected to read the example in the wider context of the news article that it is from. To help contextualise the concordance lines, collocation analysis was also used. A collocate refers to a word (or a multi-word form) that occurs next or near to another word sufficiently frequently that their relationship is statistically salient. For this case study, we used the default collocation settings in AntConc, which specified a span of five words to the left and right of the target word (“disease” in Table 9.2), with Log-Likelihood (4-term) as the likelihood measure (threshold of  $p < 0.05$ ) and Mutual Information (MI) as the effect size measure.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, this corpus has not been published on in the form used as a reference corpus for this analysis. However, it is an expanded version of the corpus analysed by Brookes (2023), which can be consulted for more information on details of compilation.

**Table 9.1.** Fifteen concordance lines for the target word “disease” when sorted to the left (by L1, L2, L3) and ordered by frequency (context size: 10 tokens). The table layout reproduces that of the concordance function (KWIC) in AntConc, version 4.2.4 (Anthony 2023).

	<b>File</b>	<b>Left Context</b>	<b>Hit</b>	<b>Right Context</b>
1	The Times...	year, trial results revealed that Lecanemab slowed progression of the	disease	by 27 per cent compared with patients taking a placebo.
2	The Times...	out new drugs that can slow the progression of the	disease,	warning that low diagnosis rates mean the true death
3	I-7A85~1...	treatment, named lecanemab, was found to reduce progression of the	disease	by 27 per cent in a phase three trial. The
4	I-15E7~1...	as Leqembi (inset), was found to reduce progression of the	disease	by 27 per cent in an advanced phase three trial
5	I-2551~1...	of developing effective treatments to change the progression of the	disease.	In the US, a new amyloidtargeting drug, lecanemab, has
6	I-...	after it was found to slow the progression of the	disease	could be available on the NHS within 18 months, experts
7	TH984C~...	after it was found to slow the progression of the	disease.	Donanemab was found to slow “clinical decline” by up
8	TH984C~...	and that seems to slow down the progression of the	disease.”	And it keeps people being able to do things
9	TH9991~...	brain and damage neurons, slowing down the progression of the	disease.	Lilley claimed in a press release that donanemab slowed
10	THA9F4~...	triumph. On average, the drug slowed the progression of the	disease	by 20-30%, amounting to about four to seven months over
11	THAC27~...	worse, but it does measurably slow the progression of the	disease,”	said Snider, a neurologist at Washington University in St.
12	THBB3F~...	and that seemed to slow down the progression of the	disease.”	And it keeps people being able to do things
13	THCDBE~...	Donanemab has been found to slow the progression of the	disease.	They said Donanemab slows “clinical decline” by up to 35
14	THEOBS~...	in the hope this would stop the progression of the	disease.	Lecanemab, which is produced by Japanese pharmaceutical company Eisai,
15	THESUN~...	Now have treatments which slow the progression of the	disease	For the first time in its 110-year history. “We

**Table 9.2.** The top 25 collocates sorted by Log-Likelihood (window span of 5 to the left and 5 to the right; minimum frequency of 1; minimum range of 1) for the target word “disease”. The table layout reproduces that of the AntConc programme, version 4.2.4 (Antony 2023).

Rank	Collocate	Freq LR	Freq L	Freq R	Range	Likelihood	Effect (MI)
1	early	111	30	81	82	122.503	1.820
2	people	7	1	6	7	78.584	-3.128
3	who	81	9	72	59	74.086	1.628
4	cent	78	64	14	53	73.536	1.658
5	benefit	45	7	38	36	73.304	2.314
6	stage	49	25	24	42	72.416	2.178
7	among	32	32	0	26	69.064	2.768
8	decline	73	62	11	60	66.462	1.624
9	eligible	27	19	8	26	66.109	3.006
10	per	77	58	19	53	64.558	1.547
11	with	174	35	139	95	63.457	0.959
12	given	57	27	30	48	52.276	1.632
13	families	25	2	23	22	49.131	2.607
14	cognitive	49	31	18	43	47.025	1.677
15	died	30	3	27	21	46.519	2.245
16	half	25	14	11	22	45.715	2.490
17	patients	12	6	6	6	45.520	-2.123
18	research	5	5	0	5	42.903	-2.858
19	to	425	242	183	155	41.706	0.467
20	would	54	15	39	32	40.442	1.449
21	i	2	0	2	2	40.401	-3.773
22	receive	21	1	20	17	38.675	2.502
23	alzheimer	194	121	73	112	38.217	0.684
24	only	44	38	6	31	37.327	1.559
25	we	18	9	9	17	35.637	-1.642

