

# CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA RESEARCH

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# Journalistic metadiscourse: Press coverage of media policy debates

*Binakuromo Ogbebor*

## Abstract

This chapter explores how the paradigm repair strategy of minimization is used in media policy debates and the implications of such coverage for democracy. Studies on press coverage of media policy assert that mainstream newspapers in Britain trivialize and denigrate efforts to ensure press accountability, in a bid to protect their self-interest (Putnis, 2000: 110; McChesney, 2008: 451; Stiegler, 2013: 137). It is this trivialization and denigration of attempts to reform media policy that are referred to as a strategy of minimization. In this chapter, how the press used a strategy of minimization in the press reform debate that stemmed from the *News of the World (NotW)* phone-hacking scandal and the Leveson Inquiry is taken as representative of how the press uses a strategy of minimization in media policy debates. Using the methods of content and discourse analyses, this study found that strategies of minimization manifested in the following ways: 1. Playing down press reform efforts that originate from external stakeholders; 2. Playing down institutions set up to bring about press reform; 3. Playing down the scandal that led to a call for press reform; 4. In a discourse of “unfair” treatment of the press; and 5. Critiquing critics of the press’s position. The chapter argues that the press’s use of the paradigm repair strategy of minimization in its coverage of media policy debates promotes inequality and reduces the quality of media policy debates, the result being the emergence of weak media policies that cannot guarantee a democratic public sphere.

**Keywords:** public sphere; media policy; journalistic metadiscourse; media and democracy; *News of the World*

## 1. Introduction

Previous studies on journalistic metadiscourse have pointed out that media coverage of the press is often characterised by certain paradigm repair strategies (Carlson, Berkowitz, 2014). The term paradigm repair was used by Bennet et al. (1985) to describe “how journalistic self-criticism protects existing paradigms rather than confronts entrenched deficiencies and contradictions” (cited in Carlson, 2015: 4). Studies on journalistic metadiscourse have identified four strategies employed by the media to protect an existing paradigm. They include “threat to the paradigm”, self-assertion, minimization and individualization (Cecil, 2002; Thomas, Finne-man 2014). This chapter is concerned with only one of the four strategies, the strategy of minimization. Minimization refers to a trend in journalistic metadiscourse whereby the media downplay a wrongdoing or an alleged wrongdoing as part of their efforts to protect a press paradigm. Studies have argued that mainstream newspapers trivialize and denigrate efforts to ensure press accountability, in a bid to protect their self-interest (Putnis, 2000: 110; McChesney, 2008: 451; Christopher, 2007: 42).

My Research Question is, therefore, “How did the British press use a strategy of minimization, if at all, in the media policy debate that stemmed from the *News of the World* phone-hacking scandal and the Leveson Inquiry? And what are the implications of this manner of usage for democracy?” Studies on the media’s role in a democracy are often premised on normative theories of the press. The normative theory that served as the framework for my analysis is the concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Fraser, 1992). The normative expectation is that the media should serve as a democratic public sphere, one that gives voice to all parties involved in a debate irrespective of their argument or status in society. The exclusion, suppression or marginalisation of any segment of the population [of those involved] from or in a debate will run contrary to “democracy’s claim of universalism” (Dahlgren, 1995: 36).

## 2. Methodology

The main method used for this research is content analysis. In content analysis, textual components (example words, phrases, images etc.) relevant to the findings of one’s research are counted, recorded and then calculated with the use of statistical methods (Krippendorff, 1980/2004 as cited in Zelizer, 2004: 115). The understanding is that the results when analysed can provide answers to the research question(s). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used as a supplementary method to my content analysis. I used principles from Norman Fairclough’s approach

to CDA, because they make room for the analysis of power relationships in communicative discourse in relation to wider social and cultural structures (Fairclough, 1995a; Wodak, Meyer 2009: 12). CDA was used to explicate the findings of my content analysis in order to conduct an in-depth analysis of how the press used the strategy of minimisation in its coverage of the media policy debate that followed the *NoTW* phone hacking scandal.

