

Will They Own Up to the Habit of Phone Hacking?



Newspaper buzz around the Leveson Inquiry has died down as everyone waits for the Lord Justice to release his report, but findings from research conducted by LSE alum Suzie Blaszkiewicz could provide a preview of how the sector will respond to Lord Leveson's criticisms.

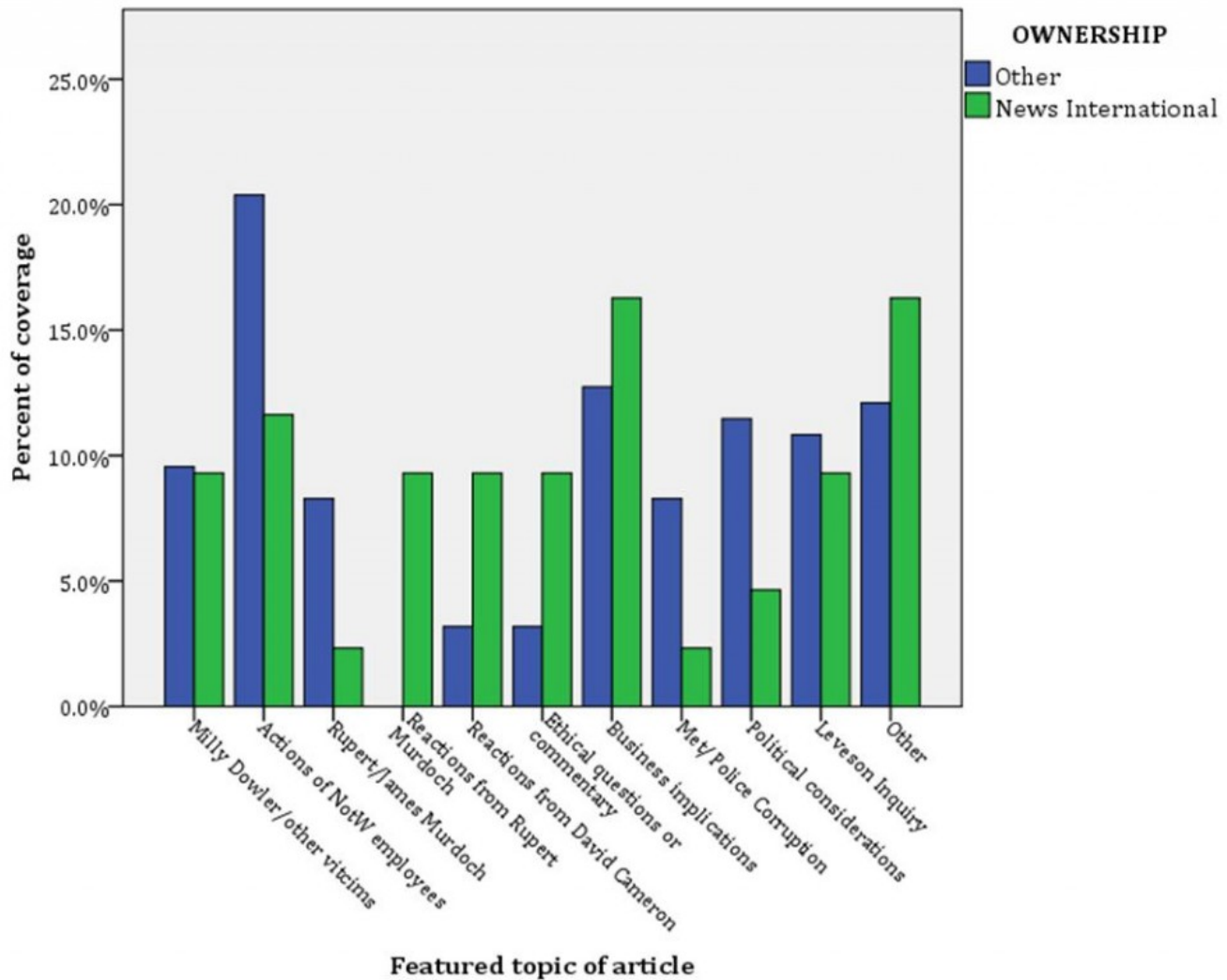
A lack of consensus over the appropriate regulatory approach for the print industry may be expected, but my recent analysis of press viewpoints at the height of the News of the World phone-hacking scandal last year shows just how polarised the sector can be on what the actual problems are. While News International titles saw phone-hacking as an industry-wide misdemeanour, other UK dailies insisted that it was strictly an internal practice in Murdoch's now-defunct News of the World.