### 3.4. Results and discussion

Table 9.3 shows the top 20 keywords, which provide a useful entry point into the topics and entities that are more salient in our dataset relative to dementia reporting in general. Unsurprisingly, drugs and treatments emerge as key, both in specific terms (*lecanemab* and *donanemab*) and as a more general category (*drug, drugs, treatment, treatments*). Likewise, aspects of the research and approval process feature as keywords (*trial, results, approval, approved, placebo, breakthrough*), as does the pathology of Alzheimer’s disease (*alzheimer, disease, amyloid*). The effects of either Alzheimer’s disease or the drugs are also key (*slow, swelling, decline*), and two social actors are included, those of *patients* and *Eisai*, which is one of two pharmaceutical companies responsible for Lecanemab (its collaborator, Biogen, is also key but ranked 26<sup>th</sup> so did not make the cut-off). While providing a useful overview of what these news reports are about, it is worth considering how these terms are used in context. Through a more qualitative analysis, we can critically engage with these words’ contributions to dementia discourses. For this, we focus specifically on how Alzheimer’s disease, the drug treatments and patients/Eisai are represented in the articles, through a collocation-informed concordance analysis of terms denoting these topics and social actors.

**Table 9.3.** Top 20 keywords identified through comparing the Lecanemab UK newspaper articles to the reference corpus.

*drug, lecanemab, donanemab, alzheimer, amyloid, trial, drugs, patients, disease, eisai, slow, results, approval, treatment, treatments, approved, placebo, swelling, decline, breakthrough*

Firstly, *lecanemab* and *donanemab* are regularly represented as a *breakthrough* in a metaphorical fight against Alzheimer’s disease (see Extract 1; keywords in italics) which is a longstanding discourse identified across mass media’s reporting of pharmaceutical developments (e.g., Bailey, Dening and Harvey 2021; Brookes 2023; Van Gorp and Vercruyse 2012). Indeed, such is the salience of this discourse that in Extract 2, the author explicitly justifies their claim about a breakthrough by distancing themselves from previous hyperbolic news headlines.

- (1) A *drug* can *slow* early Alzheimer's by up to 60 per cent in a *breakthrough* hailed as the 'turning point' in the fight against the *disease*.  
(*Mail Online* 2023)
- (2) It may be easy to dismiss the results of such trials when we are used to reading headlines about "wonder *drug*" this and "*breakthrough treatment*" that. But the excitement around *donanemab* is justified. I've long said we are "on the brink of a *breakthrough*" when it comes to *treatments* for dementia. This time, and I do not use the term lightly, I believe we have seen a *breakthrough*.  
(*The Daily Telegraph* 2023)

Concerns have already been raised that this pharmaceutical “battle” (Extract 5) against dementia risks overly vilifying dementia, venerating pharmaceutical treatments and passivising people with dementia (e.g., Bailey, Dening and Harvey 2021; Brookes 2023). This enemy positioning of dementia is exemplified by Extracts 3-7, which metaphorically

present dementia/Alzheimer's disease as an opponent ("pivotal move' in fight against"), a thief ("mind-robbing), controlling ("Dementia's cruel hold") and especially merciless ("the cruellest"). This enemy association is such that *Alzheimer's disease* collocates both with terms denoting conflict (*combat* (9), *fight* (68), *against* (24)) and cruelty (*cruel* (33), *devastating* (28), *robbing* (18), *horrible* (7)).

