Smoke and Mirrors: UK Newspaper Representations of Intimate Partner Domestic Violence

Abstract

News media are in a position to project certain perspectives on domestic violence while marginalising or overlooking others which has implications for public understanding and policy development. This study applies discourse analysis to articles on domestic violence in two UK national daily newspapers published in 2001-2 and 2011-12 to evaluate evidence of change over a 10-year time span. The research explores how discourses of domestic violence are constructed through newspaper representations of victims, predominantly women, and perpetrators, predominantly men. While one of the newspapers adopts a respectful position towards women, the textual and visual techniques adopted systematically by the other reveal a tendency for blaming the victim and sexualising violence related to perceptions of 'deserving' or 'undeserving' women victims.

Keywords: domestic violence, victim, perpetrator, newspapers, discourse

Introduction

Media presentation of sensitive issues such as domestic violence plays an important part in shaping and reflecting public opinion (Cumberbatch and Howitt, 1989). Research indicates that the media have the ability to mobilise, and tap into, people's views on social and cultural issues (Ray, 2011) and that media effects can be a formative influence on consumer attitudes and behaviour (Harne and Radford, 2008). While consumers decide for themselves which newspapers to read, the content, tone and allegiance of news coverage will be determined by journalists, editors and in some cases press proprietors (Keeble, 2006). Newspaper editorial power in setting the news agenda with their own story coupled with journalists' influence on framing popular understanding (Butler, 2014) aim to ensure that the appropriate 'take home' message (Wozniak and McCloskey, 2010) is communicated to readers.

The stimulus for investigating media representations of domestic violence in the UK was derived from our participation in a European Union funded Daphne III project titled Empowering Women and Providers: Domestic Violence and Mental Health which focused on enhancing being in control and wellbeing of women experiencing both domestic violence and mental health issues (reference is identifying so has been removed). The expressed guilt of the women participants made us consider what leads victims of this type of violence to accept guilt instead of holding perpetrators accountable. Assuming that this response of the women is anchored in their social context, and given the centrality of media in both shaping public opinion and reflecting views mentioned above, investigating media representations made sense as a way of understanding that context.

Furthermore, in addition to the internalised guilt, both the women's training groups we ran as part of the project and existing literature (Humphreys and Thiara, 2003; Mullender and Hague, 2005) highlighted the stigma attached to being identified as a victim of domestic violence. We had to ask ourselves why stigma is attached to the victims of this particular crime, whereas it is usually attached to perpetrators of a crime. Stigma is a social construct, attributed to people whose behaviour is perceived as socially undesirable, aimed at social distancing from the stigma carrier. The carrier is portrayed negatively in many ways, often leading to a generalised master status in which the stigmatised aspect of their lives is magnified to engulf and mask all of their other personal attributes (Goffman, 1963). Those stigmatised by others frequently internalise the master status to become their key self-identity as a way of making sense of the stigma they are surrounded with. In turn, the internalisation guides their belief in who they are and what they can or cannot achieve in life.

In parallel, UK legislation and formal governmental approach to domestic violence is of perceiving it as punishable crime, and to support its victims in a variety of ways (Hester, 2011). Although a wide network of support services in both the statutory and voluntary sectors exists in the UK, government funding for the domestic violence and sexual abuse sector decreased by 31 per cent between 2010/11-2011/12 (Towers and Walby, 2012) and refuges are increasingly being subject to

funding via competitive tendering (Women's Aid, 2013). A recent report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC, 2014) uncovered failings across police forces in England and Wales to deal effectively with domestic abuse. The report found just under 58,000 people, largely women and children, were assessed by police to be at high risk of serious harm or murder by partners or ex-partners. HMIC (2014) also noted that 77 women were killed by partners or ex-partners in 2012-13. Yet women in the UK disclose domestic violence to the police on average only after 35 incidents (Starmer, 2011), highlighting that there are barriers which stop women from accessing potentially supportive services. Thus the current UK context contains contradictions in terms of the attitudes towards both victims and perpetrators of domestic violence.

Given this context, and the centrality of the media in reflecting and shaping views, the key question asked in this study is how are those, predominantly women, who experience domestic violence portrayed by the media, which qualities are attributed to them, to the perpetrators, mostly men, and whether the experience is recognised as a social issue or only as a personal one. Likewise we were interested to explore whether attitudes of the media have changed during the first decade of the 21st century. To account for variations in UK opinion and social structure, the study compares the views expressed on this issue by two national newspapers at key points over this period. While television and films add more emotionally loaded stimuli for the observer, we focused our investigation on newspapers in order to examine the unique freedom of printed news media in the UK which has been the subject of much public discourse recently, discussed further below.

In reference to terminology, the UK government's (Home Office, 2013) definition of domestic violence and abuse encompasses, but is not limited to, psychological, physical, sexual, financial and emotional forms of abuse through an incident or patterns of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour. It is defined as taking place between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members, irrespective of gender and sexuality. Although there are different types and patterns of domestic violence (Beckett, 2007), including children witnessing it, we use the terms domestic violence and intimate partner domestic violence

to signify the forms of violence analysed here which frequently take place in the domestic sphere and within people's intimate relationships.

Existing research

The impact of media representations is stronger when the phenomenon studied has a high degree of uncertainty and ambiguity, with a number of key stakeholders involved, such as in the case of people experiencing mental distress and ill health (Philo et al., 1996; Ramon and Savio, 2002; Ramon, 2006). In such cases the media acts as a source of information and judgement that enables the audience to make up their own mind about the unclear issue. Hartley (1992), looking at research on youth unemployment, describes it as a 'dirt' category – namely an issue where a number of different perspectives co-exist, where simple explanations are not good enough, and the emerging picture is one of confusion. The role of the media is to clear the muddle, to enable readers to see the key issues and their essence, as well as direct them to the 'right' response. The temptation to opt for simplistic explanations and solutions for the sake of clarity is therefore high.

Domestic violence is an act usually committed in private and often by an intimate partner, and therefore many of its underlying features are not known to outsiders. Although a punishable crime in the UK, many instances of it either are not brought to the notice of the police or become withdrawn complaints by victims. The low level of episodes resulting in court cases and convictions is a reflection of the ambiguity of the responses of those involved – such as the woman, the perpetrator, their extended family and friends, the police, health and social care professionals. Cavanagh (2003) has detailed the reasons for women victims' erratic behaviour as having to do with the mixture of feelings of shame, failure to have good enough intimate relationships perceived to be the responsibility of women in heterosexual relationships, guilt, and hope that the next strategy the woman adopts will prevent further domestic violence.

