

British media needs to change negative portrayals of autism

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The paper, led by a researcher from City St George's, University of London, analyzed sentiments towards autism and autistic people in British newspapers from 2011 to 2020, as evaluated by autistic people.

The authors found that newspapers expressed more positive sentiments when autism was associated with a person rather than discussed in general terms. Furthermore, using identity-first language (e.g., "autistic person") was linked to more positive sentiments compared to person-first language (e.g., "a person with autism").

While broadsheets depicted [autistic people](#) somewhat more positively compared to tabloids, no difference was observed between left-leaning and right-leaning papers.

[Published](#) in the journal *Autism in Adulthood*, the research supports the view that newspapers should take steps to represent autistic people more positively. This is particularly important given the role they play in shaping and shifting attitudes toward autistic people in society.

Media portrayals

Newspapers often portray autistic people negatively and stereotypically, emphasizing their challenges and weaknesses instead of their needs and strengths. Media outlets also frequently use language and terminology that does not respect how autistic people wish to be referred to. This language has a negative impact on the mental well-being of autistic people and hinders their acceptance.

To understand more about the portrayals of autistic people in British newspapers, the researchers asked five autistic people to assess the sentiment towards autism and autistic people in 1,000 quotes from British newspapers between 2011 and 2020.

The autistic experts, who did not know the [newspaper](#) title and time of publication, made their judgments based on two aspects: how warmly newspapers discussed autistic people and how competent they portrayed them to be.

The researchers then examined the overall judgments of warmth and competence. They considered variations in language context and terminology, such as using general and impersonal references to autism, or identity-first and person-first language. They also examined potential differences between broadsheets and tabloids, left- and right-leaning newspapers, and changes over time.

Study findings

The majority of quotes from British newspapers were found to be low in warmth and competence. Furthermore, impersonal references to autism tended to be rated lower in warmth and competence than references linking autism to a person. At the same time, identity-first language was judged higher in warmth and competence than person-first language.

Although quotes from broadsheets were assigned similar levels of warmth, they exhibited slightly higher competence than those from tabloids. However, no significant differences were found between left-leaning and right-leaning papers in terms of warmth and competence.

The study also noted some inconsistent changes over time. After a shift towards more positive representations between 2015 and 2017, newspaper portrayals tended to become more negative between 2018 and 2020.

Lead author Dr. Themis Karaminis, Lecturer in Psychology at City St George's, said, "The coverage of autism in the press and media has increased in recent years, while lately, the notion of neurodiversity is gaining more and more recognition in educational and some professional settings. Some recent studies have found indications of progress—albeit small—towards more positive views towards autism in the public discourse.

"However, this new study, which is based on the perceptions of autistic people, challenges the notion that media coverage of autism has become more positive over the years. This finding is particularly interesting, as newspapers often still cover stories on the supposed 'cure' or 'reversal' of autism, which are hurtful and offensive to the autism community.

"Our study also highlights the critical importance of language and terminology to autistic people. Autistic people should be involved in guiding newspapers to more inclusive coverage, and it is crucial that newspapers respect the community's [language](#) preferences. Our study offers a range of positive and negative examples of [autism](#) coverage which could aid in this transition."

More information: Themis Karaminis et al, Language Matters in British Newspapers: A Participatory Analysis of the Autism UK Press Corpus, *Autism in Adulthood* (2024). [DOI: 10.1089/aut.2023.0105](https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2023.0105)

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