"Cheating, No Matter How You Try to Dress It up". Newspaper Coverage of Polyamory, 1994–2023

Alon Lischinsky (alon@lischinsky.net) 🅾

Abstract: Polyamorous relationships face considerable disadvantages in contemporary Western societies, from lack of legal recognition to pervasive prejudice and stigma. While many scholars have pointed out the role of mainstream media in reproducing this prejudice, we still lack a general overview of the nature and evolution of newspaper coverage of polyamory. In this article, I use corpus linguistic techniques to identify and categorise the characteristic vocabulary of a corpus of articles representing English-language coverage of polyamory in global mainstream newspapers from 1994 to 2023. The analysis shows that coverage tends to concentrate on issues of sexuality; on experiences of jealousy; and on negative ethical judgements. Terminology reflecting the views and principles of the polyamorous community is rare in comparison. The article is accompanied by the dataset and code to facilitate verification, replication and extension of this research.

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Introduction

Western society is dominated by the assumption that intimate relationships should take the form of a stable monogamous couple (Barker/Langdridge 2010, 750). Nonmonogamous relationships are either ignored (Hutzler et al. 2016, 80) or dismissed as primitive (Klesse 2018b, 221), immoral (Ritchie/Barker 2006, 589; Schippers 2016, 13), or pathological (Conley et al. 2017, 207; 2013, 23; Ferrer 2018, 822). The last two decades, however, have seen a growing body of research questioning the normative assumption that "the monogamous (and heterosexual) couple [is] natural, optimal, and morally loftier" than other relationships (Ferrer 2018, 819).

Scholars have explored how mononormativity (also "compulsory", "hetero-normative", or "socially imposed monogamy"; "monocentrism"; or "monoga-mism") is enforced through legal, religious, economic, and social institutional mechanisms that only recognise monogamous couples (Schippers 2016, 13); how the resulting expectations and duties disadvantage those who are not male, cis, straight, white, and affluent (Klesse 2018b, 222; Tiidenberg 2014, 4); how disapproval and stigma deprive nonmonogamous relationships from social recognition and support (Hutzler et al. 2016, 70; Johnson et al. 2015, 326; Moors 2017, 678; Séguin 2019, 671–672); and how these social pressures typically become internalised as a disposition to value romantic relationships over other kinds, to expect and demand exclusivity in such relationships, and to feel shame about experiencing nonmonogamous desire (Ferrer 2018, 821; Keshav/Zimman 2025, 3; Moors et al. 2021).

Language, narratives, and representations play an important role in reproducing mononormativity (Barker 2005; Motschenbacher 2022; Séguin 2019). Aris Keshav and Lal Zimman (2025, 14) show how the relationship escalator – the narrative of how a monogamous relationship must develop from dating to exclusive life-long commitment – is so culturally ingrained that it's automatically invoked as soon as the words "I love you" are uttered. Scholars have occasionally noted increased mention of nonmonogamy (Moors 2017; Ritchie 2010), but so far, only exploratory analyses exist. We lack the kind of large-scale examination

that would make it possible to characterise global trends in news coverage of polyamorous relationships and so contribute to our measures of public opinion on the topic.

In this paper, I describe the collection of a nine-million-word corpus of news articles to provide a comprehensive image of representations of polyamory, from 1994 to 2023, and characterise their distribution and subject matter.

Modernity and mononormativity

Monogamy has a long tradition in Europe and its colonies as part of Christian cultural heritage. However, it was not until the nineteenth century that the budding behavioural and social sciences began to promote it as a universal maxim for human behaviour (Willey 2016, 26). For the discipline of sexology and the broader modernist project, monogamous relationships represented the only properly civilised way to manage the atavistic sexual impulses of human beings (Willey 2016, 32).

This model of a nuclear family centred on the monogamous couple linked by romantic love thus became a central part of modernity; although it was never universally accepted, explicit challenges were voiced only at the fringes of acceptable society. Christian Klesse (2018b) chronicles how 20th-century feminist movements critiqued monogamous marriage as a tool of sexual oppression and a barrier to women's autonomy. Economically speaking, monogamy disenfranchises women in favour of their husbands; psychologically, it encourages dependence by isolating women from one another and devaluing and deprioritising their friendships. Many strands of feminist thought have argued that romantic love in general and the monogamous couple in particular represent an obstacle to women's autonomy and fulfilment.

Racial and sexual minorities also saw the nuclear family norm as part of a "suffocating trap" (Lester 2020, 371) of unattainable social and emotional demands posed   by hegemonic Western culture (Keshav/Zimman 2025, 4; Park 2017, 313). The Black Panther Party, for example, encouraged its members to live in "fighting families" organised around a shared commitment to both dismantling racial capitalism and building communal sexual and emotional intimacy. Though initially vitiated by a gendered division of labour, the increased role of women in the party's leadership from the late 1960s moved this programme closer to a genuine alternative to bourgeois norms. Such experiments inspired queer liberation movements to campaign for egalitarian relationship models free from "exclusiveness [and] propertied attitudes toward each other" (Wittman 1992, quoted in Lester 2020, 381).

By the 1970s, these critiques had been partly absorbed into the broader culture of sexual liberation, and nonmonogamous arrangements became more common – alongside unmarried cohabitation, single parenthood, or dual-earning families – among those exploring alternatives to the traditional nuclear family model (Rubin 2001, 716). The more radical among these focused specifically on communal living, expanding their conception of the household to cover diverse meaningful personal relationships that could include sexual or romantic elements. Others embraced open marriage, preserving the basic framework of the couple while allowing intimacy outside it. Swinger culture consolidated around the practice of recreational extradyadic sex rather than on developing ongoing emotional connections. However, nonmonogamy lost prominence during the 1980s both as a result of the AIDS crisis and of the conservative political turn of the times (Hurson 2016, 14).

The polyamory movement

This was the context for the emergence of the polyamorous movement, originally developing out of multi-partner relationships kept within a closed circle, thus reducing the risk of infection during the early years of the AIDS pandemic. Starting in the 1980s, the movement brought together a number of lifestyle practitioners and activists – including Ryam Nearing and Deborah Anapol as well as experienced sexual-liberation campaigners, such as Robert Rimmer and Bob Francoeur – with the goal of organising public outreach about nonmonogamous intimacy (Hurson 2016, 17; Noël 2006, 618).