### 2.1 Research sample

My study sample comprises all news articles on the debate that arose from the *NotW* phone-hacking scandal and the Leveson inquiry in six of the top ten British national newspapers (based on combined print and online readership figures for April 2011 to March 2012 – Source: NRS PADD, 2012): two newspapers from each category of the main newspaper classification in the UK. From the broadsheet (hard or ‘serious-minded’ news content) category, I examined the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Guardian*; from the mid-market (‘less serious’) category, I studied the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*; and from the tabloids (celebrity, sensational and entertainment-style news) I looked at *The Sun* and the *Daily Mirror*. My unit of analysis consists of all news articles on the media policy debate that arose from the *NotW* phone-hacking scandal and the Leveson inquiry, as contained in *The Sun*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mirror* from the 14 November 2011 (when the hearing began at the Leveson Inquiry) to 14 November 2013 (the aftermath of the Privy Council’s approval of a Royal Charter on press regulation). This 2-year period falls within the time frame when media coverage of the press reform debate was at its peak in the UK (Macfarlane, Torpey 2012; *Independent*, 2013).

### 2.2 Data collection and coding

My study sample was obtained from Nexis UK, an electronic archive service with full text access to all UK national newspapers. A total of 870 news articles were examined: 323 from the *Guardian*, 199 from the *Daily Telegraph*, 173 from the *Daily Mail*, 28 from the *Daily Express*, 96 from *The Sun* and 51 from the *Daily Mirror*. To deal with the differences in the number of news articles per paper, measurements were mostly based on percentage within the paper rather than a percentage of the whole sample. A coding sheet was designed to enable me to input data for my content analysis. Thirty stories randomly selected from the study sample were tested by two trained postgraduate student coders. The result of my intercoder reli-

ability test as computed by ReCal2 (dfreelon.org) was Krippendorff's alpha 0.822. This high level of agreement helps to guarantee that this research can be replicated, and if this is done, similar results can be achieved. My findings are discussed in the rest of the chapter.

### 3. The pizza Charter

Following negotiations that led to the final drafting of a Royal Charter on press regulation which saw the charter being underpinned by statute, the British press (apart from the *Guardian*), obviously displeased by the outcome, sought to undermine the decision by portraying the meeting as unserious and unfair: "Unfair" because, according to the newspapers, Hacked Off, the campaign group for victims of press abuse, was invited to the meeting and the press was not (Forsyth, 2012: 12); and "Unserious" because, according to them, the meeting took place around 2 a.m. and they had pizza for refreshment. The emerging journalistic metadiscourse in all newspapers, apart from *Guardian*, undermined the meeting because of the resultant Royal Charter underpinned by statute. As if in collaboration, one with another, they all were careful to point out that the meeting was over a pizza meal:

This week, the Queen will be told to approve a shabby Royal Charter, stitched up at a secret 2am pizza party in Ed Miliband's office by party leaders and Hacked Off vigilantes (Kavanagh, 2013c: 8 – The Sun).

No wonder the New York Times, perhaps the world's most respected newspaper, opposed this state Royal Charter, agreed in a late night pizza stitch-up by politicians and a pressure group, with the press excluded (Daily Mirror, 2013b: 8).

To date, there has been no compromise at all. The Royal Charter currently before Parliament is unchanged from the deal agreed by Mr Grant's friends over pizza in March (Slack, 2013: n.p. – Daily Mail).

But the useless article who, munching a pizza at 2am in a closed room with the above, gave 300 years of press freedom away with a whimper was David Cameron's "strategic adviser" Oliver Letwin, another Old Etonian and apparently, a born capitulator (Forsyth, 2013: 15 – Daily Express).

They were cobbled together late at night over pizza and Kit-Kats with no thought for the legal and constitutional issues involved (Mason, 2013: 27 – Daily Telegraph).

