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MEDIA OWNERSHIP AND THE EXPLOITATION OF MEDIA POWER FOR
CORPORATE SELF-INTEREST

A CASE STUDY OF NEWS INTERNATIONAL'S COVERAGE OF THE BBC AND
OFCOM

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Abstract

This work examines whether there is an agenda on the part of the newspapers owned by News International (Rupert Murdoch's UK media company) where reporting on matters with regards to the British Broadcasting Corporation and Ofcom. The agenda, examined via the content analysis of the relevant articles published in three Murdoch owned newspapers compared with three non-Murdoch owned newspapers of equal standing, proves an already existing theory discussed by the press and academics alike that Rupert Murdoch is particularly hostile towards both bodies; the BBC because it is a rival news provider, and a prominent, trusted voice in Britain; and Ofcom, because of its role as a regulator that has often stood between Murdoch and his commercial expansion plans.

The research answers three key questions: to what extent News International's newspapers seek to undermine organisations and competitors that in some way interfere with the company and/ or proprietors expansion plans; to what extent this agenda is manifested in News International's newspapers; and to what extent these compare with equal-standing, non-News International owned newspapers. The findings identify a clear bias in the reporting, demonstrating for the first time that Murdoch exploits his newspapers in pursuit of commercial self-interest.

This work demonstrates how the news agenda can be deliberately manipulated to suit the commercial self-interest of dominant owners, and provides evidence of the way in which proprietors such as Murdoch can exploit their dominance of media markets through the distorted or biased coverage of rival institutions or regulators in a bid to influence both popular opinion and the decisions of politicians and policymakers, thus undermining the democratic process.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my Grandfather, William Joseph Langworth.

Author's Declaration

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

Definitions

Rupert Murdoch's corporate entities: over the course of time, Rupert Murdoch's media companies have changed names. Throughout this thesis, where discussing his UK company, it is referred to as 'News International'. Only where appropriate and explicitly referenced by others has it been referred to as 'News UK'. References to 'News Corporation' or 'News Corp' are in relation to his US holdings.

Introduction

A free press is the cornerstone of any democracy. Even with the advent of digital and social media and powerful technology companies, traditional news publishers still retain the power to carry out investigative reporting that holds power to account and asks difficult questions, while providing a flow of uncompromised and unbiased information to reach the public and promote an informed electorate. For broadcasters, certainly in the UK and across Europe, impartiality rules and a long-standing non-partisan reporting culture ensure that these journalistic norms broadly remain intact. But for newspapers and online publishers, free to write what they want within the law, the selection of stories, how they are reported and the overall editorial stance are generally dependent on the newspaper owner's political, ideological and commercial agenda.

A single publisher with an editorial standpoint decided by the owner taking a strong line on any particular issue is not in itself a problem or a threat to democracy. However, if the proprietor also owns several other types of media platform, such as television networks, radio stations or internet sites, the opportunity to set the news agenda and the potential to influence both the public and politicians becomes a likely and potentially dangerous possibility. The more media outlets owned by a single proprietor, the more power they command, and the more dangerous it can be for a healthy democracy that relies on a plurality of viewpoints.

Issues around concentration of media ownership and the threat to democracy have frequently been raised by scholars in the UK, Australia and the US in respect of Rupert Murdoch's ownership of multiple media outlets and platforms. He owns media businesses that operate across a number of countries and is still considered to be one of the most powerful media proprietors in the English-speaking world. He is known for having conservative views, a strong disdain for elitism and the 'establishment', and a strong desire to operate in free, commercially driven markets. Most scholarly work has focused, rightly, on how Murdoch has exploited his media properties to promote this conservative worldview, whether it be through supporting (mostly) right-wing political parties and leaders such as Thatcher, Reagan and Trump or right-wing policies in areas such as taxation and criminal justice. Less work, however, has

focused on whether and how he exploits his media outlets to promote his own corporate interests and denigrate his competitors. This thesis aims to fill that gap with systematic empirical evidence from the UK.

Murdoch is known to liken the 'elite establishment' with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which he described during his 1989 MacTaggart Lecture speech as having "debilitating effects on British society, by producing a TV output which is so often obsessed with class, dominated by anti-commercial attitudes" (Murdoch, 1989). The BBC was a direct competitor to Murdoch's Sky TV, in a unique position as the UK's public service broadcaster with guaranteed public funding via the licence fee. The BBC remains a prominent voice in the UK, as a trusted news provider, both on television and via the news stories it publishes on its website. Echoing his father's comments 20 years later, James Murdoch gave a similar speech at the MacTaggart Lecture in 2009, in which he criticised both the BBC and the powerful UK communications regulator, Ofcom. Ofcom has often stood between the Murdochs and their commercial expansion plans. At the time of the 2009 speech, the regulator was conducting an investigation into the Murdochs' grip on the pay-TV market.

This thesis aims to understand the nature of the coverage of the BBC and Ofcom in Murdoch-owned newspapers, compared with non-Murdoch-owned newspapers of equal standing, during a crucial 20-year period, in order to ascertain whether and to what extent both news and editorial content related to the political position, ideology or commercial agenda of the owner.

In order to do this, an extensive content analysis has been undertaken to measure what percentage of the coverage in newspapers owned by Murdoch's News International about the BBC and Ofcom was negative, in comparison with coverage over the same periods in newspapers not owned by News International. The analysis looked at three News International newspapers – the Sun, the Times, and the Sunday Times – and three non-News International newspapers of equal standing – the Daily Mirror, the Independent and the Sunday Telegraph. A total of seven years' worth of data was collected over three separate time periods spanning 20 years, equating to 3336 articles. The key measure employed was whether the articles were deemed to be negative, positive or neutral in tone. The analysis also considers other, secondary

measures such as the nature of the language employed, which are discussed in the methodology chapter.

The starting hypothesis was that Murdoch-owned newspapers demonstrated a clear agenda in their news and editorial coverage of the BBC and Ofcom, driven by the Murdoch family's commercial and competitive imperatives as well as their outspoken hostility towards the two institutions. If Murdoch's commercially driven desire is to see the BBC and Ofcom downsized to a position of relative impotence, or abolished altogether, he has the means and power to exploit his own media outlets as weapons of influence in the propaganda battle.

Negative reporting of the BBC and Ofcom is significant not only because of the potential influence it could have on the public, but also on politicians and policymakers as a result. While not making any explicit claims about the relationship between media proprietors and the politicians and governments they seek to influence, this thesis is premised on the ability of media proprietors to use the powerful force of their media holdings to drive policymaking that suits their commercial agenda. In Murdoch's case, this means policies which have allowed him to vigorously pursue levels of ownership that are argued to be in excess of what is desirable for a democracy.

Recent political events in the UK, US and Australia highlight the power and influence Rupert Murdoch continues to wield via his considerable media holdings, such as the Brexit vote in the UK, the election of Donald Trump as President in the US, and the removal of the Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd writes that "Murdoch's agenda is patently ideological, commercial and of course political. But it is also global. Across much of the Anglosphere, these debates occur in parallel... And for those who think it will all expire when Rupert dies, there's another Murdoch in waiting" (2019)¹.

This warning about the continuing power of the dynasty through Rupert Murdoch's son Lachlan is an important reminder of why we should continue to be concerned about

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/06/democracy-overboard-rupert-murdochs-long-war-on-australian-politics>

media concentration, even as policymakers turn their attention to Facebook and Google. Murdoch continues to run one of the most powerful news organisations in the English-speaking world. Although major technology firms are disrupting the traditional business of news production and consumption, assumptions that this disruption mitigates the threat of concentrated media ownership are misguided. It continues to be the global news organisations, such as Murdoch's News Corporation (and his UK newspaper holdings through News UK) that are the main producers of news content and thus able to dominate the news agenda

Layout of the thesis

This introduction is followed by a literature review that provides the background and context to this issue, made up of six chapters. Chapter One: Media and Democracy considers the dependency of a healthy democracy on a free press, the role of the media in the democratic process, and the potentially damaging effects of media concentration.

Chapter Two: The New Digital Environment examines the rise of technology, the internet and social media, and their impact on the provision of news. Primarily focused on the role of the internet, this includes considerations of the changes that have occurred in the production and consumption of news. The roles of social media and news aggregators are explored, in particular their distribution of news content and how, in spite of aggregators' ubiquity, plurality of news sources is not increasing as a result. The literature examined in Chapter Two will confirm that the traditional news providers, including Rupert Murdoch, continue to dominate the news markets.

Chapter Three: Rupert Murdoch and News Corporation provides some background and history to Murdoch and News International in the UK, the expansion of his media business, and how his power and influence have allowed him to continue expanding his media empire. Chapter Four: Media Economy – The Economic Imperatives of Consolidation considers the economic factors that affect media businesses, and the main drivers behind the vertical and horizontal integration strategies that have been deployed over the years to achieve economies of scale and scope. Chapter Five: Current Framework looks at the regulatory framework that applies to the media in the

UK, and Chapter Six: Recent Policy and Regulatory Developments considers recent developments in regulation and policy that are relevant to the arguments advanced in this thesis around media concentration and media bias.

Chapter Seven: The Research Questions and Chapter Eight: The Methodology describe in detail the hypothesis and research questions, and explain the methodology used to undertake the research. Finally, the results of the content analysis are presented in Chapter Nine: The Results for the BBC and Chapter Ten: The Results for Ofcom, followed by discussion of these results within the context of the literature review in Chapter Eleven: The Discussion. Chapter Twelve: The Conclusion provides the conclusion and the basis of this study's original contribution to knowledge in this research area: that despite Rupert Murdoch's explicit protestation to the Leveson Inquiry that he never promotes his business interests in his own media outlets, this research offers clear empirical evidence that his newspapers systematically produced news and editorial coverage that was designed to undermine both the BBC and, to a lesser extent, Ofcom. While the Murdochs continue to own and run a major news organisation with a dominant voice in the UK, there is every likelihood that they will also continue to exploit their newspapers as weapons of influence to further their commercial and corporate agenda.

Chapter One: Media and Democracy

“The media are an inescapable and ubiquitous a presence in our lives as the environment. In fact, they are, to a large extent, the mental and cultural environment we inhabit every day, bringing us the first voices we hear in the morning, the opinions we absorb while driving, the stories and images that entertain us after work. In so far as we are intelligent beings, the media are the world we share” (Ehrenreich, 2002, p9).

Ehrenreich’s assumption that the intelligence of human beings is inextricably linked to the consumption of media as part of a common environment aptly denotes the need to consider the media within the context of a democracy. If the media truly exist as an ‘inescapable environment’ that provides the general public, either passively or actively, with necessary information about their environment, it surely contributes to the very foundations of a democracy. Furthermore, with such a key role to play in the formation and sustainability of democracy, the diversity of the media should be well maintained so as to ensure a fair and equitable provision of information that derives from a number of sources. This chapter will consider the role of the media in democracy in the UK, how such a role is undertaken, and the risks and benefits of the UK’s press to the democratic process.

What is a democracy?

Baker offers the explanation that “democracy is widely understood as respecting the view that each person equally should have a say in choosing at least its officials and, ultimately, its laws and policies and maybe its culture” (2007, p6). Schumpeter offers a similar definition regarding the ‘democratic method’, stating that it is the “institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will” (2003, p225).

On this basis, it is reasonable to assert that the media play a fundamental role in a democracy given that they are the vehicle by which the public receive information and accordingly choose their political representatives. It can be argued that people have the right to choose those representatives without accessing the media; the lack of a

newspaper or television does not remove an individual's right or ability to vote for their chosen political party or leader. However, there is little value in the process if the public do not have access to information regarding the political parties or leaders so that they can make an informed choice.

In considering how the requirements of a well-functioning democracy are fulfilled, Dahlgreen states that it is "the engagement of citizens that gives democracy the legitimacy as well as vitality" (2009, p12). In short, democracy is not achieved without the engagement and participation of citizens, albeit they can engage and participate in many different ways. For some, participation in the democratic process begins and ends with voting in general elections; others live in a democratic society without voting at all. Dahlgreen notes that "for most people most of the time in the west, while commitment to the principles of democracy remains solid, the realities of how it operates do not successfully beckon enough people to join in" (2009, p12).

Like Dahlgreen's consideration of the democratic process, Rosenstiel and Kovach claim that "in the real world, many factors work against these ideals of democracy, from business pressures in news organisations to lazy citizens to deceptive policies" (2007, p21). While neither the government nor the media can control the extent to which the public consume the information, or the extent to which they use it to inform their choice, a well-functioning democracy requires that a fair balance of information should be available. The ideal must then be a system where impartial news sources, whether print, broadcast or online, provide reliable information on the important and relevant topics necessary for the public to form opinions when considering their choice of leader, and where the public are engaged and interested to the point that they seek to learn about the relevant issues in a conscious and educated manner.

With such provision of information, and an election process in place, a nation can be considered to be truly democratic. Curran considers the requirements for successful democratic processes, which include the delivery of information that both encourages and allows the public to participate:

"the democratic process assumes that individual citizens have the capacity to hold elected officials accountable. In practice, political accountability requires a variety of

institutional arrangements including free and frequent elections, the presence of strong political parties and... a media system that delivers a sufficient supply of meaningful public affairs information to catch the eye of relatively inattentive citizens” (2011, p47).

If the realities of democracy are not particularly conducive to public engagement and participation, the public’s reliance on the platforms upon which democracy is played out surely becomes even greater where the information need not only be communicated, but to also *encourage* or *attract* participation. This is becoming even more important in the social and digital media age than it was when news was only gleaned from printed or broadcast sources.

What roles do the media play in the democratic process?

The media can be considered to play a number of roles in the democratic process. The UK enjoys a ‘free press’ system, where printed news (be it online or in hard copy form) are not in any way owned or funded by the government or state. This also applies to UK broadcasters, including the publicly funded public service broadcaster (PSB) the BBC. Although the BBC licence fee is set by the government, the broadcaster has always been constitutionally independent of direct government interference.

When a general election is held, the public will most likely turn to television shows and information printed in newspapers or online to understand what each political party is proposing, which will then allow them to come to an informed voting decision. Furthermore, when the government of the day makes a policy proposal, or communicates intent with regard to its decision making, the public will likely be advised of this via the same methods. Recent years have seen a major shift in the way in which news is consumed, given the strong presence of the internet and social media in people’s lives. However a significant portion of what is read derives from traditional media sources (explored further in Chapter Two: The New Digital Environment).

Additionally, the media, and in particular investigative journalism, have the ability to ‘hold power to account’ and expose any wrongdoing or falsities to the public. The

potential of this alone could be seen as a deterrent to those in power breaking electoral promises. Curran describes the role of the free press in a democratic society as follows:

“The market-based press is independent because it owes allegiance only to the public. The press is the people’s watchdog, scrutinising the actions of government and holding the country’s rulers to account. Its reporting of the news keeps readers abreast of important events and developments and enables them to exercise informed judgements at election time. By providing a forum of public debate, the press also facilitates the formation of public opinion. This opinion is then relayed by the press - the people’s tribune - to those in power” (2011, p326).

Curran describes the ‘dual role’ the press plays in a democracy, acting as a gatekeeper for the information that is exchanged between the people and those in power via news content. While this is still relevant to some extent, technological and lifestyle developments have seen many changes in the way the public engage and the methods via which they can provide feedback and comment. That said, the media industry is constantly evolving and adapting, so the media remain a powerful voice via which such information is communicated, albeit in new and changing formats.

Dahlgreen argues that “the media are a pre-requisite - though by no means a guarantee - for shaping the democratic character of society; they are the bearers of democracy’s political communication beyond face to face settings” (2009, p2). The media are the conduit by which information about democracy is communicated. They reach more people more quickly than politicians could hope to do by other means (notwithstanding the internet and social media, both of which are explored further in Chapter Two), and as such politicians are heavily reliant on broadcasters and the press.

This unique ability often leads to the media being described as ‘bearing witness’ to democracy. However, as this chapter will examine, the media have become so inextricably linked to the democratic process that they must now be considered part of the process itself. This is a result of both the media wielding considerable power and therefore having considerable influence over politicians, and politicians being heavily

reliant on the media to communicate messages that promote their proposals and policies. As Dahlgreen states:

“politics does not exist as a completely separate reality taking place independently of and outside the media, to then be ‘covered’ by our journalists. Rather, politics is increasingly organised as a media phenomenon, planned and executed for and with the co-operations of the media, and in the process becomes unavoidably altered” (2009, p52).

When the media’s influence is powerful enough to alter the democratic process, the media can no longer be considered to be separate from that process.

Who owns the media and what role do they play

At the time of writing, as reported by the Media Reform Coalition (2019), there are ten national newspapers in the UK, and 12 organisations producing and/or providing broadcast content. Three companies dominate the market share of newspaper audiences, and five companies dominate the market share of online news audiences. With the exception of the BBC, all are funded privately (though it is worth noting that the three terrestrial channels ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 are all ‘commercial PSBs’), and in the case of newspapers and online news, all fall under the category of a ‘free press’.

Curran and Seaton examine the ‘liberal theory of press freedom’, which asserts that “the freedom to publish in the free market ensures that the press reflects a wide range of opinions and interests in society” (2009, p326). According to the theory – which will be contested by this thesis – the press is not influenced or directed in any way with regard to what it publishes. Therefore, a plurality of privately owned news outlets will reliably and accurately reflect the different views, desires and opinions of readers, viewers and listeners. As Curran and Seaton go on to state, elaborating on this theory, “if a viewpoint is missing in the press, this is only because it lacks a sufficient following to sustain it in the marketplace” (2009, p326).

However, Curran (2009) explores a number of weak links in the liberal theory of press

freedom. As previously mentioned, this thesis similarly seeks to challenge this viewpoint and aims to prove that press content is not free of influence or agenda, and that a missing viewpoint, or even a published viewpoint, is not necessarily representative of the public's viewpoint. Nevertheless, sustaining a free press in a democratic nation remains the ideal as the press retains the power to prevent governments from controlling or manipulating what is communicated to the public, and can perform the kind of investigative journalism that seeks out and uncovers information essential to fostering a healthy democracy.

The public are reliant on accurate, trustworthy news content to provide them with essential knowledge about those running their nation, and therefore the media play a vital role in an individual's participation in the democratic process. Chapter Two will examine how the proliferation of online news, social media sites and the blogosphere is making the need for a supply of accurate news from well-resourced sources even more urgent than before. Despite the perceived growth in plurality, given the increase in the number of available 'places' to read or watch the news, the Media Reform Coalition (2019) states that a limited number of traditional providers continue to dominate the news supply both online and offline.

The special nature of news

With the system of a free-market-based press comes the risk of a concentration of ownership and/or voices in the media, which could result in limited or biased viewpoints. A free press means the government, and to some extent the state, relinquish control over the setting of the agenda with regard to what the public will hear, watch and read about. But where the free press is owned and controlled by a limited number of proprietors (whether individuals or corporations), the agenda is largely driven by what these owners believe to be relevant and important.

Freedman considers the risks posed to democracy where there is a concentration of ownership, stating that "the founding scholars of communications and cultural studies identified diversified ownership as central to the ability of media to pursue an independent and critical role in public life" (2014, p50). Freedman summarises the common findings of many scholarly works: to ensure independent media that are able

to pursue and uncover information that is of relevance to the public, and to truly hold power to account, they must operate in the absence of bias or too heavy an influence from the government *or* the market.

Freedman's work tests this theory, asking the crucial question "to what extent can we draw a clear line between media concentration and diminished diversity and, indeed, is there an actual problem with concentration in major media markets?" (2014, p51). He argues that these are empirical issues that require quantitative data to provide justifiable evidence in the form of precise metrics. However, he notes that, regardless of such metrics, other measures should be sought, such as "ones that connect to more ideological questions about how, in neo-liberal circumstances, the market in particular presents as the most desirable and efficient enabler of productive symbolic activity" (2014, p51). Freedman emphasises here that 'the media' must be considered a 'unique' or 'special' product, i.e. unlike any other that exists in a free market, because the media are involved in the production of symbolic activity that transcends the typical considerations given to a commercially produced commodity.

In his work on media markets and democracy, Baker (2002) states that media products have significant positive and negative 'externalities'. In this context, an 'externality' is defined as the value the item (the news story) has to an individual who does not participate in the transaction (the reader). Baker explains the significance of such externalities in a democracy, and that the provision of unbiased information affects not only the individual consuming it, but the overall cultural and democratic structure of society:

"people value a well-functioning democracy. They are affected by whether the country goes to war, establishes parks, or provides for retirement and medical care - and hence can be greatly benefited by other people's consumption of quality media or harmed by others' ignorance or apathy produced by inadequate consumption or consumption of misleading, distortive, and demobilising media" (2002, p10).

This special nature of news makes it all the more important to consider how it is produced, and by whom. Meier and Trappel acknowledge the importance of studying the impact of media concentration on a democratic society: "media diversity is one of

the main preconditions ensuring political and cultural pluralism and effective citizen participation in democratic decision-making processes” (1998, p38). For a nation to function as a democracy, it is imperative that there exists a free and diverse press through which information is disseminated. The public cannot be expected to make informed decisions when electing a government if the information that informs those very decisions is in any way biased, tainted or skewed by the influence of a corporation or media mogul. Where media ownership is concentrated in few hands, the public are exposed to a limited set of opinions or information depending on the political allegiance or bias of those in charge: the media conglomerates.

This thesis does not seek to claim that by virtue of owning a large share of any given media market a media conglomerate automatically conveys one-sided information, but, as has been proven by previous scholars and will be explored further in this work, the opportunity for bias is rife in such circumstances. Conglomerates wield great power by virtue of owning profitable news production businesses, and as their success increases, it raises the barrier to entry for rival media organisations that could ‘balance’ the range of available information (and in some cases opinion). Curran and Alberg (2013) summarise that democracy in its most reduced form is still reliant on the consumption of news. Democracy in a more developed form must therefore be reliant on accurate and reliable information, excluding partisan bias:

“democracy relies on equal representation of citizens’ interest. This representation of interest is dependent on an informed public. Most people would agree that citizens should make informed choices rather than act out of ignorance or misinformation. Even the minimalist, monitorial model of democracy presupposes regular scanning of news in order to identify dangers to the personal and public good” (2013, p197).

Baker (2007) examines the ‘normative egalitarian’ value of a one person/one vote democracy and how it applies to the ‘broader political sphere’. Baker suggests:

“the best institutional interpretation of this democratic vision of the public sphere is... an egalitarian distribution of control, most obviously meaning ownership, of the mass media. The basic standard for democracy would then be a very wide and fair dispersal of power and ubiquitous opportunities to present preferences, views, visions” (2007,

p6).

Baker describes this as a “democratic distribution principle” for communicative power; to achieve democracy there must be “as wide as practical a dispersal of power within public discourse” (2007, P6). If the media can be considered to be a fundamental element of public discourse, their structure, ownership and control must be considered in the context of democracy, and furthermore, their impact on the democratic process where ownership and control have become concentrated in the hands of a small number of players.

This line of argument is, of course, more complex than simply stating that there should be multiple voices. Baker (2007) considers the issue from two viewpoints. Firstly, the creation of content and its delivery should not be treated as being within the same market, so as to avoid misconceptions when assessing concentration in the market. Secondly, aside from any considerations given to economic efficiencies in the media markets, there are democratic issues that should be considered when making an assessment. The UK, for example, has ten national newspapers, which some may consider ample when considering the number of voices from which the public can form opinions. However, ten newspapers do not guarantee ten different viewpoints. If the newspapers are owned by only three or four different conglomerates, and those conglomerates choose to exert editorial control (or at the very least influence) to suit their own agendas, the number of actual viewpoints being presented to the public is then significantly reduced.

The media owners' role

If the public relies on news content to inform them of political and public affairs, this raises a question about the power vested in those who control news content. This power is arguably reduced where there are multiple media proprietors operating in the same market. Where there are very few, the potential for exercising power and control can be much more significant, and this power is not acquired via any form of democratic process. As Freedman states:

“Concentrated media power, therefore, is antidemocratic both because it hands

definitional, analytical and interpretive power to unelected organisations and because it undermines the ability of citizens to acquire and exchange the range of information and ideas necessary to take informed decisions about public life” (2014, p12).

If a member of the public in any democratic nation is exposed to only a limited number of news and media outlets, and the majority of those are owned by the same conglomerate or corporation, there is the potential for the messages being conveyed to conform to a particular corporate agenda. As Baker notes, “for this reason, a country is democratic only to the extent that the media, as well as elections, are structurally egalitarian and politically salient” (2007, P7).

The political agendas of the owners of news publishers may not necessarily be an issue, providing that there is a dispersal of ownership with a range of political allegiance across the board. This is, to an extent, the situation with the UK national press as there are popular UK newspapers situated either centrally, or leaning to the left or right in the context of their political allegiance, meaning, in the current situation, there is a newspaper that represents each of these political standpoints. Moreover, broadcasters are bound by impartiality rules, while a profusion of online sites and blogs provide myriad viewpoints. Therefore, it can be argued that the public have a wealth of information available that derives from a range of political agendas and have a choice as to what they read and which editorial opinions they align themselves with.

Doyle states that “political pluralism is about the need, in the interests of democracy, for a range of political opinions and viewpoints to be represented in the media” (2002, p12). Doyle’s explanation of political pluralism does not assert that there must be a certain number of sources of political viewpoints, only that all of the viewpoints should be available to the public for consideration. However, where there are dominant news providers that account for a concentrated share of the market, the public are in danger of being exposed to news content that omits alternative viewpoints or promotes specific viewpoints and agendas.

For all of the scholarly discussion that exists with regard to media and democracy, it is still difficult to define or quantify what plurality should actually look like: how few news publishers or owners is too few? The issue has become more prominent in

recent years, exemplified by the revelations relating to the News of the World phone-hacking scandal that led to the Leveson Inquiry. This is explored further in Chapter 6: Growing Awareness.

Undue influence

The threat that media power poses to a democracy does not end with the concentration of ownership eroding the plurality of viewpoints available to the public. Dominant owners of the press have long been known to wield considerable power and influence over politicians, and therefore the political and democratic process. Examples of this are explored further in chapters three and six, but by way of an example, Dean (2012) considers the issue from the perspective of democracy 'under attack' from the press, and the arguably dangerous influence that ensues.

Dean references a speech given by Tony Blair when he was British Prime Minister about the UK media in which he avoided referring to the Daily Mail directly because "he feared what the paper would do to him and his family should he have targeted it" (2012, p342). Furthermore, Dean states "there was a much wider group of MPs who were scared to challenge a different and even bigger media organisation, Rupert Murdoch's national newspapers, over the allegations of widespread hacking of MPs' mobile voicemail by the News of the World" (2012, p342).

Both examples illustrate the type of influence a newspaper, or group of newspapers, can have on politicians' behaviour. If politicians are to alter their behaviour, their decision making or policy setting for fear of reprisals in the headlines or editorial columns of influential national newspapers, it is arguable that, as stated by Dahlgren (2009), the democratic process itself can be altered by the media. Dean claims that ministers believe that the tabloids greatly influence public opinion and "adjust their decisions accordingly" (2012, p390).

Dean (2012) contemplates the influence news reporting has on public opinion in many areas, and references a study undertaken by Professor M. Hough into the impact of inaccurate news reporting on public opinion on crime. Drawing on results from the British Crime Survey, Hough (2005) found that two thirds of the public wrongly believed

that crime was going up, and concluded that “the simplest explanation for this trend is that people think crime is rising because they are told by the media that it is” (cited in Dean, 2012, p121). Dean goes on to discuss an even more compelling example of media influence not only on public opinion, but public behaviour, considering the media campaign regarding the MMR vaccine which saw a significant reduction in the number of parents vaccinating their children. Dean asserts that the campaign “grossly distorted the risks of the vaccine which resulted in a damaging reduction in the number of parents taking their children to be vaccinated... The Department of Health and most other health observers are in no doubt what caused this dangerous slump; the anti-MMR media campaign. It did not just change attitudes, it changed behaviour” (2012, p390).

While neither the example of crime rates nor the anti-MMR media campaign was necessarily the result of a concentration of ownership in the newspaper market, both aptly illustrate the considerable influence the media can have on public attitudes, opinions and behaviour. With greater concentration of ownership of media outlets comes a weakening dispersal of information, and therefore different agendas, with a greater risk of manipulation by a single owner. Dean examines where it ‘all went wrong’ for the British press, noting the first reason as being “because of the power which the Murdoch group was allowed to accumulate and the fear that this generated within governments and oppositions” (2012, p395).

The politicians’ role

However, not all researchers believe that the media have a bullish power to manipulate politicians according to owners’ interests. Franklin (2004) examines the issue from the perspective of the government utilising the media and ‘packaging politics’ in such a way that the messages could be ‘sold’ to the audience. Franklin focuses his work around three key concepts: “that politicians have revealed a growing commitment to using the media to market their policies and leaders to the public”; that “governments are increasingly adept at using media to package politics”; and that “this ambition to package politics poses a number of challenges to democracy” (2004, p5).

Franklin describes the ‘packaging of politics’ as the extent to which politicians’ “set the

news agenda, to use media to inform, shape and manage public discourse about policy and politics” (2004, p3).

Franklin’s approach offers an alternative view to the works discussed in this chapter so far. His assertions are made on the basis that the politicians look to ‘package’ their messages in such a way that they can best be ‘sold’ via the media. Therefore, while the message may be subject to influence and a measure of manipulation from both the politicians and the press, it packaged by the politicians in this way in the knowledge of the press’s considerable influence on public opinion. Franklin also considers the difference between the *types* of newspapers available to the public, and the impact they have:

“The influence of tabloids, with their clear partisanship, but spartan provision of political information, tends to be on readers’ practical attitudes... Conversely, the qualities tend to confine opinions to editorials with the bulk of reporting offering copious political information which readers can use to help make political choices...” (2004, p229).