Poly activists explicitly distanced themselves from swingers – and other forms of recreational sex – by emphasising love and long-term emotional intimacy rather than sexuality (Klesse 2006, 574; Lester 2020, 722; Thompson 2022, 20); they also distanced themselves from traditional and religious forms of plural marriage, which they portrayed as patriarchal and fundamentalist in opposition to polyamorists' liberal, Western values (Park 2017).

Campaigning organisations produced newsletters, pamphlets, and magazines, ran conferences, and strategically employed radio and TV appearances to raise the movement's visibility. By the early 1990s, polyamory-related content was also available online, including a dedicated newsgroup, alt.polyamory (Hurson 2016, 164). This was instrumental in disseminating the movement beyond its original US-American milieu. Melita Noël (2006, 608) traces to this period the publication of the first "self-help or instructional [books] specifically written to support readers exploring polyamory".

Polyamorous stigma

The movement was successful in consolidating an international community of polyamorists, but broader social attitudes towards nonmonogamy have been slower to shift. Nonmonogamous relationships remain not only unfamiliar but alien to most people, and those who engage in them are generally perceived as psychologically and ethically damaged (Conley et al. 2017). Only recently has research on public attitudes towards polyamory begun to be systematically undertaken (Sizemore/Olmstead 2017), but this literature shows a clear and consistent pattern of pervasive stigma.

Nonmonogamous relationships remain outside the "charmed circle" of normative sexuality (Rubin 1984); they are believed to be less personally meaningful, reliable, and mature than monogamous ones, and the people who practise them are seen as less honest, committed, emotionally secure, and generally less likely to be happy. In fact, the cultural bias towards monogamy is such that polyamorists are negatively evaluated even on traits entirely unrelated to personal relationships, such as care for the environment or professional success (Conley et al. 2017, 2013; Keshav/Zimman 2025, 17; Moors et al. 2021).

Stigma is also commonplace in academic and therapeutic evaluations of polyamory. Scholarly frameworks for understanding intimate relationships and interpersonal attachment implicitly but invariably assume they should be focused on the monogamous dyadic couple (Conley et al. 2013, 23). Much of the clinical literature lacks the conceptual tools to understand the difference between non-consensual cheating and open relationships and therefore cannot develop suitable means for supporting people in polyamorous arrangements (Ritchie/Barker 2006, 589).

This stigma is indifferent to the distinctions between polyamory and other forms of nonmonogamy, such as swinging or infidelity (Burris 2014): all intimacy with more than one partner can be subject to equal censure (Séguin 2019, 672). Also, while personal acquaintance with polyamorous people (or even familiarity with the term) can reduce the magnitude of this prejudice, internalised stigma affects even polyamorists' self-perception (Hutzler et al. 2016). In fact, much of this prejudice is built into the design of social and technical infrastructure, for example in digital systems that only offer space for a single partner (Thompson 2022, 16).

Nonmonogamy and the media

Much of the research on polyamorous stigma stresses the role of the media in reproducing and reinforcing mononormative beliefs (Antalffy 2011; Barker 2005; Klesse 2016; Séguin 2019). For example, cultural representations of romance often involve finding one's "soulmate/one and only" (Hefner et al. 2017, 518; cf. Moore/ Ophir 2022). Established narrative tropes about interpersonal relationships – such as the love triangle – present experiences of desire for more than one person as threatening temptations that must disappear for the characters to reach a satisfying closure (Saxey 2010, 28).

The crucial importance of representation has also been apparent to nonmonogamy activists and movements, who have strategically developed and embraced a variety of media (Hurson 2016). Underlying these efforts to increase public recognition is the notion that change in social mores can come from the repeated visible performance of alternative sexualities (Motschenbacher 2022). For over a decade, scholars have anecdotally noted that nonmonogamous relationships have become more prominent in entertainment and news media (Adams/ Rambukkana 2018; Barker/Langdridge 2010, 749; Hurson 2016, 14; Moors 2017, 677), and more recent work explores how space has been made for them in digital platforms (Thompson, 2022, 23). Nonetheless, empirical examinations of such visibility are scarce and fragmentary.

In a foundational study, Nikó Antalffy (2011) offered a typology distinguishing three types of news about polyamory: titillating coverage that treats polyamory as simply another form of infidelity, a common tabloid topic; conservative coverage that views polyamory as a threat to public morality and the social order; and positive coverage, typically featuring the voices of polyamory activists and community members. Positive coverage often focuses on distinguishing polyamory from other forms of nonmonogamy, as well as from infidelity (Ritchie 2010); conversely, conservative coverage presents it as a slippery slope towards those (Klesse 2018a).

From a different perspective, there is some evidence suggesting that media attention is often prompted by specific newsworthy events, such as high-profile legal cases (Barnett 2014), or comes as a result of commentary on other media products, such as interviews or reality shows (Moors 2017, 681). However, no study so far has provided an overarching description of news coverage of polyamory that could serve as a basis for assessing these claims.

Methodology

This paper seeks to address this gap by providing a systematic description of the amount, distribution, and subject matter of polyamory coverage in English-language print news. I take my methodology from corpus linguistics, where keyword analysis is often used to explore not only the "aboutness" but also the style and emotional tone of texts (Archer/Culpeper/Rayson 2009, 137; Motschenbacher 2022).

Using the Factiva database (Dow Jones & Company 2024), I retrieved all documents from newspaper sources containing the word "polyamory" or related terms. This yielded a total of 9,228 news articles published between 21 June 1994 and 31 December 2023. The articles were downloaded from the database and converted into structured text files for analysis using the Python Beautiful-Soup library (Richardson 2023).

Besides the full text and headline, the files contain metadata including date, country, publication, medium, and byline, which were used to examine the distribution of articles. Finer subdivisions, such as section, were recorded but ignored for further analysis because of the lack of a standardised taxonomy across publications.

In order to summarise the topics covered in the data, I generated word lists with their associated frequency for each article. To identify an article's distinctive vocabulary, I retrieved all keywords that were at least an order of magnitude more common than in news writing in general (as represented by the SIBOL corpus; Partington et al. 2022) and frequent enough to provide very strong support for their selection ($\log_2(DSC) > 3.322$, $G^2 > 22.22$). This yielded a total of 1,791 terms.