By playing down the meeting, the press sought to undermine the decision reached in it and warned of the threat such a decision posed to press freedom, and that it would ultimately prove harmful to democracy. As with most other arguments advanced by these newspapers (*The Sun*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror*), the *Guardian* newspaper condemned their coverage of the negotiations. The *Guardian* columnist/ City University Professor of Journalism, Roy Greenslade published a rebuttal by the Hacked Off's Executive Director, Brian Cathcart, in which Prof. Cathcart dismissed the pizza charter story as "another silly myth". Cathcart stated:

The royal charter that was approved on 18 March was not thrown together late at night. It is based on the recommendations and findings of the Leveson report ... He adds: "No pizza was served, or at least we saw none. We gave the view that our supporters, and notably the victims, would welcome the agreed cross-party charter... ." Parliament's royal charter was not thrown together; the press was not excluded from the process of creating it; pizzas were not served and Hacked Off was invited in afterwards to honour the prime minister's promise to hear the views of victims. (Cathcart, 2013 *as cited by* Greenslade, 2013)

By labelling the meeting a pizza and Kit-Kat gathering, the press sought to delegitimise the Royal Charter on press self-regulation by representing the negotiations that led to its final drafting as unserious and unfair. Another way the press used a strategy of minimization to advance their position in the press reform debate was by describing measures aimed at reforming the press as revenge. How they did this will be the focus of the next section.

#### 4. Press freedom under attack: politicians seek revenge?

"Snub the press charter ... it's a monstrous folly by politicians out for revenge: Boris slams gag on newspapers" is a headline from the *Daily Mirror* that summarises the discourse of minimization we shall discuss in this section (McTague, 2013: 24). Studies have shown that attempts by politicians to reform the press have often been interpreted as "political self-interest" (Putnis, 2000: 110; McChesney, 2008: 451). Table 1 shows that this representation of proposals for press reform as political self-interest or its equivalent (e.g. retribution, payback, revenge etc.) was done most frequently in the *Daily Telegraph* (11.3% of its sample) followed by *The Sun* (9.2%); *Daily Express* (6.7%); *Daily Mirror* (5.8%); and *Daily Mail* (4.6%). It appeared least in the *Guardian* newspaper (3.4%). The result reveals that this minimization strategy featured more in the commercial press than in the *Guardian* newspaper, which claims to function as a Trust. By representing statutory under-

pinning as a revenge tool, the commercial press sought to delegitimise the Royal Charter, the purpose possibly being to garner public support in its debate against press regulation that is backed by statute.

**Table 1: Description of measures to check press misconduct: minimization**

Description	Guardian	Daily Mail	Daily Mirror	Daily Telegraph	Daily Express	The Sun	Total
Independent press self-regulation	31.1%	6.9%	5.8%	7.7%	11.1%	8.5%	16.8%
Tough press regulation	12.4%	16.2%	10.1%	13.4%	20.0%	12.4%	13.4%
Chilling effect on investigative journalism	6.5%	14.6%	15.9%	15.5%	8.9%	9.8%	10.6%
Threat to press freedom	20.2%	30.8%	26.1%	30.3%	28.9%	39.9%	27.8%
State control or slippery slope to press-licensing	8.6%	11.5%	11.6%	10.6%	17.8%	13.1%	10.9%
Draconian or punitive	3.9%	10.0%	10.1%	3.5%	4.4%	5.9%	5.6%
Retribution	<b>3.0%</b>	<b>4.6%</b>	<b>5.8%</b>	<b>11.3%</b>	<b>6.7%</b>	<b>9.2%</b>	<b>6.1%</b>
Leveson-compliant	11.6%	5.4%	14.5%	6.3%	0.0%	0.0%	7.4%
Other	2.4%	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%	2.2%	1.3%	1.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The newspapers sought to undermine the Royal Charter by interpreting the move by politicians to underpin the Royal Charter with a statute as one born out of a revenge for the press's exposure of the MPs expenses scandal (Porter, 2011: 4; *Daily Mirror*, 2013b: 8; Forsyth, 2013: 15), as can be seen in the headline: "MPs want revenge on press over expenses" (*Daily Mail* 2013: n.p.). The MPs expenses scandal came to light in 2009, when the *Daily Telegraph* published uncensored leaked information from MPs' expenses files that showed that some members of the British Parliament had misused their privilege to claim some allowances (*BBC News*, 2009). The news sparked public outrage and led to resignations, prosecutions, repayment of expenses and apologies by some MPs (Crace, 2014: 64). All