- (3) MIRACLE ALZ DRUG; Boffins hail 'pivotal move' in fight against *disease* (*The Sun* 2022)
- (4) A new *Alzheimer's drug* is hitting the market — the first with clear-cut evidence that it can *slow*, by several months, the mind-robbing *disease*. (*The Independent* 2023)
- (5) Latest *drugs* offer hope for those with cruellest *disease*; EXPERT HAILS GAME CHANGER IN DEMENTIA BATTLE (*The Sun* 2023)
- (6) DEMENTIA'S cruel hold on the brain could be loosened if a wonder *drug* is fast-tracked for *approval*. (*The Express* 2023)
- (7) *Lecanemab* clears a build up of *amyloid*-toxic plaques in the brain that are thought to cause the cruel, memory-robbing *disease*. (*Mail Online* 2022)
- (8) The *drug* attacks and destroys buildups of a protein called *amyloid* in the brains of *patients* with the *disease*. (*The Times* 2023)

In contrast, drugs are revered as transformative ("pivotal", "game changer") and miraculous ("miracle", "wonder") and as thus providing "hope" for society's advance against dementia. This advancement is envisioned primarily in terms of the drugs *slowing* dementia's progression (thus entailing the conceptualisation of dementia as a moving object; Brookes 2023). Specifically, as Extracts 7-8 indicate, the site of this advancement is the "brains of patients with the disease", which are conceptualised "as a battleground between dementia pathology and pharmaceutical drugs" (Bailey, Denning and Harvey 2021: 368)

Throughout the articles, the voices of experts tend to be prioritised, whether these are of scientists (see "Boffins" in Extract 3 and the speaker in Extract 14) or organisations, with Alzheimer's Research UK, Alzheimer's Society, Alzheimer's Association and Alzheimer's Disease International all emerging as collocates of *Alzheimer* and regularly being quoted in the articles (see Extract 9).

- (9) Dr Richard Oakley, associate director of research at *Alzheimer's Society*, said: "This research could be game-changing in the *treatment* of *Alzheimer's disease*. For decades, people with *Alzheimer's disease* have been desperately waiting for a *drug* to *slow* down the progress of the *disease*." (*Mail on Sunday* 2022)

Similarly, the pharmaceutical company Eisai is also regularly positioned in relation to what it does (or does not) say (Extracts 10-11), which is reflected in the many verbal processes that

the company collocates with (*noted* (9), *combats* (6), *declined* (6), *insisted* (4), *comment* (5), *reported* (7), *announced* (7)).

(10) Eisai reported results from a *trial* on 1,795 participants with early *Alzheimer's disease*.

(*The Independent* 2022)

(11) In all three cases, *Eisai* has either denied the death was linked to the *drug* or declined to comment.

(*Mail on Sunday* 2023)

In contrast, from reading through the articles (a key benefit of smaller, specialised corpora), it is evident that people with dementia are rarely quoted. Instead, this social group tends to be spoken about (and sometimes for) by other individuals, authors or institutions (e.g., Extracts 5, 9). As indicated by the fact that it is the plural form of *patients* that is key, people with dementia are regularly represented in a medical and numerical context (collocating with *per cent* (78), *half* (25), *proportion* (8), *average* (15)) that often concerns the effectiveness of various drugs (Extract 12).

(12) 47% of *patients* given *donanemab* did not see their dementia worsen, compared to 29% of those not on it.

(*The Sun* 2023)

Overall, people with dementia tend to be presented collectively, often as the passive or backgrounded victims of dementia's cruelty (Extracts 3-7) to which drug treatments provide the "hope" needed (Extract 5). Individuals are also represented through their brains, upon which Alzheimer's disease acts or is fought against (Extract 8), or as statistics, most often for treatment trials (Extracts 10, 12). Such representations serve to reinforce existing practices of homogenising, pathologising and ignoring the perspectives of people living with dementia within a broader biomedically oriented discourse that vilifies dementia and valorises drugs as the solution (Bailey, Denning and Harvey, 2021; O'Malley, Shortt and Carroll, 2022; Van Gorp and Verduyck, 2012). Such discursive practices are important to critically reflect upon, since they can in turn justify and normalise the pathologisation and mistreatment of people living with dementia in everyday life (Sabat, 2018). Clearly, while being more significant to this dataset relative to dementia news reporting in general, the reporting choices made for these latest drug treatments overwhelmingly reiterate longstanding discursive tropes for dementia.