Bullock and Cubert's (2002) research in the USA proposed that domestic violence incidents are not always described as such, because they are interpreted through several frames, such as the

police frame, “just the facts”, “people are different from us”, blame the victims, and excuse the perpetrator frames. Accepting Bullock and Cubert’s approach, Gillespie et al. (2013) looked at 113 femicides defined as domestic violence covered in local newspapers in comparison to 113 femicide cases not defined as domestic violence. They suggest that the media is applying several frames in its socially constructed accounts, which are determined by sources of information, language choice, and context. On the basis of the Bullock and Cubert study, Gillespie et al. applied the following frames in their analysis of femicide coverage in the North Carolina newspapers they analysed, to reveal how domestic violence-defined femicide is categorised: event as routine, nondescript (29%); event as isolated (27%); social problem (25%); blaming the victim (16%); fault of the criminal justice system (11%). The authors found two more frames to be of relevance to femicide not defined as domestic violence, those of personal loss of control or moral breakdown of the perpetrator, and minimising the event by focusing on a broader issue. Femicide is treated by the media as presenting a social problem only in 10 percent of Bullock and Cubert’s study (2002), and as 13.7 percent of the sample in the study conducted by Richards et al. (2011). When a femicide is constructed as a social problem, information sources are likely to come from advocates of the rights of women victims of domestic violence, and a fault will be attributed to the criminal justice system. Similarly, looking at 21st century films, broadcast news and song lyrics, Batanchiev (2008), in a Ph.D. dissertation on US media, highlights that the films depicted women as weaker than men, while the song lyrics portrayed them as overcoming the abuser, yet remaining weak. The broadcasted news depicted women as responsible for their abuse, objects of pity, and exonerated the abusive men.

In contrast to the above research, Wozniak and McCloskey’s (2010) analysis of 100 newspaper reports on intimate partner violence in the USA found that journalists did not appear to excuse male-perpetrated homicide to the same extent as in previous years, nor were female victims viewed as inciting violence in the vast majority of articles they examined. Although Wozniak and McCloskey accordingly discern that promising progress has been made by journalists towards more accurate reporting, they acknowledge that their focusing on initial news articles only may have had a

bearing on their findings. They also note that the articles they examined continued to underplay the broader social context and prevalence of intimate partner violence.

Domestic violence challenges for the media

The above summary of previous research highlights that the media has faced the complex, risky and uncomfortable issue of domestic violence firstly by avoiding its prevalence (e.g. event as isolated), secondly by normalising it (event as routine), thirdly by blaming the victim, and fourthly by blaming the criminal justice system. The group escaping most of the blame seems to be the perpetrators of violence. Simultaneously we wish to recognise that there are good examples of the UK media helping to support women victims, noted further below. Yet there is evidence of an inclination towards the negative portrayal of some domestic violence victims as described in the literature cited above. In view of the fact that analysing newspaper coverage of domestic violence is an under-researched area in the UK, this paper explores the extent to which patterns illuminated by research in the USA emerge in the UK too.

UK Context

Around 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men experience domestic violence in their lifetime in England and Wales (Home Office, 2010). Although there is growing awareness of men as victims, women are more likely than men to experience domestic violence in severe and repeated forms (Women's Aid, 2009). Public opinion towards domestic violence is often influenced by information provided by news media (Carlyle et al., 2008). Indeed, findings from a British Crime Survey show that 75 percent of the public gain their information about crime from the media (Mason, 2006).

Printed news media in the UK occupy a particularly powerful, if somewhat anomalous, position. While television and radio broadcasting in the UK have a legal obligation to be impartial in their news reporting, the press have no such obligation. 1695 saw the end of journalism licensed by the state in the UK and since then newspapers have been regulating themselves. Freedom of the

press is a cherished notion. Nevertheless, concerns have been raised about press freedom being conflated with the belief that journalist undertakings are an expression of freedom, and any curtailment is an expression of censorship (Lloyd, 2012). The recent Leveson (2012a, 2012b) Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press recommended law-backed regulation of UK newspapers. Opponents fear this would signal the end of a free press and free speech and the debate concerning regulation is ongoing in the UK Parliament.

Evidence from the National Union of Journalists, submitted to the Leveson Inquiry in anonymised form due to fear of reprisals, described the competitive culture and, at times, editorial bullying within the newsroom. Their evidence revealed the pressure to deliver a story placed upon journalists, some of whom succumbed to the practice of making up quotes (Leveson, 2012b). Submissions to the Inquiry also told of top-down pressure to report stories in a mode which fitted the worldview and political narrative of a title. Leveson suggests that a fusion of fact and comment is inevitable - so-called 'agenda journalism'. However, he also cautions:

> ... what *is* harmful and what *is* worthy of criticism is a practice identified in sections of the press of prioritising the worldview of a title over the accuracy of a story. (original emphasis, Leveson, 2012b, p.684)

Although the Leveson Inquiry examined all sections of the press, its criticisms fell most heavily upon the tabloids. There are 12 national daily titles in the UK approximately comprised of four broadsheets, four mid-market titles and four 'red-top' tabloids. It is worth noting that while the UK has a largely male-managed media, with very few women newspaper editors and over three-quarters of newspaper articles being written by men (Hill, 2012), our research found that values and beliefs cut across journalists in terms of their gender, and allegiance to a newspaper's ideological worldview, rather than to one's gender, seems to be a determining variable regarding journalists' stance.