This view remains in keeping with the general nature of the types of newspaper in the UK. The tabloids tend to report on both ‘softer’ and ‘harder’ news, and are typically sensationalist, whereas the broadsheets tend to only report on ‘hard news’ in the absence of ‘gossip’. Should there be an adequate number of both types of newspaper available to the public, there should be little concern about the ‘range’ of information available for them to consume. However, Franklin’s view does not take into account the number of people reading each type of newspaper. If the majority of the public refer to a tabloid for *all* of their news, be it political or other, they risk being unknowingly exposed to a limited subset of information that is sensationalist by nature.

Franklin refers to the 1997 general election, leading up to which the Sun switched its support from the Conservative Party to the Labour Party only six weeks before the day of the election. Franklin states that “these changes in press partisanship combined with Labour’s landslide victories in 1997 and 2001 offer further and considerable evidence, albeit prima facia, in support [of press influence]” (2004, p219).

It can be argued that the media have particular sway with the government in this regard

as they influence the way in which the public perceive the government, as well as influencing the political agenda followed by other, less partisan broadcasters. A newspaper's political allegiance determines how its chosen political party will be portrayed in the media and how the party's policies will be presented, with the potential for significant influence over voters' reactions to and perceptions of that party, and of the sitting government itself. For this reason alone, a dispersal of media ownership is imperative to a democratic society, and it could therefore be argued that a newspaper's content can be manipulated to suit the political allegiance of the ownership. Barendt claims that "the Sun itself claimed credit for the surprise victory of the Conservatives in the General Election of 1992" (1998, p108). Barendt goes on to say that "Tony Blair in opposition assiduously courted Rupert Murdoch and the editors of his newspapers. It is unlikely that the Labour majority in 1997 would have been so large, had the Sun not decided to support it six weeks before polling day" (1998, p.108).

Corporate self-interest

In evidence provided to the Leveson Inquiry, Barnett² discusses the issue of plurality and how it is impacted by both corporate self-interest and editorial influence. Barnett explains that editorial influence can be achieved in a number of ways within a newspaper, by activity undertaken by editors who are "like-minded lieutenants who are trusted to pursue styles or news agenda which are consonant with their owners' view of the world" (2012, p6). If a media proprietor employs key staff who are like-minded, or at the very least fully aware of the proprietor's ideological and political opinions and willing to operate accordingly, those opinions are likely to be promoted via their news content. Barnett explains that "the professional values which professional journalists claim to embrace - and to which the vast majority certainly aspire -will inevitably be influenced by, and sometimes subordinated to, the corporate world vision and editorial inclinations of the owner and editor" (op. cit.).

Barnett continues in his evidence that this type of editorial influence can be heavily influenced by the commercial interests of the owner. Barnett states that News

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https://discoverleveson.com/evidence/Submission_by_Professor_Steven_Barnett_University_of_Westminster/11489/media

International in particular has for a long time exhibited this type of behaviour, and uses its 'huge editorial presence' to cross-promote, or to "impede the progress of competitors by failing to publicise rival initiatives, or by distorting coverage against it" (op. cit.).

Barnett cites a number of examples of Rupert Murdoch's News International conglomerate undertaking such activity, including criticism of the BBC and using his newspapers to condemn the licence fee, the removal of the BBC's news website from Murdoch's Asian Star Satellite service (in pursuit of launching a cable TV network in China), and using his media outlets to promote his Fox studio movies while ensuring a lack of coverage about movies made by rival companies (Barnett, 2012, p8).

Hardy (2010) undertook a study to examine editorial cross-promotion in Rupert Murdoch's newspapers. Via a comparative content analysis over a two-month period in 1998, it examines the material published in News International newspapers about BSkyB, the television network in which Murdoch had a controlling 40% interest. Hardy asserted that Murdoch's denial of newspaper cross-promotion is in "stark contrast to News Corp's promotion of synergies and integration across digital media, in particular global satellite television and interactive services, and integrating online and offline media" (2010, p120). Hardy's study looked at the editorial content, advertisements, television listings, and reviews of programming within the News International newspapers compared with non-News International owned newspapers. The study found that "NI newspapers used a range of promotional resources to cross-promote Sky in ways that differ from comparable competitor papers" (Hardy, 2010, p148).

As Barnett (2012) notes, these practices are not confined to News International, but they demonstrate the ability of a powerful media proprietor to use their media companies to exploit their dominance in media markets. They can turn this to their advantage by distorting coverage about rivals, which has the potential to affect public opinion, furthering their own position in the market. As discussed earlier in this chapter, media proprietors who have considerable holdings – in excess of what is deemed to be a reasonable amount in the interest of plurality – have the ability to exert considerable influence over politicians and policymakers, undermining the democratic process.

Summary

The works covered in this chapter have identified the clear need for consideration of the issue of the concentration of media ownership in a broader context, addressing how it does or does not serve democracy. With the media becoming increasingly ubiquitous in the everyday life of the general public, the ideal situation is to have multiple sources of reliable and credible news information that inform the reader in such a way that they can properly engage in the democratic process. However, the reality is that traditional news sources can be biased and present persuasive, agenda-driven views; policies and politicians can be deceptive; citizens can be lazy when it comes to engaging with information and forming political opinions.

A system of a free press can perhaps be considered to be as close to the ideal as is possible, primarily due to its ability to hold power to account, and to provide the public with unbiased, truthful information. However, with a free press that is not appropriately governed, and does not adhere to guidelines on reliable and appropriate content, and rules about ownership, there is the risk that concentration in the media markets can become problematic and threaten the democratic process.

A concentration of ownership means an increased number of newspapers of a particular political allegiance that would present information that offers only one view, with the potential to unduly influence public opinion. It also creates the potential for powerful media conglomerates that have the ability to unduly influence politicians. As it is subject to the decisions made by the same politicians, it may look to present information to appease the decision makers and serve particular commercial agendas. There is an argument that the media is the more powerful of the two parties in this scenario, as it has the most direct route to the masses, and the politicians are reliant on this vehicle to promote positive messages and information that will help place them, or keep them, in power.

This argument can be contested in light of the 'new digital environment' which has seen a multitude of new types of 'news' and ways of consuming it, and which is explored in Chapter Two. However, it remains to be seen whether anyone other but

the traditional providers can retain such power. As Barnett states:

“despite the decline in circulation – the press in people’s lives has been remarkably resilient in light of huge technological changes that have taken place over the last 20 years. And while newspaper platforms may become more flexible – moving from newsprint to electronic forms – there remain at the moment powerful consumption and editorial reasons for applying structural limits rather than making assumptions about changing behaviour patterns which may materialise either very slowly or not at all” (2012, p13).

Chapter Two: The New Digital Environment

“What is significant about the present moment... is that the question of technology has assumed cardinal importance for the very definition of media. Many of the current debates about media – its characteristics, social functions, cultural meanings and futures – pivot on technology... There is a very intensive, widespread and far-reaching set of technological systems undergoing profound change, with media experiencing some of the most direct effects of any area of society. Two words can suffice to indicate the magnitude of this shift: the internet” (Goggin, 2012, p8).

Entertainment, information and news are no longer only delivered each morning via a hard copy of a newspaper, or on the television set. The UK, the west, and much of the world have entered an era where all of the above are readily available 24 hours a day at the click of a button wherever an internet connection is available. Furthermore, all the traditional routes via which a reader would consume the news are evolving with the development of mobile applications, social media and online interaction. A major contributing factor has been digitalisation and the internet, which has in turn seen an overhaul of the ways in which news content is produced, delivered and consumed. Hachten and Scotton describe this change as the ‘information revolution’, noting that “the news media - newspapers, news services, radio stations, television, cable channels and networks, and news magazines - are being strikingly altered by the information revolution. News communication is being dramatically affected by ongoing revolutionary changes in communication satellites, computers, digitalisation, miniaturisation, and the Internet” (2012, p59).

In the context of this thesis, which examines the ability of a major media conglomerate to use the power of his popular press to attack competitors and regulators, the new digital environment and the plethora of new news sources it offers presents a valid challenge: is the issue still relevant where newspaper circulation is in decline?

It is indeed a valid challenge, as it can be argued that the Murdoch owned press is becoming less powerful now that its prominence is diluted by the many new ways in which people source news. However, in spite of this, the following chapter will explain how the established, traditional news content providers continue to dominate online

news just as they did and do in the traditional press and broadcast news. Furthermore, this move to online news has seen the BBC establish itself as a popular and reliable online news source; the 'online world' has become yet another arena in which Murdoch's media empire has to compete with its rival, the BBC.

This chapter will consider the various elements of the news that have in some way been altered or impacted by the new digital environment, including the production and consumption of the news, audience participation in the news, and the overall impact on the news media industry. It will conclude that, despite the many challenges the new digital environment presents, media organisations such as News International have continued to maintain their prominent, powerful position. This mitigates the challenge that the move to online news removes the relevance of the subject of this thesis in current times, or indeed, in the foreseeable future.

Production of news

The news industry is facing adverse challenges in light of a revolutionary and constantly evolving digital environment. Digitalisation and technological advancements offer improvements in the sourcing, production and distribution of news; new websites, forums and social media environments offer new platforms through which news can not only be distributed but debated and discussed by the audience themselves. Tewksbury and Rittenberg discuss the conventional business model of news production and provision versus that of the modern day, noting the rapid changes seen since the advent and inception of the internet:

“Changes in the news business are challenging the old definitions of press and audience. On the one hand, the dividing line between journalist and citizen is becoming particularly fuzzy, as more people become involved in the creation of news. On the other hand, the current technologies have facilitated a change in the meaning of an audience. The dominant media of the 20th century operated within a system of centralised, largely one-way news dissemination. To consume the news was to ingest a diet of information selected by news professionals. What is more, the major media determined the flow of news. Even a newspaper, always the most customisable news format, contains a structure that largely organizes news for audiences. Today, the

receivers of the news exert substantial control over their news diet. They can choose among numerous outlets, preselect specific topics, and focus their time and attention on the messages they prefer” (2012, p3).

The internet has seen increased availability of news, and digitalisation means increased flexibility in the way news is consumed; i.e. at any given moment a member of the public can use their mobile, tablet (handheld device) or computer to access online news regardless of their location, and when there is a breaking story, receive real-time updates. Furthermore, they can view stories and ‘select’ which to read or watch. This change means that news organisations need to be ready to publish information on a real-time basis, with a far more restricted time frame to source and investigate some stories. However, the internet also provides far greater means and ability to reach audiences, and allows for a different type of news, i.e. news stories with embedded videos, links to related stories, an increased number of images included with the story etc. Fenton explains that “more space equals more news. The sheer space available online is said to open up new possibilities for news presentation that cannot be found in hard copy form... Similarly, the ability to update regularly is vastly enhanced” (2010, p7).

The increased abilities and availabilities Fenton refers to offer benefits beyond simply satisfying an audience more quickly. Fenton also notes the growing belief that the internet contributes to and offers the benefits of globalisation: “some theorists believe that the web is capable of linking communities of interest across the globe, thereby creating greater political participation. Reach is further enhanced by speed” (2010, p7). When information is so readily available, and on much larger and more easily accessible platforms, the opportunity for the public to participate in the political process is – at least in theory – increased; and increased further by the opportunity that online news formats present with regard to audience participation (i.e. the audience’s ability to comment on news stories and interact). Van Der Wurff notes some examples of such features: “Several new innovative types of content and online communication have been introduced. Examples include personalised web pages, weblogs, interactive advertising, online forums and social networking sites - new formats where the hyperlinking and interactive opportunities of the internet are deliberately put to use” (2008, p66).

While Van Der Wurff discusses similar themes with regard to the increased availability of news that the internet offers, he also asserts that such technological development has not led to improvements in the quality of the content over and above what is already available via traditional form of news:

“By far the largest share of internet content - most text, audio and video files that we can access - is content that could, actually is, or previously was presented in similar ways in old media. Online newspapers, for example, may provide individual articles rather than news pages, but these news articles tend to be identical to the ones published in the print paper. New content, specifically, made for the internet - such as real time stories that are updated during the day - is scarcer and new content formats - such as interactive reporting - are even scarcer” (op. cit.).

Van Der Wurff goes on to state that despite there being *some* examples of innovative and new ways to present the news online, as mentioned above, “for the time being and for the average user, these examples are easily lost in the flood of traditional content that dominates the web” (2008, op.cit). Van Der Wurff also considers why and how online news has developed in such a way that it acts as a distribution tool for most traditional forms of content, as opposed to a medium in which an entirely different type of content, or at the very least content produced and presented in a different format, dominates the web:

“By and large, internet technology reduces the costs of content reproduction and distribution, but not the costs of content production. This basically means that organisations and individuals can easily use the internet to distribute existing content at trivial or no additional costs to large and small audiences - including audiences that could not be served cost-effectively before... if there has been any impact of the internet on content production, it is that it has become more difficult to recover production costs by selling content to audiences” (2008, p67).

Despite further digital and social media developments in the ten years since this work was published, it is certainly arguable that traditional forms of content, and the traditional major media conglomerates producing it, still dominate the online news

market. The barriers to entry in the form of the costs associated with the production of content have not changed as a result of the internet, only the costs associated with distribution. Therefore, while it is entirely possible for a smaller, lower-budget organisation, or even an individual with no funding at all to publish news information, marketing their website would likely require the kind of funding and resources that are far more readily at the disposal of a larger, well established and profitable news organisation. However, despite this view, Van Der Wurff does note one key change in the way that news is consumed that removes the traditional reliance on major news providers:

“One major break from the past is that content is distributed via the internet in an unbundled way. Instead of acquiring newspaper, magazines... combinations of content that are compiled by professionals - internet users access individual newspaper and magazine articles... this reduces the impact of editors and other professionals on user selection” (2008, p82).

Van Der Wurff's assertion about the reduction in the impact of editors implies a reduction in impact, and therefore risk, of the concentration of ownership in media markets. The internet has moved the audience away from a reliance on the potentially biased view of a single newspaper. This view is, of course, predicated on the assumption that the reader will consume online news in such a way that they read articles from several different sources and are cognisant of their choice. How audiences arrive at a news article online is a topic worth much consideration within the context of online news and media ownership and will be discussed further on in this chapter. Van Der Wurff concludes that online news does not offer the audience anything new, but rather more of it and with the flexibility to choose: “Online newspapers allow users to choose more directly and exclusively for the news that they are interested in. Thus, the internet makes the same news better available, but it depends on the knowledge, experience and desires of each individual user whether and how the plethora of available news items is accessed and used” (2009, p82).

The internet has seen one type of new ‘news’: the blog. Blogs are typically discussion or informational websites that individuals create and maintain on any given topic. Blogs often address niche areas, and when a blog becomes popular, the creators are

able to profit via selling advertising space on the site. As part of a study of journalism and democracy in the digital age, which included 160 interviews with a range of professionals across the industry, Couldry described bloggers as 'writer-gatherers', explaining the term as:

"...source-actors - lying between individual web-posters and fully fledged news organisations - who through the web are expanding the news landscape, either directly or by altering the source from which mainstream news typically draws... a non-evaluative term to capture those engaged in a regular practice of writing and/or information aggregation outside mainstream media institutions" (2010, p139).

This type of new actor indicates a move away from the mainstream coverage that has long dominated the media in western society, and perhaps from the traditional standards of journalism. Couldry describes bloggers not as journalists, but individuals offering opinion (this could be likened to the traditional format of editorial or opinion pieces that are published in newspapers). The range of actors considered in this study covered a spectrum from high-profile bloggers, commenting on mainly entertainment and celebrity gossip, to individuals offering personal opinion. However, despite their ability to expand the news landscape, Couldry described such actors as having limited chances of inclusion in or influence on mainstream news, with only a few that could be considered to be "partly institutionalised voices, some of them offering something new and potentially significant... professional blogs and armed service rumour sites are not news sites; they insert streams of individual opinion, often highly forceful in language, into the wider ambit of public debate" (2010, p145).

Gillmor (2006) offers a different view of bloggers' ability to affect mainstream news, noting an example where the Republican leader of the US Senate, Trent Lott, made reference to Strom Thurmond's presidential campaign in 1948 that called for the 'preservation of segregation' and claimed that the country would have been better off had Thurmond become president. Although shocking, the story was not picked up by the mainstream media. However, it was discussed and commented on in many online forums and by many bloggers. Due to this persistent online coverage, the story was eventually covered in the mainstream press and gathered pace.

Gillmor describes the events as a 'watershed' moment, but one that would and could not have occurred had the mainstream media not eventually picked up on the discussions taking place online, prompted by bloggers. Gillmor aptly denotes changes in news consumption and production, and how the internet has brought about a change to the transaction between the news provider and the audience, and that, in some cases, these two roles are interchangeable:

"Call them newsmakers. Call them sources. Call them subjects... however we describe them, we must all recognise that the rules for newsmakers, not just journalists, have changed, thanks to everyone's ability to make the news" (2006, pp44-45).

Gillmor goes on to assert that newsmakers need to recognise and harness the wealth of knowledge available via their audience, and that to ignore stories that the audience clearly want to read will result in loss of readership as "they will realise they don't have to settle for half-baked coverage; they can come into the kitchen themselves" (2006, p111).

Consumption of news

While the internet and technology have had considerable impact on the business of producing the news, they have arguably had far greater impact on the audience's consumption of news. This reliance on technology and the internet, and their adoption into everyday life, has radically changed not only the way in which the news is distributed to the audience, but the way in which the audience consumes it. Readers are able to 'find the news' in numerous locations online with a vast amount of choice at their fingertips; and many will 'receive' the news and/or headlines as a by-product of the consumption of various other forms of entertainment and social interaction that the internet now offers.

Blank and Dutton (2013) undertook a study of internet access in which they found that, as at 2011, 44% of users were accessing the internet via 'devices'; i.e. mobiles, tablets, handheld computers etc. That figure has since almost doubled: Ofcom (2018) reports that 77% of UK adults use a smartphone to access the internet. Blank and Dutton's

focus was on this 'next generation user' (the phrase they assign to members of the public accessing the internet in such a 'mobile' fashion) and how they are both incorporating and taking advantage of technology and the internet in their day-to-day lives. Blank and Dutton found that the internet "gives access to a variety of innovations, including web browsers, location and direction services, email, and social networking. This presents a large menu of items to be incorporated into people's day-to-day lives. It will not be done all at once; for many the internet is a continuing, multiyear exploration of possibilities" (2015, p126).

This implies that the way the next generation user accesses content online today could very well change in years to come, making for a difficult and unpredictable market for those producing content they aim to profit from. Blank and Dutton also note that "the internet is the only medium (with the exception of spending time with other people for entertainment) where next-generation and first-generation users differ. These figures underline the disproportionate value that next-generation users place on the internet" (2015, p130). It is a fair assumption that this trend is likely to continue. Ofcom (2018) reports that people spend 24 hours per week online on their smartphone; a figure that has more than doubled in ten years.

Social media have become a major part of most people's lives. The social media platform Facebook will feature news stories and headlines in a user's daily feed; what the user sees is dependent on their choices, i.e. which news source page they chose to 'like', mixed in with some 'sponsored stories', the selection of which is controlled by algorithms. Similarly, a Twitter user will see snapshot headlines as they scroll through their daily feed and have the option to 'click through' to read the full story or find more detail on the topic in question. Where a member of the public may have once relied on picking up a free daily newspaper at the train station of a morning, it is now more likely that they will have already glanced at the day's headlines on their mobile phone or tablet, and they will have personally selected which stories to consume.

Bakker and Sadaba explain that "in contrast to the classic understanding of an audience, that is, a more or less passive group expecting information or entertainment, internet users are in many cases active, looking for those pieces of content to satisfy their particularly concrete needs" (2008, p87). That being said, how news is selected

and consumed is subject to complex, interlinked developments that have evolved online. As Goggin explains, “The internet had brought vast amounts of information and news into the purview of users. With the advent of the web, the amount of material exponentially increased, but so too did the technologies for finding and distributing it. Search technologies such as Google, Yahoo! and Baidu have grown in importance because they have provided algorithmic methods of identifying and location information. Apparently radical customisation of news became possible, with the interlocking of different internet technologies” (2012, p50).

Such platforms have introduced an additional, user-based and controlled feature to news consumption: the ‘sharing’ of news. The audience no longer ‘passively’ receive news content, but now have the opportunity to engage with it in an entirely new way; not only by being able to comment on stories, but by being able to ‘share’ a story by posting it to their own social network feed for others. Effectively, the audience become part of the distribution process. Jenkins, Ford and Green describe this as ‘spreadable media’: “Our use of ‘spreadable media’ avoids the metaphors of ‘infection’ and ‘contamination,’ which over-estimate the power of media companies and underestimate the agency of audiences. In this emerging model, audiences play an active role in ‘spreading’ content rather than serving as passive carriers of viral media: their choices, investments, agendas, and actions determine what gets valued” (2013, p21).

The nature of this new model suggests that the audience have regained some or much of the power previously considered to be held by the media industry and conglomerates. The audience are now able to shape their media environment in a way that was previously not possible, by choosing what to read and further distributing this. This is harnessed by the algorithmic nature of the selection of news on social media and networking sites as the algorithms are built on and adapt to users’ choices, continuously suggesting content from certain sources, or relating to certain topics based on a user’s selections. In a news environment that is becoming increasingly reliant on the ‘spreadability’ of news and ensuring that content appears at the top of a feed, or is noticeable to the point of it being ‘clickable’, digital intermediaries are becoming prominent features of the process of distribution.

An intermediary is often referred to as a 'gatekeeper' or a 'news aggregator'. Isbell offers a simple definition for an aggregator: "At its most basic, a news aggregator is a website that takes information from multiple sources and displays it in a single place" (2010, p2). This 'gatekeeper' could be a search engine, a social media site or an app on a smartphone device that serves the purpose of "controlling information flows, selecting, sorting, and then distributing information" (op. cit.). However, complex and evolving technologies such as aggregators and algorithms now being at play does not necessarily mitigate the risk of biased or concentrated flows of information from specific sources being presented to the audience.

Jenkins, Ford and Green do not consider this new model to be as revolutionary as could perhaps be inferred, as the existing mass-media organisations continue to dominate content regardless of the format: "None of this supposes an end to the role of commercial mass media as perhaps the most powerful force in our collective cultural lives. In many cases, producers and brand makers have decided to utilise more participatory means of communication and informal means of circulation, but their ultimate aim is still the propagation of mass-media content... Throughout, mass-media content remains that which spreads the furthest, the widest, and the fastest" (2013, p259).

Perhaps aligned with the previously considered issue of digitalisation and the internet reducing the costs of distribution, but not content creation, the traditional mass-media organisations are still able to push their content further across the net, and invest in popular websites and technologies that ensure their content features as the 'top hit' in a Google search, or in a user's Facebook or Twitter feed.

Participant/citizen journalism

Sites such as Twitter, which began as a social media platform that allowed users to provide a status update in up to 140 characters (now 280), encouraged a type of participation from both the content producer and reader that have become increasingly interchangeable and, over time, evolved the purpose of the technology into something beyond simply an individual's 'status update' into a real-time news feed. Braun and

Gillespie report that Twitter amended its terms of reference to reflect this change in the nature of its service and user engagement: “The fundamentally open model of Twitter created a new kind of information network and it has long outgrown the concept of personal status updates. Twitter helps you share and discover what’s happening now amongst all things, people, and events you care about” (2011, p8). The information revolution has seen commenting on news stories, partaking in online dialogue regarding current events and ‘following’ news organisations, journalists and presenters, or even particular stories, all become common practice.

In addition to this, Twitter is increasingly a platform for a type of ‘participant journalism’, whereby users are able to publish information in real time about an event, allowing a user without any journalistic ambition or ability to break a story ahead of any traditional news organisation. For example, “the capture of Osama bin Laden entered mainstream news by a local Pakistani in the small town of Abbottabad who saw a helicopter hovering overhead and then heard an explosion” (Veitch, 2016). Tewksbury and Rittenberg recognise that users creating content online are challenging the existing nature of news and pose a threat to the conglomerates, even going as far as to assert that “citizen journalists implicitly and explicitly challenge the authority of the major news media” (2012, p11).

That said, Veitch states that while journalists can often feel frustrated as Twitter users challenge their speed and skill, there is also the opportunity via Twitter to monitor audience reaction and amenability to a story: “journalists can quickly see how the Twittersphere is reacting to news and test the pulse of the populace” (2016). Twitter allows journalists and news organisations to assess how readers react to material, and then tailor or refine future pieces according to feedback. In effect, Twitter allows them to access a ‘smart sample’ of the general public that gives them an insight into what the audience want to read about, and which stories are likely to prove particularly popular.

Participant journalism has proven to be both a challenge and an opportunity for the media conglomerates. The challenge is that suddenly a news story is no longer

'protected' in the way it once was. Previously, there was no available platform for a member of the public to 'share' information regarding a newsworthy event they had witnessed. In the absence of a conveniently placed journalist, news was typically reported 'after the fact', or as the events unfolded and gathered traction (and often the newspapers relied on news agencies to provide information). Therefore, the headline news story in the morning edition of a daily newspaper held a lot more value.

Tworek explains "in 1873, Frederic Hudson, managing editor of the New York Herald, argued that the increased speed of newspaper production provided sufficient protection of news value" (2015, p96). This remained true until the adoption of the internet into everyday life, and the beginning of the new digital environment which saw a complete overhaul of this theory. It can be a 'double edged sword': what challenges the traditional model of news gathering and distribution (and indeed poses a substantial challenge and threat to the profitability of the traditional business model) can also provide the very material that forms the basis of extraordinary news stories.

The events linked to the website WikiLeaks aptly illustrate this point. WikiLeaks is "an international non-profit organisation that publishes news leaks, and classified media provided by anonymous sources. Its website, initiated in 2006 in Iceland by the organisation Sunshine Press, claimed in 2016 to have released online 10 million documents in its first 10 years" (Wikipedia, 2016). In 2010, WikiLeaks published information it received from a whistle-blower within the US military; the information and the press coverage that ensued was considered damning.

The founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, remains wanted by the US government for compromising classified information and, at the time of writing, is fighting extradition to the US. The leaked material, and the website itself, presented an entirely new form of journalism, though some would argue it followed all the same principles of traditional investigative reporting. Either way, the website bypassed any established journalistic platform or newspaper and published the information, completely unedited, directly to its website, which was publicly available to anyone with access to a computer and the internet. Meikle and Young explain:

“WikiLeaks is not a news organisation, stateless or otherwise. Placing a quarter of a million raw documents on a website is not the same thing as producing news, which is an industrial process of creating and distributing non-fiction dramas, of giving shape and structure to raw information. WikiLeaks does not produce news - rather, it is a source of raw material for news organisations which simultaneously makes that raw material available to anyone through its website. Its role in channelling information to news media has more in common with the communication strategies of powerful sources like the Pentagon or the Metropolitan Police than with journalism” (2012, p8).

This argument elicits an interesting debate with regard to what can be considered formal or traditional journalism, and how this issue is mired when it comes to the internet. Typically, if a whistle-blower leaks documents to a newspaper, they would be held accountable for any related crime (not the newspaper). However, in the case of WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange, he himself continues to be pursued by the US authorities for the leaks (the whistle-blower who passed the information to WikiLeaks was also pursued and has served time in prison). In this case, WikiLeaks was not given the same consideration that perhaps would be afforded to a traditional news organisation, albeit it performed, to some extent, the same task of disseminating information. Gillmor notes three key aspects of this type of ‘grass-roots’, non-traditional journalism:

“...firstly, outsiders of all kinds can probe more deeply into newsmakers’ businesses and affairs. They can disseminate what they learn more widely and more quickly. And it’s never been easier to organise like-minded people to support, or denounce, a person or cause. The communications-enabled grassroots is a formidable truth squad. Second, insiders are part of the conversation. Information no longer leaks. It gushes, through firewalls and other barriers, via instant messages, emails and phone calls. Third, what gushes forth can take on a life of its own...” (2006, p46).

However, despite leaking the ‘raw’ information directly via the WikiLeaks website, the organisation still had to work with the traditional forms of mass media to circulate the

information and ensure it was seen by the many. Goggin explains that when WikiLeaks released a further set of classified documents – cables from 250 US embassies around the world – it had to repeat the previous activity of utilising the traditional mass media:

“...WikiLeaks again struck agreements with the leading press outlets. There were many advantages to this, including the ability to take advantage of the fact-checking, analysis and interpretation skills of leading journalists. Also the newspapers were able to pick out the aspects of the cables most germane to their national publics, and zero in on the points of maximum embarrassment and outrage to their own governments” (2012, p55).

This perhaps identifies the salient point with regard to a clear delineation between citizen and professional journalism, whereby skill and experience are required to ensure the content is of the quality and in the format likely to attract and hold the attention of an audience. Without this, there is the risk that the information will serve little purpose, as well as reaching a much smaller audience. Furthermore, without the marketing of such material, and lending to it the verification that comes with a trusted and known news source (i.e. an established and familiar news organisation), there is the risk that such extraordinary information, even with the power of social media and ‘sharing’, could likely be dismissed as untrue. As Meikle and Young state:

“WikiLeaks was also a newspaper phenomenon. All of the online sharing and argument, all of the social networking and collaborative chatter, were catalysed by the publication of material provided by WikiLeaks to The Guardian, The New York Times and other long-established news organisations. The convergent media environment, then, is characterised by both contestation and continuity” (2012, p7).