I classified these keywords into broad topics by annotating their semantic features using the Python version of the UCREL Semantic Analysis System (Moore/Rayson 2022). Due to the poor recall provided by the preset dictionary (0.32, with 1,216 terms remaining untagged), I manually supplemented its codes using existing entries as a basis (a procedure similar to that followed by Archer/Culpeper/Rayson 2009, 140). I excluded proper names and grammatical and discourse markers to produce a final list of 918 terms with 1,608 semantic tags.

Details of the search query, the organisation of the resulting corpus data, and the analysis procedures are provided in the Supplementary File in fully reproducible form.
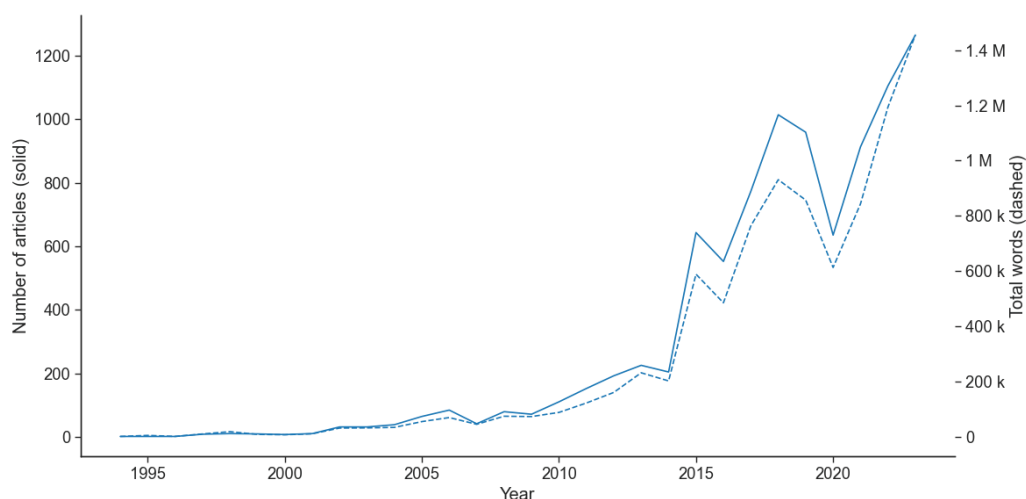
Analysis

Chronological development

Polyamory first entered mainstream news in the mid-1990s, mentioned in passing in a review of an early internet guidebook:

> "Opening [Internet Yellow Pages, by Harley Hahn and Rick Stout] three times at random, I found the Internet addresses for groups on cryonics (freezing the dead in the hope of eventual cures) and lock-picking, practical Christian life and *polyamory, the practice of having many lovers*."
> (Shannon, L. R. (1994): Peripherals. Guideposts For Hikers On Internet Pathways. In: The New York Times. 21.06.1994; emphasis added)

After similar occasional mentions in 1995 and 1996, coverage began to grow steadily in 1997. By the end of the decade, the number of mentions had reached double digits, and during the 2000s it increased tenfold again. Though slowing since, at the end of the coverage period over 1,200 articles mentioning polyamory were being published in English-language newspapers each year. Bursts of coverage can be seen in 1997 (when eight times more articles were published than in 1996), 2002 (×3.1 over the previous year), 2005 (×1.68), 2008 (×1.93) and 2015 (×3.15) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: News articles about polyamory increased by three orders of magnitude between 1994 and 2023. Data from all English-language newspapers available through the Factiva database.

These surges are often triggered by the release of other media about polyamory, such as books, films, or TV series. In 1997, for example, US and Canadian media commented on the publication of "Three in love" (Foster/Foster/Hadady 1997), a

historical exploration of fictional and historical intimate triads. Part of the coverage addressed the contents of the volume, but most of it focused on the private lives of the triad of authors. Many include commentary from conservative authors criticising the practice of polyamory, rather than the book itself:

> "Mary Jo Huth, professor emerita of sociology at the University of Dayton, has taught courses on marriage and the family, called [polyamory] 'a danger' that may contribute to promiscuity, undermine values, and jeopardize the emotional well-being of children." (Macklin, William R. (1997). Beyond monogamy. Menage a trois seen as workable and loving family unit. In: The Hamilton Spectator. 10.07.1997)

Similar bursts met the release of the documentary "When Two Won't Do" (Finch/Marovitch 2002), where the directors not only explore a variety of nonmonogamous communities but also their own experience of opening their relationship, and the 2008 broadcasting of a UK series on sexual minorities presented by Dawn Porter (Free Love 2008). In 2015, the presence of a poly contestant in the UK edition of "Big Brother" brought the topic assiduously to the news, but so did a variety of other media, including a BBC documentary about the lives of the Bloomsbury Set (Life in squares 2015) and a history of Wonder Woman that dwelt on the polyamorous lives of the authors (Lepore 2014).

Conferences, fairs, and similar events also attract large amounts of coverage. A humorous story about a swingers' convention in Miami Beach was reprinted by multiple newspapers in the US and Canada in 2002, and the presentation of an early version of Meg-John Barker's (2005) "Constructing a Polyamorous Identity in a Monogamous World" at the conference of the British Psychological Society drew international attention ranging from fascinated to openly insulting. The conference series Poly Living, running yearly since 2005, has also been the subject of repeated reporting.

Occasionally, peaks arise from more or less prolonged debates with audiences. A sympathetic article about the local poly community published in March 2008 in "The Press/Te Matatika" (Christchurch, NZ) led to several weeks of both hostile and supportive responses. The advice column "Ask Amy" by Amy Dickinson addressed several reader queries about polyamory in 2015; through its wide syndication in the Canadian press, it brought the topic for the first time to many publications.

Distribution

Press coverage of polyamory in English is recorded in 50 countries across all continents, although the vast majority of articles in the corpus come from the Global North (Table 1).