Methodology

In order to explore media representations of domestic violence at divergent ends of the political and social spectrum, and to examine whether such representations have changed over the course of a decade, we analysed articles in the *Sun* and *Guardian* newspapers in the UK for the years 2001-2 and 2011-12. The rationale for selecting these titles was based on the *Sun* being the biggest-selling national newspaper in the UK with an average daily print circulation of 2.3 million during April 2013 (Newsworks, 2013a). Although it supported Labour election campaigns under Blair's leadership, the *Sun's* floating voter status is more commonly aligned right of centre (McNair, 2003) as was the case under Thatcher and subsequently Cameron. The *Guardian* was selected due to its variation with the *Sun* in terms of being a left of centre broadsheet with an average daily print circulation of 196,000 during April 2013 (Newsworks, 2013b). There is also divergence in price with the *Guardian* costing £1.40 per issue during the week in comparison to the *Sun's* price of 40 pence (prices as of April 2013). Both titles have been available online free of charge since around the time of the new millennium (the *Sun* has recently mooted the idea of charging digital consumers). Our research is based predominantly on electronic articles, although we did examine hardcopies on a minority of days during 2012 to gain a flavour of the respective publications in their entirety, with the first named author (name to be included later) leading research into hard copies of the *Sun* and second named author (name to be included later) assuming primary responsibility for hard copies of the *Guardian*. Initial individual findings were then examined collaboratively and recursively enabling the generation and refinement of themes resulting in progressive focusing. Coding frameworks employed for analysing data emerged inductively during the process of researching the newspapers, and also deductively through being theoretically informed by existing literature discussed above (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Hodkinson, 2008). Articles found through the *Sun* and *Guardian* websites were cross-referenced with the LexisNexis (http://www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/home.page) electronic database of newspapers, which includes the location and page number of articles not

shown on the newspaper websites, though LexisNexis does not include visual material. In their research into US newspaper coverage of intimate partner violence Wozniak and McCloskey (2010) similarly accessed articles through Lexis-Nexis Academia and suggested their research could have benefitted from including pictures from internet newspaper sources. We were therefore keen to include image-based data in our research which provided a fuller picture of how individuals are depicted in newspapers. In another departure from Wozniak and McCloskey's (2010) research design, which only examined first published articles on an incident, our analysis followed domestic violence cases as they unfolded across serial articles.

In today's fast-paced world of instant breaking news and 24-hour digital coverage, newspaper sales are on the decline, yet combined print and online readership totals remain healthy. The *Guardian* has 12.7 million readers in print and online each month (its monthly print readership is around 4.3 million) (National Readership Survey, 2013). This compares with the *Sun's* monthly total of 17.4 million readers in print and online (its monthly print readership is 15.2 million, proportionately far higher than the *Guardian's* monthly print readership) (National Readership Survey, 2013).

The *Sun* and *Guardian* have similar readership profiles in terms of gender with men comprising around 55 per cent of their readers and women accounting for 45 per cent. Readership shows greater divergence concerning social class classification based on occupation, with the *Guardian* attracting more readers from the higher social grades (Newsworks, 2013a and 2013b).

Stylistically, the *Sun* has a condensed writing style, characteristic of the tabloid genre, accompanied by many photographs, including a daily photograph since 1970 of a topless woman on page 3. In contrast to the 'red-top' tabloids, the *Guardian* is known as one of the quality newspapers and has more text and in-depth analysis than the *Sun*, with fewer pictures. The *Sun's* owner, Rupert Murdoch, has been accused of editorial interference (Brook, 2008) and for extending little freedom to his editors, while the *Guardian* is said to be afforded editorial independence by its owners The Scott Trust (Ribbans, 2011).

Searches of the *Sun* (www.thesun.co.uk) and *Guardian* (www.guardian.co.uk) websites were undertaken using the terms domestic violence, domestic abuse and intimate partner violence. The number of articles found increased year on year over the span of the decade, with the search term 'domestic violence' eliciting the most articles. Table I shows the number of *Sun* and *Guardian* online articles citing the term domestic violence with the *Guardian* having more than five times the number of the *Sun*.

Table I

During the focus years of 2001-2 and 2011-12 the number of articles found in the *Sun* was 215, all of which were examined and cross-checked with coverage in the *Guardian* where corresponding articles existed. This provided insight into the similarities and differences between tabloid and broadsheet journalism, discussed below. It became apparent, however, that the terms domestic violence, domestic abuse and intimate partner violence were not always used in relevant articles which meant that reports covering these themes were not found by our initial searches. Other terms were used in articles such as domestic row, disturbance, argument, strife, marital difficulties which seem to lessen the impact. We subsequently broadened our research terms to include language such as woman/man dies; woman/man/children killed or murdered; wife/husband killed or murdered. This yielded further returns and interestingly brought up articles in which family members had lost their lives but which did not make reference to domestic violence or abuse. This matches research by Wozniak and McCloskey (2010) which found that 72% of the articles they examined on intimate partner homicide did not mention domestic violence. In our research we subsequently used the names of people known to have been involved in well documented cases to search the *Sun* and *Guardian* newspapers since this ameliorated that fact that coverage was not reported in terms of domestic violence. Naming forms of violence is essential in acknowledging their prevalence, even existence (Kelly, 1988). The lack of consistent language could contribute to

domestic violence remaining a hidden problem and consequently often remaining beneath the radar of public consciousness.

In view of the fact that newspaper coverage overwhelmingly homes in on sensational cases of intimate partner violence (Carlyle et al., 2008), the newspaper articles on which our analysis is based can be viewed as likewise extreme in the sense that they concentrate on severe rather than typical, everyday incidents of domestic violence. Given that effective qualitative research is dependent on detailed data analysis (Silverman, 2013), we undertook a fine-grained textual and pictorial study of articles paying close attention to detail to examine how those depicted were positioned by newspaper discourses of domestic violence. Informed by previous discourse analytical approaches we explored how article content was foregrounded and backgrounded (Strega et al., 2014) according to a newspaper's discursive framing of domestic violence. 'In discourse the beliefs, norms and values that are taken for granted in everyday interaction are expressly thematised and subjected to critique' (Crotty, 1998, p.144) which guided our discourse analysis aimed at critiquing the central themes identified within newspaper representations.

Findings

Reflecting the asymmetrical nature of intimate partner domestic violence in the UK (Dobash et al., 2004; Women's Aid, 2009), with men most likely the perpetrator and women the victim, our findings are based predominantly on articles following this gendered pattern. Since acknowledgement of this dominant pattern should not blinker us to 'minority patterns' (Humphreys and Stanley, 2006, p.13), a minority of articles in our analysis are concerned with female perpetrators and male victims. None included same-sex incidents. In line with the wider UK population, the majority of victims and perpetrators were of white ethnic origin and a small proportion were of minority ethnic background; we did not find ethnic origin to be a factor within the newspaper articles located by our searches thus the variable of ethnicity did not form part of our analysis. Researching the discourse of domestic violence press coverage in the UK found both congruence with and divergence from

previous research carried out mainly in the USA. Analysis of articles led to the identification of five interconnecting themes: blaming the victim, the 'ideal' victim, domestic violence campaigning, sexualising domestic violence, and scaremongering which will be analysed in turn below.