One tension in the coverage we analysed that is indicated by the keyword *swelling*, but that is often less discussed in previous analyses of dementia representations, is that of the risks and benefits of the drug treatments being discussed (Extracts 12-14).

(13) There are significant side-effects with *donanemab* and they are similar to those seen with *lecanemab*. In the Eli Lilly trial, nearly a quarter of *patients* treated experienced some level of brain *swelling* or bleeding, compared with only 2% in the control group, though serious problems were rare. Four people died while taking part in the trial – three in the *donanemab* group and one in

the control group.

(*The Guardian* 2023)

- (14) Professor Paresh Malhotra, head of neurology at Imperial College London, said: 'If the *drug* is *approved* in the UK, then NHS services will need to adapt considerably to provide it and there will need to be honest discussion between *patients*, carers, and doctors about the benefits and risks associated with this type of *treatment*.'

(*Mail Online* 2023)

As previously mentioned, the central treatments discussed in this corpus are Donanemab, Lecanemab and Aducanumab, which, across the news cycle captured in this three-year corpus, are associated with great hope, yet are also critiqued when new data emerges that associates the drugs with particular side effects, even deaths. The potential effect of this news cycle on readers is suggested by Extract 2, which argues that such headlines contribute to cynicism regarding the efficacy of whatever the next “wonder drug” is. It is worth comparing how Extracts 1 and 13 both represent Donanemab’s effects – the first foregrounds its benefits, and the latter its risks. Extract 14 acknowledges that both “benefits and risks” are associated with drug treatments, and it is notable for its atypical call for a collaborative and “honest discussion” between patients, carers and doctors about these risks/benefits, who are unusually brought together here as the key stakeholders involved in the decision regarding whether or not to use the pharmaceutical treatments. As such, on this occasion, people living with dementia are attributed the agency to evaluate and choose the best course of action for them, and drugs are not necessarily valorised as the singular source of hope for dementia.

At the textual level, then, our keyword and collocational analysis indicates that, in line with existing studies, dementia is consistently metaphorically positioned as a cruel and powerful opponent that robs victims of their memories, against which drugs can offer the “breakthrough” that society needs to fight against it, namely by slowing dementia’s progression. This metaphorical battle occurs in the brains of people living with dementia, who tend to be referred to collectively as patients, often in the context of statistics evaluating the effectiveness or risks of drugs. Typically, the articles are concerned not with the voices of people living with dementia but with what the pharmaceutical company Esai says (or does not say), alongside dementia researchers and charity spokespeople.

At the level of discursive practice, these textual patterns can in part be contextualised through attending to values regarded as enhancing ‘newsworthiness’ (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). For instance, the valuing of ‘references to elite individuals’ potentially contributes to the articles’ emphasis on researchers and charity/company spokespeople as expert sources (ignoring experience-led expertise). Notably, the results of drug trials were commonly represented as “breakthroughs” – a metaphor that has been observed to be part of science reporting genres, including the media which, operating within market-driven contexts, deploy this trope as a means to capitalise on controversies within the scientific world for the sake of generating profits (see, for example, Nerlich et al. 2009). In this case, positioning drug trial results as “breakthroughs” in a battle against a cruel, powerful enemy increases the stakes (‘threshold’) and enables follow-up stories (‘continuity’, to the point of reader fatigue/cynicism in Extract

2) that are directly relevant to much of the newspapers' readers ('meaningfulness'), since approximately half of the UK population know someone diagnosed (52%) and fear developing dementia more than other conditions (49%) (Alzheimer's Research UK, 2021). This fear reflects that dementia as a topic is imbued with the news value of 'negativity', which these linguistic choices draw on and perpetuate in their representations of dementia ('consonance'). Importantly, vilifying dementia and valorising pharmaceutical treatments backgrounds that there are many non-pharmaceutical treatment options for dementia and that people can (and do) live fulfilling lives with the condition. At the level of social practice, such a framing not only reflects but further reiterates the prioritisation of finding a cure above improving care and support for people affected, which translates into a staggeringly unequal distribution of resources (e.g., Wong and Knapp, 2020), and the continued medicalisation, passivisation and stigmatisation of people living with dementia (Putland and Brookes, 2024).