Implications for the industry

Meikle and Young consider this idea of a ‘convergent media environment’, where the traditional media now exists alongside or interlinked with the newer and evolving

formats, explaining 'contestation and continuity' as "new actors and old industries, contending modes of distribution and visibility, complex assemblages of networked digital media" (2012, p9). Like many of the views considered in this chapter thus far, there is a noticeable lack of suggestion that the new digital environment or the 'information revolution' threatens to replace the existing, more traditional news producers and organisations. Rather, it seems, the traditional industry is being forced to adapt and adopt the practices evolving out of new technologies and online platforms while contending with new and very different types of rival providers to retain its income in an already tumultuous economic environment in light of declining readership and advertising sales. Thornburg explains:

"among the 199 most popular news sites in the US, two-thirds are sites for news organisations that were in business before the internet existed. And two-thirds of the traffic to the top 199 sites goes to legacy news-sites, or sites that are run by companies that produced the news before the arrival of the internet... According to a 2009 analysis of outgoing links from social media sites done by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), about 80 percent of the links go to traditional media sites. The list of destinations to which bloggers send their readers is dominated by just three news sources: The New York Times, CNN, and the BBC" (2011, p64).

Meikle and Young describe both News Corporation and Apple as examples of traditional media organisations that can now be considered 'convergent', as they navigate the ongoing and evolving process of consolidation to create larger, integrated media firms that are 'more networked':

"Media industries develop by responding to the possibilities offered by the affordances of communications technologies... they incorporate into their existing business... they significantly change the scope and prevailing uses of the technology, and in doing so change the scope and scale of their own business. The digitalisation and networking of production and distribution means that the overlap between previously distinct sectors is now very substantial" (2012, p40).

Picard explains that the impact of the internet has been far greater on the communications industry than any other technological development, as "unlike

broadcasting or television, the Internet is a substitute for the printed world” (2015, p251). That said, it has to be noted that consumers’ viewing and listening habits are seen to be increasingly changing as broadcasters adapt, i.e. streaming services such as Netflix are becoming increasingly popular, and people are no longer reliant on TV scheduling thanks to catch-up services available via the internet.

Causes for concern

There are a number of issues to consider within the context of the new digital environment and the impact on plurality:

- *Online news*

In considering the impact of new technologies and the internet on the production and provision of news, Phillips concludes that:

“the availability of information is creating better opportunities for checking material, finding alternative sources and improving reliability, independence and therefore the democratic and cultural relevance of newspapers. At the same time, the speeding up of news reporting and the need to be visible on the net is impacting directly on the quality of follow-up of routine news. It would seem from the evidence here that, far from broadening and democratizing, the internet is actually narrowing the perspective of many reporters... One is forced to conclude that the overall effect of the internet on journalism is to provide a diminishing range of the same old sources albeit in newer bottles” (2010, p95).

This underlines the point that the internet has provided a vast, perhaps limitless platform upon which to publish, and yet for the most part, the audience is, knowingly or not, consuming much the same content (albeit through different distribution mechanisms) as before. The impact is not only on the audience; the existing and new media organisations providing the news continue to contend with an unpredictable business model from which it is somewhat difficult to gain any profit and are arguably yet to land on a viable model. Goggin explains:

“newspaper apps are being eagerly watched to see if they will provide a viable revenue stream to prop up newspapers, as they suffer the near-mortal blow of loss of advertising. Apps are part of a reinvigorated attempt to settle upon a business model that will finally see consumers pay for digital content” (2012, p55).

Fortunately for them, the existing, well-established media conglomerates already have at their disposal significant funding from other areas of their business, along with the experience of operating in media markets, and the advantage of being trusted news brands.

- *Digital intermediaries*

Foster (2012) details the potential impact of digital intermediaries on news consumption. Foster examines the premise that digital intermediaries have the potential to open up and/or further widen access to news content and therefore, potentially, further promote democracy. However, where such possibilities do exist, there is the equal, and perhaps far more damaging, possibility that the provision of news content in this manner can be manipulated in favour of the few large media conglomerates operating in the UK market. Foster explains (using Yahoo as an example) that aggregators “are close to established news media in the way that they operate, providing carefully curated packages of news content for their users, and sometimes originating new content themselves” (2012, p6).

On this basis, it is arguable that policymakers and government officials should consider such news aggregators to be the same as any traditional form of news publisher. While it is arguable that such enterprises do not actually produce content and therefore have more limited power to exercise political bias, this is not to say that some form of agenda cannot still be served. If such an enterprise as Summly, an algorithm-based app that summarises news content into 1000, 500 or 140 words, was to be bought by one of the large media owners, the media owner then has the opportunity to filter the news that reaches the consumer according to their own commercial interests. (Summly was purchased by Yahoo in 2013).

Furthermore, as long as no policy exists in regard to the acquisition of digital media

space, the media owner is effectively able to increase their market share and audience reach indefinitely. On the other hand, Thornburg argues that “on-demand delivery offers the online audience much more control over which stories it sees via social media as well as news aggregators such as Google News. Because they are reading headlines on social networking sites, many people may be getting as much news as they want without ever actually visiting a news site... the use of search and social filtering means that for many people their news diet is becoming more balanced - 68 percent of online news audience regularly relies on more than one source of news everyday, and 11 percent regularly uses at least six sites” (2011, pp65-66). This represents an ‘ideal’ approach to plurality – where audiences are drawing information from a number of sources – but, as discussed, it ignores the power of media conglomerates in the production (rather than distribution) of news according to pre-set agendas.

- Democracy

In the context of news and democracy, it is difficult to truly define the impact of the new digital environment. Hachten and Scotton explain that “concerned persons are pondering the implications of all of this. Society, in short, faces the danger of computer/communications technologies advancing faster than our ability to develop methods of controlling and using them for the general welfare of humankind. This has always been true of technologies, but today that gap is becoming ominously wide” (2012, p75). It is fair to say that the impact of the internet has been felt most when it comes to the business of news. Other areas of the media industry, such as music and entertainment, are slowly finding ways to grow and profit (albeit continuing to experience challenges along the way). The special nature of news means that the issue goes beyond profitability and new business models to ensuring that the quality of the product is not corroded, and that it can serve democracy as well as its audience.

The press, an area of the media industry that has for a long time enjoyed oligopolistic control and successful and loyal readership, now faces new types of competition as a result of the additional, potentially limitless space online. Stories are easily copied, the public are able to engage and create content, and while it can be argued that investment remains key (and therefore the barriers to entry remain in place), the

internet has provided a viable platform for smaller competitors who might previously have been deterred. It has also changed the nature of the way we, the general public, consume the news. Picard explains “circulation, listeners, viewers, and unique visitors are still critical to success, but the instantaneous distribution of news via the Internet and social media makes it difficult to retain control of one’s news product and audiences” (2015, p224).

The news conglomerates now face the real challenge of maintaining their momentum and presence in a constantly evolving market that, to some extent, is unpredictable when trying to scan the horizon for potential competitors or emerging popular trends. From a governmental and policy perspective, the issue becomes even more complex. There are two key factors to consider: the conglomerates’ reaction to the emergence of new media and the potential acquisitions that further increase their reach and power (further amplifying the issue of ownership); and the far-ranging debate about how, or indeed whether, to regulate the provision of online news content.

Summary

Issues of media plurality no longer relate to just newspapers and broadcasters in the traditional newspaper and television format. The digital age, or ‘new digital environment’, has revolutionised the ways in which people consume news and information, and as such the implementation of adequate policy to address issues of plurality becomes more complex. Furthermore, the shift in the consumption of news online has had a significant impact on journalism and the newspaper industry and has seen a wealth of new actors operating in this space.

A prominent example of a new type of actor that has the potential to further complicate matters of regulation are the ‘news aggregators’, or ‘gatekeepers’. The aggregator has the potential to exercise significant influence over the news agenda, and even what information the public is or isn’t exposed to. For example, Facebook has the ability to select which news stories will appear on an individual’s feed, or ‘push’ stories that derive from a certain news source. As discussed in this chapter, research to date indicates that the public largely participate in the consumption of news online in a passive manner, and so may not be cognisant of the bias, credibility or reliability of the

information they are engaging with.

At the time of writing, there is no policy in place in Britain that addresses media ownership and plurality within the context of online media space. Thus, as it stands, the traditional news providers and major media conglomerates have the potential to make significant acquisitions, expanding their market share and audience reach.

This chapter speaks to some broader themes within the media ownership and dominance debate. However, these themes are relevant to the central subject of this thesis: Murdoch's ability to attack and undermine his competitors and regulators in pursuit of his corporate agenda and expansion plans. This chapter confirms that the risks of a media moguls' ability to exert undue influence and power is not denigrated by the new digital environment.

Chapter one explored issues with regards to the role of the news in a democratic society and how major media players, such as Rupert Murdoch, can interfere with the democratic process by using his popular press to sway opinion and set agendas. As this thesis will assert, this can be done with the aim of pursuing personal and corporate agendas, and to the benefit of the media mogul's expansion plans.

This chapter has sought to build on that broader theme, and to mitigate any challenge that the new digital environment reduces the risks associated with the concentration of media ownership allowing such influence. By exploring the technical developments that have brought about changes in the production and consumption of news, it has allowed for consideration of the new and emerging sources of news now available to audiences that may allay concerns regarding Murdoch's ability to influence reader opinion, and therefore policy decisions.

Via the analysis of the relevant literature and studies on these topics, this chapter concludes that traditional press owners continue to dominate press content and the news agenda. Therefore, the issue of Murdoch's ability to use his popular press to attack competing media organisations, or regulators imposing potential restrictions on his business, whether it be for ideological or business reasons, or both, remains a prevalent one in the current day and foreseeable future.

Chapter Three: Rupert Murdoch and News Corporation

This chapter will undertake a chronological examination of the history of both Murdoch's business practices in the UK, and the important political relationships he maintained. It will begin with an overview of Murdoch's various acquisitions since he began business in the UK in 1968 to the present day (at the time of writing – 2019). This will be followed by analysis of a number of acquisitions, events and relationships with various prime ministers during this time period.

This analysis is done so in an attempt to understand how and why Murdoch has used the power of his media holdings, notably his UK press holdings, to undermine and attack competitors and (in this case the BBC) and a number of regulators, and to what end.

This chapter will assert that Murdoch had two core motivations for undertaking such practices: firstly, so as to make room in the UK broadcasting market to allow for his entrance and subsequent expansion; and secondly, because of his deep-rooted, ideological opposition to the 'establishment', and therefore to the BBC as Britain's Public Service Broadcaster (PSB) and to the premise of regulation of the commercial markets in which he wanted to operate.

It will also be argued that Murdoch has continued over time to use his powerful UK press to criticise such organisations as the BBC and Ofcom because of this ideological opposition, and so as to maintain his dominant position in the UK media markets.

Timeline of Business in the UK

The profile of News Corp's assets has changed over time. The timeline below details the history of Murdoch's acquisitions and other selected activities since he started doing business in the UK:

- 1968 – Purchased News of the World
- 1969 – Purchased the Sun; during the '70s, the Sun became the highest-selling daily newspaper in the UK, and retains that position to this day

- 1981 – Purchased the Times Newspapers company, owner of the Times and Sunday Times
- 1987 – Purchased the Today newspaper
- 1989 – Launched Sky TV
- 1990 – Merged Sky TV with British Satellite Broadcasting to form BSkyB
- 1995 – Closed the Today newspaper
- 2000 – Formed Sky Global Network
- 2003 – Purchased DirecTV
- 2005 – Purchased Myspace
- 2011 – Attempted to purchase the remaining 61% of BSkyB shares that News Corp did not own, but withdrew the bid following the revelations of phone hacking
- 2011 – Closed News of the World following phone-hacking revelations
- 2012 – Launched \$10 billion News Corp share buy-back
- 2013 – Split News Corp into two entities, separating the more profitable entertainment arm to become the standalone entity 21st Century Fox
- 2018 – Sold all of 21st Century Fox's shares in BSkyB to US media company Comcast
- 2019 – Closed 21st Century Fox, and formed Fox Corp.

Watson and Hickman detail the history of Murdoch's rise to power in Britain, explaining that by 2012:

“Rupert Murdoch had entered his ninth decade running a global media empire like no other. Every day, one billion people digested his newspapers, magazines, books, TV shows and feature films. In Britain, News Corp, of which Murdoch was largest stakeholder, chairman and chief executive, owned a 39 per cent stake in Sky's owner BSkyB, the Sun, News of the World, Times and Sunday Times; in Australia 70 per cent of the newspaper market and the only national title, The Australian; and in the US, the Wall Street Journal, 20th Century Fox studio and Fox TV. Murdoch was, as the title of a recent biography put it, *The Man Who Owns the News*” (2012, p4).

This profile has changed somewhat since 2012.

The News of the World newspaper published its final issue in the summer of 2011 and subsequently closed; direct action taken by Murdoch in response to the phone-hacking

revelations. Across 2018 and 2019, Murdoch agreed the sale of his shares in BSKyB to Comcast, and sold 21st Century Fox to Disney. However, despite these sales, his media (and non-media) holdings remain vast, and his net worth is considered to be around \$20 billion.

The following provides an overview of News Corporation’s media holdings in the UK, US and Australia as at 2019³:

Parent Company	Subsidiary	Brands					
		Newspaper/ publication	Online News	Tv News	Tv Entertainment	Radio	Other
News Corp	News UK	The Sun				Wireless	Press Assosiation (part owned)
		The Times					Unruly
		The Sunday Times					
	Dow Jones	The Wall Street Journal		Market Watch			
		Barrons					
	New York Post	New York Post					
							Harper Collins Publishers
	News America Marketing	Smart Source	Checkout 51				Storyful
	Move						Realtor.com
							Rea Group
		The Australian	News.com.au	Fox Sports			
		The Dauly Telegraph	News Local	Foxtel			
		The Sunday Telegraph					Punters.com.au
		Herald Sun					Taste
		Herald Sun Sunday					Delicious
		The Courier Mail		Sky News (Australia)			AAP (news wire service)
		The Sunday Mail					
		The Advertiser					
	News Corp Australia	NT News					
		Sunday Territorian					
The Sunday Times							
Mercury: The Voice of Tasmania							
Vogue Australia							
Vogue Living							
GQ Australia							
Fox Corp			Fox News	Fox Fox Sport Fox TV Stations	Fox news radio	Fox News Podcasts	

Fig 3.1

Murdoch’s holdings in the US are included due to there being some overlap between the News Corp UK and US entities that will be discussed further in this chapter. That said, it is worth noting that News Corp Australia has a significant number of media assets, including 22 newspapers and an online news publication, and “News Corp Australia titles account for 59% of the sales of all daily newspapers, with sales of 17.3 million papers per week, making it Australia’s most influential newspaper publisher by a considerable margin” (Flew, 2013)

Looking at the UK news market, a Media Reform Coalition (2019) report states that News UK’s the Sun and the Times account for a total of 35.42% of the average daily print circulation, and the Sun on Sunday and the Sunday Times account for 42.72%

³ Information sourced from News UK and News Corp websites.

of the average weekly circulation figures for the Sunday newspapers. Combined, News UK has a 36.35% market share of total circulation. News UK does not only deal in newspapers; it owns the digital radio broadcaster Wireless; and part owns the Press Association (News UK is one of 26 shareholders), and the video advertising company Unruly. The News-Corp-owned company Storyful also operates in the UK; Storyful's business is concerned with "social media contextualisation and verification" (News Corp, no date).

There is much narrative that accompanies the above timeline, particularly in relation to some of Murdoch's more controversial acquisitions; it is this that best reveals Murdoch's motivation and behaviours. Analysis of these behaviours begins with Murdoch's arrival in the UK markets, and his attitude towards Britain: in particular a considerable disdain for the British establishment which was or is often channelled through his newspapers.

The News of the World and The Sun (1968-69)

The News of the World was Murdoch's first 'media' purchase in the UK and was perhaps a sign of the business practices the country could expect to see from him in the coming years. Petley (2016, p252) describes the events that surrounded his eventual takeover of the 'very British' newspaper, noting that his involvement only came about as a result of the then then owner 'William Carr' looking to ensure the infamous Maxwell could not purchase a controlling number of shares. A careful deal was agreed between Murdoch and Carr instead, which after some time, led to Murdoch taking full control of the newspaper.

The controversy did not stop there. Petley (2016, p252) explains that once in control, Murdoch became embroiled in the British scandal involving the Christine Keeley and John Profumo affair. Murdoch purchased the rights to Keeley's serialisation of the affair to publish in News of the World. At the time, Murdoch was accused of selling 'sleaze' and 'muckraking' by publishing details of an otherwise forgotten scandal. Despite Murdoch's assertions to the contrary, he was said to be 'surprised' by the angry reaction to the News of the World's publication of the scandal.

“Murdoch had anticipated this might happen, but was taken aback by the sheer amount of criticism and, in particular was concerned that this episode might jeopardise his plans to buy the Sun. The Independent television Authority (ITA) banned all television advertisements for the paper until the serialisation had ended, the Press Council condemned the serialisation as a ‘disservice both to the public welfare and to the press’, and Cardinal Heenan, the Archbishop of Westminster and Britain’s most senior Roman Catholic, withdrew from a commitment to write an article on the ‘permissive society’ for the paper.

It was perhaps Murdoch’s earliest ‘run in’ with the British regulators, and of course the ‘establishment’, and his introduction to the British public as a controversial character unafraid to publish ‘sleazy’ material and ready and willing to ruthlessly pursue his business interests. However, despite a frosty reception, Murdoch’s purchase of News of the World, and subsequent purchase of the Sun, proved to be particularly profitable and paved the way for Murdoch’s future interests in the UK.

Wolff asserts that “the News of the World established Murdoch as a new and unnatural character in British public life... but it is the Sun that makes Murdoch a player in Britain, and whose success makes it possible for him to show little or no interest in submitting to, as it were, British rule” (2008, p131). Wolff claims that Murdoch’s powerful influence on the political stage is enabled by the success of these two newspapers: “the Sun, with profit margins as high as 60 or 70 per cent, has become the most significant part of his business and will remain so for nearly twenty years. It not only becomes the primary revenue source, supplying the cash flow for his other efforts, but it also gives him his extraordinary power base in the United Kingdom. The Sun becomes one of the key levers to push the transformation of Britain itself. It changes Murdoch too, giving him a sense of just how large his ambitions could be” (2008, p205)

London Weekend Television (1971)

Not long after the purchase of his soon to be very profitable News of the World and The Sun, Murdoch attempted to expand his media business by purchasing London Weekend Television. George Munster (1985) explains that from early on in his career, Murdoch considered there to be a ‘direct road’ from newspapers to television. However, while his entry into Fleet Street in the UK was relatively easy, his attempt

into commercial television, a 'licence to print money', was not so. In 1971, Murdoch wanted to purchase shares in the commercial broadcaster 'London Weekend Television'. The regulator concerned with commercial broadcasting at the time was the Independent Television Authority (ITA); the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA)

The 1964 Broadcasting Act was in place at the time which stipulated restrictions in ownership of commercial broadcasters on a number of reasons, including where a person already owned newspapers, and the ITA could use its power to terminate contracts where they did not serve the public's best interest (Munster, 1985, p139). However, Munster (ibid) suggests that the 1964 Act was debated and eventually amended based on compromises to appease the then powerful newspaper proprietor Thomson.

This provided Murdoch with a loophole to enter the commercial broadcasting world, and his request to invest in London Weekend Television (LWT) was approved. Munster (1985, p140) explains: "*Murdoch was in, seemingly to stay, and he promptly used his well exercised muscle. Two days later, he obtained the agreement of his fellow directors to the dismissal of Tom Margerison, the managing director of London Weekend Television*". In a short amount of time Murdoch purchased non-voting shares in LWT and became a non-executive director. Eventually, News of the World owned between 30 and 35 percent of the non-voting LWT stock.

Thanks to his newfound position, Murdoch was able to assume the position of chair of the LWT Executive Committee, meaning he had a controlling say in the types of programmes that LWT would broadcast. Petley (2016, p258) explains that the sacking of Tom Margerison and Murdoch's assuming the position as the executive committee head contravened the Television Act. As Munster explains (1985, p 141) "*...The ITA issued three demands which LWT was to meet within six weeks: programme plans were to be submitted for approval; a managing director and a programme controller were to be appointed, subject to ITA scrutiny; and the next managing director's name would not be Rupert Murdoch*" (Munster, G, 1985, p141).

Murdoch was unimpressed with the ITA's decision, and "ever suspicious of

machinations against him within the British establishment, personally accused the ITA of besmirching his reputation” (Petley, J, 2016, p258). Bonner and Aston (1998) explain that “This became a very public matter and Murdoch was furious. He accused the ITA of character assassination by what he saw as their portrayal of him as a man unfit to control a public television station... many believe Rupert Murdoch neither forgot nor forgave.”

Following the ITA’s decision, a new chief executive and chairman of LWT was put in place: John Freeman. Freeman sought agreement with Murdoch that he would be able to run the company without Murdoch’s interference. The ITA was said to be impressed with Freeman’s ability to take control of the company’s affairs, securing LWTs franchise once again.

Petley (2016, p259) explains that “Murdoch did more or less leave him to his own devices, but Freeman left him in no doubt that he would resign if Murdoch interfered, which would undoubtedly spell the end of the franchise”. By 1979 Murdoch had turned his attention elsewhere, predominantly to media opportunities in the USA, and by March 1980 had sold all of his shares in LWT.

Docherty (1990, p75) explains that “The ITA could have turned a blind eye to Murdoch, It did not do so, however; instead it opted for the classic and, in the circumstances, sensible bureaucratic compromise: the authority invoked the Television Act, thus making Murdoch aware that this was more than a clash of personalities, and then allowed the company sufficient time to cast around for a solution which would save face and allow the ITA to confirm the contract.”

It concluded Murdoch’s first foray into the British broadcasting market, and arguably the second of many unwelcomed interruptions from regulators. Barnett, S and Curry, A, (1994, p22) explain: “... his first venture into broadcasting had brought him straight into a conflict with the British regulatory establishment when he tried to take over London Weekend Television in 1971. The then Independent Television Authority had blocked him, and he had come away with an unaccustomed bloody nose and an abiding hatred for the British regulatory system.”

Docherty (1990, p75) adds that Murdoch's fight became bigger than just that with the ITA: "In the short term, Murdoch simply had no way of taking on the combined weight of their Television Act, British broadcasting culture, the ITA and both ends of the British political establishment."

Petley (2016, p261-262) writes of the 'significant parallels' between Murdoch's takeover of News of the World and his attempt to take over LWT, and outlined the type of business practices the UK could expect to see from Murdoch in the decades to come. Petley writes that:

"It is thus entirely possible that the endless propaganda campaign against public service broadcasting and in favour of 'deregulation'... that has for so long been such a prominent feature in Murdoch's newspapers had its genesis in the LWT episode. Similarly, the absolute ruthlessness of Murdoch's dealings with the Carr family and his trouncing of Robert Maxwell foreshadow his brutal treatment of all those who would stand in his way in the future..."

Sky TV (1989)

It could be argued that Murdoch's sustained criticism of the BBC was not only born out of his disdain for the British establishment, but also his early ambitions with regard to satellite television. Murdoch's earliest pursuit of such a venture was in 1989 when he launched Sky TV. It was another example of Murdoch seeking ways to circumnavigate regulation and outrun his competitors. A licence for satellite broadcasting had already been granted to the British-owned company British Satellite Broadcasting (BSB) in 1986: a company backed by two existing, British-owned media organisations – Granada and Pearson. Described by Wolff (2008) as always being open to technological developments, Murdoch quickly seized the opportunity to latch onto satellite technology that would allow him to control what people were watching on their TV set at home. Wolff explains that Murdoch entered into a 'race' against Granada, Pearson, and Richard Branson (who had started BSB).

Shawcross (1992) describes the events leading up to the launch of Sky TV as the 'Star Wars' that threatened the Murdoch empire, but also the opportunity for Murdoch to, once again, take on his enemy the 'British establishment'. As Shawcross (1992, p445-

456) explains, in 1989 three of five 'Direct Broadcast Satellite' (DBS) channels were made available, and the 'Independent Broadcasting Authority' invited licence applications. The remaining two channels were allocated to the BBC, but the project failed to materialise. Seven applications were made, one of which came from Rupert Murdoch and his Sky channel service (which was already broadcasting to European cable systems).

At the time, many of the other applicants for a licence *"all seemed to have one thing in common- they wanted to keep Rupert Murdoch out of British television. There was much talk about the danger of his putting the Sun on satellite and doing a Wapping of the air. The risks to both morals and established television practices seemed overwhelming"* (ibid).

The licences were granted to BSB (at the time made up of a franchise of companies that did not include Murdoch). Shawcross (1992, p446) describes the winning applicant, BSB, as having a service that was 'firmly entrenched' in middle-class values. *"To Murdoch, it was uncompromisingly "Establishment-oriented", in that it fitted easily into the mainstream of British television. The Sun called it 'toffs' telly"*. It's one of the early examples of Murdoch's attempt to enter the British broadcasting market, only to be restricted by the regulator, the IBA, and the 'establishment', the middle class 'toffs'.

Murdoch's response was to circumnavigate the process, and broadcast via a different route: *"Having had the front door closed against him, he decided to kick down the back door, and come into, or rather over, Britain on Astra, a private pan-European satellite operated from Luxembourg"* (Shawcross, 1992, p447).

Despite running at a considerable loss in its early life, Sky TV had the benefit of financial backing from Murdoch's already established, other media interests. Richard Branson was one of the major shareholders in BSB at the time and, from an early stage, saw that Sky would become a significant, dominating competitor:

"Branson knew how resolute a competitor Murdoch was and he realised that Sky would be enormously boosted by support from all the News International papers. That

plugging began at once. In the months to come, Murdoch's papers, in particular the Sun, the News of the World and Today all became shameless cheerleaders for Sky" (Shawcross, 1992, p450).

BSB suffered delays to its launch, and was operating in a difficult market environment, competing with Sky for subscribers. BSB deemed this not to be fair competition, given the ability of Sky's parent company, News International, to promote Sky to the British public:

"All the time, stories about Sky were vigorously promoted in Murdoch's popular papers. BSB submitted a large dossier of complaints on such cross-media advertising to the Home Office, the Department of Trade and Industry and the Office of Fair Trading, and then conducted and released a poll of Members of Parliament. Eighty per cent of those questioned thought it was undesirable for one proprietor to control newspapers, TV and radio. BSB argued that Sky should be subject to the same provisions of the Broadcasting Bill as applied to the ITV stations" (Shawcross, 1992, p453).

Murdoch did eventually win the race against BSB; Sky launched first and proved to be popular. However, technological difficulties involving hardware and encryption had caused Murdoch a significant cash-flow problem. In 1990, it was announced that BSB would merge with Sky, creating BSkyB; Murdoch took control of the company. Many of the events leading up to the merger were considered symptomatic of Murdoch and News International's rash, risk-taking approach to business. Wolff notes that "were it not for his debt crisis, if he could just have eked out a few more months, the other guys would have collapsed, leaving him with 100 percent of what is now a \$14 billion business, instead of 39 percent)" (2008, p310). Of course, things have moved on since Wolff's account; Murdoch mounted two bids for the remaining 61% of BSkyB, but both failed (discussed elsewhere in this chapter).

Thatcher (1979 – 1990)

Following the acquisitions of the News of the World and the Sun, Murdoch moved on to his purchases of the Times and the Sunday Times. This purchase was

controversially nodded through by the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher without procedural reference to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC). It was a move that was highly criticised at the time and showcased a strong alliance between the mogul and the country's leader. Murdoch and Thatcher had enjoyed a notoriously long and profitable friendship, based on their common ideological belief in free markets and commercialism. The purchase of the Times was not only criticised for this prime ministerial support, but for Murdoch's treatment of the paper once he had taken control. The purchase was predicated on specifications about the editorial structure of the newspaper that Murdoch promised to adhere to, and then quickly abandoned:

"The dramatic events at the Times and the Sunday Times that followed Rupert Murdoch's takeover were more than simply a clash between editors and the domineering owner. They resulted from Murdoch's breaking his promises to allow his editors independence. In the drama, the leading characters were Murdoch's appointee editor of the Times, Harry Evans, and the editor of the Sunday Times, Frank Giles. Both Evans and Giles later wrote books about the occurrences that caused the newspapers to sharply change course, describing Murdoch's ever-present demands over news stories, headlines, editorials and columnists. Interference was key" (McChesney, 2013, p89).

Such practice further highlighted Murdoch's approach to the management of his newspapers, and his intention to use them to promote his viewpoints.

Page summarises the culmination of the relationship between Thatcher and Murdoch as follows:

"By the middle of the 1980s, as Murdoch's business operations moved towards the great Wapping turning point, Mrs Thatcher and her small but ascendant section within the government had gained a degree of influence over British news media... this influence they owed for the most part to the Murdoch alliance" (2003, 15966).

The 'great Wapping turning point' that Page (2003) references relates to the union strike during the early '80s that was brought on by the Murdoch-owned company, then called News International, building a new printing plant to house all of its titles. The

strike led to some 6000 workers going unpaid for nearly a year.