Blaming the victim

The most commonly identified theme derived from our research relates to how women are held accountable for the domestic violence they experience. This resonates with research by Richards et al. (2011) in the USA which found that victim blaming language in the news is mobilised more in relation to incidents of domestic violence than in any other crimes involving violence. Victim blaming remained consistent across of the time span of our research. In accordance with previous studies we likewise found evidence of direct and indirect victim blaming language (Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2009), though overt manifestations were the predilection of the *Sun* and not the *Guardian*. Characteristic of tabloid vernacular, the *Sun* is replete with descriptions of men who have killed their partners as 'spurned lover', 'jilted lover' and 'jealousy-crazed' insinuating that the woman is responsible or at least partially responsible for her victimisation.

A domestic violence case on the Channel Island of Jersey is a key case in point. Rzeszowski fatally stabbed his wife, Izabela, two children, father-in-law, a family friend, Marta, and her daughter all of whom were Polish. The *Sun* (14 August 2012) notes that Rzeszowski 'slaughtered six people at a family barbecue after he flipped over his wife's affair'. According to the *Sun,* Izabela had changed her status on Facebook from married to single and then reverted to married status. Furthermore, the *Sun* (17 August 2011) states 'In a bizarre twist, fellow murder victim Marta had also changed her Facebook status to "single" — after a row with her IT worker husband Craig, 37'. There is no way of verifying the *Sun's* alleged behaviour of Izabela and Marta – the paper appears to denigrate both women with impunity, and as silent victims they cannot defend themselves (Soothill and Walby, 1991). The *Sun* describes Rzeszowski as a 'doting dad' and Izabela as 'cheating on him' and uses the caption of 'So innocent...' underneath a photograph of their children (16 August 2011). The semiotic

impact of the photograph and its caption serves to differentiate the children from their mothers who may be victims of domestic violence, but perceived by the *Sun* as blameworthy victims. The *Guardian's* (16 August 2011) reference to unconfirmed reports of Rzeszowski's financial difficulties serves as another indirect way of diminishing the agency of the perpetrator (Taylor, 2009).

Sources that journalists choose to include in articles are telling of their stance on domestic violence (Gillespie et al., 2013). This is exemplified in the case of a father, Say, who fatally stabbed his two children. According to the *Sun* (8 December 2011), Say's wife had left him for another man two years earlier taking the children with her. 'Jilted' Say had killed their children as he was due to be evicted from his flat. A neighbour appears to side with Say and she reports him as saying that he was always the one who did things for the children while "all his wife did was sleep and go to work" (*Sun*, 15 February 2011). Here we see the *Sun* using the neighbour as a conduit to disparage a woman whose children have been killed. The case bears out Taylor's (2009) observation that using neighbours for comment can give a misleading picture of events.

Women's commitment to work as a contributory cause of domestic violence came to light a decade earlier in the case of police constable Bluestone who killed his wife and two of their four children before hanging himself. Both Bluestone and his wife are reported in the *Sun* and *Guardian* to have had affairs. In the *Sun* (30 August 2001) friends described Bluestone as a 'devoted dad' 'who adored his kids' making it difficult for them to understand why he had 'flipped'. The *Sun* juxtaposes 'community bobby,' against 'a crazed copper' who went 'berserk,' 'exploded' and 'in a frenzy' 'bludgeoned' his wife and children. It is as though forces external to Bluestone provoked the fatalities.

Similarly the *Guardian* (30 August 2001) quotes Bluestone's parents' description of him: 'He was a man devoted to his children, dedicated to his job and filled with love for his wife'. The *Sun* article depicts a photograph of one of the sons before he was murdered wearing his father's police cap and jacket, again evocative of the good relationship Bluestone had with his children. The second photograph shows Bluestone smiling, with a pencil behind his ear, giving the impression of a happy,

hardworking man. A later *Sun* article similarly shows a colour photograph of Bluestone with a son on this shoulders with the caption 'Snapped', while his wife is pictured alone in a black and white photograph, possibly suggestive of a colder disposition (*Sun*, 7 November 2001). In an attempt to account for Bluestone's actions the *Sun*, as self-appointed moral arbiter, concludes one article by casting suspicion on his wife:

> ...the carnage is thought to have been triggered by a long-running dispute between Bluestone and high-flying administrator Jill, his second wife, over her yearning to move nearer her job. She earned £40,000 as the head of Basildon District Council's policy and performance unit. And she faced rush-hour car journeys of up to two hours to reach her office in Essex. Karl earned £25,000 as part of a special police team tackling crime. (*Sun*, 30 August 2001)

Here the *Sun* invokes a sense of emasculation experienced by some men when their wife's employment is in the ascendency as a way of explaining, perhaps justifying, acts of violence. Several theorists, Ray (2011) tells us, have suggested that violence in the private sphere may be a response to a crisis of masculinity and to a sense of powerlessness among some men. Accordingly, it is as though the actions of Bluestone's wife were the qualifying trigger for the fatalities (cf. Winterson, 2001). If women are viewed as inciting domestic violence, it is not surprising many blame themselves and hesitate contacting support services.

During the course of our research we found evidence aplenty of perpetrator responsibility for abuse receding from view. This emerged in the case of a solicitor who killed his wife, as explained in the *Sun* (25 July 2002): 'Lawyer Les Humes stabbed his wife to death in front of their children after she told him she was cheating on him. [...] Humes worked long hours to provide his family with a comfortable lifestyle and a beautiful home.' The woman's alleged infidelity receives condemnatory treatment in contrast to the man's applauded efforts regarding the family's 'mansion'. He was charged with manslaughter rather than murder on the grounds of provocation

and jailed for seven years. A potential message to readers at the time is that mitigating circumstances can sometimes result in a more lenient sentence.

Provocation is no longer permitted as a defence in the UK and has been replaced with a new partial defence of 'loss of control' for killings since 4 October 2010 (Coroners and Justice Act, 2009). While there can no longer be an infidelity defence, an appeal judgement in 2012 ruled that since all circumstances at the time of a killing have to be examined, if infidelity was present it can be a factor in causing a loss of self-control (Baird, 2012). Although the defence of loss of control through infidelity can be considered by a jury, the conditions allowing this defence are now more stringent.