Table 1: Sources from the Global North dominate reporting about polyamory. Data from all English-language newspapers available through the Factiva database. Not listed in the table are, with two instances, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Guernsey, Malaysia, Namibia, Nepal, Rwanda, Uganda and, with one instance, Austria, Bangladesh, Cambodia, the Cayman Islands, Eswatini, France, Greece, Iran, Jamaica, Japan, Norway, Pakistan, Romania, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Taiwan, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, United Arab Emirates, and Zimbabwe.

Country	Total articles	% of total
United Kingdom	4780	51.8
United States	1432	15.52
Canada	1204	13.05
Australia	729	7.9
Ireland	278	3.01
India	263	2.85
South Africa	154	1.67
New Zealand	124	1.34
Israel	40	0.43
Nigeria	36	0.39
Hong Kong	29	0.31
Germany	25	0.27
Singapore	21	0.23
Spain	21	0.23
Philipines	17	0.18
China	13	0.14
Kenya	7	0.08
Poland	4	0.04
Russia	4	0.04
South Korea	4	0.04
Thailand	4	0.04
Indonesia	3	0.03

The US, where the term was first attested, accounts for over 15% of the total volume of articles. It remained the main source of such news until the mid 2000s, when Canada (13% of the total), Australia (8%), and the United Kingdom reached roughly comparable levels. Coverage in the UK has boomed since 2013, providing over 50% of the data in the corpus (Figure 2). Other important contributors are Ireland (3%) and India (2.9%).

Figure 2: Over the course of the 2010s, the UK overtook the US as the main source of news about polyamory. Data representing the top eight countries listed in Table 2
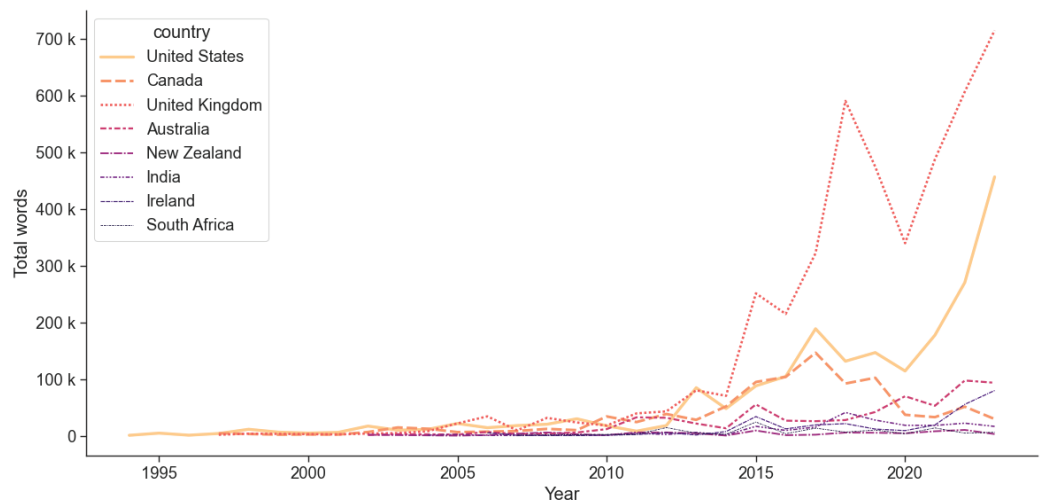
Source: the author, 2025. Available under the terms of the CC-BY 4.0 Licence.

Articles about polyamory can be found in 576 different publications over the period covered in this study. Nonetheless, a sizable proportion can be traced to a small number of newspapers (Table 2): almost a quarter of the data come from the top five ("MailOnline", "Daily Star" online, "The Sun", "The Guardian", and "The Daily Mirror" online; all of them UK sources), and almost half is accounted for by the top 20.

Table 2: Over a fifth of all news about polyamory are concentrated in just four UK tabloids.

Publication	Country	Medium	# articles	Total words	Median word count
Mail Online	United Kingdom	Online	779	736,596	769.0
Daily Star Online (UK)	United Kingdom	Online	467	271,950	539.0
The Sun Online (UK)	United Kingdom	Online	328	263,947	694.5
The Guardian (UK)	United Kingdom	Print	323	413,382	1 037.0
The Daily Mirror Online	United Kingdom	Online	243	179,626	591.0
The Sun (UK)	United Kingdom	Print	243	180 684	498.0
The Scottish Sun Online	United Kingdom	Online	240	201 930	747.5
The New York Times Online	United States	Online	238	438 284	1 249.5
The New York Times	United States	Print	209	326 099	1 164.0

Publication	Country	Medium	# articles	Total words	Median word count
The Times (UK)	United Kingdom	Print	196	209 155	685.5
Independent Online	United Kingdom	Online	176	176 323	855.0
The Sunday Times (UK)	United Kingdom	Print	156	184 960	1 029.0
The Washington Post Online	United States	Online	133	156 282	929.0
The Telegraph Online (UK)	United Kingdom	Online	130	162 661	1 076.5
The Toronto Star	Canada	Print	116	117 333	851.5
Daily Express Online	United Kingdom	Online	110	79 618	620.0
The Boston Globe	United States	Print	107	94 383	801.0
The Times Online (UK)	United Kingdom	Online	100	125 201	890.0
USA Today Online	United States	Online	100	293 743	1 182.0
i	United Kingdom	Print	98	64 316	542.5
The Globe and Mail	Canada	Print	84	93 572	918.0
The Sunday Times Online (UK)	United Kingdom	Online	83	111 718	1 156.0
Irish Mirror Online	Ireland	Online	80	54 288	543.5
The Washington Post	United States	Print	80	130 303	931.5
Evening Standard Online	United Kingdom	Online	76	90 098	1 023.0
The Independent	United Kingdom	Online	69	87 816	1 202.0
The Australian	Australia	Print	68	52 587	685.0
The Daily Telegraph	United Kingdom	Print	67	64 500	849.0
The Observer	United Kingdom	Print	66	77 248	1 009.5
Financial Times	United Kingdom	Print	65	56 804	844.0
The Hamilton Spectator	Canada	Print	65	56 233	795.0
The Daily Mirror	United Kingdom	Print	59	27 118	381.0
The Globe and Mail Breaking News	Canada	Online	56	68 968	979.5
Waterloo Region Record	Canada	Print	54	41 686	767.0
The Toronto Sun	Canada	Print	53	22 595	416.0

Publication	Country	Medium	# articles	Total words	Median word count
The Sydney Morning Herald	Australia	Print	52	41 228	659.0
New York Post	United States	Print	48	38 268	724.5
Daily Telegraph	Australia	Print	47	32 087	478.0
Evening Standard	United Kingdom	Print	47	34 598	527.0
The Advertiser	Australia	Print	46	48 081	757.5

Across most countries, coverage is concentrated in "quality" publications. This includes many newspapers of record such as the "NYT", the "Washington Post" and the "Boston Globe" in the US, the "Toronto Star" and the "Globe and Mail" in Canada, and "The Australian". A significant exception is the UK, where many of the largest contributions come from tabloid papers, including the "Daily Express" as well as the "Mail", "Star", "Sun" and "Mirror".