Murdoch was said to be heavily supported in his approach to the Wapping situation by the Thatcher government at the time, a part of the same dark era during which the miners' strike had also taken place. As Page explains of Murdoch's seemingly ruthless pursuit: "It was recognised as a 'high risk' course which would depend on unquestioning and almost unlimited support from London's Metropolitan Police – a force, uniquely in Britain, then directly under central government control" (2003, 16346). Noting the unusually favourable and unwavering support Murdoch received, not only from Thatcher, but from the Metropolitan Police, Page continues that "if every firm in Britain were to treat its workers with the provocation Murdoch intended, there would be no cops available for any other duty" (2003, 16350). The support of the government, and therefore the police, was indicative of the strong ties between Murdoch and Thatcher. The road to success with regard to the overhaul of Murdoch's newspaper production and the considerable profit he achieved thereafter may not have been so smooth in the absence of such a friendship. Equally, Thatcher could have arguably received a much harsher reception from the British public had Murdoch's newspapers not been so supportive.

BBC (1980s – onwards)

Murdoch and Thatcher were seen to have similar opinions on fundamental issues, such as their shared misgivings about the BBC and the very premise of a publicly funded broadcaster. While it would seem logical that Murdoch's misgivings stemmed from his commercial perspective, it is often argued that they were actually deeply rooted in his ideological beliefs. According to Wolff:

"Murdoch in England is a never-ending fight with the establishment. He uses the word establishment partly as the Brits do, to suggest toffs and Eton and plummy accents, but expands it to include any other owner centre that he's against – for instance, and not incidentally, the BBC. So there is the left establishment, and the journalistic establishment, and the banking establishment, and the royal establishment, and of course the trade union establishment" (2008, p121).

In a similar fashion, Page considers Murdoch's attitude that the BBC is the personification of the left-wing, establishment view that he felt needed reform:

"...like the Prime Minister and other of her advisors, he believed there was a vast, Augean task to be undertaken in cleansing the BBC of decadent leftism, before launching it as a grand vessel of private enterprise" (2003, p361).

The BBC was a British institution that existed within the very market that Murdoch wished to dominate and represented the kind of left-wing political approach that Murdoch abhorred. This whole attitude was indicative of Murdoch's belief in and pursuit of a commercial, free market. Murdoch viewed the BBC as 'state-sponsored', believing that it removed the fundamentals of audience choice. According to Knee, Murdoch saw the BBC as:

"a venerated but sleepy organisation whose objectives were defined in terms of what the public should see rather than what they wanted to see. Although the government had allowed the establishment of two new privately-owned terrestrial channels, the variety of available programming was a fraction of what was available elsewhere" (2009, l4125).

Shawcross had earlier made similar comments, claiming that "Murdoch agreed there was still a place for 'public service television' in Britain, but it should be the subservient not the dominant factor... If the market, rather than the public service, dominated television, freedom, he argued, would be safer" (1992, p457).

In the 1980s, the BBC made a bid for a licence fee increase. This came at a time when Thatcher was in power, and her Conservative government was looking at the television system in the UK to see what reforms could be made.

An already hostile press responded to the BBC's bid for more funding with negative coverage of the broadcaster. In a survey of the coverage, O'Malley (1994) found that the native coverage was particularly strong in the newspapers owned by Rupert Murdoch. O'Malley argues that this was driven not just by Murdoch's ideological objections to the BBC, but also Murdoch's desire to expand into the television market

at the time.

This attitude to public service broadcasting is perhaps what first inspired a seemingly long-standing resentment towards the BBC and its prominent position within the UK. It would appear that these opinions have not only remained but inspired similar bad feeling amongst the next generation of News Corporation leaders. Building on his father's sentiments, Rupert Murdoch's son James Murdoch, the then Chairman and Chief Executive of News Corporation in Europe and Asia, echoed his father's comments in a speech about the 'British broadcasting establishment' at the 2009 Edinburgh International Television Festival. In this, he described the BBC as 'throttling' the market, stating that "the scope of its activities and ambitions is chilling" (Murdoch, 2009).

The speech was a lengthy disquisition on all that the Murdochs considered to be wrong with British institutions such as the BBC and Ofcom, and how the government should scale back any kind of regulatory activity and allow for a free, commercially driven market. It was confirmation of the Murdochs' antipathy towards the BBC and Ofcom, which had already been consistently channelled to the British public via the Murdoch-owned newspapers for some time. As Belfield, Hird and Kelly note, "since 1985 the Times papers, in concert with the Sun and the News of the World have maintained a relentless attack on the BBC" (1991, p83).

This ideological opposition to the BBC went hand in hand with Murdoch's own commercial and business interests. Firstly, his then interest in Sky TV (explored further later in this chapter) meant the BBC was obvious competition due to its strong and credible position in the market. Secondly, as the internet became a more and more popular part of everyday life and news consumption, the BBC's online presence as a free news site posed a threat to Murdoch's newspapers, such as the Times, which was attempting to monetise its site via an online paywall.

Petley (2015) considers one of the issues crucial to this research when examining the 'relentless campaign' Rupert Murdoch has waged against the BBC, and how it has achieved its goal of persuading the government of the need to 'slim down' the BBC and slow any growth in its funding. Petley states:

“Ever since Rupert Murdoch decided to enter the television game in the early 1980s, his newspapers have waged continuous war on public service broadcasters, and on The BBC in particular. These he sees purely as rivals in the broadcasting marketplace, and when Murdoch spots rivals his instinct is to exterminate them” (2015).

Petley notes examples of the negative headlines found in Murdoch-owned newspapers about the BBC (in particular its size and power) from 1985 up until 2015. Furthermore, as is discussed in this chapter, Petley highlights the obvious links between the headlines in Murdoch-owned newspapers and the actions and/or decisions taken by those in power, suggesting the persuasive headlines and leaked information were designed to force the government’s hand. Petley asserts that it was this behaviour (on the part of the Murdoch-owned newspapers) and the many meetings held between Murdoch himself and then Chancellor George Osborne that led to the 2015 announcement that the BBC was to fund licence fees for the over-75s, costing the BBC around £250 million (BBC, 2019).

Major (1990-97)

Price writes of the prime ministers who followed Thatcher and believed it to be Murdoch and his newspapers’ influence over the public that was key to Thatcher’s success:

“John Major, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown all believed that her success in winning so much support, not to say adulation, in the press was the key to her electoral success. As a result they exaggerated the power of the media and paid a heavy price for it. The election of 1992 had a profound effect on them, too. That contest, in which John Major triumphed against the odds, was followed by the claim that ‘It’s The Sun Wot Won It’” (2011, 1384).

What has become clear over the years and many elections is that there is a tendency for political parties to pursue the support of Murdoch’s newspapers to help them win, but also that that support can switch between political parties – at Murdoch’s command – depending on who could offer him amenable regulatory or policy change, and/or who

was most likely to win. As McChesney explains: “Murdoch observers have argued that the key to Murdoch’s politics is that he likes winners. Which explains his support for Blair in the 1997, 2001 and 2005 elections” (2013, p151). However, despite Murdoch’s preference for the Labour Party in those elections, a preference confirmed by the headlines featured in his newspapers, prior to Labour taking power in 1997, the Conservatives had enjoyed the full support of the Murdoch press.

This explains the Sun’s particularly fierce campaign against Labour leader Neil Kinnock in 1992, which many commentators believe was the key to his Conservative opponent, John Major, winning that year’s election. McChesney explains that “The Sun’s campaign revealed Rupert Murdoch’s preparedness to use his newspapers mercilessly to destroy Labour’s chances of victory... Later, some academic studies minimized the influence of the Sun on voters who might otherwise have voted Labour, but they failed to note that its hysterical last weeks of coverage formed the culmination of years of hostile vilification” (2013, p154).

Though the result was as Murdoch had hoped, with John Major winning the election, a mutually beneficial relationship between the two men did not ensue. In providing a witness statement to the Leveson Inquiry into phone hacking, Major stated of Rupert Murdoch:

“he wished me to change our European policies. If we couldn’t change our European policies his papers could not, would not support our Conservative Government. As I recall he used the word ‘we’ when referring to his newspapers. He didn’t make the usual nod to editorial independence” (2012, p8).

This evidence supports the assertion that Murdoch was prepared to use the full force of his newspapers to persuade the government to change policy to suit his agenda and confirms the influence he has over the content of his newspapers to ensure his success. Furthermore, Murdoch was quoted at the same inquiry as saying that he had never asked a prime minister for anything, and “if any politician wanted my opinions on major matters, they only had to read the editorials in The Sun” (2012, p88).

Blair (1997 – 2007)

Following his advantageous relationship with Thatcher, and his contribution to Major's electoral win, Murdoch formed another strong alliance, this time with the Labour leader and winner of the 1997 election Tony Blair. McChesney discusses the relationship, stating:

“Throughout the three terms of Tony Blair's UK Labour prime ministership... his influence was exercised through personal contact with Blair and his chancellor, Gordon Brown, and through the Sun newspaper” (2013, p150).

McChesney alluded to the closeness of his relationship with Blair going beyond that of his relationship with Thatcher: “Murdoch's relationship with the Labour leadership was even closer than that with Thatcher... Blair and Brown had made efforts to be sociable, often inviting him to Downing Street when he was in London” (McChesney, 2013, p151).

The closeness of the relationship was amplified by Murdoch's choice of Tony Blair as godfather to one of his daughters. This type of personal, familial relationship made it difficult to believe that Murdoch would not in some way benefit when it came to his business practices. Price maintains that between the two men “A deal had been done, although with nothing in writing. If Murdoch were left to pursue his business interests in peace he would give Labour a fair wind” (2011, 15837). This allowance for Murdoch's business pursuits is supported by Watson and Hickman:

“Murdoch's newspapers endorsed Tony Blair at three general elections, and Blair scrapped or softened attempts to limit the proprietor's power. In 1996 Blair's Labour Party opposed plans to impose tougher cross-media ownership rules, in 1998 rejected calls for a ban on the predatory pricing of newspapers and lobbied the Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi over a TV network Murdoch was interested in acquiring – and frequently gave interviews and important announcements to his papers, such as the date of the 2001 general election” (2012, p7).

These assertions echo those made about the Murdoch/Thatcher relationship, which

allowed for transactions and the relaxing of regulations that would otherwise hamper the commercial expansion of News Corporation. There was also a suggestion that the relationship between Murdoch and Blair went beyond profitable business favours. Journalist Matthew Holehouse (2012) wrote of the relationship between the two men for the Telegraph, stating that “The News International titles supported the war in Iraq, and former Number 10 staff credit Murdoch for discouraging Blair from holding a referendum on euro entry”⁴. This suggests that Murdoch was instrumental in influencing Blair’s decision making on political issues that went well beyond his immediate business interests.

Ofcom (2003 onwards)

In a similar way to the BBC, the Murdochs are understood to hold considerable disdain for Ofcom. Fundamentally, this is because it is a regulatory body that imposes stipulations on what the Murdochs believe should be a free market. However, Ofcom has been known to create very real obstacles for the Murdochs when they have attempted to expand their media business. Davies (2014) writes of two prominent, fairly recent examples of this. The first case was in 2006 when James Murdoch, as the then Chief Executive of BSkyB, purchased 17.9% of the ITV commercial network. At the time, the rival cable operator NTL was looking at a potential merger with ITV; this posed a significant threat to BSkyB’s dominant position in the UK broadcast market, and so James Murdoch purchased the shares in order to prevent the merger. This prompted attention from Ofcom:

“Ofcom investigated and reported that the share grab had given BSkyB too much influence over broadcast news bulletins in the UK. That triggered an inquiry by the Competition Commission, who told BSkyB that they must sell most of their ITV shares. BSkyB became embroiled in years of legal appeals, and the value of their ITV holding fell through the floor” (Davies, 2014, p227).

Not long after this, Ofcom launched its 2007 investigation into the pay-TV market. Feedback was gathered from a multitude of sources, including smaller, rival

⁴ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/phone-hacking/9098653/The-Blairs-and-the-Murdochs-a-special-relationship.html>

companies of BSkyB that complained it exercised a 'vicious circle of control'. Davies (2014) reports that the Murdochs, and James in particular, used the full financial force at their disposal to fight back and challenge Ofcom's findings from a legal (and any other) perspective. Davies explains:

"In the background, the Murdochs used political lobbyists and their own direct access to ministers to complain bitterly about Ofcom's role. As with their campaign against the BBC, there were some indications that they may have been tempted to fouler means. Ofcom's chief executive, Ed Richards, told colleagues he suspected he was the object of some surveillance" (2014, p227).

As with the BBC, James Murdoch used the MacTaggart Lecture he gave in 2009 to speak of his disdain for both the BBC and Ofcom:

"Tonight I will argue that while creationism may provide a comfortable illusion of certainty in the short-term, its harmful effects are real and they are significant. Creationism penalises the poorest in our society with regressive taxes and policies – like the licence fee and digital switchover; it promotes inefficient infrastructure in the shape of digital terrestrial television; it creates unaccountable institutions - like the BBC Trust, Channel 4 and Ofcom" (2009).

The extent of this long-standing and deep-seated hostility towards both the country's public broadcaster and to regulation forms the crux of this thesis. If confirmed through empirical evidence, it will demonstrate how a media mogul attempts to exercise self-serving power and influence through his media outlets – despite his own denials at the Leveson Inquiry that he would ever do so.

DirecTV and the Wall Street Journal (2003 – 2007)

It was perhaps the eventual success of BSkyB that inspired Murdoch to consider a similar venture in the USA, and in the early 2000s, he purchased the satellite broadcaster DirecTV from General Motors. Murdoch had originally made a bid for the satellite broadcaster in 2001, but lost out to EchoStar Communications Corp.

However, EchoStar's acquisition was rejected by the US federal regulators on the grounds that it would create a monopoly and the potential for a rise in subscription prices. Once that bid was rejected, Murdoch was again able to pursue the purchase himself. Despite a lengthy period of federal review from an antitrust perspective, no monopolistic concerns were found, and the deal was allowed. That said, there were concerns at the time with regard to vertical integration given that News Corp would own several channels of content, as well as the distribution channel – DirecTV.

In 2003, Murdoch was successful and secured a controlling interest in DirecTV for \$6.6 billion. Wolff discusses Murdoch's aggressive ambitions with regard to the deal:

"He has staked his reputation and much of News Corps' reason for being on his satellite vision. He has pursued DirecTV so assiduously, so single-mindedly, that, at one point, he even considered buying General Motors to get it. He has invented some of the media business's most baroque and far-fetched financing strategies to do the deal... he finally succeeds after waging a fifteen-month antitrust battle. It's the pinnacle of all his aspirations... it's his most megalomedia dream come true" (2008, p119).

This type of assiduous pursuit of corporate ambition was typical Murdoch behaviour; conversely, so was his next move. Less than three years after the purchase of DirecTV, Murdoch 'swapped' the prize asset in order to secure the Wall Street Journal, a well-established, powerful voice in the US newspaper market that Murdoch had long yearned for. Murdoch traded his 34% stake in DirecTV with John Malone, a media rival and owner of Liberty Media, who at the time held a significant interest in News Corp shares. In trading the stake in DirecTV for Malone's shares in News Corp, Murdoch was able to take down two rivals at once. The deal not only removed Malone's interest in Murdoch's company, but also the potential for Malone to cause problems in Murdoch's pursuit of the Wall Street Journal.

Perhaps due to his sudden abandonment of DirecTV, the purchase of the Wall Street Journal was considered by many to be one of Murdoch's more sentimental pursuits, driven by more than just business acumen and strategy. Knee describes it as a "clear-eyed willingness to abandon a twenty-year quest by selling DirecTV... quickly followed

by an inexplicably sentimental obsession with owning the Wall Street Journal at almost any price” (2009, 14282). The price Knee references was not only the \$5 billion Murdoch paid for the publication’s parent company, Dow Jones, but the lengthy pursuit of the deal that was subject to much criticism focusing on Murdoch’s suitability to be owner of the prestigious Wall Street Journal. It was not the first time Murdoch had faced such criticism and regulatory challenge. As Lisners explains, “In 2007 it was thought that Murdoch had achieved his ultimate ambition with the successful takeover of the Wall Street Journal (WSJ). It was the jewel in his crown, and he had fought hard against his detractors to win. Once again, as with his battle for the UK Times, there were those who loudly voiced opposition, declaring that he was unfit to run such a prestigious and influential newspaper and that he was bound to take it down-market” (2012, p10).

One of Murdoch’s motivations for the purchase is considered to be his desire to undermine his rival and competitor the New York Times. Wolff discusses this motivation, stating: “Murdoch’s intention, which he began to announce everywhere with something like a sadistic glint, was to use the Wall Street Journal to go to war against The New York Times, not least of all because the Times was ground zero for the journalists who held him in contempt. He’d acquired one of the two best papers in the world – which every journalist who didn’t work for him assumed he would ruin – in order to destroy the other. It was a kind of personal revenge as well as, possibly, a viable business strategy” (2008, p7).

Cameron (2010 -16)

Much like those before him, Prime Minister David Cameron is considered to have courted the Murdochs by appealing to their commercial desires and making announcements with regard to the need for a licence fee freeze, or even to abolish the fee all together if the BBC didn’t change its ways (Davies, 2014). In keeping with previous Murdoch/News International behaviours, they responded with reporting in their popular red-top newspapers:

“The message was well received by the Murdoch camp, who flashed back a response, through the Sun, with a news story which said nothing about the impact which a frozen

licence fee might have on the BBC's ability to produce quality programmes but reported that 'Mr Cameron wants to curb the BBC's bloated bureaucracy and waste of cash. He plans to choke off the taxpayer funding that gives it an advantage over rivals such as Sky'" (Davies, 2014, p229).

It is exactly this type of reporting about the BBC that this research proves was maintained consistently throughout the extended period examined. Such reporting sought to undermine the BBC, and promote negative messages about its existence, operations, behaviour and funding to both the audience and those in power.

Cameron and Murdoch's dealings spanned a shorter time period than that of Cameron's predecessors, but had all the markers of a relationship that would prove to be similarly advantageous for both. Having supported the Labour Party, and in particular Tony Blair, previously, the Murdoch-owned newspapers suddenly switched their support to the Conservatives for the 2010 general election. It was reported at the time that Cameron was thought to have done a 'deal' with Murdoch to secure the support of his newspaper the Sun. While details of any such deal went unreported, the previous editor of the Murdoch-owned News of the World was appointed as Cameron's Director of Communications shortly after he came to power. This appointment was considered to be particularly favourable to Murdoch at the time.

Davies describes a number of instances in 2009 when the Conservative Party made announcements that were suspiciously aligned with the needs and wants of the Murdochs:

"On 26 June 2009, two years after it started its inquiry into pay TV, Ofcom announced that BSkyB should be forced to cut as much as 30% off the price of the material it sold to rival platforms. BSkyB said it would appeal... Ten days later, on 6 July 2009, David Cameron announced that, if elected, he would abolish Ofcom" (2014, p230).

Davies' description of the relationship between the Murdochs and the Conservative Party (in particular David Cameron and Jeremy Hunt) reveals perhaps some of the most obvious examples of the direct link between Murdoch's commercially driven agenda and subsequent reporting, on the part of News International, and the decisions

taken by Cameron the electoral candidate. By 2010 the country knew it was heading for an election which could see David Cameron become Prime Minister. This would prove crucial for Murdoch; in 2010 it was revealed that Murdoch was planning a bid for the remaining 61% of BSkyB:

“That would make them the dominant players not only in British newspapers but also in British television, significantly boosting their power as well as their profit - but only if the government and Ofcom would let them do it” (Davies, 2014, p238). It was a strategy that might have had significant ramifications if the revelations relating to the phone-hacking scandal had not come to light.

BSkyB bids (2010)

Murdoch made the first of his two bids for the remaining 61% of shares in BSkyB in 2010. It followed two years of the Murdoch's and News International strategizing, building funds and waiting for the 'right political moment' (Davies, 2014). Had the deal gone through, it would have seen Rupert Murdoch achieve even greater levels of power, wealth and dominance of the media sector:

“For Rupert Murdoch, this was a chance to take complete control of the richest broadcaster in Britain, with an annual income of £5.9 billion, compared to The BBC's £4.8 billion, with all that that meant for his commercial power. It was a chance, too, for him to become not only the biggest newspaper player in the country but also the dominant broadcaster, one of only three TV news providers (along with The BBC and ITN), one of only two radio news providers (along with The BBC) and the giant of pay TV with 67% of viewers, with all that that meant for his political power” (Davies, 2014, 272).

Murdoch's bid was approved by the European Commission but was still subject to an investigation by Ofcom on the grounds that it needed to be subjected to the 'public interest plurality test'. Ofcom found that the deal would not be in the public's interest. In spite of this, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport was not expected to pass the decision to the Competition Commission, but rather would accept a number of undertakings from News International in lieu of the referral. However, the entire

deal was eventually dropped once the revelations pertaining to phone hacking came to light, as discussed further in the next section. The BSkyB bid and the subsequent regulatory reviews are discussed in full in the next chapter.

Phone hacking (2011)

In 2011, following an investigation by the Guardian newspaper, it was revealed that the News of the World had hacked into the voicemail of murdered teenager Millie Dowler. There had been speculation for some time about illegal activities at the newspaper (predominantly phone hacking, but also police bribery), and there had even been an investigation by the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) some five years earlier. However, it was not until the story regarding Millie Dowler broke that public outcry against the newspaper, and its proprietor Rupert Murdoch, ensued.

The revelations resulted in changes within News International, including Murdoch stepping down from a number of directorships controlling his newspapers. It was considered by some at the time to be 'corporate cleaning' (BBC, 2012). Former News of the World editor, and communications advisor to the then Prime Minister David Cameron, Andy Coulson resigned from his position in government shortly before the story was revealed, and thereafter was arrested and charged with conspiracy to intercept voicemails. After his conviction, Coulson served five months of an 18-month prison sentence. On 6 July 2011, it was announced that the PCC was to be closed down and replaced (it was eventually replaced by the Independent Press Standards Organisation – IPSO), and that an inquiry into phone hacking and police bribery was to be launched and led by Lord Justice Leveson. On 10 July 2011, the News of the World printed its final edition.

The scandal was perhaps the largest and most difficult hurdle the Murdochs and News Corporation had ever had to overcome. As the inquiry began its proceedings, it came to light that the 'bad behaviours' at the News of the World amounted to more than just the interception of voicemails, and that this practice was more widespread across the Murdoch empire than anyone could have known (and subsequently, as it transpired, more widespread within the whole industry). Watson and Hickman provide a detailed account of the phone-hacking scandal and of Murdoch's behaviour, trying "to explain

how a particular global media company works: how it came to exert a poisonous, secretive influence on public life in Britain, how it used its huge power to bully, intimidate and to cover up, and how its exposure has changed the way we look at our politicians, our police service and our press” (2012, pxvi).

In some ways, the scandal confirmed there was an element of truth in the speculation about the practices of News Corp, which had long been discussed with reference to Murdoch: that the proprietor was ruthless and relentless in his pursuit of dominance, and that he had often used his considerable influence and power to ensure he achieved his goals. Watson and Hickman explain “how the Australian-born tycoon had come to exert such a grip on Britain’s public life that his newspaper group had been able to cover up its misbehaviour for years. Emboldened by powerful connections, News International’s executives had destroyed evidence, run smear campaigns, lied to Parliament and threatened and intimidated journalists, lawyers and politicians. Despite their efforts, campaigners had slowly uncovered the truth about the ‘dark arts’ of newsgathering inside the organisation’s headquarters in Wapping, east London” (2012, p2). In one sense, it could be argued that phone hacking was the illegal embodiment of a long history of inappropriate behaviour that, until 2011, had gone on with little consequence due to Murdoch’s considerable power.

The Murdochs’ insisted that they were not aware of the illegal practices that were ongoing. “The Murdochs’ insisted they had not known about the criminality at the News of the World and blamed staff. They stressed what a small part of their global business the News of the World was. ‘My company has 52,000 employees,’ Rupert explained. ‘I have led it for fifty-seven years and I have made my share of mistakes. I have lived in many countries, employed thousands of honest and hard-working journalists, owned nearly 200 newspapers” (Watson and Hickman, 2012, p3).

However, despite potentially plausible claims that running a global organisation as large as News Corporation meant that Murdoch and his executive team were not aware of hacking practices at News of the World, Lisners explains that, in fact, the bad behaviours were far more widespread and, as such, threatened to topple the entire News Corp empire:

“In September 2010, it became apparent that activities at the News of the World over hacking and other serious forms of malfeasance were far wider than had originally been believed... The fallout from News International’s UK holdings dramatically unfolded, each revelation building on the last. A mountain of killer revelations was finally exposed to the world which now threatened a global organisation, built, controlled and powered by its central figure – Rupert Murdoch” (2012, pviii).

The revelations to which Lisners refers were about such behaviour being deployed elsewhere, such as at the Times, the UK broadsheet owned by News Corp. The Times published an article acknowledging the wrongdoing of its parent company in not being able to ‘police’ the behaviours at News of the World:

“As the evidence of wrong doing came to light, News International, Rupert Murdoch’s company that also owns The Times, was unable or unwilling to police itself. This was a disgrace. It was, of course, the press that put Fleet Street in the dock. The dogged investigative reporting that unearthed the phone hacking scandal deserves respect, even if the story was exaggerated and key details misrepresented”⁵ (2012).

However, despite this admission of guilt on behalf of its corporate parent, it soon after came to light that a journalist for the Times, Patrick Foster, had engaged in phone hacking as well: “Over the coming weeks the truth was slowly dragged out of The Times. Its legal director, Alastair Brett, and its managing editor, David Chappell, had known by 4 June 2009 that Foster had used hacking, but the paper had published the story days later regardless after seeing off a legal attempt by Horton to prevent its publication” (Watson and Hickman, 2012, p257).

It was yet another example of the leadership within News Corporation choosing to allow stories sourced by illegal means to be published, and the revelations about such activity across the organisation continued: “Sky News was also forced to admit in April that it too had hacked email accounts – despite originally telling the Leveson Inquiry that it had never hacked – and had in fact done so twice” (Watson and Hickman, 2012, p258).

⁵ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-future-of-the-press-gvb6fw5swpb>

The first part of the Leveson Inquiry took 12 months to complete, hearing from a vast number of witnesses, and resulted in a report (Leveson, 2012) that made several recommendations, including the need for an independent body to replace the PCC. The findings of the inquiry are discussed further in Chapter Six: Recent Policy and Regulatory Developments. However, with regard to Murdoch and his empire, McKnight claims:

“The biggest consequence of the hacking scandal has been the splitting of News Corporation into two, with most TV, cinema and entertainment grouped in one company, with newspapers and book publishing into another. This separates the money spinners of TV and movies from the less profitable news and book-publishing enterprises. It also means that the vehicles through which political and intellectual influences can be exercised must stand alone. Among other things, this will spotlight the loss-making newspapers which Murdoch has previously subsidised in exchange for political influence. These include the London Times (reliant for a long while on the Sunday Times), the New York Post (which has never made a profit in twenty years) and the Australian whose annual losses are estimated at \$25 million a year” (2013, p213).

As stated previously, since dividing the business in this way, Murdoch has also sold all of News Corp’s shares in BSkyB to media rival Comcast (in 2018), and the News Corp owned movie and television production company 21st Century Fox to Disney in 2019.

Summary

Analysis of Murdoch’s business strategies, political influence and typical behaviours illustrates the potential power that can be obtained by a proprietor whose media holdings are significant beyond reasonable levels. Once Murdoch had established himself in the UK via his two popular and profitable daily newspapers, he was able to leverage the influence he had over public opinion to affect regulation and policy as he deemed necessary and expand into other areas, predominantly the more profitable broadcasting market.

Whether his motivations were purely business based, or also driven by his grievances with the establishment, the literature in this chapter has made clear that he pursues his aims by using his popular newspapers, and therefore the powerful influence he has over politicians. Furthermore, Murdoch is both unafraid and unashamed to quickly change his political support to suit his business needs.

“Murdoch was adroit at courting and cooling politicians, but he also used his newspapers to advance his own political views... hard-right-wing views common among the super-rich; supportive of strong leadership, low taxation and light regulation and hostile to trade unions, the European Union and global-warming science. His newspapers strengthened his power by being politically promiscuous, periodically switching support from waning parties to challengers who, encumbered by gratitude, might advance his political and commercial agenda, particularly granting him favours in a heavily regulated TV industry” (Watson and Hickman, 2012, p6).

Lisners aptly summarises the power Murdoch holds over prime ministers and, perhaps of more concern given the powerful influence of his media outlets, how easily he can be persuaded to switch his support:

“A politician who might be sympathetic to his organization would be given a good press while otherwise he or she would be regarded as an enemy. And a Prime Minister’s term in office was finite while Rupert Murdoch was there for life. So, it was they who usually sought favour with the press mogul and not the other way round... When it helped his business, Murdoch could be at ease with either political party or, if necessary, support a dictatorship” (2012, pvxi).

However, it must be noted that, in spite of his influence, not all consider Murdoch’s dominance and success in media markets so negatively. Knee describes Murdoch as “the most complex, creative, and contradictory of the moguls, both personally and in the conglomerate he has built” (2009, I4088), and goes on to say that “Murdoch values and knows how to achieve operating efficiency in assets that have no meaningful structural barriers to entry... and has shown exceptional creativity in managing competition in ways that reflect that environment” (2009, I4303).