Women who kill their partners are rare and tend to be depicted as particularly deviant. An illustrative example is the *Sun's* (15 January 2011) article about Tracie Andrews, convicted of killing her boyfriend in 1996 while driving home, subsequently in preparation for release following 14 years in prison. The article title reads 'Evil Andrews serves up cuppas in a church cafe' juxtaposing her evilness with the sanctity of a church café and having a 'cuppa'. The manic-looking photograph depicting Andrews after the incident adds to her malevolent profile. Compare this with the smiling photograph of police officer Bluestone cited above whose crimes of murder were 'out of character'. The term 'evil' is suggestive of internal, innate characteristics in contrast to Bluestone going berserk and flipping which have connotations of external triggers.

The theme of evil women surfaced again in relation to so-called 'honour-based violence'. Most cases concern women killed by fathers, brothers and husbands. Of the 105 articles on honour killing found in the *Sun* from 2000 to 2012 one article used the term 'evil' in its headline in relation to a grandmother who plotted to have her daughter-in-law killed: 'Evil gran will never leave jail' (4 October 2007).

Individuals referred to in newspaper coverage of domestic violence were not only discursively positioned through text but also through pictorial images. Visual content reinforced written content especially via photographs of male perpetrators in uniform such as police officers and soldiers. In the case of former soldier Michael Pedersen the *Sun* and *Guardian* use similar

photographs of him in military uniform when reporting his killing of his two children and committing suicide. Pedersen had survived an IRA (Irish Republican Army) bomb explosion 30 years earlier and is referred to in the *Sun* as a 'bomb hero' (2 October 2012). Described as 'Tormented ex-soldier,' Pedersen seems to receive greater sympathy in the *Sun* article than his wife who had 'kicked him out of their home following a furious row.' The tormented and the tormenter are co-created. Similarly, when aspiring footballer Andrew Hall stabbed his 15-year-old girlfriend the *Sun* (7 September 2012) laments the loss of his promising football career 'for killing the pretty brunette', accentuated by the photograph of Hall in his football strip (the *Guardian's* picture was one of Hall not in his football strip).

Photographs of men in uniform could be interpreted as indicating that domestic violence can happen to anyone – they may be pillars of society but they can still perpetrate acts of homicide. Alternatively such images could be interpreted as casting men in a more positive light and do indeed contrast with visual representations of women perpetrators. For instance, Emma Bushen, now 'teetotal' and reformed since previously hitting her husband, is shown in the *Sun* drinking from a bottle 'during her boozy days' (20 June 2012). Reference to multiple sexual partners and having children born to different fathers adds to women's trial by media, be they domestic abuse victim (*Sun*, 13 May 2011) or 'sex-crazed' perpetrator (*Sun*, 12 November 2012).

While inclusion of irrelevant behaviours can reveal authorial intent to denigrate the character of the victim, so too can the exclusion of information which is in keeping with other studies applying discourse analysis (Strega et al., 2014). Given that the majority of femicide cases are preceded by a history of domestic violence (Taylor, 2008), and that men who commit intimate partner homicide are more likely to have a long-standing history of violence in comparison to men who murder other men (Dobash et al., 2004), omitting previous abuse incidents from news coverage of domestic violence may help to exculpate the perpetrator. *Guardian* journalists were consistently more likely to refer to pre-existing violence in comparison to those of the *Sun*, who tended to gloss over or exclude historical incidents even in cases where previous abuse had resulted in police action,

as had occurred in the case of police officer Bluestone cited above. Omitting historical acts of abuse contributes to the discourse of perpetrators 'snapping' and committing a one-off act, whereas UK data examined by Dobash et al. show perpetrators of intimate partner homicide are likely to be acting '*in character'* ([original emphasis] 2004, p.598) based on the on-going nature of their violence.

Through the lexical choice of 'spurned lover', 'jilted lover' the *Sun's* narrative engenders a clear division between maligned and maligner, absolution and culpability. The extent to which victims are blamed and perpetrators exonerated seems to bear correlation with the good woman-bad woman dichotomy discussed in the next section.

The 'ideal' victim

In parallel to the *Sun's* discourse of victim blaming it runs articles expressing sympathy towards certain victims of domestic violence. The subtext to the paper's multiple attitudes towards women appears to be linked to the analogy of 'ideal' versus 'undeserving' victim articulated by Gekoski et al. (2012). Their research into tabloid journalists in the UK found that women emerged as the second most perfect victims after children. Particular characteristics like being young, female, white, middle-class, respectable and physically attractive contributed to the newsworthiness of homicide cases and boosted newspaper circulation figures. Undeserving, non-ideal victims who do not fit the 'ideal media profile' inspire less public sympathy or interest because they are perceived as likely to have contributed to their 'expected' fates (Gekoski et al., 2012), a description befitting a number of domestic violence cases.

According to journalistic values, Jane Clough appears to fit the criteria of an 'ideal' victim in that she was attractive, from a good home and a nurse. The *Sun* (25 October 2012) describes her as a 'loving daughter' and a new mum when she was fatally stabbed by her ex-boyfriend in the car park of the hospital where she worked. Worthy characteristics, such as Jane's, will garner greater sympathy in the tabloid press. This echoes research into the Canadian print media's portrayal of street sex workers by Strega et al. (2014) who note that the technique of foregrounding women's

respectability reduces the separation between 'them' and 'us' thereby increasing the human-interest currency of the story.

Another example of an 'ideal' victim identified in our research is Heather Cooper, a police officer killed by her partner who later committed suicide in prison. The *Sun* (22 November 2011) includes photographs of the couple's young children at their mother's funeral and quotes a senior police officer at the funeral service describing Cooper as 'a super mum, super person, super cop'. She had received a commendation by her force for her 'professionalism, dedication and commitment' (*Sun*, 26 June 2012). Those abusing 'ideal' victims tend to receive harsher treatment by tabloids like the *Sun,* commensurate with victim worthiness, in comparison to perpetrators of crimes against 'non-ideal' victims. Indeed, there are examples of men committing intimate partner homicide being referred to in the *Sun* as hubby – 'killed by hubby' (1 November 2001), 'strangled by hubby' (25 January 2002; 21 January 2011), 'Post[man] hubby "killed wife over affairs"' (22 March 2011). Using the diminutive term 'hubby' can have the effect of deflating and arguably trivialising marital violence (Conboy, 2006).