newspapers apart from the *Guardian* argued that if the Royal Charter was backed by statute, “journalists would live in fear that if they angered MPs – by exposing another expenses scandal, for example – they could get revenge by making the rules even more draconian” (*Daily Mail*, 2013: n.p.).

This use of a retribution theme, in the press coverage of the debate that followed the phone-hacking scandal, affirms assertions made by previous studies on how the press represent debates about themselves (Putnis, 2000). McChesney (2008: 451) is of the view that such coverage is born out of a refusal by media owners to be held accountable to authority. Media magnates possess enormous power as a result of weak press regulatory systems, power which even political leaders are wary of, because it can be used to mar political careers (Papandrea, 2000: 12 as cited in Putnis, 2000: 105). Such “freedom” earns them not only money but also influence. Warnings of retribution or political self-interest serve as defence mechanisms to protect this enormous power. My study also found that the press, apart from the *Guardian*, attempted to denigrate the Leveson Inquiry, its report and other proposals to reform the press, by promoting discourses that questioned the legitimacy and relevance of the inquiry. The next section examines how they used the paradigm strategy of minimization to do this.

## 5. Leveson Inquiry: not objective, not neutral

Previous studies on the coverage of media policy debates argue that during debates on press policy, the press resists reforms aimed at making it accountable to the public interest by portraying institutions given the responsibility for such reforms as incompetent, illegitimate or lacking the moral justification to reform the press (Putnis, 2000: 110; Pickard, 2015: 177-189). In the press reform debate that followed the phone-hacking scandal, such institutions include the Leveson Inquiry and its report, political leaders and the Royal Charter on press self-regulation.

Table 2 reveals that the use of this discourse of minimization, that described the Leveson Inquiry as illegitimate and unfair, featured in 7.1 per cent of the study sample. It was expressed more prominently in the commercial press appearing in 18.4 per cent of the *Daily Mail*, 15.2 per cent of *The Sun*, 5.6 per cent of the *Daily Express*, 10.3 per cent of the *Daily Mirror* and 3.9 per cent of the *Daily Telegraph*, as against 0.5 per cent of the *Guardian*. This discourse of minimization questioned the objectivity and neutrality of the inquiry. One way it did this was by alleging that there were “potential conflicts of interest” involving some members of Lord Justice Leveson’s team of assessors.

**Table 2: Description of Leveson Inquiry: minimization**

Description	Guardian	Daily Mail	Daily Mirror	Daily Telegraph	Daily Express	The Sun	Total
A threat to press freedom	20.5%	28.9%	28.2%	28.6%	33.3%	38.0%	27.1%
Harmful to UK's reputation	2.3%	3.9%	5.1%	7.8%	5.6%	12.0%	5.4%
A chilling effect on journalism	8.7%	17.1%	20.5%	26.0%	22.2%	15.2%	15.0%
A fair deal	12.8%	3.9%	2.6%	11.7%	0.0%	0.0%	7.9%
Solution to efforts to curb press excesses	48.9%	15.8%	20.5%	13.0%	16.7%	8.7%	28.4%
Illegitimate/ unfair to the press	0.5%	18.4%	10.3%	3.9%	5.6%	15.2%	7.1%
Anti-democratic	3.7%	9.2%	10.3%	7.8%	16.7%	9.8%	7.1%
Other	2.7%	2.6%	2.6%	1.3%	0.0%	1.1%	2.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