#### **4. Future directions**

The news media is a pervasive source of information for the public, and can play an important role in shaping societal perceptions and understandings of, as well as actions in relation to, health issues. In exploring discourse-based studies of news media representations of health and illness, this chapter has uncovered several critical trends and themes. A recurring finding across studies regards news media's tendency to represent and frame health issues in ways that emphasise their danger and risk, consistent with news values of 'negativity', and foreground individuals' responsibilities to manage their health risks and ensure that they do not become burdensome to the state, consistent with the increasing spread of neoliberal ideologies within society. Such representations often lead to the stigmatisation of individuals affected by health issues that are deemed as 'preventable' or framed as 'lifestyle' conditions, such as obesity and some types of cancer. Meanwhile, the stigmatisation of mental health issues, which can likewise be framed as matters of individual responsibility, frames such issues either as crises to be managed or threats from which society should be protected. While a range of methodological approaches have been used to examine the discourses that constitute such representations, those belonging to, or at least, allied with critical approaches such as CDA have proven both popular and effective for disentangling relations of power which pervade institutional and social practices and, as such, shape the complexion of such discourse and its likely effects within society.

The case study presented in Section 3 serves to illustrate the effects of such institutionalised practices through which 'the news' is created. Notably, hyperbolic linguistic practices that vilify dementia, victimise people with dementia and position drug treatments as society's 'miracle' in its battle against dementia enhance the perceived newsworthiness of the articles according to socially determined criteria (see the above discussion of 'news values'). However, when these representational choices are made again and again, which the similarity of our findings to other studies certainly indicates (e.g., Bailey, Denning and Harvey 2021; Brookes et al. 2018; Brookes 2023), these reductive villain/victim/hero characterisations risk restricting both social understandings of and responses to dementia. For instance, dementia remains, for much of the UK's population at least, the most feared health condition, which contributes to the stigma that people affected by dementia face. While of course important, overly valorising pharmaceutical treatments may ignore uncertainties (notably regarding pathological theories and risks) and be at the expense of 'care' oriented research and

initiatives, which remain chronically underfunded, despite showing promising results for people's quality of life with dementia (Wong and Knapp, 2020). Since what (and who) is foregrounded, backgrounded or excluded in media representations can not only reflect but help determine social attitudes, experiences and (political) agendas, critical investigation is key. Similarly to the media's accumulative impact, while individual critical analyses are themselves useful, it is through also making comparisons *across* critical studies that a more comprehensive understanding of discourses can emerge and be engaged with.

There is considerable scope for expanding the remit of research in this area. In our view, particularly promising areas include considering, for example through contrastive discourse approaches, how different cultural contexts and (news) media systems shape the representation of health issues. Such a perspective could further illuminate the interplay between global and local health discourses and help, in turn, to 'denaturalise' the common-sense status of culturally situated ways of talking about and otherwise representing health issues. Equally, while pleas for methodological plurality are, by now, commonplace in the broad area of discourse studies, such calls still have merit, and there is certainly scope for discourse-based studies of news media representations of health and illness to benefit from triangulation, which could open up new and exciting analytical possibilities. For example, combining corpus linguistic with multimodal approaches to discourse analysis could help researchers to better understand how linguistic and visual choices work together to represent health and illness in news media texts, and to apprehend the systematicity and possible variability of such combinations at-scale, thereby illuminating their incremental force. Another long-standing area for development in discourse studies regards audience responses. Drawing on approaches afforded by disciplines such as behavioural psychology could enable discourse analysts to explore more systematically the potential effects of discourse, including determining empirically how these might shape health behaviours among the public (Bru Garcia et al., 2022).

### Related topics

*Health inequalities, critical theory, discourse as social practice*

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