“It’s Pure Panic”: The Portrayal of Residential Care in American Newspapers during COVID-19

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Photo: Grant Hindsley. Apr 18, 2020. New York Times.
“They’re Death Pits: Virus Claims at Least 7,000 Lives in U.S. Nursing Homes”
Allen, L.D. & Ayalon, L. (forthcoming). “‘It’s Pure Panic:’ The portrayal of residential care in American newspapers during COVID-19.” The Gerontologist.
Quick Background

Dramatic increase in high-visibility news coverage of residential LTC since COVID-19  
(Miller et al., 2020)

As of Sept 17, in the US:

- 8% of total state cases (46 states)
- 41% of total state deaths (47 states)

are in LTC facilities  
(KFF, 2020)
Residential Care in the News

‘It’s Pure Panic’: A Wrenching Wait at Nursing Home Where Coronavirus Took Hold
Mar 4, 2020. New York Times.

Nursing Homes Becoming Islands of Isolation Amid ‘Shocking’ Mortality Rate
Mar 10, 2020. New York Times.
Aim

to understand how residential care has been portrayed in the newspaper media through the initial months of the coronavirus outbreak in the U.S.

Jan 21 – May 8, 2020

Photo: Eduardo Munoz Alvarez, Getty Images. May 7, 2020. “Playing Russian Roulette: Nursing Homes Told to Take the Infected.” NYT.
Methods

3 leading American newspapers; LexisNexis database

New York Times

USA Today

New York Post

398 → screening for duplicates & relevancy → 54 total articles

Photo: William Westhoven. Mar 26, 2020.
“All 94 residents of N.J. nursing home presumed positive.” USA Today.
Methods

Discourse forms social structures, but is also formed by social structures

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

specific focus on power in social discourses that produce and sustain social inequality

(Richardson, 2007; Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2015)

**Thematic Analysis**

(Braun & Clarke, 2012)

"At least 2,300 nursing homes infected; CDC’s coronavirus count vastly underestimated." USA Today.
Findings

1. Residents’ voices are excluded, and their experiences are replaced by those of their family members.

2. Residential care is a shockingly dangerous setting.

3. Residential care is deceptive and problematic.
Residents’ experiences are superseded by family members’
“as disturbing as the prospect is for elders, it is often scarier for their children” (NYT; D13).
“I can’t visit my mom in her nursing home; Guilt, second-guessing haunt my days and nights” (USA; D20).

Residents are Entirely Helpless and Stereotyped
“diaper,” “sitting ducks,” “elderly”
(2) “A Disaster Waiting to Happen”

**Dangerous**

“coronavirus in a nursing home can be like fire through dry grass” (NYP; D23)

“deadly petri dishes” (46:5 NYT)

**Shocking**

the virus was said to “stagger” (NYT; D46:2), “startle” (NYT; D6), and knock staff “completely off guard” (NYT; D52)

**The Kirkland Symbol**

Photo: Ted S. Warren, AP. Mar 14, 2020. “Trump Administration Is Relaxing Oversight of Nursing Homes.” NYT.
Ambiguity & Skepticism

“Shrouded in Suspicion”

“I still question what’s going on in that nursing home,” Ms. de los Angeles said.” (NTY, D1).

Blame followed political leaning

i.e. The New York Post (R) and Governor Cuomo (D)

Photo: Seth Wenig, AP. Apr 18, 2020. New York Times.

“They’re Death Pits: Virus Claims at Least 7,000 Lives in U.S. Nursing Homes"
Discussion & Conclusion

Journalistic discourse contributes to common knowledge of reality in residential care.

repetition of alarming language and shocking stories create panic and fearmonger.

Mistrust of the industry. Blame prevents holistic understanding.

An illusion of inclusion.
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