



Consensual Non-monogamies in the UK press: The Years 2010-2014

AN ANALYSIS OF NEWS COVERAGE
SHORT REPORT 2 – CNM-MOVES PROJECT
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Half a decade of consensual non-monogamies in the UK's written press

An analysis of news coverage

Short Report of the CNM-MOVES Research Project

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Introduction

The research project “CNM-MOVES: Consensual Non-Monogamies and Social Movements: A Comparative Study of Activism in Portugal and the UK” engages in a comparative transnational analysis of how activism and social movements have evolved, organized, and changed, when it comes to consensual non-monogamies (CNMs). Part of this process involves understanding whether these movements are represented in the *media* and how, and what rhetoric and narratives are available to the general public.

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One of the functions of media, and journalism in particular, is to make new or different realities known to the public, to educate and inform with rigor and impartiality, and to allow the dissemination of diversity present in society.

Studying the way CNMs are represented in the print media in the UK allows us to understand how the coverage of the theme has evolved, what language was used, which social actors were mobilized to talk about it, and it helps to understand what ideas have been passed on to the general public over the course of the years.

More specifically, in the context of the CNM-MOVES project, analyzing the Portuguese and UK press allows us, on the one hand, to identify groups and individuals that are relevant for social movements concerned with CNM and, on the other, to understand which narratives reach the public.

Methodology

In order to understand more deeply how the UK print media talk about CNMs, and to allow a comparison with the Portuguese press, a survey of allusions to CNMs over the last decade was carried out.

Through an automated collection of pieces via the LexisNexis database, all pieces (e.g.: news, reports, opinion, editorials) of national and regional print

media that contained at least one of the following keywords were collected: “polyamory” OR “consensual non-monogamy” OR “monogamish” OR “open relationship” OR “relationship anarchy” OR “non-monogamy”. Swinging was not included in the keyword search as the literature shows that there has been little to no activism around it, and as it would have greatly increased the number of extraneous results. The search was carried out with software assistance on 20/01/2020, using the aforementioned LexisNexis database, and the time parameters were between January 2010 and January 2020.

This yielded an initial set with 3220 results for the entire decade, after automated deduplication of entries that had the exact same title and were in the same publication and date. This was then split into two periods of 5 years each, considering the size of the sample and the available time to conduct the whole research. Thus, the data for this Short Report consists of the published pieces of the first period between January 2010 and December 2014.

Of the original 620 results for these years, 59 were deleted for being duplicated or invalid, and a further 217 were deleted because they were irrelevant for the study (i.e., they did not actually refer to questions regarding CNMs). In the end, 344 entries remained, which constitute the total *corpus* of this analysis. While it is not yet possible for us to accurately diagnose long-term changes in media coverage, it should be noted that the total valid number of pieces for 2010 was only 48, whereas for 2013 it was already 84. These data support thus the idea that interest in, and coverage of, CNMs in press media has been increasing overall.

A coding grid for Computer-Assisted Content Analysis was created, using the NVivo 12 software, which focused on identifying social actors, themes, frameworks, geographical references and other details, some of which are discussed in this Short Report. The text genre (e.g.: opinion piece, brief, news, reportage) and the place and the date of the publication were identified in the research, but omitted from this Report for the sake of brevity.

What follows is a compilation of the main results obtained, focusing on the themes, social actors and approaches chosen by media editors. The results are presented as percentages of the total articles in the *corpus*; please note that most variables are, or can be, multiple-coded.

Main results

1 - Which non-monogamies?

The keywords used to do the research partially limit the types of CNMs that were made visible in this analysis of news coverage. Even so, as is evident from the results, there are more types of CNMs than those used for searching the database, and it is important to note the difference in the distribution of references.

Polyamory	16.3
Open Marriages	3.8
Open Relationship	89.2
Swinging	5.8
Polygamy	4.9
Free love	4.1
Cruising	4.7
Relationship Anarchy	0
Communes	1.5
Monogamish	0.9

Table 1 - Types of CNM, as a percentage of total pieces (N = 334). Project data.

- **Open Relationship is the most frequently mentioned type of CNM**, as can be seen on Table 1 which runs counter to results observed in Portugal (see previous Report, linked to at the end of the document), and to other findings around public interest in consensual non-monogamies. However, it is also worth noting that “open relationship” is also often used as a more general descriptor for various inter-relational arrangements, rather than as simply a clearly defined specific type of CNM relationship. It works as a kind of catch-all term.
- **Polyamory is the second term on the list, but it is *at the forefront of specific CNMs***, with over 16% of the mentions. This shows that, when it comes to naming specific forms of CNM, in the early 2000s polyamory does come first place, even above and beyond other more established forms of CNM, such as swinging.
- **Swinging comes a distant third in terms of term prevalence**, with about 5.8% of the references alluding to it. Although it remains outside of the scope of this Report (due to our focus on activism), much of this coverage is sensationalist in nature.