The reports of domestic violence discussed here frequently draw upon the construct of the ideal woman and the dominant ideology of motherhood (cf. Sunindyo, 2004). Women must navigate their way, for example, between being appropriately hard working, unlike the 'jailbird junkie' whose actions are at 'the taxpayer's expense' (*Sun*, 13 May 2011), but not too career-minded so as to adversely affect family life, nor too hardworking so as to financially emasculate husbands or partners and risk provoking domestic abuse and hostile treatment at the hand of the press.

Our research also found evidence of victim 'worthiness' being calibrated against real estate value. A recurring detail often included in *Sun* articles is reference to the value of the property where domestic violence took place. Real estate values were far less likely to feature in *Guardian* articles though they were occasionally present (*Guardian*, 31 August 2001). The *Sun* additionally provides information as to whether a property was owner-occupied or rented by victim and perpetrator (*Sun*, 26 January 2011). Higher property values seem to elicit greater attention by the

Sun in comparison to lower ones. The *Sun* appears to project its view regarding the perceived incongruity of high value properties being the backdrop to domestic violence. This was in evidence in cases where the perpetrator was male and the victim female (*Sun*, 25 July 2002; 25 November 2011; 31 December 2012) and where the perpetrator was female and the victim male (*Sun*, 23 June 2011). In line with research by Gekoski et al. (2012), peoples' higher social class, and their associated higher real estate value, yield greater news worthiness in homicide cases including those committed in the domestic sphere. Referring to property values in cases of domestic violence seems to be suggestive to readers that property worth, victim worthiness and news worthiness are positively correlated.

Domestic violence campaigning

Perhaps surprisingly, to its credit the *Sun* runs several articles campaigning against domestic violence. We found examples, more so in the latter years of the time frame of our study, of the paper giving a voice to women who have experienced domestic violence and encouraging others to speak out. A notable example is Tina Nash whose eyes were gouged out by her boyfriend. Sandra Horley, Chief Executive of Refuge, is interviewed at the end of some *Sun* articles, and details of the weblink to Refuge's 1in4 women campaign are included (15 November 2012; 29 August 2012; 21 October 2011). Details of support for male victims are given too (12 March 2012). Campaigners have highlighted the importance of publishing expert views alongside news reports of domestic violence and there are examples of the *Sun* subscribing to this practice. While ostensibly positive, the *Sun's* campaign has parallels with Parker's (2004) discernment that contradictory meanings in discourse can represent people in ways that reinforce power relations. Thus the depiction of individual women through a victim empowerment lens means that perpetrator accountability and wider social conditions remain noticeably absent from the analytical frame (Berns, 2004).

The *Guardian* adopts a more reflecting than shaping stance on domestic violence in comparison to the *Sun* and gives its backing to campaigns rather than campaigning. It likewise

provides a platform for victim survivors such as Tina Nash to speak for themselves in-depth. Sandra Horley has written articles in the *Guardian* too. In one (10 October 2012) she writes that domestic violence cases are not about a man 'losing his temper' or 'flipping out', they are about systematic control and abuse. However, losing their temper and 'flipping' in response to the actions of their partners are precisely the terms frequently used by the *Sun* to describe some men who commit violent acts as demonstrated above. The paradoxes within the *Sun* suggest its domestic violence campaigning could be less than ingenuous and rather a strategy for publicity redolent of its 'self-promotional paradigm of campaigns' (Conboy, 2006, p.188).

Sexualising domestic violence

The biggest-selling UK tabloids base much of their appeal on sexualisation and titillation. No subject seems out of bounds, including violence and death. Submissions to the Leveson Inquiry relating to reports in the *Sun* and two other national UK tabloids led to the conclusion that all three titles included articles 'which appeared to eroticise violence against women' (Leveson, 2012b, p.664). We found evidence of the *Sun's* penchant for sexualising violence unrelenting during the focus years which bookended the decade time frame of our research. The *Sun's* (15 February 2013) front page photograph of Reeva Steenkamp wearing a bikini the day after she was shot in Oscar Pistorius's home is a recent reminder of the paper's unswerving adherence to the sexualisation of intimate partner domestic violence.

Celebrity crime victims represent high newsworthiness and even more so when the association between sex and violence is established. This is evidential in the *Sun's* focus on the singer Rihanna, abused in 2009 by her boyfriend, Chris Brown, also a singer. There is in part sympathetic treatment of Rihanna by the *Sun* as it shows her injuries and condemns Brown's attack on her. While purporting concern for her welfare, these articles also serve as an instrument for depicting sexualised images of Rihanna attached to sexual headlines, multiple times a week during

2012, akin to regular instalments of a soap opera, and are positioned next to photographs of her injuries.

Salacious headlines are another means of increasing readership appeal and marketability. In the case of a man who killed his girlfriend and then himself while on a boat, the *Sun* (4 September 2012) ran the headline 'Purple sex toy, duct tape, hard drive, cable ties and a sheet covered in blood', thereby magnifying the link between sex and violence (Eaves et al., 2012). The *Sun's* perennial use of the word 'lover' enhances the sensational currency of intimate partner violence. Another longstanding trait of tabloid reportage is the use of actresses in contrived photographs described over 25 years ago in Peck's (1987) analysis of newspaper coverage of violence against women. The *Sun* continues to use images of staged domestic violence depicting semi-clad actresses in simulation with actors, or semi-clad actresses with bruises adopting defensive, potentially provocative, poses (*Sun*, 15 December 2011).

As already noted, notions of women's infidelity were repeatedly inscribed in the *Sun's* representations of female victims. Details of a woman's alleged unfaithfulness serve the twofold purpose of holding her accountable and infusing a case with sexual overtones. The *Sun's* depiction of Diana Garbutt, fatally beaten with a metal bar by her husband while asleep in bed, makes reference to her 'string of affairs' (2 April 2011), describes how she 'used internet dating sites' (24 March 2011), 'had sex with a man on a sofa' when visiting friends with her husband 15 months before she died and 'romped with a cousin's husband' (22 March 2011). The recurring disparagement of Diana gives the impression that she is on trial, amplifying long-established campaign calls to stop judging the victim and look at the evidence instead. Predictably Diana continues to be referred to as 'unfaithful' and as having visited dating websites after her husband's conviction of murder (*Sun*, 25 May 2012).