Since 2019, more news about polyamory have been published online than in print. The phenomenon is primarily driven by the prolific tabloids mentioned above, which primarily cover the topic in their online versions: the most extreme examples are the "Daily Mail" (with 779 articles online vs 39 in print), the "Daily Star" (467 vs 27) and the "Daily Mirror" (243 vs 59).

Topics: Relationships

The main topic addressed by news about polyamory is, predictably, that of close personal relationships. These discussions focus especially on sexual orientation and activity. Other important topics characterising this corpus include psychological experiences of reflection, emotion, and desire as well as ethical judgements focused on promiscuity and faithfulness (Table 3).

The majority of the terminology that distinguishes this corpus describes intimate personal relationships (276 keywords, corresponding to category S3.2 in the USAS taxonomy). This includes the terms used to seed the corpus as well as approximately 60 closely-related ones: more general concepts of which "polyamory" is a subset (for example, "relationship"); other relationship types with which it is contrasted ("monoamorous", "coupledom"), and specific formats of polyamorous arrangement ("triad"). Several keywords denote types of nonmonogamous relationships that have similarities but also crucial differences with polyamory; these include "swinging" and "wife-swapping".

Vocabulary in this group also addresses intimate feelings, behaviours, and roles. Among these, terms specifically referring to romantic affection ("attachment", "platonic", "romance") are vastly outnumbered by references to sexuality.

This includes dozens of different terms for sexual orientation and desire ("gay", "bisexual", "queer"), a similarly extensive list of sexual practices ("threesome", "orgy", "masturbation"), and references to sexual arousal ("sexy", "erotic", "steamy"). Other terms describe sex toys and media ("porn", "vibrator", "sex-tech"), sex work ("brothel", "stripper"), and other related professions ("sexologist", "sexpert").

A closely related group of keywords describes kinship relationships (USAS category S4, 98 terms found across 8,056 articles). Over a third of the articles in the corpus address the topic of monogamous "marriage" through a variety of terms for this institution and the roles it defines: "marital", "spouse", "fiancé". Even terms for nonmonogamous arrangements that are significantly different from polyamory ("polygamy", "bigamy", "polyandry") are more common and numerous than the few items that are polyamory-specific ("polycule", "metamour"). Mentions of the latter often emphasise how unfamiliar and strange these terms are to a general audience:

> 'She and her fellow polys, it transpires, have created their own language. Polyspeak, one might say. […] Feeling 'frubbly' is, apparently, the opposite of feeling jealous, and is used to describe feelings of friendship towards a lover and their other partners, who are called 'metamours'." (Johnston, Jenny. (2005): Polyamory. In: The Daily Mail. 07.04.2005)

Table 3: The vocabulary that characterises news about polyamory focuses on issues of sexuality, deviance and deception. Top keywords were measured against the SiBol corpus ($\log_2$(DSC) > 3.322, G^2 > 22.22) and classified using the UCREL taxonomy. The 20 most frequent semantic categories are represented in the table.

USAS code	USAS category	# keywords	Keyword	Frequency	Range	$\log_2$(DSC)	Log likelihood	Semantic tags
S3	Relationship	281	Relationship	22 660	5 686	4.525	77 693.922	[A2.2, S3.1, S3.2, S4]
			Sex	22 215	4 352	4.468	75 164.284	[S2, S3.2]
			relationships	11 438	4 073	5.394	46 285.301	[A2.2, S3.1, S3.2, S4]
			polyamorous	11 015	6 388	12.233	61 023.341	[N5+, S3.2]
			sexual	9 768	3 526	3.331	23 346.089	[S3.2]
			polyamory	8 520	4 212	12.821	47 305.481	[N5+, S3.2]

USAS code	USAS category	# keywords	Keyword	Frequency	Range	log₂(DSC)	Log likelihood	Semantic tags
S2	People	159	sex	22 215	4 352	4.468	75 164.284	[S2, S3.2]
			partners	5 448	2 498	3.679	14 758.431	[S2mf, S3.1, S3.2, S4mf]
			gay	5 229	1 436	4.144	16 294.040	[S2.2m, S3.2]
			couples	4 757	1 943	4.943	17 798.503	[S2mf, S3.2]
			girlfriend	2 664	1 460	4.022	8 023.311	[S2.1f, S3.1, S3.2]
			boyfriend	2 646	1 500	4.208	8 385.390	[S2.2m, S3.2]
S4	Kin	98	relationship	22 660	3 328	4.525	77 693.922	[A2.2, S3.1, S3.2, S4]
			marriage	11 691	4 073	4.617	40 915.913	[S4]
			relation-ships	11 438	2 947	5.394	46 285.301	[A2.2, S3.1, S3.2, S4]
			married	6 436	2 498	3.346	15 471.168	[A2.2, S4]
			partners	5 448	1 406	3.679	14 758.431	[S2mf, S3.1, S3.2, S4mf]
			monogamy	3 145	1 406	10.509	17 191.564	[S4]
S1	Social actions, states & proces-ses	66	lifestyle	2 657	1 533	4.001	7 952.851	[S1.1.1]
			intimate	1 544	1 179	3.669	4 168.274	[S1.2.1+, S3.2, S5-]
			intimacy	1 242	799	4.615	4 343.371	[S1.2.1+, S3.2]
			swinging	922	524	3.941	2 711.642	[S1.1.2+, S3.2]
			swingers	824	392	7.098	4 013.481	[S1.1.2+, S3.2]
			open-minded	328	268	4.531	1 125.432	[S1.2.1+, S7.4+]
G2	Crime, law and order	63	cheating	1 488	772	5.127	5 758.951	[A5.2-, G2.2-]
			defendant	762	45	3.605	2 012.391	[G2.1, S2mf]
			cheat	513	338	4.034	1 549.920	[A5.2-, G2.2-]
			cheated	427	299	4.157	1 335.002	[A5.2-, G2.2-]
			adultery	297	154	4.940	1 110.396	[G2.2-, S3.2]
			recognize	287	226	3.782	803.875	[G2.1+, S1.1.1, S7.4+, X2.2+, X2.5+]