This research, conducted as a Master's dissertation at the LSE, looked at how phone hacking scandal coverage varied between News International titles and other major UK newspapers. It analysed 200 articles from six different UK dailies—the *Times* and the *Sun*, both owned by News International, as well as the *Guardian*, the *Telegraph*, the *Daily Mirror*, and the *Daily Mail*—published in July 2011, the month that the scandal broke, during which allegations were flying and new details emerging daily.^[1] Specifically, it examined both broad themes and specific topics of each article to shed light on implications of guilt based on alleged knowledge of or responsibility for phone-hacking among key players involved in the scandal.^[2]

The findings confirm the influence that press ownership can have on news coverage. Overall, it found that Murdoch-owned UK papers only published half as many articles on the scandal compared with their counterparts in the country. The *Sun* and the *Times* released 11 and 32, respectively, while competing tabloids the *Daily Mirror* published 25, the *Daily Mail* 34, and broadsheets the *Daily Telegraph* came out with 41 and the *Guardian* 57.

While topic distribution was relatively similar across all newspapers, the latter group was also more likely to focus on NotW employee behaviour prior to the scandal, a feature in 20.4% of articles. News International publications instead dwelt on the implications of the scandal for its parent firm News Corp a featured topic in 16.3% of articles.

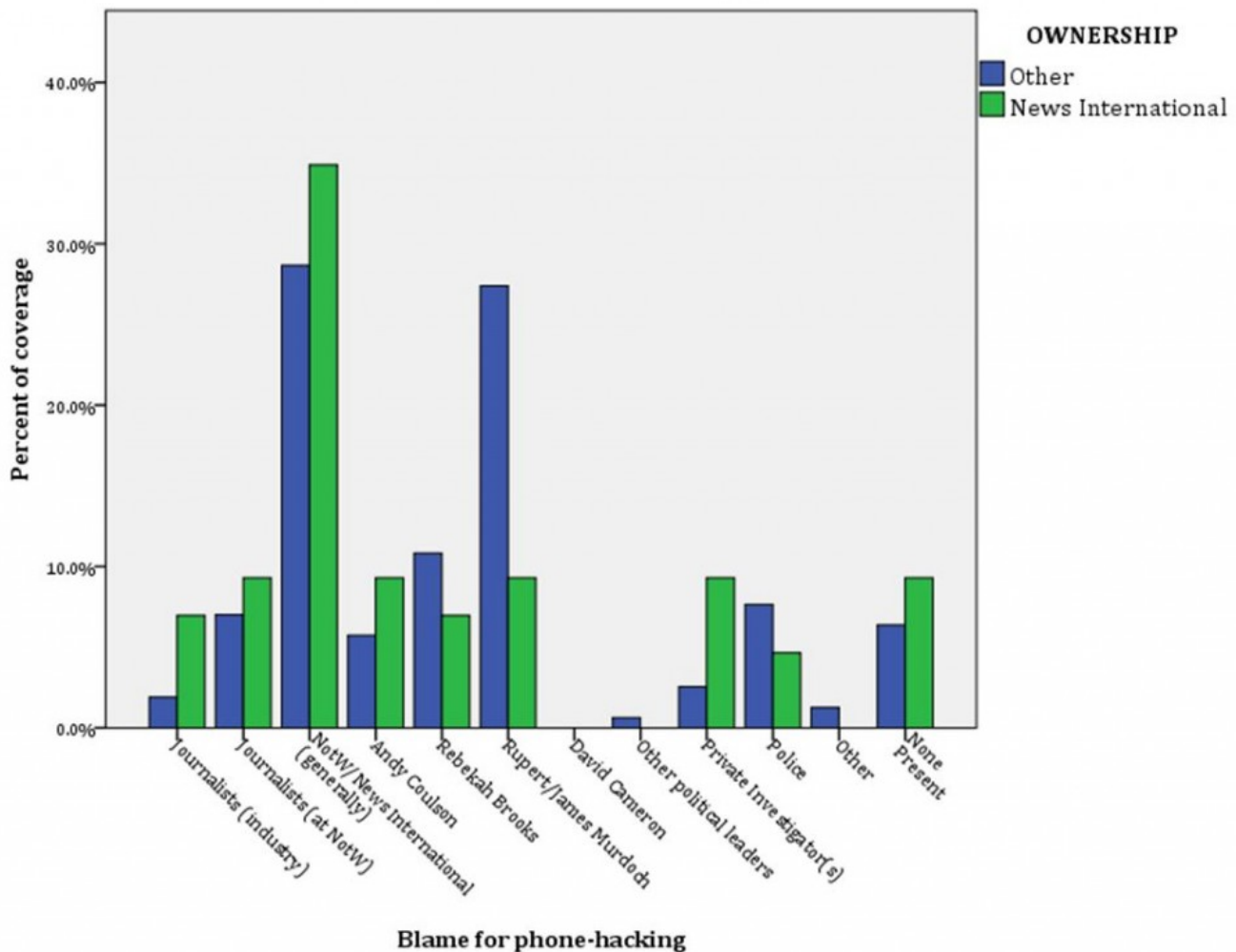
**Featured topic of article:
News International vs. 'Other' newspapers**



Theme distribution was again relatively similar, with both groups of newspapers focusing roughly 45% of their coverage on criminal behaviour. Notably, however, News International newspapers were much more likely than their competitors to highlight the scandal's moral and ethical aspects (in 20.9% of News International articles, compared to only 12.7% in other publications) and reflect on questionable practices within the entire UK press industry.