2 - Which people?

The way in which sources are presented in news pieces is important, as it allows us to understand who is given a voice, who has the legitimacy to comment on certain topics, and it also allows us to understand whether or not social movements are successful in attracting media attention and co-determine CNMs' narratives.

Not all sources have the same type of legitimacy, and not all are framed in a similar way, and news media often turn to using 'specialized' sources to establish a higher 'truth'. While activists can be seen as specialized sources, more often than not this falls to, in this area, psychologists and researchers.

People in CNMs	77.0
Celebrities	53.2
Scientists from other Social and Human Sciences	6.7
Fictional characters	8.1
CNM activists	2.3
Psychologist	22.4
Policymakers stakeholders	6.7
Non-CNM activists	4.1
Scientists in Natural Sciences	0.9
NGOs not linked to CNMs	1.5
Companies	8.1
Religious movements	3.5
Other Exact Science Scientists	0.9

Table 2 - Types of social actors present, as a percentage of the total number of pieces (N = 334). Project data.

- **The vast majority of media pieces include people in CNM relationships in some form.** However, coding is done from the way these people are presented by journalists, and not necessarily by self-definition or from a legitimacy check on whether or not any practice constitutes CNM from a more sociological point of view. This means that in practice much of the news coverage about CNMs is done in the absence of the voices and stories of people behind the experiences presented. Many of these pieces generically refer to people in CNM relationships (or who are assumed to be) without actually addressing them specifically or in more detail.
- **Celebrities** show up in a considerable number of pieces collected – **over 53%** speak of one or more people with a high degree of public visibility, such as philosophers, cinema and theater professionals, and others. Just like in Portugal, but more so, many references tend to focus on gossip around famous peoples' lives. This means that the representation of CNM people noted above still mostly translates into a form of distant gazing into, and potential fetishizing of, CNM lives.
- Scientists and academics in the field of social sciences and humanities are also present in various news, with **psychology** being frequently represented (**over 22% of the pieces**). It should be noted that the UK's data set has a great deal of opinion pieces that constitute

sexual/psychological advice columns, which results in a large percentage of all pieces featuring centrally a psychologist or sexologist.

- **Fictional characters are mentioned in about 8% of the pieces.** Like in Portugal, this includes references to books or plays that address relationship and intimacy issues, but also allusions to historically relevant works (e.g.: *A Stranger in a Strange Land*, by Robert Heinlein, a book famous within some polyamorous communities).

- **Activism (as a political form of action) - only about 2% of the pieces** include people identified as activists, and less than 7% referenced politicians or public stakeholders. From these results, it is possible to see that the political side of CNMs is largely removed from the processes of news coverage in the UK, and that topical activism is particularly absent from it.

3 - Which aspects?

In addition to identifying who speaks or what type of CNMs are mentioned, it is also important to understand what aspects are referred to, in order to identify the main axes of media attention.

These allow us to further explore what is prioritized by media planning in the UK.

Relational dynamics	92.4
Lack of visibility of relational diversity	7.0
Informal or interpersonal discrimination	7.3
Multipartnered marriage	2.6
Formal discrimination	1.7
Criminal Law	9.9
Misrepresentations of CNMs	2.3
Polyparenting	2.3
Internalized polyphobia	2.3
Inheritance or shared ownership of property	1.7
Education	0.0

Table 3 - Aspects of the mentioned CNMs, as a percentage of the total pieces (N = 334). Project data.

- Each of the **legal issues** (e.g., marriage or inheritance and property) is **mentioned in about 2%** of the sources or less; the most common reference (9%) has to do not with legal issues surrounding CNMs, but with crimes committed by people who are allegedly in CNM relationships (even when that had no bearing at all on the specific context of the crime reported).

- **Informal discrimination (7.3%)** or references to problems linked to lack of visibility for relationship diversity (7%), that link to broader social and structural issues, are seldomly featured.
- **An overwhelming majority of news pieces focuses on relational dynamics (92.4%)**. This means that the way relationships work ends up capturing a good part of the media attention, transforming news into an exploration of relational strategies or problems, rather than focusing on all the social ramifications that result from it.

4 - *What frameworks?*

Searching for media frameworks means looking for the way in which certain facts or ideas are put in articulation with each other; how they are ordered and presented, how they are made coherent. This can be seen on Table 4, below.

Sexual Expression	82.8
Alternative to Monogamy	29.7
Normalization	13.1
Tendencies of a New Generation	10.5
Social/Cultural Corruption	4.7
D/Evolution of Gender	10.8
Future of Relationships	4.4
Fetishization	4.9
Reflection of Neoliberalism	7.6
Pathologization	18.3
Sexual Perversion	9.6
Religion and Spirituality	4.1
Free Love Revivalism	2.3
'External' influences	2.0

Table 4 - Frameworks used for CNMs, as a percentage of the total pieces (N = 334). Project data.