USAS code	USAS category	# keywords	Keyword	Frequency	Range	$\log_2$(DSC)	Log likelihood	Semantic tags
N5	Quantities	52	polyamo-rous	11 015	6 388	12.233	61 023.341	[N5+, S3.2]
			polyamory	8 520	4 212	12.821	47 305.481	[N5+, S3.2]
			throuple	2139	722	10.190	11 771.935	[N5+, S4c]
			polygamy	1 882	589	10.813	10 321.872	[N5+, S4]
			poly	1 855	745	8.253	9 618.321	[N5+, S3.2]
			threesome	1 066	562	7.349	5 280.145	[N5+, S3.2]
A1	General	48	bondage	470	314	5.941	2 051.735	[A1.7+, S3.2@]
			knot	328	288	3.922	959.084	[A1.1.1]
			practiced	128	103	5.320	511.788	[A1.1.1]
			practicing	119	107	4.088	365.077	[A1.1.1]
			lucks	119	19	6.075	527.801	[A1.4, X9.2+]
			utopian	107	71	3.409	263.406	[A1.6, X7+]
A6	Comparing	43	queer	2 097	645	5.032	7 978.026	[A6.2-, S3.2]
			consensual	825	597	5.252	3 262.139	[A6.1+]
			unconven-tional	669	547	4.933	2 497.850	[A6.2-]
			kinky	612	379	7.126	2 986.842	[A6.2-, O4.4, S3.2]
			kink	446	232	7.378	2 213.142	[A6.2-, O4.4]
			nonbinary	283	120	6.870	1 355.034	[A6.2-, S2]
B1	Anatomy and physiology	43	orgasm	458	249	5.306	1 827.185	[B1]
			intercourse	314	202	4.898	1 164.644	[B1, S1.1.1, S3.2]
			penis	310	185	3.486	785.163	[B1]
			masturba-tion	260	154	5.617	1 087.541	[B1, S3.2]
			orgasms	222	149	6.114	989.119	[B1]
			vagina	159	132	3.499	404.623	[B1]

USAS code	USAS category	# keywords	Keyword	Frequency	Range	$\log_2$(DSC)	Log likelihood	Semantic tags
Q4	The Media	38	romantic	2 998	1 802	4.278	9 675.159	[Q4, S3.2, S5]
			romance	1 936	1 097	3.925	5 667.109	[Q4.4, S3.2]
			porn	1 382	563	4.280	4 462.422	[Q4, S3.2]
			pornogra-phy	484	261	3.691	1 316.193	[Q4, S3.2]
			comics	336	154	3.475	847.600	[Q4.2]
			romanti-cally	287	243	5.100	1 105.274	[E1, Q4, S3.2, S5]
X2	Mental actions and processes	35	feelings	2388	1 437	3.409	5 878.114	[E1, X2.1, X3]
			identifies	535	298	3.927	1 566.740	[A10+, X2.2+, X2.5+]
			realized	439	335	4.867	1 618.354	[X2.5+, X9.2+]
			realize	298	265	4.223	948.191	[X2.5+, X9.2+]
			recognize	287	226	3.782	803.875	[G2.1+, S1.1.1, S7.4+, X2.2+, X2.5+]
			recognized	267	176	4.254	856.392	[G2.1+, S1.1.1, S7.4+, X2.2+, X2.5+]
S7	Power relationships	31	mistress	455	269	3.944	1 339.453	[P1, S2.1f, S3.2, S7.1+]
			taboo	371	320	3.587	973.987	[S7.4-]
			consenting	336	260	5.712	1 424.123	[Q2.2, S7.4+]
			open-minded	328	268	4.531	1 125.432	[S1.2.1+, S7.4+]
			recognize	287	226	3.782	803.875	[G2.1+, S1.1.1, S7.4+, X2.2+, X2.5+]
			recognized	267	176	4.254	856.392	[G2.1+, S1.1.1, S7.4+, X2.2+, X2.5+]

USAS code	USAS category	# keywords	Keyword	Frequency	Range	log₂(DSC)	Log likelihood	Semantic tags
S9	Religion and the supernatural	30	unicorn	262	69	3.818	742.279	[L2, S9]
			mormon	250	153	5.301	996.435	[S2fm, S9]
			unfaithful	191	155	4.798	694.358	[A5.2-, S6-, S9]
			tantric	177	95	7.080	861.047	[S3.2, S9]
			vampires	172	75	4.869	634.295	[S2mf, S9]
			fundamen-talist	158	101	4.538	543.038	[S9]
A2	Affect	29	relationship	22 660	5 686	4.525	77 693.922	[A2.2, S3.1, S3.2, S4]
			relation-ships	11 438	4 073	5.394	46 285.301	[A2.2, S3.1, S3.2, S4]
			married	6 436	2 947	3.346	15 471.168	[A2.2, S4]
			marry	1 154	740	3.682	3 128.632	[A2.2, S4]
			fluidity	217	150	4.420	725.482	[A2.1+, M1, O1.2]
			cis	84	58	3.772	234.547	[A2.1-, S2]
A5	Evaluation	26	cheating	1 488	772	5.127	5 758.951	[A5.2-, G2.2-]
			infidelity	892	492	5.896	3 872.606	[A5.2-, S6-]
			cheat	513	338	4.034	1 549.920	[A5.2-, G2.2-]
			fantasies	507	306	4.156	1 584.515	[A5.2-]
			cheated	427	299	4.157	1 335.002	[A5.2-, G2.2-]
			unfaithful	191	155	4.798	694.358	[A5.2-, S6-, S9]
Q2	Speech acts	23	consenting	336	260	5.712	1 424.123	[Q2.2, S7.4+]
			respondent	127	15	3.774	354.751	[G2.1, Q2.2, S2mf]
			judgemen-tal	111	102	3.663	299.031	[E2-, Q2.2]
			rumors	101	67	4.616	353.236	[Q2.2]
			labeled	77	72	3.617	204.191	[Q1.2, Q2.2]
			gushed	72	72	3.461	180.665	[M1, N5+, Q2.1]