A major point of contention was the implication of guilt. While the majority of all coded articles (34.9% for News International newspapers, 28.7% for others) named *News of the World* as the sole culprit in the scandal, non-News International dailies just as readily pointed the finger directly at News Corp CEO Rupert Murdoch and his son James whose leadership styles were blamed for the continued practice of phone-hacking in 27.4% of articles. The Times and the Sun, on the other hand, were more inclined to distribute blame among various News of the World employees, and imply that other newspapers also hacked people's phones.

Blame for phone-hacking: News International vs. 'Other' newspapers



These findings suggest competing press outlets used a 'scandal' framework to focus specifically on transgressions at the *News of the World*, subsequently diverting attention away from their own possible involvement in the practice. News International newspapers had a decidedly broader focus of coverage, citing the possibility of industry-wide misconduct while withholding negative comments about its top-level management. With a new Murdoch publication added to the UK press landscape and formal charges being brought against former *News of the World* employees, it would be interesting to see which viewpoint will be given credence by Lord Leveson's recommendations for future press regulation.

[1] The sample of 200 articles were taken from every second day of coverage beginning the day the scandal broke, July 5th 2011, up until July 29th 2011. Articles were gathered using LexisNexis and key search terms including 'News of the World', 'phone-hacking' and 'Rupert Murdoch'.

[2] Articles were coded for 20 different variables, the most significant being the 'topic' and 'theme' of the article, as well as implicated 'blame' for phone-hacking practices. These variables were then cross-tabulated with the variable 'newspaper ownership', categorized as either News International or other.

