

Forget How We Got Here? Newspaper Coverage of the Royal Charter Deal

When Leveson published his **Report** at the end of November **our research** showed that the press presented the story as one mainly about freedom of the press and the struggle by hacking victims for vindication and protection in the future. Slightly less prominent but also present was a narrative of the politico-media complex or ties between big media and politicians. Our latest study of newspaper coverage before and after the Royal Charter agreement for implementing Leveson's recommendations showed that the struggle of the victims of press wrongdoings has all but disappeared from the story.

Newspapers can influence public debate by **framing**. This is the presentation of news or facts whilst offering a particular interpretative normative frame, or criteria for evaluation of those facts. In a way it tells readers what the story is about in a broader sense. The LSE MPP team^[i] looked at coverage of both the morning before the Royal Charter deal was announced, when a vote on a potential press law was expected, and the day after the announcement of the deal and its presentation in Parliament^[ii]. Whereas in our earlier work on newspaper coverage of the Leveson Report **three prominent frames** were identified, this time the team identified five frames:

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

Political Motivations – Newspapers framed the story as being about political motivations of party leaders and members to reach a solution referring to the standoff, the eventual deal in which all parties could claim victory, and the potentially divisive vote in Parliament.

Hacked Off Pressure – Newspapers framed the story in relation to the victims' group's pressure placed on political parties to strongly regulate the press. They refer to lobbying by famous hacking victims, (mainly Hugh Grant,) portray the group as influential and point out the presence of Hacked Off representatives in the negotiations (and the newspapers' absence).

Technical Implementation – Newspapers framed the story in terms of the technicalities of implementation, such as the practical implications of using a Royal Charter and/or problematic issues including whether it would apply to bloggers and new media platforms.

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

Two of these frames – freedom of the press and redress for victims – had appeared in the November coverage of the Leveson Report. The politico-media complex frame identified in that coverage was not evident in the Royal Charter coverage. However, by far the strongest frame the two days surrounding the Royal Charter deal was that of party politics and the strategic motivations of political leaders. The *Financial Times* and *The Times* lead-up coverage on the exclusively used this frame, and it remained the dominant one in their day two coverage. Yet this frame had little to do with Leveson's recommendations and the substance of the problem they sought to address.

Issues related to technical implementation of the recommendations were not prominent in the first day's coverage. Technical implementation was still only the second weakest frame after the deal and its details were released. On the second day, this frame received the strongest score **only** in *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* coverage focusing on the potential problems. This **may** **be** an

indication that the newspapers needed more time to analyse the complexity of the Charter and corresponding clauses.

The redress for victims frame was by far the weakest of the five appearing only slightly in five of ten papers covering the story before the deal and only three of eleven papers on the day after. Much more prominent in both days was a frame in which famous victims appeared in relation to the Hacked Off Campaign, mainly Hugh Grant and JK Rowling. This frame painted the story as being about the efforts of a powerful pressure group to influence politicians. The *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph* carried this narrative most prominently through both days particularly emphasizing on the second day Hacked Off's presence at the negotiations.

Overall the pressure group frame figured almost as prominently as the freedom of the press frame. *The Sun* had the highest score for freedom of the press frame on both days and on the second day it was joined by *The Daily Telegraph* and the *The Daily Mirror*. On the second day this frame did appear in all papers except the *Financial Times*, which stayed focused on the political motivations and consequences of reaching a deal.

The table below compares just the day after coverage of the Royal Charter deal with the day after coverage of the Leveson Report in terms of the extent to which the frames were evident on a scale of 0 to 3.

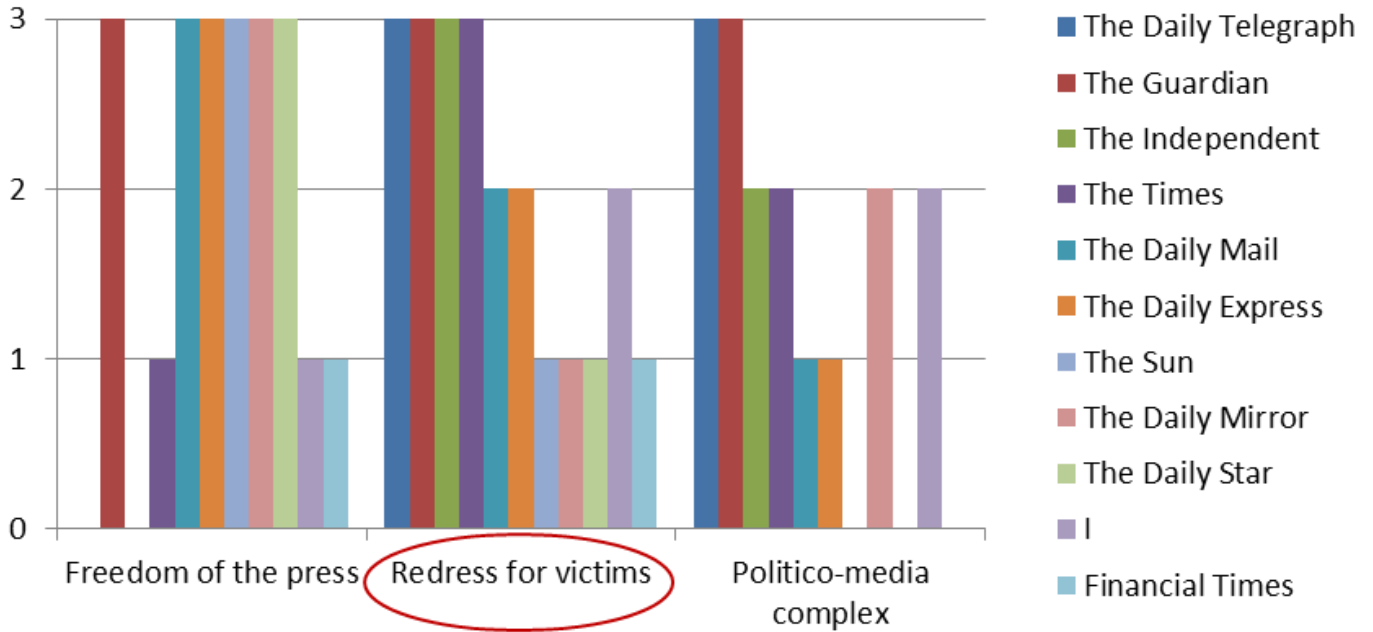
Of course these two news events are not the same and coverage is expected to differ. The Leveson Report contained the Inquiry's judgment on wrongdoings and relations between the press and both the police and politicians, in addition to Leveson's recommendations for a new way of regulating the press. The Royal Charter deal, however, was a political agreement that outlined the implementation of those recommendations. Nonetheless, the two events are intricately connected and can be seen as parts of the longer story that began when the incidence of phone hacking by *News of the World* led the Prime Minister to launch the Leveson Inquiry in July 2011.