When women are not the victims their sexuality can still be used against them. The case of Charlotte Collinge demonstrates how women can be cast in the role of the temptress by the tabloid media. The *Sun's* coverage describes how 'Evil Charlotte "the Harlot"' 'lured' (1 August 2012) two

men to her home 'with offers of sex' (24 July 2012) in return for their fatal battering of her husband. The use of the term 'lured' bestows greater agency on Charlotte than on her accomplices.

Gratuitous coverage can further sensationalise *crime passionnel*. This came to light in the *Sun* (25 January 2002) during the case of Richard Cooper, on trial for 'the horrific strangling of love-cheat wife Teresa Cooper'. By using the term 'love-cheat wife' the *Sun* is constructing a discourse of domestic violence which holds the victim accountable and instantly sets the tone for the ensuing article. Cooper is reported to have secretly audio recorded 'a sex session between Teresa and her lover,' Chris Sindall. Cooper allegedly activated the recorder inadvertently when he confronted his 'three-times-wed wife' about her affair. The article presents a detailed transcript of the recording, which had been heard in court, and includes a particularly disturbing transcript of Cooper strangling his wife. Sections of the quality and tabloid press (and television news) dubbed it the 'Weakest Link' murder case because Cooper had used the catchphrase from a popular television quiz saying 'You are the weakest link, goodbye' when strangling his wife. Based on information about the audio recording from Cooper's defence lawyer, the *Sun* states 'the sound of mum-of-three Teresa giving lover Sindall oral sex could also 'clearly' be heard on it'. The very inclusion of this reference could be interpreted as contributing to the paper's victim-besmirching discourse. Moreover, the coupling within the same sentence of mother status and giving oral sex to a lover appears to underline the adulterous actions of the woman, not befitting the paragon ideology of motherhood. Here the linguistic coupling operates as a stance reporting device to intensify the force of the report and convey the attitudinal stance of the journalist (O'Keeffe and Breen, 2007). The woman's infidelity is used to rationalise and mitigate the perpetrator's violence:

> In the case of domestic murder, uncontrollable sexual jealousy is 'understood' and explained as a normalized reaction to the female's action. (Mason and Monckton-Smith, 2008, p.704)

Scaremongering

The discursive regime operating in UK press coverage of domestic violence not only blames victim *action* as causal in violence but also blames victim *inaction* for not standing up to abusers or leaving them. Though a less pronounced finding in comparison to other identified themes, yet present across the study's time span, our analysis found evidence of a scaremongering agenda which appears to play on parental, particularly maternal, wariness towards social services. Research has documented the long-standing reluctance among mothers who experience domestic violence to seek professional help due to feeling guilt and fear of their children being taken away (National Children's Home, 1994). One of the key misconceptions surrounding domestic violence is that it is simple for victims to leave (Harne and Radford, 2008). Indeed, cross-national data repeatedly show that when a woman endeavours to leave an abusive relationship, or asks a partner to leave, she is most at risk of serious or fatal injury (Women's Aid 2009; Richards et al. 2011). As we found out during the running of our own training programmes with women experiencing domestic violence and mental health issues mentioned above, women's difficulty in disengaging from a violent partner is often due to self-blame, the associated stigma of domestic violence and financial dependency. So too is it due to isolation, low self-esteem, the controlling influence of abusers, women not seeing themselves as a victim and fear of social services removing their children - all reasons described experientially by Tina Nash in the *Guardian* (4 December 2012). This corroborates research in the UK by Rivas et al. (2013) who similarly found that women did not always recognise their psychologically abusive experiences as abuse. Fear combined with feeling there is no way out has not assuaged criticisms that some women, who stay with their partners, allow perpetrators' actions to continue.

When the *Sun* (14 February 2011) reported the deaths of Joy Small and her two children at the hands of their father it states that 'police and social services had warned her she might lose the children unless she dumped him' – hardly a reassuring message to readers, nor likely intended to be. In cases where service providers do intervene regarding relationship breakdown, the *Sun* (9 November 2011) sets little store by the ability of some professionals to intervene effectively

referring to them as 'so-called experts from the burgeoning child "protection" industry' whose actions are perceived as contributing to family fragmentation and 'state-enabled hell'. Apparently costly state intervention by some 'overzealous social workers' (*Sun*, 22 June 2011) not only takes its toll in human terms but financial ones too since 'self-righteous' professionals, among them social workers, are 'on the public payroll' (*Sun*, 22 November 2002). Mothers staying silent about domestic violence for fear of their children being taken away is stoked by the *Sun's* narrative of social workers as 'the tyrants of child protection' whose 'playing-God mindset' denies parental access on 'mere suspicion' and 'hearsay,' and whose Child Protection Plans are often 'based on nothing more than an unfounded suspicion, plunging one or both parents into a Kafka-esque nightmare' (28 November 2012). Little wonder some women are reluctant to contact child protection services.

Discussion

Sun and *Guardian* journalists frame the issue of domestic violence according to the social, political and ideological discourse within which they operate. Newspapers are entitled to be partisan in their views (Leveson, 2012a), yet the intertwining of facts and opinion can lead to distortion, especially among those journalists who wish to convey a news report imbued with their ideological hue. Worldview trumps accuracy.

Our research has found complex, multiple faces to the *Sun* newspaper and resonates with Leveson's finding:

> The Sun has campaigned admirably against domestic violence, rape, and size zero models. But it is clear that those campaigns have, perhaps uncomfortably, sat alongside demeaning and sexualising representations of women. (Leveson, 2012b, p.664)

When considering the differences between the decades of coverage, the *Sun* has moved paradoxically with the times concerning developments in technology, positively through the

inclusion of weblinks in articles to online sources of support, but also negatively in its references to Facebook entries and dating websites in their victim-blaming perspective. The old script of blaming women victims for male violence is thus finding articulation in new forms. The language and photographs examined within the *Sun* conspire to carry a parable-like message intended to spread a moral lesson, namely that women need to conform to moral values pertaining to a good wife, mother, carer and homemaker and thereby avert victimisation. Moralising narratives of the *Sun* are less likely to be projected onto men who are perpetrators, especially in cases of undeserving or 'non-ideal' victims. Even the *Sun's* domestic violence campaigns are engaged in according to its moral framework of women knowing their place. Double standards continue to be applied to women's behaviour by publications like the *Sun*: on the one hand flaunt yourselves, but on the other perceived deviant behaviour will be met with tabloid indignation if abuse happens. The *Guardian* takes a more respectful position towards the victims, letting them speak more with their own voice.

