

## Shaping and Sustaining Stigma and Shame, and Getting Your Voice Heard: Local Press Coverage of Foodbank Use

Our new research paper, [\*'The do-gooders and scroungers': examining narratives of foodbank use in online local press coverage in the West Midlands, UK\*](#), shows how local online news coverage and 'below the line comments' can be influential in shaping attitudes towards foodbank users. We sought to understand the importance of local, on the ground responses to foodbank use, and local news organisations and 'below the line comments' provided this opportunity.

Foodbanks are a relatively new addition to the UK. However, as demand has grown, so have the number of foodbanks. In the five years up to 2019, [foodbank use increased by 73%](#), whilst [75% of independent foodbanks](#) were founded since 2010. During this period of foodbank growth, there has been a backdrop of government austerity, welfare reforms, and benefit sanctions, as well as rising food and fuel costs. As foodbank usage has risen rapidly in the UK, so has newspaper and media coverage. [News reporting concerning poverty](#) has focused on foodbanks in particular, and is now widespread in both national and local media. How society understands poverty and foodbank use is affected by news article representations and 'below the line comments'.

Following our [Food Action and Research Midlands \(FARM\) network research](#), we decided to choose the West Midlands region for this study. A qualitative study was undertaken which included online news articles and below the line comments from local online news organisations in the West Midlands. The news organisations included in our sample were: the Birmingham Mail; the Birmingham Post; and the Coventry Telegraph. These are the main local news organisations in the West Midlands. Our study aimed to fill a research gap, showing how stigma and shame are shaped and sustained by not only mass media reporting, but also local online coverage of foodbank use.

News articles and below the line comments content focused on two distinct themes: the presentation of shame and stigma of people using foodbanks; and a discourse which differentiated between the notion of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor.

Users of foodbanks are often infrequently quoted in news articles but we were able to show news stories which only contained the stories of foodbank users. Here, the foodbank users quoted described their feelings of desperation, shame, stigma, and embarrassment. Journalists appeared to be sympathetic and compassionate in their reporting, and the quotes provided an opportunity to allow those suffering from poverty the chance to have their voices heard. Quotes from foodbank users drew attention to the stigmatisation they were subjected to for visiting a foodbank. This stigmatisation was problematic as it revealed the poverty a person was facing if they needed to turn to a foodbank.

Foodbank users also felt embarrassed about needing to ask for a food parcel. In visiting a foodbank, a user first had to overcome the shame of not being able to provide food for either themselves or their family. Users also described how they felt they were taking away food from those who were in worse situations, and had a greater need for a food parcel. Overall, the news articles included a range of people who found themselves in poverty for a range of different reasons. The often hidden experiences of those living in food poverty were brought to the attention of the audience, with readers being presented with more realistic representations of poverty.

The narratives of the experiences of foodbank users quoted in the news articles contrasts sharply with the narratives of the commenters. We found narratives in the below the line comments which described foodbank users as scroungers and skivers.

Commenters described how those using foodbanks could afford mobile phones, or were able to purchase food from McDonalds. These comments stereotype foodbank users, framing them as people who are scroungers because of their actions. As foodbank users could afford mobile phones or a McDonalds, there was a sense that those in poverty today were in a better position than those who struggled to live in the 1950s. It was difficult for these commenters to relate their own disadvantages to those currently facing poverty.

Those who had been in work but had struggled could not relate to those needing to use foodbanks. For these commenters, their narratives suggested others should be doing the same, and by not doing so, they were viewed as being idle and shirkers. In these comments, poverty was claimed to occur due to the moral and personal failures by an individual. This inability to cope meant an individual belonged to the 'undeserving poor'. Commenters who were

working and 'just about managing' claimed they felt a sense of pride in managing in difficult circumstances. The 'just about managing' narrative meant these commenters were able to differentiate themselves from the 'undeserving poor'. They did not view themselves as 'scroungers' who needed to use foodbanks. The terms [scrounger, shirker or skiver have been used extensively in the media](#), becoming established in the public consciousness. It now appears commenters are using the same vocabulary.

For whatever reason, the three news organisations included in the study decided to stay away from the discourse concerning migrants. Only one article was located which mentioned migrants or refugees. This contrasted with the below the line comments section. Commenters created a distinction between UK residents and migrants entering the country. Whilst commenters were concerned about people in the UK living in poverty and a need for foodbanks, compassion was not extended to migrants. Instead, narratives focused on migrants 'displacing' UK residents. Once again, the focus was on the 'undeserving poor'. Welfare provision for migrants in the UK is restricted, and the [immigration status of a migrant determines the level of welfare entitlement](#).

Our research illustrates the dominant discourses used by commenters, is used to punish and shame those who are dependent on foodbanks. However, the news articles are more sympathetic and compassionate towards foodbank users. Through the inclusion of journalistic quotes, foodbank users are able to have their voices heard.

If you would like to read the full research paper and are unable to access it, please email Catherine Price ([catherine.price@warwickgrad.net](mailto:catherine.price@warwickgrad.net)) to request a copy.

"The do-gooders and scroungers': examining narratives of foodbank use in online local press coverage in the West Midlands, UK" published in *the Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* has been included in our "Living in a COVID-19 Economy" collection. The collection brings together research on economic crises and their effects on policy, poverty and social justice. In light of the economic instability caused by COVID-19, we feel that this research is now more relevant than ever. The collection, including your article, will be free to read until 31 October.

You can find the full collection here: <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/journals/covid-economy>  
And here is a direct link to your article: <https://doi.org/10.1332/175982720X15905998323834>