What is evident in the comparison above is that while the freedom of the press frame remains relatively consistent, the frames related to how we got to this point in the first place have all but disappeared. The stories of suffering that led to the Inquiry being launched, including journalists pressured into unethical behavior by their bosses, barely figured in the coverage of the "solution" intended to address their plight. The issues of media power and connections to politics are no longer evident. In the coverage of the Leveson Report we found the newspapers to be quite balanced in their presentation of its harsh critique of their industry and controversial proposals for their future. They avoided solely focusing on their own defence. However in the coverage of the Royal Charter we found that there was less consistency across different papers, and that much of that earlier balance has been lost.

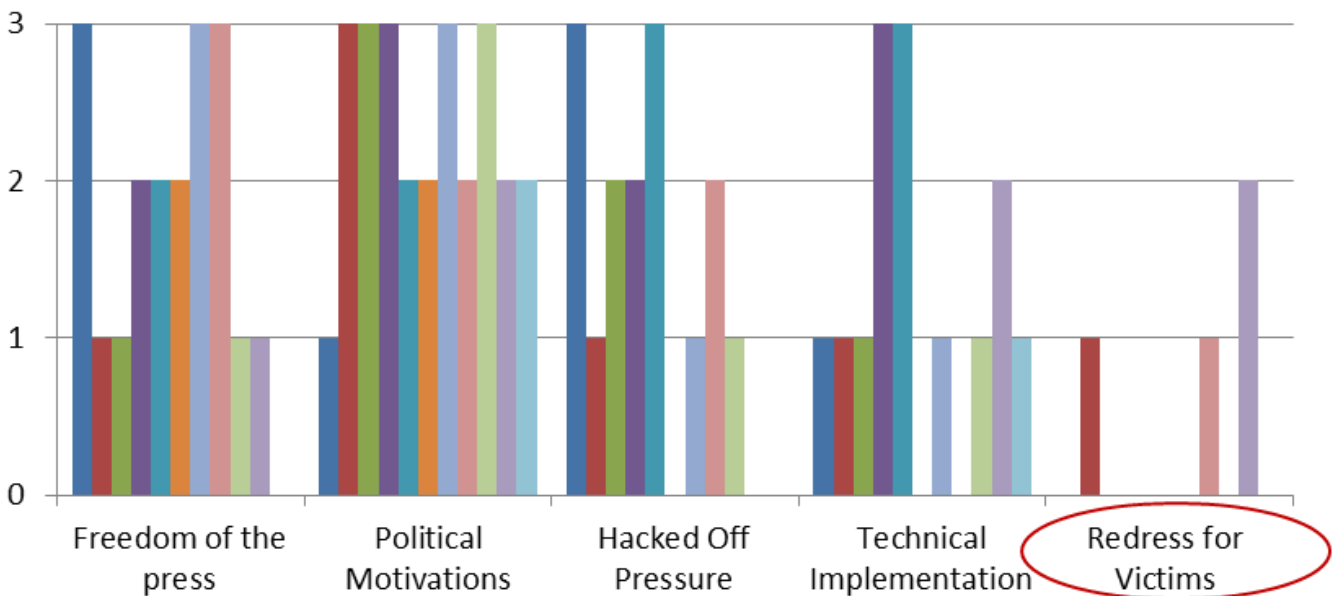
[i] The research team consisted of Matilde Beccatti, Maria Paula Brito, Sally Broughton Micova, H el ene De Chalambert, Jacopo Genovese, Ying Huang, Alexandra Kulikova, Paul Moura, and Damian Tambini.

[ii] The sample included all the daily national newspapers sold on 18 and 19 March, 2013. It consisted of 10 newspapers on the first day because there was no coverage in *The Daily Star* and 11 newspapers on the second day.

Frames used in coverage of Leveson Report, 30 Dec. 2012



Frames used in coverage of Royal Charter, 19 March 2013



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