USAS code	USAS category	# keywords	Keyword	Frequency	Range	log₂(DSC)	Log likelihood	Semantic tags
E4	Happiness	22	jealousy	1939	1 078	6.396	8 901.704	[A9, E4.1-, S3.2]
			jealous	1 083	683	5.021	4 111.800	[A9, E4.1-, S3.2]
			playboy	310	161	4.113	957.576	[E4.1+, S2.2m, S3.2]
			humor	153	116	5.063	585.327	[E1, E4.1+]
			compersion	127	103	10.923	697.268	[A9-, E4.1+, S3.2]
			rom-com	92	74	4.576	318.903	[E4.1+, Q4, S3.2, S5]
S5	Groups and affiliations	20	romantic	2 998	1 802	4.278	9 675.159	[Q4, S3.2, S5]
			intimate	1 544	1 179	3.669	4 168.274	[S1.2.1+, S3.2, S5-]
			romanti-cally	287	243	5.100	1 105.274	[E1, Q4, S3.2, S5]
			commune	204	114	4.045	618.310	[S5+c]
			exclusivity	147	131	3.995	439.201	[O4.2+, S5-]
			rom-com	92	74	4.576	318.903	[E4.1+, Q4, S3.2, S5]
E2	Liking	20	lovers	1 645	1 075	4.057	5 003.601	[E2+, S2mf, S3.2]
			lover	1 312	916	3.454	3 283.864	[E2+, S2mf, S3.2]
			fetish	439	259	5.867	1 898.924	[E2+++]
			lust	374	245	4.151	1 167.273	[E2+]
			favorite	269	204	3.962	795.997	[E2+++]
			tlc	148	88	4.954	554.890	[E2+]

Topics: Beliefs and emotions

Thoughts and feelings experienced in connection to polyamory form, in fact, another important topic. The cognitive dimension appears in keywords denoting belief, understanding, and knowledge (USAS category X2, 35 terms across 2,701 articles). Most narrate the process of self-examination and reflection that leads to realisations about one's sexuality: from "fantasis[ing]" to "ruminating", "scrutinizing" one's "feelings", "unlearning" "internalised" norms and "experiment[ing]" in the quest for "self-knowledge".

On the emotional dimension, the vocabulary emphasises experiences of dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Almost nine out of ten occurrences of words in category E4 (22 terms across 2,001 articles) refer to "jealousy", one of the most salient keywords in the corpus. In contrast, the terms coined by the polyamorous community to describe the joy found in a partner's other relationships ("compersion", "frubbly"; cf. Ritchie/Barker 2006, 594) are an order of magnitude less frequent.

> "So open marriages leave themselves 'open' to many resentment, hurt, disappointment, arguments, jealousies and rule violations and eventual break-up." (Free-flowing marriage. In: The Asian Age. 10.05.2019)

Topics: Ethics

Keywords can capture not only subject matter but also distinctive aspects of the tone and stance adopted in discussing polyamory. The evaluative language that characterises polyamory news focuses particularly on issues of ethics and morality (USAS category G2.2, 28 terms across 1,742 articles). Failures to live up to the expectation of fidelity in monogamous relationships are the most frequent topic, expressed in terms such as "adultery", "cheating", and "hoodwinked".

A second group of keywords in this group index a more generally negative view of sexuality, where promiscuity is intrinsically regarded as undesirable. For the most part, these are terms that convey negative appraisal regardless of context, such as "slut", "debauchery", or "lascivious". In some cases, authors explicitly claim that the desire for polyamory must come from "sleazy" straight men's predatory sexual instincts:

> Even more insidious, though, is the rise in polyamory. "Open relationships are nothing new in Silicon Valley, but they're on the rise. In some circles, it is viewed as prudish not to be open to an open relationship." The reason is simple: many of these men are self-styled visionaries [who]

> predict a future in which they are able to have sex with lots of women and not feel bad about it. (Machell, Ben. (2018): Sex, drugs and Silicon Valley. In: The Times Online. 10.02.2018)

Another common pattern avoids making an explicit evaluation but nonetheless conveys a negative judgement by the choice of terms with which polyamory is coordinated. The arguments of Australian conservative senator Cory Bernardi comparing equal marriage to polyamory and bestiality attracted much censure (and endless reporting), but similar analogies are not difficult to find elsewhere:

> "Some of those steps lead into pretty dark corners. In both the American and Australian versions, story lines include polyamory, cannibalism and bestiality." (Rhodes, Joe. (2014): Now Starring as the Jerk You Can Feel For. In: The New York Times. 12.01.2014)

Here again we can find some terms that reflect the views of the polyamorous community, in this case its self-definition as a specifically ethical form of non-monogamy ("enm") or its awareness of "stigma". These are, however, far less common than terminology that reproduces this stigma by conveying negative appraisal.

Topics: Media

The final salient theme we discuss here is represented by the keywords concerning the media industry and its products (USAS category Q4, 38 terms across 3,624 articles), which cover a wide range of genres – from "rom-com" to "cyberpunk" – and formats – from film to comics.

Some of these reprise issues discussed above; for example, the emphasis on sexuality represented by "porn", "erotica", or "smut". Others, however, represent instances where news reporting is concerned with polyamory only because it appears in other media; these discussions show the importance of the "film-makers'" making "doc[umentaries]" and "serials" (and of the "bookstores'" selling how-to guides for practitioners) in driving polyamory into the mainstream news.