Furthermore, some would argue that Murdoch has made considerable contributions to the continued provision of news in an ever-declining market by, for example, running such papers as the Times at a significant loss. To date, the loss has been mitigated by the more profitable areas of his business, though this could be subject to change in the future following the splitting of the company and the sale of some of its most significant holdings. The counterargument, of course, is that Murdoch has run such newspapers at a continual loss so as to be able to remain a powerful voice within the political arena, and leverage that power to aid the expansion of his media empire as well as propagate his own ideology and political views.

The wealth of issues discussed in this chapter with regard to Murdoch and News International demonstrate the ability of a media proprietor to use the power of their media holdings to affect competition within the market, and the politics surrounding the market, so as to ensure their dominance and to serve his corporate agenda. Above all, this chapter has sought to examine how Murdoch has manoeuvred in such ways so as to achieve his business goals.

From his very early interactions in the UK when he was attempting to enter the broadcasting market, Murdoch was met with the resistance of the 'British establishment', be it via the regulators that looked to restrict his movements in the market, or the BBC, a strong competitor and very well respected part of said establishment. Over time the regulators changed, and as such the criticism of them represents a less obvious trend. However, in the case of the BBC, criticism from the Murdoch press has remained prevalent, and thus proven by the empirical evidence presented in this thesis

Chapter Four: Media Economy – The Economic Imperatives of Consolidation

To fully understand the factors that drive the consolidation within media markets, those aside from a media moguls' goals and ambitions and that are outside of their control must be considered. To provide a fair analysis of Murdoch's business practices and motivations for the criticism of the BBC and Ofcom, the external factors that may (or may not) have contributed to his practices must be explored.

Such examples as the widely studied and debated 'digital revolution' has undoubtedly impacted the business model of the British newspaper industry as the average consumer can now access news, information and entertainment from multiple sources via a variety of methods, i.e. computer, TV and mobile phone. The public are no longer solely reliant on the daily newspaper to understand what is happening in the world.

Furthermore, the traditional funding model for the newspaper industry has seen significant change and is ever more reliant on advertising for revenue. The widely debated issue of globalisation is also a major contributor to consolidation in the media markets, and as such the marketplace is no longer localised or subject to the considerations of one nation alone, but operates on a much larger, almost global scale.

Such arguments are relative to the central theme of this thesis, regarding how Murdoch has used his press interests to undermine and attack his competitors and the regulators, as the market conditions and any potential constraints and opportunities will have had an effect on the decisions taken by Murdoch, and may have contributed to the drivers of the criticism. It also provides insight into the motives behind Murdoch's business practices, and how he has manoeuvred within the various media markets (and others) so as to maintain his dominant position.

Chapter 2: The New Digital Environment examined the new forms of media platform via which news stories are disseminated. This chapter does not repeat that analysis, but rather looks at the 'digital revolution' in the broader context within which media companies in the UK, and around the globe, have attempted to consolidate and converge so as to be able to continue to compete.

Meier and Trappel explain the trend of media mergers moving from the newspaper to television market, predominantly “supported by the accelerated speed of technological innovation, in particular as regards broadcasting distribution technology and digitalised online technology” (1998, p43). They then offer a number of plausible arguments for the convergence of the media in favour of monopolistic or oligopolistic media markets, most notably that “the consolidation of production in the hands of large corporations is one of the basic facts of modern economic life, taking advantage of economies of scale and scope and reducing the cost of goods and services to consumers” (op. cit.).

Technological developments have seen the inception of digital TV in the UK, as well as satellite TV (currently with only one domestic satellite TV provider serving the country: Sky, previously BSkyB). While profits have been reaped from the development of the TV sector, its expansion has arguably had the opposite effect on newspapers. In order to understand the key drivers that lead to consolidation within the media industry, the traditional business models that exist must first be understood and assessed. There are a vast number of corporate entities operating within the UK media market; for the purpose of this chapter, a ‘media firm’ is considered to be any entity that is in the business of producing, packaging or distributing media content.

This chapter will consider the typical structure of a media market, and how this correlates with the UK media market (in particular press and broadcast). It goes on to look at mergers and acquisitions, the types of integration that can take place, and how Murdoch has looked to implement such integration to expand his business into other areas; notably, examples where Murdoch has attempted to acquire assets wholly outside of the media market but with the same aim of expanding his empire are explored.

‘Digital convergence’ will then be explored, which provides examples of the types of change within the media market that can drive existing, established media organisations to look to consolidate. Furthermore, the BBC is noted as a proven example of a ‘successfully convergent’ firm, securing its position as a direct competitor for both of Murdoch’s media entities: News International and Sky Television. Finally, this chapter will consider what all of this means for the future of the media market and how the existing media players will need to adapt so as to be able to continue to

compete.

Media Market Structures

Market structures tend to fall into three categories: a free market, where price is driven by unrestricted competition between privately owned entities; an oligopoly, where a market is shared by a small number of entities producing and/or selling goods or services; and a monopoly, where one entity has exclusive control of the provision of goods or services.

Alternative descriptions offered by Doyle (2013) are 'perfect', 'imperfect' and 'monopoly'. The distinction between them lies in the number of rival producers or sellers in a given market, which also provides an indication of the market power an individual firm may have. The more market power, the greater the ability the firm may have to "control and influence operations in the market... the less market power that individual firms have, the more competitive the market structure in which they operate" (Doyle, 2013, pp8-9).

The media market in the UK is often described as oligopolistic, or imperfect by nature, because a small number of conglomerates dominate the production and provision of media products. While Doyle (2013) discusses the economic benefit of operating in this environment, considering the oligopolistic nature of the media markets, Cunningham, Flew and Smith explain that it is difficult to apply traditional economic theory to oligopolies:

"...they have a wide range of behavioural choices not dictated by market pressures. Individual firms in an oligopoly possess incentives both to cooperate and to compete with one another... They also have incentives to maintain barriers to entry for potential new competitors into their industry, whether through acting to slow the development of technologies that may threaten their business models or by lobbying politicians to create or maintain restrictions on market entry" (2015, p22).

This consideration implies, contrary to common assumptions, that it may be preferable for a media firm to operate in an oligopoly, where it can use the small and controlled

measure of competition to its advantage, particularly where political leverage is sought.

Albarran offers a similar consideration, stating that “many media markets have evolved to represent a more common structure, especially in those countries where the media industries have become concentrated. A hybrid type of market structure now exists, combining elements of an oligopoly market with a monopolistic competitive structure” (2010, p56). Albarran explains that, with this type of structure, there is typically a small group of leading firms that control up to 80% of the market, with smaller firms vying for the remainder.

This type of market structure, oligopolistic with monopolistic tendencies, is how the UK newspaper market can be described. The newspaper groups News UK (Murdoch owned), DMG and Reach make up for 83% of the market (MRC, 2019).

Mergers and Acquisitions

Mergers are a way for media companies to become more efficient in reaching viewers and turning a profit; to become more powerful, more profitable and to reach more audience members. There are a number of ways in which a media firm will look to expand, but these will typically fall into one of two categories: vertical integration or horizontal integration (also described as diversification).

“Vertical integration is identified as a firm’s effort to control all aspects of creation, production, distribution and exhibition, which form the media value chain. By being in control of all of these areas, the company could theoretically leverage their assets in the widest possible way and engage in a number of cross-marketing and cross-promotional efforts in order to capture more revenues at the various stages of the value chain and, ideally, increase market share” (Albarran, 2010, p46).

Horizontal integration is where a media company enters into different markets; for example, where a media firm that once owned only a newspaper, or group of newspapers (a single-dimensional activity), then acquires a TV station: “When companies expand into other related or non-related markets, they are engaging in

horizontal integration – meaning they draw revenues (and losses) across business segments. Some segments may perform well, while others may not. A horizontal strategy is widely believed to help ride out fluctuations in the business cycle” (Albarran, 2010, p45). In some studies, this is also referred to as ‘horizontal diversification’.

There are numerous examples of horizontal integration or diversification within Murdoch’s News Corporation. Over the years, News Corporation has moved from the newspaper business into broadcasting and cable/satellite TV, movie production and distribution, publishing, multimedia, and a number of other non-media-related businesses. However, it is often argued that Murdoch’s non-media-related interests were purchased in pursuit of creating efficiencies and increasing profits across his media holdings.

News Corporation is a prime example of a company that has deployed the horizontal diversification strategy in such a way that it has been able to accommodate losses in some areas of the business. It is often noted in studies and texts that Murdoch runs a number of his newspapers at a loss (for example the Times), but the losses are mitigated by his other, more profitable business interests. Running at such a loss calls into question Murdoch’s typically shrewd business practices, but it is widely considered that retaining such an asset as the Times, albeit it at a loss, allows Murdoch to continue as a powerful voice within the UK. The losses of the newspaper are likely made up for elsewhere in his business, and ensures that he is able to maintain the political persuasion owning such a popular newspaper carries.

Flew and Gilmour (2003) discuss the practice of ‘conglomeration’, which provides scope for reductions in cost and risk. Perhaps the most notable of Flew and Gilmour’s assertions is that it provides the opportunity for ‘cross-promotion’, where the media firm can utilise any number of its different media holdings to promote the others. As has been discussed in Chapter Three, there are a number of examples where Murdoch has been seen to use the practice of cross-promotion to his businesses’ advantage.

In Hardy’s work (2010) that examines examples of cross-promotion across diverging media he states, “...Murdoch-owned newspapers have been used as vehicles to

promote News Corporation's other media and corporate interests is a largely accepted charge and commonplace observation..." (2010, p119). Previously discussed and briefly reiterated here, such examples include when Murdoch's Sky TV entered into direct competition with BSB; Murdoch's newspapers "became shameless cheerleaders for Sky" (Shawcross, 1992, p450).

Flew and Gilmour (2003) explain that media firms are able to engage in these activities via one (or more) of the following five options:

1. Horizontal expansion – as discussed, mergers and acquisitions and/or the development of the production of goods and services within the industry
2. Vertical expansion – as discussed, mergers and acquisitions and/or the development of enterprises involved in the supply chain within the industry
3. Diagonal expansion – also described as 'conglomeration' by Flew and Gilmour, whereby a media firm expands into complementary activities that enable productive synergies to be developed
4. Diversification – where a media firm expands into non-media-related activities; Flew and Gilmour define this as being different from horizontal integration
5. Globalisation – where a media firm expands its operations and/or provision of goods and services into other regional or national markets.

Flew and Gilmour (2003) find in favour of arguments that News Corporation has pursued a successful strategy to become a 'global enterprise' via all of the above methods, though predominantly pursuing globalisation.

An example of Murdoch's shrewd attempt at diversification so as to further profit his media empire can be found when in 1998, he bid for the Premier League football team Manchester United. The Guardian⁶ reported that at the time no one foresaw any regulatory issue or intervention. The political climate was considered to be 'favourable' given that Tony Blair was the Prime Minister; Murdoch's newspaper the Sun had switched its support to Labour in the 1997 and infamously claimed that to be the reason for Blair's electoral success.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1999/apr/11/theobserver.uknews1>

However, in a less favourable act by the Labour government, the bid was referred to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC), which undertook a review and concluded by blocking the bid. It found that “As a wholesale supplier of sports premium channels offering a broad range of sports, BSkyB has no competitors” (MMC, 2007, p73). The acquisition would have given BSkyB the potential to have some independence in setting its prices. It also carried the risk that BSkyB would have access to privileged information with regard to the Premier League’s ‘rights-selling’ arrangements, which would be deemed to be an unfair advantage over its competitors.

The MMC concluded that there were a number of areas of concern in relation to the potential acquisition, including a public interest concern given that the move would make BSkyB the controller of the TV rights to Manchester United matches. Furthermore, the MMC deemed that, given News International owned 39% of BSkyB, which resulted in News International having a ‘material influence’ over BSkyB, the acquisition would result in News International also having a material influence over Manchester United. The MMC concluded that the acquisition should not go ahead as it would be against the public interest.

Murdoch had come close to a brush with the MMC before; when he was in pursuit of his purchase of the Times and the Sunday Times, the purchase had the potential to be referred to the MMC as per procedure. However as discussed, in a highly criticised move at the time, then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher chose not to refer the matter to the MMC and waved it through.

While the MMC is not the direct subject of this thesis (which focuses on Murdoch’s criticism of the BBC and the regulator Ofcom), Murdoch’s experience with the MMC in the case of Manchester United speaks to yet another example of a UK regulator that has stood in the way of his corporate agenda and expansions plans, and has done so for reasons of his attempt not being in the ‘public interest’.

Murdoch’s attempt to purchase the football team was not one born out of hobby or his passion for football, but rather a potentially shrewd business move that, had it been allowed, would have seen him gain a measure of control in the setting of BSkyB prices,

and therefore potentially further monopolising the subscription TV market. This example perhaps speaks to one of the many reasons behind his antipathy towards regulators.

Digital convergence

Doyle (2013) describes digital convergence as the coming together of different sectors of the media markets that were previously separate, commonly via the use of digital technologies. One example is the combining of text and video, packaged together with interactive features, all of which would previously have existed as separate products produced for different sectors. Furthermore, as mobile phones, laptops and tablets have become a common feature in everyday lives, media output can be repackaged and made available to be accessed across multiple devices. Lawson-Borders describes it as “the realm of possibilities when cooperation occurs between print and broadcast for the delivery of multimedia content through the use of computer and the internet” (2006, p4).

This type of convergence in the media industry has lent itself well to the globalisation strategies often pursued by media conglomerates. The internet in particular is a ‘disruptive’ technology that has reformed the way in which media products are delivered and consumed, and expanded their potential audience share. Albarran (2010) discusses the emerging markets within the media sector that have caused disruption, mostly where they interact with the activities of many traditional media companies, but do not perform the core functions of traditional media (i.e. content production), listing them as search engines, social networking, user-generated content, smartphones, and video-game consoles. The emergence of such markets has caused disruption as they have added new layers to the value chain, i.e. they have impacted the traditional methods of distribution and changed the way in which the audience consumes media products.

Furthermore, these new markets typically operate via the internet. While the ability for a traditional media firm to horizontally or vertically integrate or diversify by acquiring a business that operates in such new markets exists, competition is arguably much

stronger on a platform such as the internet, given the number of actors able to publish there (as discussed in Chapter Two), and online consumer trends have a tendency to be fluid and less predictable. Lawson-Borders explains that “Changing demographics and competing messages made the Internet particularly attractive to traditional print and broadcast media that sought to protect their brand and their historical speciality of gathering and disseminating news, information, and entertainment” (2006, p6).

Lawson-Borders argues that the history of media development and ‘creative disruption’ dictates that one medium has never replaced another entirely, but rather built on and adapted the predecessor: “Radio was considered a threat to newspapers, TV was supposed to replace its predecessors, cable was predicted to unseat TV, and now satellite and the Internet loom as the latest replacement. All of these media coexist in an intricate communication delivery system that has expanded choices for the public” (2006, p11). However, since Lawson-Borders’ analysis, it is arguable that the internet has brought about a unique threat to existing media platforms in that not only does it bring something new to the experience via user-based selection and interactivity, but it also collects all of the experiences offered by its predecessors into a single platform.

Meikle and Young explain that there are two ways in which a media firm can be considered to be or described as convergent. “The first of these describes the ongoing processes of consolidation and expansion through which global media firms become larger, more integrated and more networked. The second sense describes the ways in which media firms are adopting and adapting the potential of technological convergence” (2012, p35).

Meikle and Young use the example of Rupert Murdoch’s attempt to launch the Daily in 2011. The Daily was a newspaper made available only on the Apple iPad device. Murdoch’s publicly stated target was one million subscriptions, at 99 cents per week. It was a questionable model at the time, given that everything that was to be published in the Daily – news, sport, games, celebrity news/gossip, opinion pieces etc – was available elsewhere, both in print and online. The Daily was an attempt at media convergence and was a promising partnership with Apple, given the popularity of the iPad.

However, as Meikle and Young note, the iPad at that stage was a tethered device (it was not yet fully mobile as it was unable to provide a mobile data connection) and so the Daily still adhered to some of the traditional values of a newspaper. However, the case “illustrates the central role of convergent media industries in driving the new media environment. This collaboration between News Corporation and Apple, the shared attempt to create a new business model for online content, and their use of a particular convergent product (the iPad), all illustrate a second key dimension of convergence” (Meikle and Young, 2012, p35).

Considering more successful attempts, Meikle and Young cite the BBC as one of the most ‘successfully convergent’ media firms, stating that “The BBC has been a major driver of digital television in the UK through its creation of the Freeview model, which broke the subscription monopoly on digital delivery. And it has made very significant developments online. Its websites are among the most-visited in the world, it is experimenting with initiatives to digitize and open up its entire archive, and it has made some of the most sophisticated responses to the rise in user generated content of any established media organisation” (2012, p43). Convergence has not only prompted existing media firms to expand and diversify so as to adapt to disruptive technologies but has also allowed new players to enter the media market, albeit from less traditional and arguably less predictable angles.

The BBC’s success in this area makes it an even stronger competitor for Murdoch’s organisation. Not only has it had to compete with the BBC in the broadcast arena, but as Barnett⁷ (2002) explains, with the creation of Freeview came the threat of destabilising BskyB’s ‘stranglehold’ on the digital television market. Furthermore, as the BBC established its online presence it quickly became one of the most trusted and respected news sources, making it a competitor for Murdoch in the printed news market as well. Murdoch’s criticism of the BBC began long before digital convergence came into existence, but the BBC establishing itself as a credible contender in this newly emerging market undoubtedly gave Murdoch yet more reason to resent the organisation and criticise it in his newspapers.

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2002/oct/28/digitaltv.comment>

The future

The emergence of the internet and 'disruptive' digital convergence has had major implications for competition within the media markets, in that media firms are not only contending with decisions about which media products and distribution mechanisms to pursue, but also with the almost unprecedented speed of change in consumer behaviour. Albarran explains:

“a key trait of the media economy is that most products can be substituted for another, a concept known as cross elasticity of demand... Cross elasticity of demand raises concern for media companies and advertisers vying for our attention. Because there are so many choices available, this leads to increasing fragmentation of the audience into smaller and smaller sectors. As we add new digital platforms and other technologies to reach consumers, the problem is further magnified, giving consumers more control over when, where and how to access media content” (2010, pp40-41).

Lawson-Borders echoes this view, stating that the audience's role in the new media environment is central to convergence: “The arguments regarding push-and-pull technology are transformed through use of the computer and the Internet. Companies can no longer merely push the information they want audiences to receive; with the Internet, the customer is in charge and makes the choice to pull only the information he or she selects” (2006, pp17-18) As a result of this, competition has to be approached in a different way, and the effects of digital convergence mean it lends itself to the 'global enterprise' structure that Flew and Gilmour (2003) associate with Rupert Murdoch and News Corporation's success. In this model, strategies to establish strong audiences across multiple platforms and diversified holdings can then be leveraged to create efficiencies and economies of scale. Lawson-Borders states:

“traditional media organisations have relied on their reputation as reliable sources of news and information, brand, and credibility. However, new media organisations are making a drive to change the paradigm. Media companies that are practicing convergence through different business subsidiaries must handle local competition both inside and outside the core market. Organizations that do not own their media

outlets are seeking to develop partnerships and alliances to maximize their convergence potential” (2006, p17).

This being the case, the implication is arguably that existing dominant actors within the industry will look to expand their market share further, increasing the potential for market consolidation. There has been some indication of this in recent years: faced with popular software and streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and Apple, traditional players such as Disney and Comcast have begun to look at consolidating their production and distribution capabilities to survive and compete.

Conclusion

In considering the relevant factors that affect the media market, Murdoch’s media empire can be considered one that has implemented strategies in all of these areas, and for the most part, to his great advantage. By undertaking both horizontal and vertical integration, and diversifying across a number of markets, Murdoch has acquired more and more of the media markets and become a dominant voice, particularly in the UK press.

Digital convergence has undoubtedly had a significant effect on the industry, and has brought with it a wealth of new players into both the news and entertainment markets. Like many other traditional media players Murdoch faces an uncertain future when it comes to his press holdings, as newspaper circulation continues to fall and advertising revenue is harder to come by. However, like many others, Murdoch has moved into online news and his established newspapers continue to set the news agenda both in hard copy and online.

That being said, the BBC, traditionally a news broadcast company only, has brought a credible news website to the market that is available to the public for free (funded by the licence fee), while other news organisations, and Murdoch's News International in particular, are grappling with ways in which to continue to profit for their news content, exploring options such as pay walls and online advertising revenues. It can be said that none are yet to establish funding models that they can be certain will have the necessary longevity to survive.

The BBC is in no way constrained by such concerns. Its guaranteed funding model allows for it to publish news content for free, and without the need for advertising. It also allows for it to provide a vast catalogue of its broadcast material via its online streaming service, 'BBC iPlayer; again, this is provided for free thanks to the licence fee. This is a continuation of the very principals Murdoch is ideologically opposed to, and it contravenes the ideals of a free, commercial market. Additionally, given the BBC's success as a digitally convergent media market player, it likely builds on Murdoch's existing frustration with the Public Service Provider and its protected position as a credible competitor to Sky TV and News International.

Chapter Five: Current Framework

To better understand the development of media business and ownership changes in the UK, both the historical and current frameworks of policy and regulation need to be explored. While navigating the topic can be somewhat complex in light of the evolving landscape and changes of government over the last 40 years, all relevant Acts and provisions must be considered in order to gain a holistic view of how policy in this area has developed.

This chapter first examines the legislation that applies to the relevant areas of the media industry, predominantly broadcasting and some provisions of competition law, and then moves on to consider the chronological development of press self-regulation in the UK. It will provide examples of the way in which Murdoch has been able to use both the power of his press holdings in the UK, and the advantageous relationships he has maintained with those in power to either pursue certain policies, or to circumnavigate them so as to continue to expand his business.

Furthermore, this chapter will provide insight into the motivations behind some of the earliest examples of Murdoch's press attacks on the BBC; attacks that were undertaken so as to undermine the organisation's prominent position in the markets in which Murdoch sought to operate as a result of both Murdoch's ideological opposition to the BBC's existence and funding model, and so as to make room within the markets in which the BBC operates for his own business.

Legislation

- 1973 Fair Trading Act

The Fair-Trading Act was introduced in 1973 under a Conservative government. The Act stated that the merger or acquisition of a newspaper must be referred to the Secretary of State for approval when the daily circulation (of either the currently owned or proposed newspaper) exceeds 25,000. This figure was increased to 50,000 in 1991. In some cases, the Secretary of State would refer the issue to the MMC, but had the discretion not to do so if it was deemed not necessary for such reasons as

‘where the newspaper is not economic as a going concern’, or where the Secretary of State is ‘satisfied that the case is one of urgency if it is to continue as a separate newspaper’, among others.

Feintuck and Varney (2013) consider the Fair-Trading Act to include a mixture of specifications that were subject to discretionary decision making on the part of the Secretary of State. This reliance on the Minister was mitigated by the inclusion of the need to refer anything that was of ‘public interest’ to the MMC. However, as Feintuck and Varney explain:

“Unfortunately, the statutory definition of ‘the public interest’ in this context was so vague as to be virtually meaningless, requiring the consideration of ‘all matters which appear in the circumstances to be relevant and, in particular, the need for accurate presentation of news and free expression of opinion... Within the permissive, discretionary structure of the FTA [Fair Trading Act] provisions and the application of the nebulous construct of the public interest, the statutory measures on newspaper acquisitions, in so far as they had any effect, operated simply to leave the power of determination essentially within the hands of the government of the day, a prime example of ritualistic regulation masking raw political power” (2013, pp130-4).

A prime example of this was when, under Margaret Thatcher’s premiership, the then Secretary of State John Biffen waved through Murdoch’s purchase of the Times newspaper without referring it to the MMC, despite the circulation figures for both the papers Murdoch already owned and the Times far exceeding the threshold. That this was a wholly political decision designed to placate a vital political ally of Mrs Thatcher’s became clear when it transpired that Murdoch had visited Thatcher for lunch in January 1981, as a decision was being considered. This was put to Murdoch during the Leveson Inquiry, but he claimed to have no recollection of such an occasion. Commenting in his final report on Murdoch’s inability to remember the meeting – either in evidence to the inquiry or when interviewed for the official history of the Times – Sir Brian Leveson preferred not to draw any conclusion about whether an overt political deal was done but concluded drily: “It is perhaps a little surprising that he does not remember a visit to a place as memorable as Chequers, in the context of a bid as important as that which he made for Times Newspapers. However, perhaps that is all

I need to say” (Leveson Inquiry, Vol III, p1245).

- 1985 Peacock Committee

In 1985 then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher formed a committee to assess the effects of advertising revenue or sponsorship on the BBC. The man selected to chair the Committee was professor and economist Alan Peacock. The report produced by the committee found that advertising would not prove a suitable alternative funding model for the BBC, however it also delved much deeper into ideas for the future of funding for the BBC than its original remit. Ho, E (2010, p35) states that “The Peacock Report went well beyond its original brief to consider the funding of the BBC. Although it rejected immediate funding of the corporation by advertising, it envisaged an eventual “full market” for broadcasting based on direct payment.”

It was said that Thatcher’s ideological opposition to the BBC, and a general view amongst the conservative government that the BBC should operate as part of a commercially driven market, was the driving force behind the setting up of the committee. It was a view that was well known to be shared by Thatcher’s supporters within the media market, most notably Rupert Murdoch. Similar considerations were being investigated for the NHS, however, the government and newspaper’s hostility towards the BBC was more obvious.

Holland (2013, p142) writes that “the setting up of the committee was the culmination of the government’s aim to move the BBC to a more market-oriented position... but while the government and its supporters in the national press were cautious in their public pronouncements on the NHS, there had been no restraint in regard to the BBC”.

Barnett and Curry (1994, p22) explain that “As an aggressive entrepreneur who had set his sights on the broadcasting business, Murdoch viewed the BBC as a complacent institution sheltered from the rigours of the real world by guaranteed funding. More importantly, its size and share of the audience represented a real obstacle to his television ambitions. One obvious answer was to try to destabilize it. Nevertheless, it still came as a shock when in January 1985 The Times ran three consecutive editorials condemning the BBC’s request for a rise in the licence fee.”

The Times launched a particularly scathing attack on the BBC in support of the Peacock Committees anticipated outcome. Holland (2013, p142) explains that “Its attack was uncompromising. ‘Do we need the BBC’ a leader demanded. On three successive days (14-16 January 1985) the paper ran editorials arguing that sections of the Corporation should be auctioned off and the rest financed by advertising.”

The attack published in the Times was indicative of Murdoch’s attitude towards the BBC, and his use of his newspapers to disseminate negative messages about the BBC so as to undermine it was a tactic that would be deployed over the next several decades, as this thesis asserts. Barnett and Curry (1994, p22) explain that “although the editor, Charles Douglas-Home, angrily denied any proprietorial interference, it was scarcely credible that the correspondence with his boss’s interests as pure accident. These editorials set the tone for The Times, and Murdoch’s other British papers, for several years to come.”

The Director General of the BBC at the time was Alasdair Milne. Milne met the criticism of the Murdoch press by generating stories, interviews and speeches that aimed to demonstrate the importance of the licence fee. Holland quotes Milne discussing the criticism published in the Times as stating that “... if acted upon would have the practical effect of enabling its owner Rupert Murdoch to acquire some of the most valuable broadcasting action in the UK” (Holland, 2013, p142-143).

Both Thatcher and Murdoch’s approach to the BBC was born out of similar ideological misgivings about the BBC, and both the governments campaign and Murdoch’s press campaign could be considered to be intimately linked, with the latter helping to legitimise the former. That being said, the outcome of the Peacock report did not culminate in any kind of material change to its funding model. Seaton and McNicholas (2009, p125) explain that

“...By far the most important thing about the report was that it, persuasively, in the most impeccably ‘dry’ terms dismissed advertising as a feasible alternative to the licence fee and depoliticised the argument about the licence fee by recommending that it be indexed on an annual basis to the general rate of inflation. It came up with

a convincing argument for the short or middle-term economic rationality of public service broadcasting, based on the view that it compensated for market failure in the conditions of imperfect market competition that characterised the industry by delivering programmes that the market could not.”

Despite the motivation behind the setting up of the Peacock Committee being to try and remove the BBC’s prominence and power, Seaton and McNicholas (2009, p125) conclude that “the Peacock Report marked a decisive moment in the Corporation’s survival and success for the next 20 years...”

- 1990 Broadcasting Act

The 1990 Broadcasting Act came into force following the recommendations of the Peacock Committee. The Conservatives had intended to create a more open and competitive market (Goodwin, 1998), which would bode well for Rupert Murdoch’s plans to launch Sky TV and suit his ideological beliefs with regard to the BBC and free markets. According to Curran and Seaton (2014), the Conservatives had originally sought to abolish the BBC. When they realised that this was not possible, they looked to change expectations of it and ‘radically alter the ecology’ of the institutions within which it operated. “There had been no doubt, among politicians on both sides and in pressure groups, that the object of the 1990 Broadcasting Act had intended to be the destruction of the BBC” (Curran and Seaton, 2014, p213-14).

However, following the publication of the Peacock Report and the 1998 White Paper ‘Broadcasting in the 90s’, the Act ended up taking what Seaton and Curran (2014) describe as a ‘gradualist approach’ to reforms in the TV market. Its provisions included allowing ITV franchises to be put out to tender, and the relaxation of the public service requirements on satellite television and licensed commercial radio in comparison with the rest of the broadcasting system. It also placed limits on cross-media ownership by restricting newspaper proprietors from holding more than a 20% stake in TV companies, as well as limiting cross-ownership across commercial TV, satellite TV and national radio stations.