The pursuit of profit and influence is often, possibly always, the underlying dynamic of newspapers. By way of boosting readership appeal and sales, news media commonly pay attention to extreme cases of domestic violence which can obscure the prevalence of abuse. The tendency within UK press reporting to equate violence against women as perpetrated in public by a stranger (Mason and Monckton-Smith, 2008) contributes to the legitimising of domestic violence as normal, albeit unacceptable. Although taking place in private, the scale of domestic violence, its impact not only on the victim but often also on her children and perhaps on the perpetrator too, turn it into a social problem whose place is very much in the public domain. Yet we have seen how domestic violence in the news is seldom framed as a societal public health concern but rather as an individualised problem or somehow precipitated by victims (O'Keeffe and Breen 2007; Heeren and Messing, 2009; Carlyle et al., 2008)). Scant media reference to causal factors and wider patterns of abuse impresses the need for governmental action aimed at raising public awareness and tackling the origins of domestic violence through such measures as the introduction of statutory relationship education in UK secondary schools.

A limitation of our study has been that, based on the results of our searches, we focused on spectacular rather than routine forms of domestic violence and on cases referring to able-bodied, heterosexual intimate partners, but the newspapers' material does hardly mention the non-spectacular cases. The study could have benefitted from analysing different forms of domestic violence. We are mindful that examination of honour-based violence was beyond the scope of this study and recognise the importance of exploring whether similar victim-blaming narratives are evident in the coverage of these cases. One of the methodological strengths of this study is also a weakness: only articles at the beginning and end of a decade of news coverage were analysed enabling us to examine evidence of continuity and change, though there could have been themes in the intervening period which our methodology missed. Comparing a wider sample of newspaper titles and analysing increased digital media output represent useful areas of research in the future.

Blame and fear are prominent themes within the discourse of domestic violence media coverage. We need to ask ourselves whether news media have a moral obligation beyond informing people – a wider vision of what society could aspire to. If so, there may be a place for a more comprehensive representation of domestic violence, one that begins with empathy towards the victim which would make a worthwhile difference to victims and to public opinion.

Conclusion

This study has offered a fine-grained analysis of how women victims of domestic violence and their perpetrators are discursively framed by two leading UK newspapers. Our findings are consistent with predominant trends reported by studies in the USA concerning victim blaming, as well as providing new insights into domestic violence press coverage more specific to the UK context pertaining to tabloid journalism's proclivity for sexualising violence against women. Narrative appropriation by the press may be all the more prominent in the UK where printed news media are not subject to impartiality obligations.

The number of articles reporting the issue of domestic violence has risen consistently over the 10-year period of our analysis which may be grounds for optimism in relation to promoting awareness and public dialogue. So too has there been a noticeable increase in media coverage giving recognition to the issue of intimate partner violence against men which is to be applauded given the hidden, taboo nature of this problem. Where there has been less change is in the content of coverage. The 10-year passage of time has diminished neither the medium nor the message of the *Sun* in terms of sexualising violence against women and blaming victims. Our findings have a fresh resonance with concerns described over 20 years ago by Soothill and Walby (1991, p.47): 'It is the cuckolded husband who kills who gets the sympathy'. The language may have toned down since the days when a UK judge in 1985 said a man found guilty of the manslaughter of his unfaithful wife "deserved sympathy" (Soothill and Walby, 1991, p.47), or the case of the man who killed and buried his "nagging wife" (*Guardian*, 29 October 1999), yet women still appear to be shown less mercy in comparison to men. The *Sun* continues to mobilise familiar spirals of representations concerning domestic violence, making moral judgements resulting in an ideologically skewed picture of blame, perpetrators and victims.

News media have the power to transmit information to consumers and inform public opinion in the process suggesting that, while the media appear to be part of the problem of distortion and misunderstanding, they can be part of the solution to tackling domestic violence too (Gillespie et al., 2013). Although domestic violence will not be eradicated with the cessation of misleading media coverage alone, it is essential that media content continues to be critically analysed if the causes of domestic violence, sanctioning of privatised abuse and reinforcement of violent culture are to be challenged and changed.

Future research could examine whether the ongoing debate around press regulation will affect UK newspaper coverage of gendered issues like domestic violence. Furthermore, finding out from victims and from the general public their views about the representation of this issue by the

newspapers would make an important research contribution, as would an action research study in which journalists too would participate alongside victim survivors and their welfare organisations.

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Sun (25 November 2011). 'Kate body found'.

Sun (8 December 2011). 'Dad killed kids to 'spite' his wife'.

Sun (15 December 2011). 'Teenage domestic violence laws plan'.

Sun (12 March 2012). 'Kirsty bashes Tyrone; Shock Corrie plot tackles domestic abuse on men'.

Sun (25 May 2012). 'Wife killer jury "right"'.

Sun (20 June 2012). 'I beat my hubby like Corrie's Tyrone'.

Sun (26 June 2012). 'Ex-cop admits he murdered mum of two'.

Sun (24 July 2012). 'Killer wife facing life'.

Sun (1 August 2012). 'Killer wife given life'.

Sun (14 August 2012). 'BBQ dad 'killed 6 over wife's affair'.

Sun (29 August 2012). 'If a man hits you once, he'll keep doing it if he thinks he can get away with it'.

Sun (4 September 2012). 'Purple sex toy, duct tape, hard drive, cable ties and a sheet covered in blood'.

Sun (7 September 2012). 'Teenage football star admits murdering girlfriend, 15'.

Sun (2 October 2012). 'Hyde Park IRA bomb hero kills his kids then takes own life'.

Sun (25 October 2012). 'Why it's never okay to hit a woman'.

Sun (12 November 2012). 'Woman who drugged lover's beer then smothered him in bed is jailed for life'.

Sun (15 November 2012). 'Why 2pm is a vital time for abuse victims'.

Sun (28 November 2012). 'Expose the tyrants of child protection'.

Sun (31 December 2012). 'Man kills lover and is found hanged'.

*Sun (*15 February 2013). '3 shots. Screams. Silence. 3 more shots'.

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Table I: Number of online articles citing the term 'domestic violence' for specified year(s)

Time span	***Guardian***	***Sun***
2000-2012	3975	695
2001	156	5
2002	203	20
2011	472	79
2012	544	111