> "Writer-director Angela Robinson's drama about the devoted, polyamorous trio whose relationship inspired feminist superhero Wonder Woman, includes several three-way sex scenes." (Barnard, Linda. (2017): Putting twists, not kinks, in superhero's origin. In: Toronto Star. 13.10.2017)

Discussion

Reports of a surge of interest in polyamory are borne out by the data. In terms of news coverage, the rise of polyamory to public prominence has been rapid, sustained, and spectacular. Over the course of 30 years, polyamory has grown from a niche topic – worth the exceptional mention precisely for its exceptional nature – to a mainstream, global phenomenon richly represented in a variety of media. At the time of this writing, news mention polyamory as frequently as they do aromatherapy, fedoras, or mumps.

There is evidence that some of this reporting makes an active effort to provide representation for the views, experiences, and culture of the polyamorous community, as expressed by the language it has crafted to communicate them. The use of terms such as "ethical nonmonogamy", "polycule", or "compersion" in a number of articles shows how the news media can act as a medium for spreading the word about the community, making its understanding of intimacy available to a broader public and providing the means for interested audiences to educate themselves further about the topic (Hurson 2016; Moors 2017). Even beyond this terminology, the salience of words such as "consensual" or "egalitarian" within the corpus shows attempts to convey the nature of polyamory as polyamorists themselves understand it.

Further evidence of the presence of poly voices in news reporting is provided by keywords for personal reflection and growth. These can be taken to reflect the confessional motif studied by Ani Ritchie (2010), in which polyamorists account for their personal journey seeking to distinguish their practices from cheating or casual sex. Testimonies focused on the "unlearning" of cultural norms and of "internalised " feelings call into question the compulsory nature of monogamy rather than assuming its natural character, and can be explicit in their call to "normalise" different relationship models. The works of polyamorous scholars, filmmakers, playwrights, and other artists have played an essential role in catalysing such conversations.

It is important to note, however, that such confessional stories seem relatively rare. For the most part, polyamory news focuses on mononormative concerns and anxieties. The overt hostility towards polyamory identified by prior research (Antalffy 2011; Klesse 2018a) is distinctly recognisable in terminology for ethical evaluation that includes disapproval of sexual activity as "debauched", shaming of those who engage in it as "slapper[s]" or "sluts", and especially in comparisons of polyamory with "bestiality", "incest", and "pedophilia" that attest to the persistence of conservative arguments against sexual liberation.

A subtler but more pervasive way in which news reporting others polyamory is by pruriently overemphasising its sexual dimension. Out of the many aspects of poly intimacy, news articles focus insistently on labelling, describing, and discussing the kind of sex poly people like to have. News coverage that dwells on sexual activities, desires, and responses represents a distortion of the conceptualisations of polyamory articulated by practitioners and activists, which emphasise instead personal growth and the cultivation of loving relationships (Klesse 2011; Lester 2020).

Monogamous anxieties are also prioritised by the focus placed on "jealousy", which is mentioned more often than any other emotion in the corpus, and about as frequently as "feelings" in the abstract. There is no doubt that polyamorists experience jealousy, and that managing those feelings can require significant time, effort, and attention (Barker/Langdridge 2010, 759); nonetheless, evidence suggests these feelings are less of a problem in a polyamorous than a monogamous context (Conley et al. 2017, 217–218). Focusing on them while downplaying experiences of compersion can only offer a distorted and unsatisfying image of polyamorists' emotional life.

The expansive vocabulary for infidelity found in the corpus offers an ambiguous picture and cannot straightforwardly be identified with the kind of titillating coverage that downplays or erases the differences between polyamorous relationships and deception (Antalffy 2011). In many instances, concepts such as "cheating" or "unfaithfulness" are explicitly contrasted with polyamorous experiences; in others, they are connected, for example by dwelling on the past infidelities of people who subsequently discovered polyamory as an ethical alternative. In some cases, opinion writers directly make the argument that all nonmonogamy

> "is cheating, no matter how you try to dress it up as something else.
> Why bother getting married if you're not going to be faithful?" (Lakritz,
> N. (2014): Sex-swap enthusiasts don't need special status. In: Calgary
> Herald. 11.09.2014)

To distinguish these different characterisations and establish their prevalence, in-depth analysis of individual news articles (and of the different voices being conveyed within those) would be necessary.

Although the findings discussed above are consistent with the general stigma against nonmonogamy identified in the literature, it is important to remember that negativity is a fundamental value in all kinds of news-making. If stories about polyamory place undue emphasis on relational problems such as deception, emotional difficulties such as jealousy, or stigmatised sexual practices such as bondage and sadomasochism, it may simply be a reflection of the fact that

news coverage is especially drawn to events that involve controversy, scandal, or conflict about sexuality (Attwood 2006, 80).

This is especially true when it allows the editorial voice to adopt a position of normative superiority towards the (allegedly) disordered or reprehensible lives of others (Gorin/Dubied 2011, 614–615). Evaluating whether the representation of nonmonogamous relationships is unusually negative would require systematic comparison with that of monogamous ones, a task that lies beyond the scope of this paper. It is worth noting that this type of coverage is especially associated with the kind of tabloid journalism that has dominated news about polyamory for the past decade; a systematic comparison between tabloid and broadsheet coverage could help untangle these factors.

Evidence of titillation must be interpreted with similar care. In a context of increased "preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities" and especially with the negotiation of their meaning (Attwood 2006, 77; Ritchie 2010, 46), issues of sexuality have generally become more common across a variety of media, and it is hard to distinguish these global trends from the specific evolution of public debates about polyamory. Regardless of its cause, however, it seems clear that the insistent journalistic attention to poly sexuality contributes to reproducing harmful stereotypes of polyamorous people as hypersexual, uncommitted, and shallow (Conley et al. 2013, 23).

The data also show the importance of another driver of news reporting that may provide a useful counterbalance to these pressures: entertainment, documentary, and even scholarly media. Many press discussions about polyamory are prompted by books, plays, films, or shows on the topic, and these often offer more space for voices articulating lived experience than can be found in other forms of reporting. An important task for future work will be modelling the circulation of ideas about polyamory through different media and the intertextual links between them.

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Data-availability statement

All data (other than the copyright-protected full text of the articles) is available as Lischinsky, Alon (2025): Polyamory in the News Corpus [dataset]. Zenodo. doi: 10.5281/zenodo.14989797

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