The Act's provision with regard to limiting cross-media ownership across satellite television would not have suited Murdoch's plans. The rival satellite television company at that time, BSB, was lobbying for the 1990 Act to ensure the restrictions on national newspaper proprietors (i.e. Murdoch) controlling more than 20% of a British television company would include broadcasts from "medium-power satellites such as Astra" (Shawcross, 1992, p500). Thatcher and her government were reluctant to implement a policy that would hurt Murdoch in such a way. To avoid doing so, the government asserted that:

"Since Sky came from a Luxembourg satellite, using frequencies not allocated by the British government, and a technology which could provide essentially unlimited channels, it was not subject to the spectrum scarcity argument which had required the previous restrictions" (Shawcross, 1992, pp500-01).

This was a controversial statement given the Sky headquarters and studio were based in Britain. It was considered to be a loophole created to appease Murdoch and allow him to pursue his television expansion plans unhindered. This was viewed as fundamental in the development of Sky TV, and the expansion of the Murdoch empire. Petley (2015) describes it as an act of 're-regulation', whereby the government looked to replace regulation that sought to protect the public interest with regulation that looked to promote corporate self-interest.

The Act was considered to be a step towards 'de-regulation' at the time, and a step towards a more commercially driven market. Hobson (2013, p178) states that "the Act heralded a huge expansion of channels and changes in the broadcasting landscape, both in the number of channels and their blatant commercialism." In spite of its attempts to broaden the market and allow for commercially, competitive driven programming, Hobson explains that it in fact ended up damaging the existing players.

While the BBC remained largely protected thanks to the findings of the recommendations of the Peacock Report being predicated on a technological revolution that had not quite arrived yet, other terrestrial players such as ITV were forced to begin competing in a commercially driven market where the competitors were satellite broadcasters, such as Sky TV. "In order to compete with the unfettered

popular programming available across the range of satellite channels, it was necessary for terrestrial channels especially to adapt to their programming strategies to try to keep their audiences” (Hobson, 2013, p178-179).

Overall, despite the somewhat failed attempts of the Murdoch Press campaign against the BBC that sought to legitimise the Peacock Committee’s investigation into its funding, and the anticipated change in the BBC’s funding model that did not materialise, the Broadcasting Act of 1990 offered a promising consolation prize to Murdoch. The Broadcasting Act allowed for Murdoch’s Sky TV to enter the UK market, in spite of his newspaper holdings, and hurt the existing broadcast competitor with which he would be competing for audiences.

- Broadcasting Act 1996

The 1990 Broadcasting Act, which was introduced under a Conservative government (albeit passed in the same month that Margaret Thatcher resigned from her position as Prime Minister), was amended to form the 1996 Broadcasting Act under Labour leadership and remains in place to this day. As discussed previously, the Act originally included provisions that limited the extent to which cross-media ownership could be pursued by proprietors, but also included a loophole for Murdoch’s Sky TV. However, in 1995, the government published its report ‘Media Ownership: The Government’s Proposals’, which looked to introduce legislation to allow greater cross-ownership. The revised 1996 Act brought these proposals into effect, introducing a more relaxed approach to the ownership of television and radio licences, and newspaper market share.

The Department of National Heritage’s explanatory guide detailed that the “numerical limits on the holding of television licenses have been abolished,” and that the rules restricting some participants to a maximum 20% shareholding in certain licences were removed “except in the case of national newspapers having 20% or more of national circulation who remain restricted to no more than a 20% interest in a licence to provide a channel 3 service or channel 5, and certain disqualified persons who remain limited to a maximum 5% interest in any television licence.” The rules appeared to be logical and had the potential to address what remains a concern about the reach and control

of a select few conglomerates, given the oligopolistic tendencies of the market structure. The actual effect of this legislation was to allow any existing newspaper proprietors of the time to own TV stations, with the exception of Mirror Group and Murdoch's News Corporation.

While the provisions included in the Broadcasting Act 1996 can perhaps be considered to be somewhat limited in addressing reach and control, the amendments did not override the provisions regarding merger control stipulated in the Fair Trading Act of 1973. The Fair Trading Act was eventually superseded by the Enterprise Act of 2002, although at the time of the inception of the Broadcasting Act and its subsequent revision, the newspaper market was still bound by the original rules. A merger was considered to be "unlawful and void, unless the transfer is made with written consent given (conditionally or unconditionally) by the Secretary of State" (Barendt and Hitchens, 2000 p243). Again, while the premise is sound and can be seen to give consideration to both corporate arguments for mergers and public interest arguments, the wording is ambiguous enough to allow for subjective interpretation and interference by the Secretary of State.

- Enterprise Act 2002

The Enterprise Act of 2002 reformed UK merger law. The Act removed Ministers from the decision-making process for the majority of merger cases, leaving them to be dealt with by the competition authorities (then the Office of Fair Trading and the Competition Commission, replaced by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), which is in place to date). Graham examines the major change in competition law and policy that the Act represented and argues that it could be seen as "a further development of the 'regulatory state', or new public management, through its removal of power from politicians and towards independent agencies" (2004, p276). The Act created the Office of Fair Trading, which took over the functions of the DGFT [Director General of Fair Trading]. Graham states:

"The most important change is that the Act provides for a much more restricted role for Ministers than under the previous regime. The basic principle of the new Act is that the OFT will make the references to the CC (Competition Commission) and the

CC will decide on whether or not there is a competition problem and, if there is, what remedy would be appropriate. This is a major change which removes important powers away from elected politicians towards two independent agencies” (2004, p277).

Despite this major change, the Act continued with the provision from the Fair Trading Act of 1973 whereby a qualifying merger was referred to the competition authorities on a voluntary basis. The Act did not prevent the Secretary of State from making referrals to the Competition Commission, and they could continue to do so where there was a public interest concern. The Secretary of State can refer the case where it meets the requirements of the specifications of section 58 of the Act, or where it does not but the Secretary of State believes that it should: effectively cases the Secretary of State believes to be of importance or concern to the public interest.

The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) document providing guidance on the Enterprise Act and public interest intervention in media mergers explains that, despite Ministers being removed from the process and the competition test (otherwise referred to as the plurality test), “the Act allows Ministers to intervene in merger cases which raise public interest considerations specified in the Act”. (DTI, 2004, p5). However, the amendments to the Act detailed in the Communications Act 2003 specified the public interest considerations could be applied to mergers involving newspaper and broadcasting enterprises. Graham explains:

“the Communications Act 2003 inserted the accurate presentation of news, free expression of opinion and the need for a plurality of news in newspapers in this section as well as the need for plurality of media ownership, a wide range of broadcasting and a genuine commitment by those in control of media enterprises to the attainment set out in the Communications Act” (2004, p278).

Where the Secretary of State refers a case, the Competition Commission (now the CMA) will report back with any findings from a competition perspective. The Secretary of State is bound to accept the findings, but where public interest matters are concerned, the Secretary of State has the power to make the decision alone. The Enterprise Act also renamed ‘monopoly investigations’, as prescribed in the Fair

Trading Act, to 'market' investigations. Again, the test included in the Act allows for the Office of Fair Trading to refer a case to the competition authorities where there is concern about the restriction of competition in any market.

- *Prologue to the Communications Act 2003*

In stark contrast to Margaret Thatcher's ideological misgivings about the BBC and her tendency to favour the privatisation of markets and advancing commercially driven business models, Labour activists had for a long time lobbied against the concentration of power within private media business, and the national daily press that so clearly favoured the Conservative approach. In 1995, Labour MP Chris Mullin sought to introduce a bill that prevented a media proprietor from owning more than one national newspaper. Hesmondhalgh considers that "the bill was clearly aimed at countering not only the influence of Rupert Murdoch's News International, but also the expansion of the empires of other members of the late twentieth-century press barons" (2006, p100) However, having either sought, or attempted to seek, a friendlier relationship with Murdoch in light of its "fear of the hostile influence of the widely read newspapers he owned" (op.cit), Labour did not support their own MP's bill.

McKnight (2012, p160) writes of the growing suspicions during the years leading to Blair's electoral success that an 'understanding' between him and Murdoch had mounted, as it became clear to Murdoch that Blair represented less of a threat to his newspaper and broadcast holdings and operations than the then Prime Minister John Major. McKnight claims that this was "heavily underlined when at the end of 1995 ... a Labour shadow minister supported an inquiry by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission into Murdoch's dominance in cable and satellite television: he was immediately ordered to withdraw by Blair's office."

Freedman (2008) notes similar misgivings, asserting that any suspicions with regard to Labour's loyalty to media proprietors, in particular Rupert Murdoch, were confirmed when the draft communications bill was introduced in May 2002 under Tony Blair and the Labour government. The draft bill, in the words of its authors, "involved 'substantial liberalisation' within individual media markets and a reduction of cross-media ownership rules... Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell boasted to Parliament that 'these

changes are deregulatory... Ownership regulations will disappear or be reduced. Self-regulation will be extended wherever possible” (HoC Debates, 7 May 2002, col35).

Freedman (2008) views two clauses within the resulting 2003 Act as particularly controversial. The first is the removal of the restriction on national newspaper groups purchasing Channel 5, a move that would allow for the already powerful Rupert Murdoch to potentially move into terrestrial broadcasting; and the second was the removal of the ban on foreign ownership of UK broadcasters.

Freedman refers to the government’s view only six months before the introduction of the 2003 Act that unless a foreign nation was to offer reciprocal arrangements to allow British companies to expand into its media markets, the UK would not look to implement any such policy, which then changed to a ‘determination’ to implement the exact opposite. Freedman considers the argument that the relaxation of ownership policy was on economic grounds to be a flawed approach; surely any policy relating to the media, particularly broadcasting and the press, should include considerations relating to public interest and social policy. Freedman also notes that the government’s sudden change of mind with regard to ownership policy did little to quash the suspicions that it was heavily influenced by commercially motivated media proprietors, i.e. Rupert Murdoch.

“This suspicion was strengthened by the publication of documents showing that BSkyB lobbyists met with Downing Street officials six times during the passage of the communications bill in 2003, seeking (and gaining) assurances, amongst other things, that plurality concerns could not be used to block mergers if they met existing ownership rules and that there was not going to be a u-turn in the new Channel Five ownership policy” (Freedman, 2008, p118)

Much debate surrounded the proposed removal of existing media ownership restrictions. Doyle and Vick (1999, p85) state that “some took the view that deregulatory measures which, for the first time, allow major newspaper proprietors to acquire Channel 5 or national radio broadcasting licences were unjustified and represented ‘appeasement’ of News International.” Faced with major delays in

implementing the legislation as a result of the dissent, the Government looked to compromise with the most influential of the dissenters, Lord Puttnam, who had tabled a number of proposed amendments to the draft bill.

Faced with considerable support for Puttnam's proposed amendments, the government agreed to accept the principle of his plan, providing he agreed to drop the exact wording of his proposal; the inclusion of the plurality test was agreed. However, even with such a test in place, many were sceptical about its robustness, particularly given the historic ability of proprietors such as Murdoch to persuade prime ministers to waive protocol in their favour. Freedman explains:

“The problem is that such a test is unlikely to be robust enough to withstand pressure from either politicians or astute media barons. The test requires the Secretary of State to judge whether there are sufficient public interest considerations arising from a particular merger to recommend further action” (2008, p119).

As Feintuck and Varney summarise, “while the 2003 Act has changed the statutory basis on which intervention in relation to newspaper takeovers and mergers takes place, it does not seem to have had any significant impact on the problems revealed by [the] historical survey” (2013 p134).

It can be argued that Feintuck and Varney were eventually proved wrong in respect of Murdoch's attempts to acquire the remaining shares he did not already own in BSkyB. At his first attempt during 2010/11, the public interest plurality test introduced by the Puttnam amendment was invoked, and it took several months for an investigation to be undertaken; long enough for the phone-hacking revelations to come to light and the deal to be dropped by Murdoch. In 2018, Murdoch made a second attempt at the deal and, again, the plurality test was invoked and prevented a full takeover; Sky was subsequently purchased by Comcast

- *Communications Act 2003*

In July 2003, the New Labour government introduced the Communications Act 2003, superseding the 1984 Telecommunications Act and updating the preceding

Broadcasting Acts in a sweeping piece of legislation designed to acknowledge convergence across media. The Act followed a number of years of consultations, Green and White Papers and drafts (as discussed), culminating in a piece of legislation that was expected to have far-reaching effects on the media and telecommunications sectors. The Act brought about the following key changes for the media sector:

Ofcom

The new 'super-regulator' Ofcom was created, assuming the powers of five existing regulatory bodies: the Office of Telecommunications (Ofcom), the Independent Television Commission (ITC), the Broadcasting Standards Commission, the Radio Authority, and the Radio Communications Agency. Ofcom was also given concurrent powers with the Office of Fair Trading for the entirety of the communications sector in relation to breaches of the Competition Act 1998 and investigations commissioned under the Enterprise Act 2002.

Media ownership reform

The Act brought in changes to help promote competition and investment in the media market, while also introducing a 'plurality test', whereby a public interest test would be carried out in the event of a 'qualifying merger' involving broadcasters. The Secretary of State was given the power to intervene in a merger where it was deemed to impact plurality. In the event of the test being applied, Ofcom was expected to report on the public interest considerations, and the matter could be referred to the competition authorities for a final decision.

Foreign ownership

The Act removed restrictions on foreign ownership of ITV, Channel 5 and all local and national AM and FM radio stations (note: digital radio stations did not have any such ownership restrictions in place).

Cross-media ownership

Under the Communications Act, a national newspaper group was allowed to purchase Channel 5 providing they passed the plurality test. However, national newspaper groups remained prohibited from purchasing ITV. A parallel rule was applied to local newspapers and their local ITV service.

Public service

The Act required the BBC, Channels 3, 4 and 5, and teletext to fulfil a public service remit. Ofcom was afforded the power to discipline the broadcasters should they be found to be failing in this remit.

The 2003 Act followed a number of draft bills and debates, but it was the 2000 White Paper that saw the first real indication of the government's intentions to implement changes to media ownership rules (Freedman, 2008). This White Paper, titled 'A New Future for Communications', stated the need "to create a new system for the regulation of media ownership which is appropriate to fast-changing, modern market conditions" (DTI/DCS, 2000, p36). The following year, the government launched a consultation into media ownership rules which "attempted to strike a balance between the need for continuing safeguards on ownership and concentration and a more liberalised environment for media mergers" (Freedman, 2013, p241). Doyle and Vick (2005) assessed that the strategy deployed by the New Labour government at the time of the implementation of the 2003 Communications Act derived from three basic principles: that the commercial media in the UK needed new sources of investment; that the source of this investment was unimportant so long as effective content regulation that assured quality and diversity was in place; and that ownership rules should reflect the reality of a global market place.

Feintuck and Varney (2013) consider the provisions of section 373 of the 2003 Act, which repealed the provisions of the Fair Trading Act and applied those of the 2002 Enterprise Act in the context of newspapers. The Act was deemed by many at the time to be a move towards 'deregulation' that was in favour of media proprietors. The repeal of these rules under the 2003 Communications Act caused considerable debate as it potentially opened the door to major conglomerates, such as Rupert Murdoch's, to operate a Channel 5 licence. Doyle and Vick state "in doing so, the government ignored concerns about the potential anti-competitive implications of 'cross-platform' promotion (for example, the promotion of programming available on Murdoch-controlled Channel 5 by Murdoch's BSkyB or newspapers owned by Murdoch's News International)" (2005, p12). It was a clear shift in policy direction at the time, and in stark contrast to what had existed previously.

The government consultation on media ownership rules stated that “Whilst the need for a plurality of media sources remains clear, we are committed to a deregulatory approach to media markets” (2005, p7). The approach was aimed at increasing efficiency and making the product cheaper for the consumer, as “further liberalisation would benefit existing companies and potential news investors, providing for further consolidation, more scope for investment, and a more significant international presence” (op.cit). The consideration of consolidation is often fraught with complexity in any industry as the nature of a market and economies of scale can often lend themselves to the argument for an oligopolistic structure. However, as is explored in more detail within this thesis, it can be argued that the media cannot be considered in the same way as a typical product, and so there is a need for special provisions within legislation to ensure plurality.

Hesmondhalgh describes the 2003 Communications Act as “without doubt the most important piece of British communications legislation since the 1990 Broadcasting Act” (2006, p96). Both Acts are considered to have been greatly influenced by conglomerates and lobbyists, and both prime ministers Margaret Thatcher, of the Conservatives, and Tony Blair, of Labour, have been widely recorded as having enjoyed personal friendships with Rupert Murdoch that were suspected of having had an influence over the development of the legislation. Hesmondhalgh writes that “Labour media policy had traditionally been pro-public service broadcasting, and in favour of significant controls over media ownership and behaviour” (2006, p100) Such an approach was not apparent in the 2003 Act.

- *Ofcom (2003)*

In line with the deregulatory approach, following the 2003 Communications Act, the functions of five separate media related regulatory bodies were combined to form the Office of Communications (Ofcom). Corner explains that the “body follows the broad model of ‘oversight’ bodies set up to monitor the performance of once publicly-owned services that have now been privatised” (2010, p146) Collins (1997) explains that “Ofcom was also the institutional culmination of a significant shift in the focus of UK television regulation, away from the allocation of relatively scarce spectrum to achieve

public service objectives and towards the control of market power to facilitate free market competition” (cited in Smith, 2006, p929).

Smith notes the extensive debate at the time of Ofcom’s proposed inception, with one side considering that a single regulator across all of the telecommunications markets would ensure consistency, and the other (including the BBC) concerned to make sure that “the need to ensure that any changes to the existing regulatory system would not prioritise narrow economic concerns over the wider public interest and that the main tenets of public service broadcasting would be preserved into the digital age” (2006, p929). In light of the BBC being publicly funded, it was not within Ofcom’s mandate to enforce any form of governance over the PSB, and it was felt by many of the private media corporations that were ‘within scope’ of Ofcom’s regulatory oversight that “there was no direct competitor in size and reach to the BBC” (Corner, 2010, p142), given that commercial broadcasting was set up as a regional rather than national venture. Smith asserts that the establishment of Ofcom was not a mere ‘tidy up’, but rather a shift in focus shaped by the following: “(1) UK commercial media interests and their attempts to use convergence to justify deregulation; (2) New Labour’s commitment to free market principles and policy innovation; (3) a regulatory ‘turf war’ between the ITC and Oftel; and (4) bargaining between rival departments within the Labour government” (2006, p937).

Self-regulation (press)

- *General Council of the Press (1953)*

O’Malley and Soley (2000) outline the history of press self-regulation, noting that it originally derived from the 1930s when the first instance of concern about the power of the press in the UK was recorded. The Political and Economic Planning group (PEP) was set up, comprising a number of individuals from academic and industrial backgrounds, and produced a report that outlined concerns regarding considerable intrusion into private lives and personal affairs. The recommendation was for self-regulation rather than statutory regulation, and the report stated: “It should consist of a chairman commanding unqualified general confidence, for his judicious gifts, with two assessors drawn from representative panels of proprietors and of journalists. The

tribunal would need no legislative authority and could be launched with a widely published appeal to the public from the Press that anyone feeling aggrieved by alleged journalistic intrusion should lay a complaint before it” (cited in O’Malley and Soley, 2000, p52).

Issues of press control and power continued to be considered by the government, and in 1946, a Press Commission was set up to look at “ownership and control, financing, the tendencies towards monopoly, and the influence of financial and advertising interests on the distortion and suppression of news” (O’Malley and Soley, 2000, pp52-53). By 1948, the Commission, while not making recommendations pertaining to ownership, did agree to a General Council of the Press. The council was to comprise a number of people from the press industry (including proprietors, editors and journalists), and a small number of ‘lay’ members. The objectives of the General Council, as outlined in 1948, were as follows: “The objects of the General Council should be to safeguard the freedom of the Press; to encourage the growth of a sense of public responsibility and public service amongst all engaged in the profession of journalism – that is, in the editorial production of newspapers – whether as directors, editors or other journalists; and to further the efficiency of the profession and the well-being of those who practices it” (O’Malley and Bromley, 1997, p150). The objectives included ten points that outlined specific actions or areas of work that the council should undertake.

However, O’Malley and Soley (2000) note that the major points that featured heavily in subsequent debate related to the prescribed need for a layperson chair and 20% layperson membership. Furthermore, the objectives called for the council to promote training, public responsibility and public service. “To do this it would need to monitor developments on press freedom issues, censure undesirable practice, build up a code of conduct, consider complaints from the public and act as the public face of the press in dealings with the government and international agencies” (O’Malley and Soley, 2000, p55).

Despite the outline of these objectives, the newspaper proprietors were not keen to implement the recommendations; it was not until 1 July 1953 that the General Council of the Press met for the first time. O’Malley and Soley state that “It was an essentially

negative response to a positive recommendation by the Royal Commission and the Labour Cabinet. It was Labour and Liberal pressure during 1952 that pushed the government into bringing the proprietors around to a compromise.

While the delay testified to the power of the proprietors, it also helped nurture the idea that in the end statutory means might be needed to impose standards" (2000, p58). When the council was set up in 1953, it had 25 members, all from the newspaper industry (including from unions), and no lay members at all, and included the following clause: "provided that in dealing with representations which it may receive about the conduct of the Press or of any persons towards the Press, the Council shall be required to consider only those from complainants actually affected, and shall deal with such in whatever manner may seem to it practical and appropriate" (O'Malley and Bromley, 1997, p314).

- Press Council (1963)

In 1961, a Royal Commission on the Press was announced, chaired by Lord Shawcross, with the aim of investigating the General Council of the Press, and in particular concerns about witnesses and criminals being paid for stories. The result was the implementation of a number of recommendations that were closely aligned to the original objectives proposed for the General Council of the Press. These included the appointment of a lay chairperson, 20% of the council's membership to be people from outside the industry, and an increase in its operating budget. The Commission also found that the General Council of the Press had not been set up in such a way that it had sufficient power to monitor changes in newspaper ownership, and that overall, the recommendations from the first Commission had not been properly implemented. "Nothing substantial had happened to stem disturbing practices by the newspapers.

In February 1967 complaints about chequebook journalism reappeared in the House of Commons in a debate on the economic malaise of the industry... In March 1968 Edwin Brooks MP asked for legislation to force the publication of details of payments to witnesses, and later another MP pressed for a law to curb invasions of privacy by long-range cameras and TV equipment. Both requests were refused by the

government” (O’Malley and Soley, 2000, p67).

The council had a reputation as a body that did not enforce its own rules. For example, Murdoch (who had recently purchased the News of the World) refused to attend a hearing of the Press Council about stories that were believed to be in contravention of the council’s rules. In 1970, a third Commission was set up, chaired by Kenneth Younger, prompted by continued concerns with regard to privacy and the press. The committee produced a report in 1972 that was “highly critical of the Press Council and its seeming inability to command the confidence of the British public” (Leveson, 2012, p202).

The report made a number of recommendations, including the repeated recommendation that the Council increase its percentage of lay membership so as to improve its credibility amongst the British public. It also recommended that newspapers publish any adjudications and build up a body of case law that could be understood and referred to by the industry (Leveson, 2012).

The General Council of the Press was reformed as the Press Council on 1 July 1963. It amended its constitution to remove reference to training and technological development, and to focus more on dealing with complaints about the press: “To consider complaints about the conduct of the Press or the conduct of persons and organisations towards the Press; to deal with these complaints in whatever manner might seem practical and appropriate and record resultant action” (O’Malley and Soley 2000, p64). The council increased its lay membership to ten (half the number of industry representatives) and made minor changes to include lay membership on its Complaints Committee.

Leveson notes that the reforms of the council “did not encompass the most significant of the recommendations made in the Younger Report... the performance of the Press Council was regarded by the Government of the day as so inadequate that, within a year of publication of Sir Kenneth Younger’s report, not only was a third Royal Commission on the Press established, but it was given an express remit to examine in detail ‘the responsibilities, constitution and functioning of the Press Council’” (2012, p202).

In 1974, a further Royal Commission on the Press was established, chaired by Professor Oliver MacGregor (later Lord MacGregor). The commission had a broad remit and was asked to “inquire into the factors affecting the maintenance of the independence, diversity and editorial standards of newspapers and periodicals and the public freedom of choice of newspapers and periodicals, nationally, regionally and locally” (Royal Commission on the Press, ppi-ii). Its report was ultimately undecided on the best version of regulation of the press.

However, it was “unequivocal in its criticism of the Press Council both as a regulator of press standards and as able to provide appropriate means of redress” (Leveson, 2012, p203). Aligned with recommendations made by previous commissions, the MacGregor Report recommended reforms to the Press Council, including proper adjudications to be published by the offending newspaper. Furthermore, it was recommended that the Press Council should seek to ensure adjudications were published swiftly and, where appropriate, on the front page. The report also suggested that, should the industry not respond and implement the recommendations in a timely manner, a statutory solution might need to be sought.

- Press Complaints Commission (1991)

O'Malley and Soley assert that the “mixture of recalcitrance and delay, public and official criticism meant that in its first 20 years the Press Council was unable to persuade enough people that, as a body, it was intended to, or could, deliver higher standards” (2000, p70). The political events that took place between 1987 and 1993 were particularly important for press regulation and included three attempts at a statutory right of reply, two attempts at a privacy bill, two government-initiated inquiries into press self-regulation, and ultimately the collapse of the Press Council.

The first of the attempts at a statutory right of reply was launched by a Labour MP, aiming to give members of the public the right of reply against allegations made about them in the press. The bill also looked to introduce a ‘Media Complaints Commission’ which would have the power to order the publication of a correction and could enforce this by a High Court order if necessary. This came about at a time when a

Conservative MP had presented a 'right to privacy' bill, which led to debates in the House of Commons regarding unfair reporting in the press. O'Malley and Soley state that while neither bill "received government support... they were important barometers of an intensifying dissatisfaction with self-regulation among MPs" (2000, p86).

A further two bills were introduced on the same topics, albeit narrower in scope, and the bill pertaining to the right to privacy gained cross-party backbench support. O'Malley and Soley state that the bill posed an issue for the government, as it could not be seen to dismiss a further two bills, particularly when there was strong support, "but it was clearly unwilling to forge ahead, back the bills and thereby incur the wrath of the proprietors" (2000, p86). Rather than progressing the bills, the government opted for another Committee, and so the Calcutt Inquiry was established in 1989.

The Conservative government's Calcutt Committee investigation into privacy and the behaviour of the press led to the creation of the PCC in 1991. David Calcutt QC was asked to undertake a review of privacy in relation to the press, following which he recommended that the Press Council (the PCC's predecessor) be disbanded and replaced by the PCC. "Calcutt rehearsed the criticisms of the Press Council which were by now familiar to anyone who had an interest in the debates. These included its ineffectiveness as an adjudicating body; its perceived lack of independence from the proprietors; its tendency to reject large numbers of complaints before adjudication; the lack of clarity in the way it classified complaints; the delay in getting adjudications in contested cases; and the lack of effective sanctions" (O'Malley and Soley, 2000, p88).

The Calcutt Inquiry made a number of recommendations in its report, including the need for a code of practice to be published and monitored; the PCC would be smaller in size with an independent chair. Calcutt also stipulated that, should the industry fail to comply with the recommendations in a timely manner or should there be 'large-scale flouting' of the adjudications, the government should then establish a statutory body with statutory powers. The inquiry suggested a 12-month time frame to implement the recommendations, which was backed by the government.

The Board of the PCC was to consist of editors of the various UK press institutions

and was to be given 18 months before a review of its activities was undertaken. Unfortunately, the promise of the PCC's mandate was not realised. The Leveson Inquiry identified a number of failings that led to its recommendation for the PCC to cease practice and make way for a new body with a fit and proper framework stipulating its formation and structure. The inquiry found that "too many stories in too many newspapers were the subject of complaints from too many people, with too little in the way of titles taking responsibility or considering the consequences for the individuals involved" (Leveson, 2012, p11).

Furthermore, Leveson stated that "there is insufficient clarity about what is acceptable and what is not: that is also what the PCC was, or at least should have been, championing" (op.cit). Leveson found that the PCC was not a regulator at all, but merely a complaint-handling body that lacked the independence to act or impose any kind of sanction or penalty that would act as sufficient deterrent to similar behaviour in future. Ultimately, it was the Prime Minister who suggested the abolition of the body, with which Leveson agreed in his report (Leveson, 2012).

- Independent Press Standards Organisation

Following the disbandment of the PCC, a small number of the newspaper proprietors colluded to form IPSO. IPSO gives its mission statement on its website as "We exist to promote and uphold the highest professional standards of journalism in the UK, and to support members of the public in seeking redress where they believe that the Editors' Code of Practice has been breached."⁸ IPSO claims that it is able to consider concerns about editorial content in newspapers and magazines, and about the conduct of journalists: the core issue that came to light in the phone-hacking scandal, and what led to the widespread and in-depth review of the newspaper industry carried out by the Leveson Inquiry.

To date, a vast number of local, regional and national publications have joined IPSO,

⁸ www.ipso.co.uk

with the notable exceptions of the Guardian, the Financial Times and the Independent. IPSO operates an Editors' Code of Practice Committee, though it has been criticised for not being independent of the publishers which run IPSO (one of the key recommendations of Leveson). In its first incarnation, the committee installed Paul Dacre, previous editor of the Daily Mail, as its Chair. This was somewhat ironic given that the Daily Mail provoked complaints for unethical behaviour three times more than any competing national title.

