

Front Page Leveson: Papers lead with freedom the day after the Report

The Report of the Leveson Inquiry contained severe criticism of press behaviour as well as proposals for a new self-regulatory mechanism. The next day, the country's newspapers faced the prospect of reporting the criticism of their own industry and proposals key to their future business. The LSE Media Policy Project has examined how the national newspapers covered and reacted to the story. We have examined headlines, news stories and pictures in national newspapers. In this first preview we outline some of our findings on the front pages.

Newspapers, whilst reporting news, can potentially exercise influence by **agenda setting**; selecting from the available news some particular issues or events to cover, thus setting the agenda for future discussion. The choice of headlines and of front page coverage can be an important tool in setting the agenda for debate. Therefore one thing we were interested in was the extent to which reporting focused on criticism of journalists' behaviour or on the proposals made in the report. Looking at the front page stories we found six out of the nine papers carrying stories that at least started on the front page focused on the proposals made and the Prime Minister's reaction to it. According to the headlines the PM's reaction was the main news of the day. Only three of the front page stories seemed balanced on both the admonishments of the press and the proposal.

Another way newspaper can influence matters is by **framing**: this is the presentation of news or facts whilst offering a particular interpretative normative frame, or criteria for evaluation of those facts. Given that the agenda was clearly going to focus on the recommendations of the report, framing is of interest in terms of potential bias or the deployment of newspaper power to influence the debate.

The LSE MPP team first looked at the coverage of the Leveson Report and identified the dominant frames being used. A coding frame was then designed to help coders recognize those frames and tested, allowing for the possibility that in some cases none may be applicable. The three frames were:

Freedom of the Press – Newspapers framed the story in terms of threats to and defence of freedom of the press and those involved as falling on one side or another of a battle on this issue.

Redress for Victims – Newspaper framed the story in terms of the struggle of the victims of phone hacking for vindication and for more protection in the future and portrayed those involved as supporting or disappointing the victims.

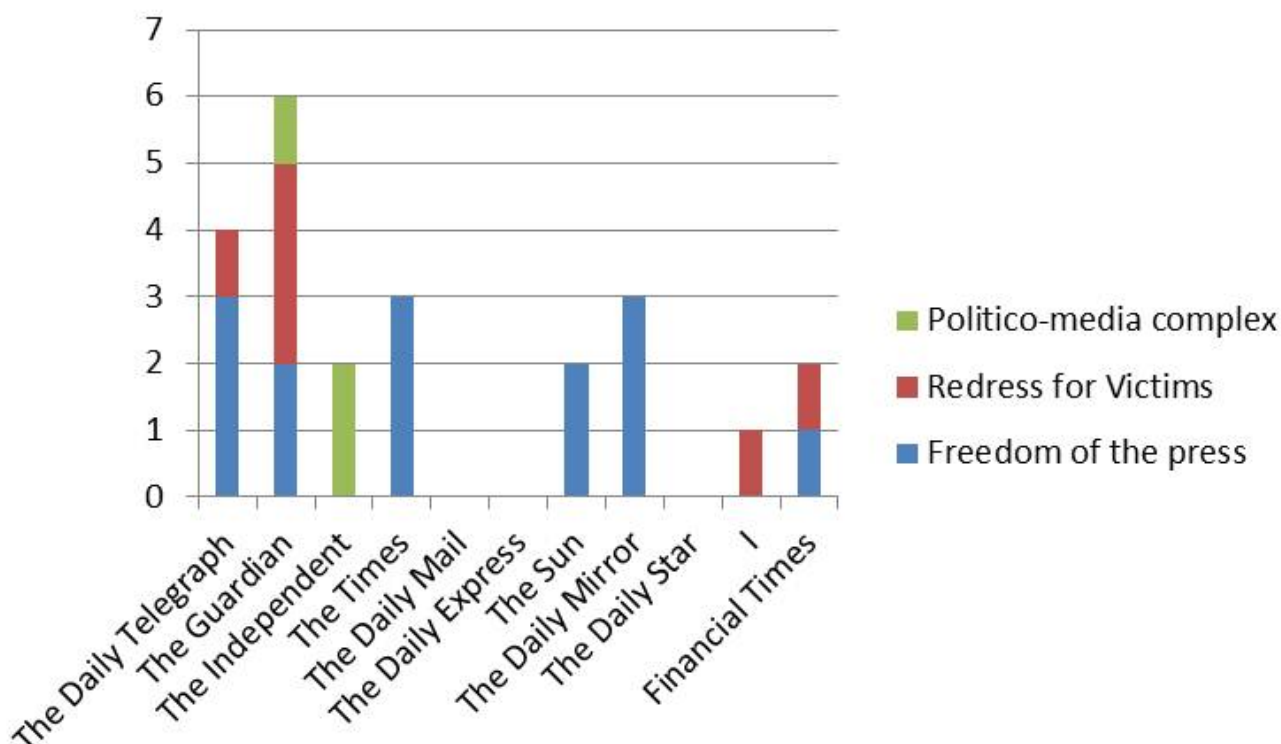
Politico-Media Complex – Newspapers framed the story in terms of media power and large media corporations' interests and connections between politics and media.

Each newspaper was examined by two researchers working separately to ascertain the extent to which the various aspects of their coverage (story content, headlines, pictures used, etc.) reflected these different frames. A third researcher was brought in where a discrepancy appeared between the first two. Here we present the findings on the front pages only. The Inquiry's Report and reaction to it were the main story on seven of the 11 newspapers studied and on two front pages it appeared in a side bar with a photo and some text. *The Daily Mail* only carried a small headline referring to internal pages and *The Daily Star* had no mention of the story on the front page. The freedom of the press frame was most evident in the papers with the victims frame coming in



second. However, as can be seen in the table below, some paper's front pages exclusively framed the story in only one way.

How evident was each frame on the front pages 30 November 2012 (from 0-3)?



The Times, The Sun and the Daily Mirror framed the story in terms of freedom of the press. The Guardian's front page was the most mixed, which could be attributed to the paper having more content about the Leveson story on the front page. However, The Times' front page was also entirely devoted to the Inquiry's report and ensuring reaction with photos, text, and other content; yet its framing was entirely as a freedom of the press issue. Only the Guardian had a photo of victims of phone hacking, the Dowlers, on its front page. All other front page photos were either of Lord Brian Leveson or politicians, mostly David Cameron.

Based on this analysis of front pages and front page stories, it seems that on the day after the Inquiry released its report, the press have largely framed the story as one about the future of their freedom and focused the agenda on what is next for press regulation, rather than criticism of the press. They did not appear to address significantly the failings of the industry pointed out in the Report in their front page coverage. Could this be a sign of acceptance of Leveson's criticism? Or is it an attempt to divert discussion from their own misbehaviour towards the defence of their freedom?

*This is the second in a series of posts looking at the way the press have covered the Leveson Report. The **first looked at editorials** and in the next post we will look more closely at the inside pages and overall coverage of the Leveson story.*

This research was conducted with Media Policy Project Interns: Alexandra Kulikova, Helene De Chalambert, Jacopo Genovese; Nick Davies, Paula Brito, and Ying Huang. Thanks also to Ellen Helsper.

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