- Placing **CNMs as a form of sexual expression or intimacy** is by far the most frequent framework, used in **over 82%** of the articles. This points, as it did in the analysis of Portuguese media, to a process of sexualization and individualization of the phenomenon, although it is relevant to mention that, for better or worse, some references also link CNMs to changes related to gender dynamics (about 11%), impacts of neoliberalism (7.6%), which allow for a more structural-focused reading.
- Representations of **CNMs as normal (13.1%)** or **as an alternative to monogamy (29.7%)** are somewhat common, pointing to an integrative perspective on these realities, but also eventually stoking a conflict or dichotomy between monogamy and consensual non-monogamies.
- In other pieces, **pathologizing (over 18%)**, **fetishization (9%)**, or **sexual perversion (7%)** are some of the master frameworks used that

contribute to increasing the stigmatization of people in CNMs. This shows how the media contribute to the promotion of mononormativity - that is, monogamy as the only socially valid discourse on loving relationships.

5 - *With what tone?*

The tone of the journalistic pieces is another important element to understand how a topic comes to public attention. Although the idea of journalistic objectivity is an underlying assumption of how newsrooms work, opinion pieces are not subject to this criterion, and even journalism itself should not be exempt when it comes to safeguarding issues related to Human Rights.

Positive	16.6
Neutral	19.5
Negative	38.1
Mixed	17.2
Satire	11.3

Table 5 - Tone used in pieces on CNMs, as a percentage of the total pieces (N = 334). Project data.

The **majority of the pieces are negative (38.1%) or neutral (19.5%)**. Even so, a bit under 17% are positive, with 11% also containing elements of satire in relation to the topic at hand. These results show that journalistic representations of CNMs are even more skewed than those in Portugal, but that the tendency is inverted, with a much heavier focus on negative, critical or demeaning positionings. Even so, there are observable differences between, on the one hand, short news, news pieces and opinion articles (all of them predominantly negative), and feature writing, which is more positive. The only type of coverage that had a majority of neutral pieces was Reviews.

6 - *In what geographical areas?*

United Kingdom	82.0
USA	20.3
Brazil	0.3
France	2.3

Table 6 - Countries most frequently referred to in pieces on CNMs, as a percentage of the total pieces (N = 334). Project data.

Overall, **82% of the pieces focus partially or exclusively on national events or people**, about 20% also contain references to the USA. This shows the relevance and strength of Anglophonic contexts as a sort of insular system of cultural communication and transmission that is mostly opaque to outsider influences; the linguistic and historical proximity to the USA and the global position of the Anglosphere within journalism and media are still quite evident in these results.

Discussion

Over the past decade, CNMs seem to be increasingly represented in UK media outlets. As the analysis of the media coverage of the years 2010-2014 included in this report demonstrates, a good deal of this representation is negative in how it is framed or presented.

Besides this, and on par with the data from Portugal, **a great deal of media representation around CNMs focuses on everyday relationship management**, especially around celebrities. Activist presence is somewhat lost and diluted within this deluge of materials on various types of open relationships. The emphasis on celebrities also partially explains the dominance of Anglo-American-centric coverage.

Likewise, reporting on CNMs still seems to be mostly depoliticized. Issues around legislation or discrimination are seldomly mentioned, and voices of or reports on political actors are also rare within news media.

Covering certain celebrities' relationships and actions is a main driver of coverage but also, and unlike in Portugal, opinion pieces and sex advice columns also constitute a good portion of the total pieces (in fact, with 31.4% it is the largest portion).

The tone of the media coverage is far from uniform, and it is closely related to the type of piece under consideration – thus, the overabundance of opinion pieces fundamentally skews the results, as these are the most negative overall.

Even though it is one of the most recent terms on the list of CNM types, polyamory has established itself as the most talked about *specific* form of CNM. However, it is worth mentioning that UK-based newspapers mostly deal with the topic of “open relationships” without necessarily ascribing it to a specific identity-connotated term like swinging or polyamory – it operates as an umbrella-term that captures many potential forms of living in CNM. The role of this specific term, and its usage, shall be a focus of future research.

Overall, the UK data shows how **there is an individualizing, and therefore potentially depoliticizing, focus in the media narratives around CNMs, with a strong negative slant in how it is presented, mostly through a psychology-based narrative and discourse**. The presence of activists or political figures is residual at best, and the bulk of CNM's media presence is *about those who practice it* and not *with them*.

It is also possible to observe a **discrepancy between (negatively-slanted) shorter-form journalism and (more neutral or positive) long-form journalism**, thus emphasizing the importance of slow journalism and more resources allocated to it when it comes to defending democracy.

In light of the project's overall objectives, it is important to note that, although polyamory seems to have entered mainstream vocabulary, the **UK's media agenda is mostly unresponsive to activists and their work**, whereas psychologists dominate the discursive space.

More detailed analysis will be done later in the project, and these results should be read alongside those already available on the project's website: <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/rcass/our-expertise/cnm-moves/>

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