In 2018 the campaign group Hacked Off published a document titled *Thrown to the Wolves*, which detailed much of the criticism of IPSO, including accounts of continued press abuse and harassment despite the revelations of bad and illegal practice unearthed by the Leveson Inquiry of 2012. Referring to the Kerslake Report, published in 2017 as part of a review of the 2017 bombings at Manchester Arena, Hacked Off reported that, despite there being copious amounts of evidence of press intrusion and harassment of the victims and their families, "IPSO continued to turn a blind eye. A serious regulator would have launched investigations, but IPSO has not launched a single one in its four years of operation" (Hacked Off, 2018, p18). Hacked Off likened the criticism to earlier complaints about the General Council of the Press, the Press Council, and the PCC: "IPSO, like its predecessors, is dominated by the big press corporations that control it and wrote its rulebook" (2018, p18).

Summary

This potted history of press regulation demonstrates that, time and again, the UK's newspaper proprietors have defied commissions and enquiries to escape proper scrutiny for breaches of their own codes. This remains true to the present day despite decades of attempted reforms. It also demonstrates that successive governments of all political persuasions have not been prepared to take on the power of press barons, even when the public interest has demanded some kind of political intervention. The history of media policymaking in the UK is one of firm regulation of the broadcast industry but indulgence of the press, and this has been reflected in the history of media ownership policy too.

The Peacock Committee was one of the early examples of Murdoch's alleged collusion with a Prime Minister (then, Margaret Thatcher), and of his attempts to undermine and destabilize the BBC. It was not necessarily an example of Murdoch using the power of his press holdings to influence political opinion on the matter; Murdoch was fortunate in that Thatcher shared his ideological misgivings about the BBC. However, he did use the popularity of his press, notably The Times, to run a campaign attacking the BBC that helped to legitimise Thatcher's own campaign, orchestrated via the setting up of the Peacock Committee.

The 1990 Broadcasting Act, also introduced under the Thatcher government, provides yet another example of Murdoch's relationship with a Prime Minister providing great advantages to his business. The 1990 Act prevented Murdoch from broadcasting Sky Television in the UK based on scarcity; looking to appease Murdoch, Thatcher's government allowed him to broadcast on the basis that SKY was broadcast from a Luxembourg owned satellite, and therefore the UK scarcity restrictions did not apply. This paved the way for Murdoch's entry into the UK broadcast industry, and the significant expansion of his business in the UK. These events also saw Murdoch use the power of his press for the purpose of cross-promotion.

The history of the press 'self-regulation' points to multiple attempts to create a framework and code of practice according to which the press should operate, but that to date has proven unsuccessful. Over the years and under the regulatory framework of the Press Council, PCC, and IPSO, Murdoch's UK press has continued to be able to spread disinformation and heavily criticise the BBC and (to a lesser extent) Ofcom in such a way that is entirely at odds with the editorial codes such regulatory bodies are supposed to oversee.

Chapter Six: Recent Policy and Regulatory Developments

This chapter examines more recent developments and events in policy and regulation that are relevant to the media markets in which Murdoch's organisations and the BBC operate. These events are important in the context of this thesis as they speak to the continuing issues surrounding policy and regulation that have had the potential to effect Murdoch's business, and how he has responded. Furthermore, and more importantly, a number of the select committees and inquiries highlight further examples of Murdoch's attitude towards the BBC and regulators, and how even in recent years he has continued to see to de-stabilise and undermine the BBC.

This chapter will consider a number of House of Lords Select Committees and Ofcom investigation into ownership of the news and media plurality, all of which Murdoch's organisation has responded to, noting the 'critical' need for the BBC to be included in any such review. It will also examine Murdoch's bid for the remaining shares in BskyB that he did not already own and the resistance he met from the regulators in that process. It will then go on to look at the phone hacking scandal that brought the whole thing to a halt, and the subsequent evidence provided to the Leveson Inquiry into the phone hacking scandal, much of which dealt with Murdoch's business practices and his relationships with politicians.

2008 House of Lords Select Committee on Communications: Ownership of the News

In June 2008, the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications published the report of its inquiry into media ownership, titled *The Ownership of the News*, its summary stating: "We have proposed changes to the regulation governing ownership, but do not believe that by themselves media ownership laws are sufficient to ensure our aim of a diversity of voices in the news. We believe that public service broadcasting has a continuing and vital role to play" (2008, p6). Thus, it signalled clear recognition of the principle that consolidation could constitute a threat to plurality, while also concluding that the BBC was a key institution with a vital role to play in ensuring diversity and providing informative and balanced information.

The Select Committee took a strong stance on the upkeep and continued investment in the BBC, stating that it “occupies a pivotal position in news and current affairs and it is vital that nothing be done to diminish that role” (2008 op. cit.). The report also recognised the special consideration that needs to be given when examining the ownership of the news, given the ‘special’ nature of the product, and that media ownership is “regulated differently to ownership of most other business activities because of media’s place in a healthy democracy” (2008, op. cit.)

The report also recognised that, in light of the then pending switch-off of analogue TV and the potential loss of a significant amount of the indirect subsidies for commercial PSBs, that the BBC should not remain as the only PSB, to ensure consistent plurality. It recommended that Ofcom should be given the power to “ensure the quality of the news provided by the commercial public service broadcasters is maintained” (2008, op. cit.). It had never been within the remit of Ofcom to comment on or examine the conduct or business of the BBC, as it was then governed by the independent BBC Trust, as laid out in the broadcaster’s Royal Charter. However, the Select Committee saw the need for the extensive provision of public-service-minded content that promoted and upheld democratic expression.

The report considered the public interest plurality test that was included in the Communications Act 2003, which requires that the test be applied to any media merger that is proposed. The Select Committee found that the plurality test does not account for whether a proposed merger would have an adverse effect on newsgathering: an area that the committee noted had seen a ‘worrying trend’ of lack of investment. The Select Committee also stated that “The criteria to be considered during the Public Interest Test for newspaper mergers in particular are far from comprehensive and are in need of review” (2008, p6). It noted concern that the decision to issue a ‘public interest intervention notice’ remains solely with government ministers and recommended that Ofcom should be afforded the same power.

2010-11 News Corporation Bid for BSkyB

In 2010, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation made a bid to take full control of BSkyB, the UK’s largest satellite broadcaster, by acquiring the 60.9% shares it did not already

own. At the time, Rupert Murdoch owned 40% of the voting shares in News Corp. News Corp owned 39% of BSkyB, with other people/entities holding the rest; James Murdoch was the chairman of BSkyB. Rupert Murdoch sought the approval of the European Competition Commission in November 2010, and it approved the deal. The size of the merger meant that the European Commission would take the lead in determining whether the deal would impact competition; the commission ruled that the merger would not significantly impede competition (Seely, 2017). Following the European Commission's decision, the Secretary of State for Business, Vince Cable, requested that Ofcom undertake its own investigation with regard to the impact the deal would have on media plurality in the UK.

The proposed deal attracted a lot of press attention at the time, as well as widespread criticism given the percentage of the media markets in the UK that Murdoch already owned. The LSE Media Policy Project stated that "News Corporation is the UK's largest newspaper publisher, printing more than one in three copies sold. Sky is the largest broadcaster, with turnover of £5.9bn against the BBC's £4.8bn. The Murdoch family say a merger makes good financial sense, but critics say it would create a media group of unprecedented power, in which newspapers could be bundled with a Sky subscription, or Sky Sports content could be shown exclusively on Times and Sun websites"⁹ (2011).

The BBC's then Business Editor, Robert Peston, stated that "if the deal did go ahead, it would 'erase any scintilla of doubt that Mr Murdoch's News Corporation would be the most powerful of all the traditional media groups in the UK'"¹⁰ (2010). He added that the deal created a problem for the coalition government at the time (Conservatives and Liberal Democrats), given that Murdoch's newspapers had been supportive of the Conservatives, but particularly hostile towards the Lib Dems.

This was highly pertinent because the minister required to make a decision on whether to refer the deal to Ofcom on public interest grounds was the Business Secretary Vince Cable (Liberal Democrat). Vince Cable was unknowingly recorded stating that he had

⁹ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediapolicyproject/resources/dossier-media-plurality/>

¹⁰ https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/robertpeston/2010/06/murdochs_londonbased_global_ne.html

‘declared war on Rupert Murdoch’¹¹ (Robinson, Halliday and Mulholland, 2010). Once the declaration was revealed in the press, Vince Cable was stripped of his duties with regard to assessing the deal, and it was passed to Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport Jeremy Hunt (Conservative).

It is interesting to note that the Murdoch press had remained virtually silent on the matter of Ofcom’s investigation into the proposed acquisition; whereas under normal circumstances it could be expected to see a measure of criticism in the Murdoch reporting on Ofcom, there was none at all during this time period. The only criticism to be found was focused on Mr Cable. At a time when Murdoch need Ofcom to find in his favour, his newspapers fell suitably quiet on the matter. While this does not necessarily support the hypothesis that his newspapers maintain a negative agenda in their reporting on Ofcom, it does support the assertions that Murdoch uses his press to report in such a way that suits his corporate agenda.

On 31 December 2010, Ofcom published its Report on Public Interest Test on the Proposed Acquisition of British Sky Broadcasting Group plc by News Corporation, in which it stated:

“Full control would allow News Corp to take decisions involving Sky which are in the exclusive commercial interests of News Corp... we consider it would result in a reduction in the number of persons with control of media enterprises and that Sky would cease to be a distinct media enterprise... News Corp’s potential ability to influence would increase with the addition of Sky News, increasing its share of references from 12% to 22%. News Corp’s reach as a percentage of regular news consumers would increase from 32% to 51%” (2010, p10).

In its application of the public interest plurality test, Ofcom also noted that while multisourcing of news is important, it did not feel it can be relied on to ensure sufficient plurality. Ofcom concluded that “we consider it reasonable to believe that the proposed acquisition may be expected to operate against the public interest since there may not be a sufficient plurality of persons with control of media enterprises

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/dec/21/vince-cable-rupert-murdoch>

providing news and current affairs to UK-wide cross-media audiences” (2010, p13)

The Ofcom assessment recognised a number of factors considered in Chapter One: Media and Democracy with regard to the dangers of concentration of media ownership and the threat it poses to plurality and informing public opinion and debate. Furthermore, the report considers the issues of news in the ‘new digital environment’ (as explored in Chapter Two) regarding the complex and changing nature of news consumption that appears to retain its roots in the traditional news providers.

Perhaps more notable on publication of this report were the concerns raised by those who engaged with Ofcom and submitted evidence and/or expert information regarding plurality that did not relate to the potential News Corp/BSkyB transaction. Ofcom stated “These concerns arise from the rapid and far reaching changes that are taking place within the media as a result of technological advances and new business models” (2010, p91) Considering the provision of the contemporary framework within which a public interest test in relation to media plurality was only triggered by the potential merger of two media organisations, Ofcom made the suggestion that “the current statutory framework may no longer be fully equipped to achieve Parliament’s objective of ensuring sufficient plurality of media ownership” (2010, p116). Again, while somewhat ambiguous in the recommendation of what action should be taken, there is the clear assertion that the regulatory framework was not sufficient to adequately address the trend of convergence and consolidation within an already oligopolistic market structure.

It was speculated that Jeremy Hunt would choose not to refer the proposed News Corp/BSkyB deal to the Competition Commission. He accepted a number of undertakings from News Corp in lieu of the referral, including Sky News being spun off as an independent public limited company. The undertakings, proposed by News Corp in an attempt to allay fears and avoid further referral and delay, would also include “a board made up of a majority of independent directors, including an independent chair, and a corporate governance and editorial committee made up of independent directors (who would have no other News Corporation interests). News Corporation would not be allowed to increase its shareholding in the new company

without permission from the Secretary of State for 10 years”¹² (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and Hunt, 2011).

After several months of further consultations about ‘undertakings in lieu’, Hunt was on the verge of allowing the merger through and fulfilling Murdoch’s dream of full ownership of BSkyB. With just days to go before the final decision was due, the details of the Murdoch-owned News of the World newspaper’s involvement in illegal phone hacking were revealed, and Prime Minister David Cameron announced a public inquiry to be led by Lord Justice Leveson (explored further in the next section). In light of the public outcry that followed, and in an attempt to defuse the situation, Murdoch closed the News of the World and made a public apology. Facing a motion in the House of Commons that the merger should be stopped, which was almost certain to pass, News Corp withdrew its bid for BSkyB.

2011-12 Leveson Inquiry

The Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press, set up in the light of revelations about phone hacking, was a wide-ranging investigation into allegations of illegality, inappropriate relationships between the press and the Metropolitan Police, and the adequacy of Britain’s framework for media plurality. Underlying it were serious questions about the concentration – and abuse – of power in the media. After a year of written evidence and oral statements from newspaper editors, proprietors (including Murdoch), victims of press abuse and other interested parties, Leveson produced a final report of four volumes covering, amongst much else, Rupert Murdoch’s business practices and relationships with politicians and those in power.

As part of its terms of reference, the Leveson Inquiry was to make recommendations as follows:

“a. for a new more effective policy and regulatory regime which supports the integrity and freedom of the press, the plurality of the media, and its independence, including

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/news-corporation-bskyb-merger-3-march-2011>

from government, the prosecuting authorities and the police;

b. for how future concerns about press behaviour, media policy, regulation and cross-media ownership should be dealt with by all the relevant authorities, including parliament, government, the prosecuting authorities and the police;

c. the future conduct of relations between politicians and the press; and

d. the future conduct of relations between the police and the press”¹³ (Leveson, 2012).

Despite the inquiry being prompted by the phone-hacking revelations, Leveson’s remit went much wider than just unlawful press behaviour; it was recognised to be about press power, and more specifically about too much power being concentrated in the hands of Rupert Murdoch.

In a very thorough approach to understanding the historical evidence around the exercise of power by the Murdoch empire, the inquiry looked as far back as the 1980s and included evidence about Murdoch’s purchase of the Times and Sunday Times in 1981, and his relationship with Margaret Thatcher at the time. It referred to previous inquiries on press behaviour and regulation, in particular the 1990 report by a committee chaired by Sir David Calcutt QC which called for improvements in press accountability, and Calcutt’s follow-up report concluding that there had been insufficient change.

In the executive summary of the final report, Leveson states that “for the seventh time in less than 70 years, a report has been commissioned by the Government which has dealt with concerns about the press. It was sparked by public revulsion about a single action” (2012, p3). Leveson qualifies the inclusion of the relationship between the press and police given “public concern that the police had become too close to the press in general, and News International in particular, with the result that the investigation of phone hacking had not been conducted with the rigour that it deserved” (2012, p3). Leveson notes the reasoning behind the inclusion of politicians as being

¹³ <https://www.discoverleveson.com/Resource/TermsOfReference>

“notably because of the political consensus from the Government and Opposition parties that politicians had been too close to the press but also because of concerns about the bid by News Corporation for the remaining shares in B Sky B plc” (op.cit).

The report makes a total of 92 recommendations, 47 of which related to a revised regulatory model for the British press. Leveson (2012) states in his report that the principle of a free press operates as a cornerstone of UK democracy, and as such the press is afforded ‘significant and special rights’. However, the inquiry found that the press responsibilities “on which the public so heavily rely, have simply been ignored” (Leveson, 2012, p4). It notes a similar finding to so many inquiries and reports on the media and the press that came before Leveson: that “there is a cultural tendency within parts of the press vigorously to resist or dismiss complainants almost as a matter of course. Securing an apology, a correction or other appropriate redress, even when there can be no argument, becomes drawn out and difficult” (op. cit.). Leveson recognised that the criticisms levied against the British press applied only to some newspapers, and only some of the time; however, where the failings did occur, they were serious.

Barnett and Townsend (2014) explain that the Leveson Inquiry heard from leading figures from the past 25 years of government who all put forward arguments for the need for substantial change in media policy to address matters of ownership. Barnett and Townsend cite former Prime Minister John Major as being “convinced that parliament needed to act”, and Cameron as admitting that the relationship between government and Rupert Murdoch had been “too close” for many years, and under both parties of government (Barnett and Townsend, 2014, p168). Despite the extensive evidence with regard to the influence of Murdoch and his News International newspapers over a number of prime ministers, who provided said evidence directly, there is little to suggest that anything has changed since the inquiry:

“The urgency and anger which defined debates in the summer of 2011, when senior politicians rushed to apologise for their proximity to media proprietors, have subsided. Meanwhile, News UK (originally News International) launched the Sun on Sunday in February 2012, thus restoring News Corp’s 36 per cent of national newspaper circulation in the UK” (Barnett and Townsend, 2014, p167).

Despite Lord Justice Leveson and others urging the government to go ahead with part two of the inquiry, Culture Secretary Matt Hancock announced in February 2018 that it was cancelled. An attempt to overturn this decision in the House of Commons was made in May 2018, but it failed by nine votes.

2012 Ofcom report – Measuring Media Plurality

In October 2011, Secretary of State Jeremy Hunt MP once again requested that Ofcom produce a report titled Media Plurality, specifically relating to five questions around the measurement and framework for ensuring plurality, what should trigger a public interest test, and whether the BBC should be considered within the scope of any form of review. The methodology deployed included an invitation to comment, to which Ofcom received 50 responses, including from various media organisations and campaign groups.

The report concerned itself only with news and current affairs, and asserted that it should not look at the differing areas of media in silo, but should take a holistic view of the market, including the provision of news online: “Online news, in a wide variety of forms, is used by a significant and rapidly growing proportion of the UK population. It is a dynamic and diverse sector. Online should be included in a plurality review” (Ofcom, 2012, p2). While positive that the government wanted the regulator to recognise the need to include online provision of news in any kind of plurality review, the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications recognised the considerable challenge given that the “millions of access points around the world adds to the practical difficulties of regulating internet content, even if it was deemed desirable” (2014, p10).

In building the report Ofcom invited comment from the industry and other interested parties. The BBC responded, noting the challenges the news media sector faces in light of the ‘erosion of traditional business models’ and the fragmentation of audiences. In spite of that, the BBC stated that “On any metric the BBC is a leading provider of news in the UK, It delivers significant public benefits through the universal availability

of well-funded, high quality news” (BBC, 2012, p1-2)¹⁴. While the BBC noted its funding model being one that means it is free of the commercial pressure other news organisations experience, the BBC maintained its position that it should not be a ‘trigger’ for a or ‘subject’ of any new plurality regulation (Op Cit).

News Corporation also provided a response to Ofcom’s invitation to comment. It’s core views on the matter were stated as:

“Markets are working and the trend continues to be towards greater plurality rather than less plurality...The existing regulatory regime provides adequate protection for plurality... Considerable care should be taken when attempting to use quantitative metrics to assess the sufficiency of plurality... The role of the BBC and the availability of news on all platforms must be taken into account” (News Corp, 2012, p2)¹⁵.

The Ofcom report made recommendations regarding the potential triggers for a review of plurality within the UK where there is not a proposed merger. Ofcom ascertained that reviews should be undertaken every four to five years and should not be “triggered by metrics or complaints, nor do we believe there should be scope for discretion to trigger a review between the fixed period reviews” (2012, p2). A regular and periodic review of plurality is logically sound, as it allows for continuous and refreshed monitoring of the media landscape.

However, in the absence of ‘metrics or complaints’, significant acquisitions or developments could take place that are not subjected to proper consideration or a public interest test. That said, at the time of writing, there is no measure in place to trigger the need for a plurality review unless there is a proposed merger. Ofcom did recognise the impact on the market of overengineering review processes and that “the regulatory framework needs to be consistent and avoid a double jeopardy outcome” (op.cit).

Perhaps more notable than Ofcom’s lack of any substantive recommendation for

¹⁴ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0024/51468/bbc.pdf

¹⁵ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/69311/news-corporation.pdf

plurality reviews in the absence of mergers were its suggestions in response to Jeremy Hunt's question "Is it practical or advisable to set absolute limits on new market share?"¹⁶ (cited by Ofcom, 2012). Ofcom considered that limits could be set in the form of a 'prohibited share', whereby a simple, binary rule that is clear and definitive would be put in place. However, having considered this, Ofcom in fact observed that "setting absolute limits leaves no room to take account of the broader context"¹⁷ (Ofcom, 2012). Ofcom did not consider setting such limits to be advisable as "this creates a risk that it is not possible to address issues of commercial sustainability and innovation in an appropriate manner" (op.cit).

The lack of a recommendation on the setting of definitive limits does nothing to encourage the sitting government to seriously consider the issue. The government is not obliged to act upon the recommendations of the regulator, but the pressure mounts where such independent bodies suggest legislation that is in the public interest. Ofcom's subsequent report later in the same year, titled Report to Secretary of State on the Operation of the Media Ownership Rules Listed under Section 391 of the Communications Act 2003, again did nothing to push for regulatory change. In considering the 20/20 rule (whereby a newspaper group with more than 20% of a national newspaper share is prohibited from acquiring more than 20% of a Channel 3 licence), it merely recommended that it was for "Parliament to decide if and when this rule should be modified or removed" (Ofcom, 2012b, p3).

2012 House of Lords Select Committee commission report on The Future of Investigative Journalism'

In 2012, the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications published the report titled The Future of Investigative Journalism. The report was written when the Leveson Inquiry was under way, and as such did not look to solutions around "the greatest political media scandal of a generation" (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2012, p5). What it did do was look to consider "the media landscape in which investigative journalism operated and argues that any changes

¹⁶ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/media/media-releases/2012/ofcom-publishes-report-on-measuring-media-plurality>

¹⁷ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/media/media-releases/2012/ofcom-publishes-report-on-measuring-media-plurality>

should not be rooted in the past but should seek to enable responsible investigative journalism to flourish in the future” (op.cit). The report recognised the importance of investigative journalism in the context of a democracy and the vital role it plays in holding power to account. However, it also recognised how poorly the press has behaved in the United Kingdom, and the failings of existing policy and lack of legislation to ensure appropriate behaviours and practices amongst the press.

The report urged the “prosecuting authorities to publish their broad approach to determining which cases should be prosecuted or otherwise in cases where illegal activity undertaken by journalists in the course of an investigation might be considered to be in the public interest” (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2012, p68). Additionally, it urged media organisations to implement processes to formally record their investigations of stories, and their decision to publish based on it being in the public interest. It recommended that any fines imposed on a media organisation should be paid and placed into an ‘investigative journalism fund’ that would be used to fund investigations and/or training so as to ensure investigative journalism can continue.

2014 House of Lords Select Committee on Communications report on Media Plurality

In 2013, the Select Committee on Communications initiated an inquiry into media plurality in the UK. This committee in particular recognised the growing feeling of discontent with the plurality framework in the UK, referencing the numerous committees and inquiries set up to look into the issues surrounding the media, and the ever-present need for reform: “The focus placed on plurality across these various fora might create the expectation that a consensus is forming and that momentum is now building behind reform. However, plurality has been rather absent from recent debates” (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2014, p5).

The not-for-profit activism-based organisation Avaaz organised a petition that was signed by 52,000 members of the British public that called for a 20% cap on sector by sector ownership. In its submission, Avaaz stated that “Regulation of how the media operates cannot is not sufficient [sic] to solve this problem. Phone hacking, bribery, obtaining private medical records – the tales of press misconduct reported to Leveson

are all already illegal under British law. What allowed these transgressions to take place was not a lack of rules against them, but a media empire that had grown so large as to feel immune from them”¹⁸ (Avaaz, 2014, p4). Rather than approaching the issue from the typical perspective of a lack of policy and regulation to deal with unruly behaviour, Avaaz considered that the issue is actually that larger media conglomerates become so powerful, they no longer feel the need to adhere to the rules.

The Leveson Inquiry and the Select Committee’s inquiry both revealed the fundamental issue to be concentration of media ownership. While it has been the focus of many previous policy discussions, it was perhaps the notoriety of the events of the phone-hacking scandal and the Leveson Inquiry that acted as a catalyst and raised the profile of the issue. Furthermore, as previously discussed, it is no longer enough to simply review the market share of any one conglomerate. There now exists the need to examine cross-ownership, audience reach, and acquisitions of online spaces, aggregators and gatekeepers.

The BBC argued this very point in its written evidence to the Select Committee: “The BBC has argued that measuring media plurality cannot be confined to any single measure, such as market share, but should reflect a ‘basket’ of measures. These should include available voices, concentration of market (e.g. share of revenues and of news consumption including reach and share), ‘multisourcing’, and internal (as well as external) plurality” (2014, p70).

Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation also provided evidence to the enquiry (2014, p661)¹⁹. In summarising its views, News Corporation stated:

“Plurality is and can be delivered through market forces.... Any consideration of plurality must consider both all providers of news and current affairs, whatever their legal status, and all distribution channels used by them. Otherwise, any conclusions

¹⁸ <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/lords-committees/communications/Mediaplurality/MediaPluralityEvidence.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/lords-committees/communications-and-digital/Mediaplurality/MediaPluralityEvidence.pdf>

on plurality will inevitably be distorted, being based on a partial analysis of the range and variety of voices available to consumers.”

News Corporations comments were clearly aimed at the BBC, alluding to the fact that they must too be considered as part of a media plurality review. This follows the longstanding position Rupert Murdoch has taken with regard to the BBC and the ‘unfair’ advantages he deems them to have as Britain’s Public Service Broadcaster (PSB). The News Corporation evidence (2014, 663) went on to say:

“The role of the BBC cannot logically be excluded from any plurality assessment (whether qualitative or based on a market share limit). A news provider is a news provider. The BBC accepts that it is logical for any review of the sufficiency of plurality to take into account its share, voice and key role in audiences’ news diet.”

News Corporation also concluded that “regulatory inquiries and court decisions have established a framework for a qualitative assessment of plurality. What matters is the range and variety of voices available to consumers, including the range of voices within a single organisation” (Op Cit).

Similar to its response to the Ofcom report on plurality, News Corporation made its opinions clear: it did not consider significant levels of ownership to be an issue where one organisation a number of media outlets (as News Corporation did and still does), and that the BBC should be subject to the same level of inquiry as commercial media firms.

The Lords Select Committee report acknowledges the growing awareness of media plurality issues within the UK, noting all of the reports detailed in this chapter, and Murdoch’s proposed acquisition of BSkyB. It establishes a clear set of principles for policy reform. Firstly, the committee recommends that “there must be a way to assess the impact on plurality of organic market change as well as the impact of specific transactions... certain automatic interventions such as statutory caps are not the best option; they have to be set on a single scale and thus inherently impoverish the assessment that can be made about whether and how to intervene” (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2014, p50).

This echoes Ofcom's consideration that while a numerical measure provides the simplicity of a binary rule, it eliminates the ability to consider plurality within a broader context. Both attribute significance to examining not just the percentage of ownership, which in itself needs revision, but the other aspects that affect the diversity of a media market, i.e. reach and influence. Moreover, the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications is specific in its recommendation that Ofcom, the independent regulator, should be heavily involved: "there should be accountability for politicians where appropriate, but the onus should be on Ofcom to balance citizen and consumer interests" (2014, p5).

The committee undertakes a holistic analysis of the media market in the UK and advises that while the BBC should continue to be publicly funded and satisfy its public service mandate, it should be considered 'in-scope' of any plurality review. However, it should not be "subject to any control measures as a result of that assessment, at least from outwith its own regulatory framework" (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2014, p17). The committee goes as far as to agree with the Leveson report's conclusion that "governance controls in place to ensure internal plurality within the BBC, and the effect of the impartiality requirements meant that its size gave rise to no plurality concerns" (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2014, p17).

Again, as with the reports produced by Ofcom, there is recognition of the changing nature of the market and the new digital environment, and the committee stipulates that a review of plurality should under no circumstances be limited by channel or medium: "print, broadcast and content delivered over the internet may all be relevant, as could be the influence of digital intermediaries on the consumption of this content" (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2014, p19).

The 'centrepiece' of the committee's approach focuses on the need for government to "introduce a statutory periodic review of the plurality of the media markets to be undertaken by Ofcom on a 4-5 yearly basis, which will re-shape the role for government, parliament, regulator and competition authorities in protecting public interest" (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2014, p54). This

aligns with Ofcom's recommendation that periodic reviews should be undertaken. However, the committee takes the more stringent view that any metric used to measure plurality should not be set in statute. Instead, it suggests that there should be the "flexibility for Ofcom to interpret statutory guidance, design the assessment framework and select appropriate metrics according to the circumstances at the time of the review" (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2014, p55).

This implies a more reactive approach that properly addresses the changing nature of the market, and the need for a flexible and independent review that is not limited by specific metrics, but rather driven by public interest and/or mounting concern. Perhaps the most controversial recommendation to come out of the report is that "where immediate and pressing concerns resulting from organic change are discovered in a periodic preview, it should be possible for Ofcom to order a media enterprise to divest" (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2014, p57). The committee of course stipulates specific provisions/measures by which such a decision should be taken, but it signals the recognition of the serious need for regulatory reform and would attribute far greater power to the regulator to properly tackle media ownership and ensure plurality.

Summary

This chapter has explored a number of recent inquiries, committee investigations and events that have had the potential to effect Murdoch's business, whether directly or indirectly. Across a number of select committee investigations and Ofcom reports, concern was noted with regards to plurality and the diversity of news voices in the UK. In almost all cases Murdoch (or his organisation) responded that plurality and diversity have already been achieved in the UK news market, and that the number of 'voices' owned by any one organisation should not matter. Furthermore, the Murdoch responses all followed a similar pattern of asserting the critical need for the BBC to be considered in any plurality or diversity review, signalling his continued resentment of the BBC's position in the market.