This discourse questioned the fairness and impartiality of the inquiry, based on the fact that three of its six assessors had “direct or indirect links” with Common Purpose, a charity which the papers alleged had links to Hacked Off, the campaign organisation that represented victims of press abuse and was advocating tighter press control (*Daily Mail*, 2012; Kavanagh 2013b: 8). In a 3030-word article headlined “A nuclear bomb that dropped on the press – and the motley crew who seized their chance”, the *Daily Mail* attempted to establish that Sir David Bell, a member of Lord Justice Leveson’s team of assessors, had links that meant there was a conflict of interest that should delegitimise the Leveson Inquiry (*Daily Mail*: 2012). The details of the alleged links are that “Sir David Bell is a co-founder of the Media Standards Trust, the group behind the Hacked Off campaign. He is also a trustee and former chairman of Common Purpose, a charity that runs leadership courses... .”

The other two Leveson Inquiry assessors were also linked to Common Purpose (Kavanagh 2013b: 8). By pointing out these direct and indirect links to Com-

mon Purpose, the papers used journalistic metadiscourse to discredit the Leveson Inquiry, portraying it as partial and a conspiracy to stifle press freedom. The following article from *The Sun* summarises the press's argument:

He [Sir David Bell] was a founder of Common Purpose, a shadowy organisation dedicated to curbing the Press. He helped set up the Media Standards Trust which virtually scripted Leveson proceedings, Hugh Grant's Hacked Off, and the disastrous Bureau of Investigative Journalism which led the BBC to falsely suggest Lord Alistair McAlpine was a paedophile. (Kavanagh 2013b: 8)

The *Guardian* newspaper (Wilby 2012: 30) carried a counter discourse relating to the allegations of conflicts of interest propagated by the other papers, particularly as these related to Sir David Bell. In an editorial with the headline "Cameron's dilemma: the press can still ruin careers: Coverage of the Leveson inquiry proves why the press must be reformed, but also shows the risk involved in doing so", the *Guardian* pointed out that such treatment given to Sir David Bell by the press was what might likely lead to statutory regulation of the press (Wilby 2012: 30). A similar article from the *Guardian*, with the headline "Laughable Daily Mail 'investigation' smears Leveson Inquiry assessor" (Greenslade 2012: n.p.), described the discourse advanced by the other papers as "a classic example of conspiracist innuendo"; "a farrago of distortion with added vilification". It then went on to deconstruct the argument, interpreting it as "prejudice against the Leveson Inquiry" (ibid.).

The journalistic metadiscourse on the media policy debate also accused politicians of spending too much time and resources on the Leveson Inquiry, to the detriment of "matters of higher social and economic importance". An example is an article published by *The Sun*, with the headline "Stop gagging the press and fix the economy; that's what you tell MPs" (Wood, 2012: 6). This discourse spelt out the cost of the Leveson Inquiry and tried to convince the public that a huge amount of taxpayers' money was being wasted on an unnecessary course, for political reasons (McKinstry, 2012: 14; Pettifor, 2012: 19). The reasons for this "expensive gagging of the press", the papers argued, were to cover up the politicians' messy role in the scandal as well as to stifle the press so that it could no longer challenge corrupt politicians; it was also represented as an emotional response to public outrage over a criminal offence whose penalty had already been provided for in law and, worse of all, their actions would (or had) dealt a terrible blow to press freedom: "THE absurdity of the entire Leveson business is that we never needed the expensive inquiry in the first place, for the behaviour of a minority of journalists was already against the law" (McKinstry, 2012: 14).

In line with Putnis' (2000: 105) claim that the press uses its privileged position as a disseminator of information to "pay back" any individual or institution that opposes its position in media policy debates, this study showed that in using a strategy of minimization, the press embarked on what can be described as character smears of those who opposed its position in the debate.

## 6. Character Smears: Critiquing critics

"Critiquing critics of the press" was one of the minimization techniques employed by the press to promote their views in the media policy debate that followed the *News of the World* phone-hacking scandal. It involved what can, arguably, be described as character smears of persons with views opposed to those of the press in the media policy debate. This character-smearing technique was used to cast a shadow of doubt on the integrity and legitimacy of the Leveson Inquiry. For instance, *The Sun* newspaper revealed what it referred to as the "Loverson scandal" and, based on it, much of the press contested the legitimacy of the Leveson Report (Chapman, 2013; *Daily Mirror*, 2013a: 2; Nash, Schofield, 2013: 2; McKinstry, 2013: 14). The "Loverson Scandal" came to light in April 2013, when *The Sun* newspaper carried a story alleging a love affair between David Sherborne, counsel to actor Hugh Grant and other victims of the *NoTW* phone-hacking scandal, and Carine Patry Hoskins, one of Leveson's team of advisers. The story disclosed that David Sherborne and Carine Hoskins spent a holiday together at the Greek Island of Santorini four months before the end of the inquiry (Nash, Schofield, 2013: 2). The pair later explained that they went on holiday together to discuss the possibility of a future relationship and decided against it, but changed their minds after the inquiry. Lord Justice Leveson (and much later, the Bar Standards Board) excused the action of Sherborne and Carine, saying it did not stand in the way of a credible report from the inquiry (*ibid.*).

The "Loverson scandal" was used by the press, with the exception of the *Guardian*, to de-legitimise the Leveson report and call for a revocation of the Royal Charter. The emerging discourse warned that the relationship between a lawyer in Leveson's team of advisers with the barrister representing campaigners for statutory regulation of the press shows the whole inquiry was not impartial but a "panto stitch-up": a conspiracy to stifle press freedom. The papers then went on to call for the Leveson report to be scrapped, as can be seen in this headline from the *Daily Mail*, "Calls for press regulation plan to be scrapped after revelations" (Seamark and Cohen 2013: 14). A similar article in *The Sun* reads "Press must withdraw from panto stitch-up" (Kavanagh, 2013a: 8).

The amount of money paid to the lawyers was also highlighted, probably to attract public contempt and reduce the public's acceptance of the Leveson report, as can be seen in the *Daily Telegraph's* headline, "Leveson lawyer who had affair was paid £220,000 of taxpayers' money" (Swinford, 2013: n.p.). Though the "Loverson Scandal" featured in the *Guardian*, the paper only went as far as mentioning that Lord Justice Leveson defended Carine Hoskins' involvement in the "developing relationship", saying that it did not compromise the Leveson report because she only played a minor role, such as proofreading the report (O'Carroll, Halliday, 2013: 17).

## 7. Conclusion

This chapter has shown how a strategy of minimization was used in the debate that stemmed from the phone-hacking scandal and the Leveson Inquiry. My findings revealed that this strategy was used in varying degrees by all newspapers in the study sample. It manifested as press disparagement of the Royal Charter, which they nicknamed the Pizza Charter; interpretations of press reform measures and proposals as decisions motivated by political self-interest; by delegitimising the Leveson inquiry – describing it as illegitimate and unfair; and by using a character-smear technique against supporters of stringent press reforms. The press's minimization of opposing views and their propagators in the debate affirm the assertion of previous studies that newspapers take advantage of their position as facilitators of the public sphere to trivialize and denigrate efforts at ensuring press accountability, in a bid to protect their self-interest (Putnis, 2000; McChesney, 2008; Pickard, 2015). This finding provides answers to the research question, "How did the British press use a strategy of minimization, if at all, in the media policy debate that arose from the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal and the Leveson Inquiry? And what are the implications of this manner of usage for democracy?"

My findings affirm the claim by previous studies that journalistic metadiscourse is highly defensive, characterised by a lack of self-critique and based on an ideology that is quick to claim its rights and highlight its importance, while refusing to be accountable to society (Carey, 1974; Eason, 1988; Thomas and Finne-man, 2014: 172; Haas, 2006 as cited in Carlson). I argue that the press's use of the paradigm repair strategy of minimisation in the coverage of media policy debates is an abuse of the press's gatekeeping powers. It promotes inequality in media policy debates, because other stakeholders with views considered to be against the press's interest are denigrated, the result being the emergence of weak media policies that cannot guarantee a democratic public sphere.

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### **Biography**

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