It is noted in this chapter that when Murdoch's bid for the controlling shares in BskyB was being reviewed by Ofcom, a crucial time for Murdoch and the anticipated

expansion of his business, his newspapers published hardly any content relating to Ofcom. Whereas during other time periods a fairly significant amount of criticism of Ofcom can be found in the Murdoch press (as shown in the results of this work), at a time when Murdoch needed Ofcom to find in his favour, his newspapers chose not to criticise the regulator, and in fact to hardly write about it at all.

The acquisition could have seen Murdoch own an even more significant percentage of the UK media market. As discussed, Murdoch withdrew from the purchase when the phone hacking scandal came to light and began to dominate the UK headlines. As a result, the Leveson Inquiry took place and heard a substantial amount of witness evidence that spoke to Murdoch's business practices and the close relationships he has held with Prime Ministers and politicians over the years.

The number of recent investigations and inquiries into ownership, plurality and diversity speaks to the continuing and prevalent concerns with regards to those issues. In many cases Murdoch has continued his anti-BBC rhetoric in his responses to the various inquiries. Ofcom itself was responsible for the 2012 review which took into consideration online news; an area in which the BBC has excelled while other news providers continue to grapple with a successful, profitable model. The Ofcom review proposed regular, five yearly reviews of media plurality within the UK news market that were to include the provision of news online.

In some way each investigation or inquiry has presented a potential threat to Murdoch's media empire in the UK, either by challenging his significant percentage of holdings, by scrutinizing his business practices, or by introducing the potential for further regulation that could in some way restrict or hinder his business and any further expansions plans. It is clear that throughout these inquiries and investigations, Murdoch continues to resent what he sees and the BBC's 'exemption' from such restrictive regulation; possible motivation for the criticism that both the BBC and Ofcom receive in his newspapers.

Chapter Seven: The Research Questions

1. To what extent does an agenda exist in News International's publications that seeks to undermine organisations and competitors which in some way interfere with News International's global expansion plans, specifically focusing on:
 - 1a. coverage of the BBC, its funding, structure, governance and ethos;
 - 1b. coverage relating to the notion of an independent regulator and Ofcom itself, focusing on coverage of Ofcom's legitimacy, governance, structure and decision making?
2. To what extent is this agenda manifested in News International's publications, both through news stories and opinion, i.e. the selection of stories and the way they are reported?
3. To what extent do these compare with equal-standing non-News International owned publications?

Chapter Eight: The Methodology

Introduction

This chapter of the thesis outlines the chosen method for the research and the process by which it was undertaken. It will provide a detailed overview of the rationale for the research (including the supporting theoretical framework) and the chosen method, the process for the data collection and analysis, the study's validity and reliability, and any limitations. The chosen method was a quantitative content analysis of the coverage of the BBC and Ofcom in News International owned newspapers compared with that of equivalent non-News International owned newspapers.

Theoretical approach

There are a number of theoretical approaches that exist in the field of media and communications research, though at the outset it can be considered that the researcher must adopt either a 'deductive' or 'inductive' approach to the research design. Bryman describes Deductive Theory as "the commonest view of the nature of the relationship between theory and social research, whereby the researcher draws on what is known about in a particular domain and on relevant theoretical ideas in order to deduce a hypothesis (or hypotheses) that must then be subjected to empirical scrutiny" (2016, p8).

Bryman describes how a researcher arrives at a hypothesis, which in turn can be tested via empirical evidence; ultimately the results (whether they confirm or reject the hypothesis) provide an original contribution to knowledge. The hypothesis that this piece of work asserts and aims to prove, looking at media ownership and the exploitation of media power for corporate self-interest, follows that process. The existing knowledge regarding the negative impacts of concentrated ownership of the press in a democratic society that is examined in the literature review, combined with the theoretical framework (discussed later in this chapter) relating to media and communications research, ensures the appropriateness of the hypothesis that can then be tested by the selected research method: content analysis. Bryman (2016) cites the following as the 'process of deduction':

1. Theory
2. Hypothesis
3. Data collection
4. Findings
5. Hypothesis confirmed or rejected
6. Revision of theory.

This research has followed a deductive process, starting with a hypothesis about the harmful consequences of media concentration, followed by collection of empirical data from a carefully constructed content analysis to answer the research questions. The subsequent findings allowed for specific conclusions and assertions to be made, and the hypothesis either confirmed or rejected. Given the original nature of this research, it is likely that unknown, more general ‘premises’, or further hypotheses or conclusions, may be drawn from the specific data, lending itself to a more inductive approach. An inductive approach follows the opposite of the process described above, with observations or findings leading to the definition, identification and defining of a theory. Bryman notes that “the last step, revision of theory, involves a movement that is in the opposite direction from deduction – it involves induction, as the researcher infers the implications of his or her findings for the theory that prompted the whole exercise” (2016, p8). The scope of this research pertains specifically to the reporting of News International owned newspapers in comparison with non-News International owned newspapers on the BBC and Ofcom, which, as discussed in the previous chapters, are institutions standing in the way of News International’s expansion. As such, the overall approach can be considered deductive.

The process of reasoning aside, broader philosophies regarding the nature of the research and its framework should be considered and applied. Typically, epistemological and ontological considerations will be given to a piece of research; epistemological being “what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline”, and ontological being “concerned with the nature of social entities” (Bryman, 2016, p11). Within the context of these theoretical frameworks, social research will often identify with one or more of the following theories: Positivism, Realism, Interpretivism, Objectivism or Constructivism.

In deploying a deductive, quantitative method, this research has adopted a positivist approach. Bryman describes Positivism as “an epistemological position that advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond... knowledge is arrived at through the gathering of facts that provide the basis for laws” and states that “the purpose of theory is to generate hypotheses that can be tested and will thereby allow explanations of laws to be assessed” (op. cit.). This work follows a structured approach by which the analysis of quantitative data aims to allow for hypotheses to be tested through the systematic gathering of empirical data, and assertions to be made which are rooted in empirical evidence. In discussing Positivism, Gray states “Inquiry should be based upon scientific observation (as opposed to philosophical speculation), and therefore an empirical inquiry” (2018, p23). This, and Bryman’s explanation, infers a purely fact-based nature of inquiry that stands alone from broader, more philosophical approaches and lends itself well to the methodical content analysis of historical, published data undertaken here. Gray continues that “ideas only deserve their incorporation into knowledge if they can be put to the test of empirical experience” (op. cit.). This piece of work aims to do exactly that: prove the hypothesis via valid and reliable empirical evidence such that it can be considered and incorporated into ‘knowledge’.

Gray notes the challenges to Positivism, particularly where Popper (2005) asserts that theories cannot be proven to be true with complete certainty; they can only be proven to be false. Gray offers a challenge to this argument by stating that “with the deductive approach, theories are tested through observation, leading either to the falsification and discarding of the theory, or to the creation of, as yet, unfalsified laws” (op. cit.). Crotty offers an alternative view, noting that respectable research needs “objective, valid and generalisable conclusions”, with results that “will be plausible, perhaps even convincing, ways of seeing things – and, to be sure, helpful ways of seeing things – but certainly not ‘one true way’ of seeing things” (1998, p10). This research does not aim to establish an ‘unfalsified law’ per se, but rather a clear bias in reporting that, coupled with a concentration in media ownership has the potential to unduly influence public opinion, thus building on existing and established theories about media ownership and power. While the term ‘unfalsified law’ seems too definite in relation to the results of social research, the data collected for this piece of work is (as previously

mentioned) both historical and already published. It is 'dead data'; its existence cannot be challenged, and with robust and appropriate categorisation, it should allow for a clear set of results that either confirm or reject the hypothesis.

This research originates from existing knowledge of the Murdoch empire and its animosity towards the BBC and towards Ofcom as a regulatory body. Existing knowledge of a Murdoch-directed agenda and the potential threat to democracy as a result of a concentration of ownership in the media and communications industry was established via the study of the existing theory and literature, as outlined in the literature review, and evidence of Murdoch's criticism of the BBC and Ofcom in the press, both in his own publications and broadcasts, and in various interviews (as previously examined). This work adopts more of a post-positivist approach because, while the results of the content analysis allow for the establishing of an obvious bias, it is relative to its context and cannot claim to speak to the intention of the publication of the material wholly without challenge. While taking such an approach is fitting for a quantitative method such as content analysis, and provides validity to the empirical evidence, it is also supported by a secondary set of evidence via the analysis of the language used in the articles categorised as negative (the coding schedule is discussed further on) for inferred meaning, and the existing theory regarding Murdoch's agenda and ownership of the press.

Research method – content analysis (quantitative)

A content analysis of News International owned newspapers' coverage of the BBC and Ofcom compared with similar coverage by equal-standing non-News International owned newspapers offered the best possible method by which to ascertain whether the hypothesised systematic bias does exist. As Riffe, Lacey and Fico state, "Communication content may be viewed as an end product, the assumed consequence or evidence of antecedent individual, organizational, social, and other contexts. The validity of that assumption depends on how closely the content evidence can be linked empirically (through observation) or theoretically to that context" (2014, p11). The assertions made with regard to News International's and its owner's view of the BBC and Ofcom (whether directly or in relation to regulation and public service broadcasting) via the works explored in the literature review form the

theoretical basis and context for the hypothesis. This is then tested at a more granular level via an extensive analysis of the empirical evidence (the content) that can be found in the relevant publications. The content analysis allows for clear, quantifiable results that either support or falsify the research questions.

The method selected for this piece of work was content analysis of the material published by both News International owned newspapers, and appropriate comparators, relating to the BBC and Ofcom. The selection of the sample is discussed further on in this chapter, as is the development of the coding schedule; this section aims to explain the reasoning behind the chosen method and its suitability in the context of the hypothesis and research questions. It is imperative to the success and validity of the research that the research questions are both plausible and justified in relation to the original hypothesis, and the issues they aim to address. The hypothesis asserts the overall premise that News International's coverage of the BBC and Ofcom is an example of the exploitation of media power for corporate self-interest. Underpinning this are the research questions (as previously defined, but repeated here for reference):

1. To what extent does an agenda exist in News International's publications that seeks to undermine organisations and competitors which in some way interfere with News International's global expansion plans, specifically focusing on:
 - a. coverage of the BBC, its funding, structure, governance and ethos;
 - b. coverage relating to the notion of an independent regulator and Ofcom itself, focusing on coverage of Ofcom's legitimacy, governance, structure and decision making?
2. To what extent is this agenda manifested in News International's publications, both through news stories and opinion, i.e. selection of stories and the way they are reported?
3. To what extent do these compare with equal-standing non-News International owned publications?

The research questions are purposefully specific and finite in their remit. The content analysis aims to provide definite answers to questions 1a and 1b, which in combination with the study of the existing theory and literature, and analysis of the content analysis

results, will answer questions 2 and 3. Satisfying each research question will provide the necessary 'empirical adequacy' to validate the hypothesis. As Hesmondhalgh states, "empirical adequacy refers to the success or otherwise of an account of the media in using evidence and theory in such a manner that it justifies its conclusions" (2006, p124).

Bertrand and Hughes consider the advantages and disadvantages of content analysis, specifically when looking at news content; one of its major advantages is that "it can deal easily with current events or past events or both)... that is it does not depend upon fallible memory" (2018, p243). This work has the luxury of focusing on published information that is readily available and is not subject to personal opinion or interpretation (notwithstanding the researcher's subjective judgement with regard to the assessment of the material against the coding schedule; but with a solid framework and clearly defined categories and measures by which to make the assertion, there should be little room for challenge). Denscombe states that "the main strength of content analysis is that it provides a means for quantifying the contents of a text, and it does so by using a method that is clear and, in principle, repeatable by other researchers" (2014, p284). Bertrand and Hughes state that content analysis "is excellent for managing large amounts of data which can then be quantified and compared with statistics about the real world" (2018, p243). This research will provide a unique body of data and analysis about the real world in relation to media concentration and the exploitation of media power.

Bertrand and Hughes consider the disadvantages and problems that arise when undertaking content analysis, primarily noting issues with regard to sampling and measurement, all of which are considered further on in this chapter where the sampling and coding schedule is discussed. Bertrand and Hughes also consider the broader considerations and challenges that should be taken into account when choosing content analysis as a method, as "content analysis results do not tell how the content came to be that way (that can only be answered out of an intellectual framework), or what the content 'means' (that can only be answered out of a theory of communication)" (op. cit.). Seale also considers such challenges to the method: "Chiefly amongst these is the objections that such analysis is concerned simply with 'crass' content: with what is said rather than how it is said; with the descriptions of

texts rather than their interpretations” (2018, p404). Seale implies that content analysis applies a solely ontological approach to the research and is perhaps narrow in its scope and remit. However, the primary focus of this work is not on specific terminology and does not assume any form of discourse analysis that searches for textual meaning.

However, the nature of this content analysis and the categorisation used constitute a more straightforward approach that does not delve into discourse analysis or examination of potential ‘inferred meaning’. As Crotty explains, “the more the text relies on subtle and intricate meanings conveyed by the writer or inferred by the reader, the less valuable content analysis becomes in revealing the meaning of text” (1998, p285). This study does include comparative analysis of the language used in the articles defined as negative, which allows for further understanding of the inferred (or direct) meaning of the texts and the potential impact on the audience. However, the chief aim is to identify the scale of negative reporting in comparison with equal-standing newspapers. As previously asserted, in isolation the results provide a clear view of the scale of negative reporting on the subject matters, but it is in the context of the intellectual framework and the theoretical work considered in the literature review that this will provide a consolidated view of the issue, which in turn will either confirm or reject the hypothesis.

Research sample

In order to ascertain if a bias exists, the News International owned newspapers need to be compared and contrasted with non-News International owned newspapers that can be considered of an ‘equal standing’. Such a comparison will allow for a stronger, more valid set of results from which more obvious trends can be identified. To analyse the News International publications alone would prove little without a suitable comparison; the comparative data provides the basis on which it can be ascertained whether there is indeed a bias.

The following provides the detail of the publications selected, along with the details pertaining to ownership, type, age, political affiliation, and circulation:

Name	Type	Owner	Year Establishe d	Political Affiliation (as at 2017 election)	Average Circulation <small>20</small>
The Sun	Tabloid	News International	1964	Right wing, Conservative	3,269,658
The Times	Broadshee t (compact since 2004)	News International	1785	Right wing, Conservative	608,710.4
The Sunday Times	Broadshee t	News International	1821	Right wing, Conservative	1,234,652. 8
The Daily Mirror	Tabloid	Reach	1903	Centre-left, Labour	1,639,875. 6
The Independ ent	Broadshee t/compact	Johnston Press/Alexander Lebedev	1986	Centre, no party affiliation	206,421
The Sunday Telegraph	Broadshee t	Barclay Brothers	1961	Centre-right, Conservative	646,654.5

Fig 8.1

Clearly, there are many more UK newspapers than those listed in the table. However, the non-News International owned publications were selected on the basis of them being considered of 'equal standing'. Temple (2008) describes the three types of newspaper in the UK: the 'quality' press, the 'mid-market duo', and the 'red top'. Referring to the 'quality press', Temple advises that "today, not counting the specialist Financial Times, there are four 'serious' or 'quality' daily papers: The Independent, Guardian, Telegraph and Times" (2008, p87). Temple cites the 'mid-market duos' as

²⁰ <https://www.abc.org.uk/>

those papers that cater to the mid-market and offer a Sunday edition: these are the Daily Mail, the Mail on Sunday, the Express and the Sunday Express. The third category is the 'red top'. The term 'red top' is defined in the Oxford English dictionary as a tabloid newspaper characterised by sensationalism; Temple cites the Sun, Star and Daily Mirror as red tops (otherwise referred to as tabloids).

The selection of News International owned newspapers was straightforward, in that the organisation owns a paper in each of the three categories described above: the Sun (red top), the Times (quality press) and the Sunday Times (mid-market duo weekend paper). To ensure a fair comparison, non-News International owned newspapers within the same three categories were selected: the Daily Mirror (red top), the Independent (quality press) and the Sunday Telegraph (mid-market duo weekend paper).

Date range

Once the selection of appropriate publications was complete, the date range for the search of articles was established. The aim was to look at material spanning a broad range of years so as to be able to establish whether there was indeed a systematic bias that was not localised to a single period of time (that could have been the result of a particular event). For the material relating to the BBC, the following date ranges were selected:

- 1 January 1990 – 31 December 1991
- 1 January 2000 – 31 December 2001
- 1 January 2010 – 31 December 2011.

This date range was selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, it provides six years' worth of material: a suitable amount of data to be considered robust and reliable to establish bias. Secondly, it spans three decades, allowing for any changes in editorial or other staff within the newspapers in question, or any political events that may have influenced reporting. The dates were purposefully selected to avoid consideration of particular events relating to the BBC that may have inspired negative reporting, for example the renewal of the BBC Charter (in 2006 and 2016) or revisions to the BBC

funding model (aligned with the charter renewals). Focusing on reporting around the time of such events would have potentially posed a challenge by returning an increased number of articles to be analysed. The aim was to avoid 'cherry-picking' material that would inevitably lend itself to the hypothesis. To focus on reporting on the BBC in News International owned newspapers in 2016 would have very likely included multiple articles reporting negatively on the BBC's funding model. Murdoch's opinion on public service broadcasting and its funding is well known and extensively written about, as discussed in the literature review. To make assertions on the basis of such evidence alone would not necessarily provide a substantive, original contribution to knowledge. By focusing on the date ranges listed above, this research could aim to establish any systematic bias that exists even in the absence of events that may inspire negative reporting, and that may therefore have otherwise gone unnoticed.

A slightly different approach was taken to selecting the date range for the material covering Ofcom. As Ofcom was not established until 2003, the latter range of dates looked at for the BBC material was selected: 1 January 2010 until 31 December 2011. Consideration was given to extending the date range so as to collect six years' worth of data (as was collected for the material pertaining to the BBC). However, time constraints and concerns about the validity of the data if deviating from the date range used for the BBC resulted in this refined scope. Nonetheless, having conducted the content analysis for the reporting on Ofcom between January 2010 and December 2011, the results established an unexpected lack of extremities in the negative reporting. Accepting that to test a hypothesis and achieve results not as expected does not invalidate the research per se, analysis and review of the results led to the consideration that they could have been informed by events that were ongoing in relation to News International and Ofcom at the time: Ofcom was due to publish its report regarding the News International bid to acquire the remainder of the shares it did not own in BSkyB. Cognisant of the potential for this to have influenced reporting on Ofcom as a regulatory body at the time, the content analysis was revised to include the year preceding these events – 2009 – to test if levels of negative reporting were higher before it became clear that Ofcom would be participating in a decision that would directly affect News International corporate expansion plans. While this does indeed deviate from the approach taken with regard to the BBC material, it supports

the very premise upon which the hypothesis was built: To what extent does an agenda exist in News International's publications that seeks to undermine organisations and competitors which in some way interfere with News International's global expansion plans?

Sourcing of articles

The articles selected for analysis were sourced via the Dow Jones Factiva database. For each publication selected, the same date range and search phrases were entered so as to ensure the reliability of the comparative data retrieved. When searching for articles including reporting on the BBC, entering the phrase 'BBC' into the Factiva search function alone meant an excessive number of articles referring to programmes featured on the BBC (e.g. an article referring to the events that took place in EastEnders, quoting 'shown on BBC1'). While the content of such an article does technically refer to the BBC, the reporting is relevant to the TV show only, and not the BBC itself. Therefore, the search terms had to be refined to avoid including an excessive number of surplus articles that would then need to be discounted once the content analysis began. Accordingly, the following search terms were used:

- BBC spending
- BBC cuts
- BBC bosses
- BBC and public service broadcasting
- Beeb
- Auntie Beeb
- BBC decision
- BBC staff.

The same approach was undertaken to source material that dealt with the topic of Ofcom. However, searching 'Ofcom' alone did not return an excessive number of articles that could not be worked through in a timely manner, and as such the search phrase 'Ofcom' was used to identify all relevant material. This resulted in a number of articles being discounted where they referred to, for example, '121 complaints were

made to Ofcom'. While examples such as this do include reference to Ofcom within the article, Ofcom is not the subject of the reporting; the number of complaints made to Ofcom is the subject, and therefore the article could be discounted.

The coding schedule

There are a variety of units of analysis that can be applied via content research. However, for this piece of research, the primary measurement is whether the article (about either the BBC or Ofcom) is negative, positive or neutral in its reporting. Secondary to this, the type of article, article length, sources quoted and the focus of the article are vital units of analysis. The coding schedule is appended to this thesis (Appendix N), but for ease of reference, the core measures for each article were as follows:

1. Name of publication
2. Date of publication
3. Length of article (word count)
4. Type of article: News, Feature, Editorial, Business, Other
5. Tone of article: Negative, Positive, Neutral
6. Sources directly quoted: BBC, Ofcom, Government, Independent voice campaign/pressure group, Other, None
7. Focus of article: subject is either primary focus, secondary focus, or mentioned in passing.

The selection of units of analysis for the content analysis was simple, given the specific nature of research questions 1a and 1b; the challenge was in the definitions of categories as detailed in the coding schedule (see appendix N). For example, asserting whether an article can be considered 'negative', 'positive', or 'neutral' in its reporting is, to an extent, arguably subjective. As Bertrand and Hughes (2018) note, it is difficult to establish watertight categories by which to measure the content; a researcher can only aim to establish the most suitable category that is justified by the overall framework supporting the research, and demonstrate the process by which the method is undertaken with clear rationale for the defined categories. The coding schedule includes seven measures in total, only the last three of which require the

coder's assessment to assign a category. Measures 1 – 4 relate to detail such as the date the article was published, the word count and the type of story; these elements are not variables and are available directly from the Factiva database. Measures 5 – 7 require coder assessment. Examples of how categories were assigned to these measures are as follows:

- Measure 5 – Tone of article

Each article was categorised as either negative, positive or neutral. A conservative approach was taken; only if it was obvious that the article was asserting a clearly negative tone would it be coded as negative. An example of an article that can be deemed to be negative is one that includes the following:

- A headline that is obviously critical of the BBC or Ofcom (e.g. 'BBC blasted for bias')
- Obvious critical text within the body of the article (e.g. 'The bias at the BBC is now a national scandal')
- An article with a critical headline, even where the body of the text is less critical.

There are, of course, exceptions to the above guidance where the coder must make a judgement. For example, where an article was obviously critical in an assertion, but offered a counter-argument to the criticism, i.e. the BBC was quoted and its defence/justification for the actions or decision being criticised was prominent and obvious to the reader, and equal in its prominence in comparison to the criticism, the coder could assign a neutral category, as there is an equal balance of both negative and positive representations. That said, where an article had an obviously critical headline, even if a measure of balance was offered in the body of the text, the coder could still assign the negative category to the tone of the article. The tone of the article can be considered to be asserted on the basis of the headline, given its prominence and depending on the severity of its criticism. The same applied when assessing the article as positive or neutral: an article with a positive or neutral headline that included some small amount of criticism could still be considered to be positive or neutral overall. Where the coder was unsure as to whether the article could be considered negative or positive, it would be categorised as neutral.

- Measure 6 – Sources directly quoted

The categories assigned to sources directly quoted are as follows:

1. BBC
2. Ofcom
3. Government
4. Independent voice campaign/pressure group
5. Other
6. None
7. Vested interest.

The assigning of the categories was straightforward in that the coder would only assign the appropriate category where the source was directly quoted in the article: references to sources that had spoken elsewhere and not directly to the newspaper itself (i.e. on television, or a quote repeated from another publication) would not be categorised. Category 7 – ‘vested interest’ – is explained in the coding manual as any source that has a vested interest in the publication of the story, or the story itself, or is a direct competitor in the area of the subject matter at hand (the BBC or Ofcom), i.e. where Sky News is commenting on the actions of the BBC; as a competitor, Sky News can be considered to have a ‘vested interest’. Category 5 – ‘other’- would be assigned where a directly quoted source did not fit into any of the other six categories.

- Measure 7 – Focus of article

The categories that could be assigned to define the focus of the article were as follows:

1. Primary focus
2. Secondary focus
3. Mentioned in passing.

While somewhat self-explanatory, for the avoidance of doubt, the following explains how the categories were assigned. Category 1 – ‘primary focus’ – would be assigned where the subject matter either featured in the headline, or ‘high up’ in the story, i.e. it

was made clear within the first few lines of the body of text that the article was primarily concerned with the relevant subject matter. Where an article referred to the subject matter a significant amount, i.e. more than one or two lines of text, but the article was not primarily concerned with the subject matter, it would be categorised as the 'secondary focus' (category 2). Category 3 – 'mentioned in passing' – would be assigned where the subject matter was briefly mentioned, i.e. one or two lines within the text at most. While this process can be deemed straightforward, the coder needed to be aware of exceptions or conflicting examples of the scenarios described, such as where the subject matter was mentioned in passing, but within a very short article, i.e. the article consisted of perhaps only four or five lines of text, and within that, the BBC was mentioned once. While only mentioned once, the prominence of the mention in a short article needed to be considered, and where this occurred, the article would be assigned to category 2 – 'secondary focus'.

Reliability

As previously discussed, it can be considered that one of the major advantages of undertaking a content analysis is that it follows a defined set of logics that, if undertaken properly, can produce reliable quantitative data. The content analysed in this piece of research is historical and available to the public, and the coding manual prescribes very clearly defined measures by which to assign content to specific categories. Riffe, Lacey and Fico explain that reliability in content analysis is defined as agreement among coders about categorizing content. "Indeed, content analysis as a research tool is based on the assumption that explicitly defined and accepted concept definitions control assignment of content to particular categories by coders" (2014, p94).

Given that the content analysis was undertaken by one coder alone, there is no concern with regard to any deviation from the defined concept definitions to which the content was assigned. However, the single coder's investment in the hypothesis and work overall does leave this research open to challenge on the grounds of potential bias or lack of impartiality.

Ethical considerations

As this piece of research consisted of a content analysis undertaken by one coder, there were no ethical concerns or issues to be considered.

Limitations

The disadvantages, or limitations, of content analysis as a method in itself were discussed earlier in this chapter. However, consideration needs to be given to the limitations of its use in the context of this piece of research with regard to proving the hypothesis. A content analysis is undoubtedly the most appropriate method by which to ascertain if a systematic bias in reporting on the BBC and Ofcom in News International owned newspapers does exist. Nevertheless, it was not undertaken in the absence of knowledge of potential challenge with regard to other secondary methods that could have been deployed to support the primary method.

A suitable secondary method could have been to interview industry professionals who currently or previously worked for the News International owned newspapers analysed so as to ascertain if there was indeed editorial (or other) pressure to report on the BBC and Ofcom negatively. Depending on the type of interview conducted, this could have also allowed for insight into the nature of any potential inherent bias against the BBC and Ofcom, i.e. culturally within the organisation. There were two practical considerations that led to the decision not to pursue such interviews: time constraints and access to the relevant individuals. Given that the study of the coverage in the News International owned newspapers is historical, dating as far back as 1990, it would be difficult (and in some cases likely to be impossible) to gain access to the individuals who worked at the Sun, the Times and the Sunday Times during the relevant periods. Furthermore, to gain access to such individuals from all three newspapers was unlikely, and interviews with individuals who worked at only one or two of the newspapers would not allow for results that could be considered to be robust and valid. Even with access to such individuals, strong consideration would need to be given to whether they would remember and be willing to speak about any inherent bias; the method would be reliant upon fallible memory and notably subjective. Given the size of the content analysis and the time needed to complete it, pursuing interviews was deemed to be impractical.

Consideration was given to the concept of a 'Qualitative Content Analysis' (QCA), or another form of qualitative research such as discourse analysis, whereby the text and language of the coverage could be analysed for inferred meaning. Schreier explains that "In most general terms, QCA will be an option if you have to engage in some degree of interpretation arrive at the meaning of your data... Data never 'speaks for itself', it does not 'have' a specific meaning. Meaning is something that we, the recipients, attribute to the words that we hear or read" (2012, p2). While this project does indeed look at the language used to demonstrate the extremities of some of the negative reporting, which could to some extent be considered a form of QCA, the meaning behind the language is not deemed to be 'inferred', but rather standardised. As Schreier explains:

"Highly standardised meanings are also meanings by convention, and they also require some degree of interpretation. But because the meaning is such a standard one, the process of meaning construction no longer requires any effort; it has become automatic, and pretty much everyone with the same cultural background will agree that this is what the material means. When you are dealing with highly standardised meanings, there is really no need to apply a method like QCA (or any other qualitative method for data analysis)" (2012, p2).

Summary

In summary, a deductive approach via a content analysis was undertaken to ascertain to what extent an agenda exists in News International's publications that seeks to undermine organisations and competitors which in some way interfere with News International's global expansion plans. The content analysis focused on six years of coverage of the BBC and three years of coverage of Ofcom within the Sun, the Times and the Sunday Times between 1990 and 2011, compared with the same coverage in equal-standing non-News International owned newspapers: the Daily Mirror, the Independent and the Sunday Telegraph. A robust coding schedule of clearly defined categories was developed and used throughout the analysis. Other research methods, including qualitative approaches such as interviews and/or discourse analysis, were considered and discounted due to practicality and time constraints. The

content analysis was deemed to be the most appropriate method by which to identify and trend bias; the results of the content analysis are presented in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Nine: The Results for the BBC

In order to assess whether and to what extent an agenda exists in News UK's publications to undermine other organisations and competitors, a content analysis of News UK reporting on the BBC and Ofcom was undertaken and compared with the same analysis of non-News UK owned publications. The theoretical assumption behind the hypothesis is that Murdoch uses his national newspapers to disseminate negative messages about the BBC and Ofcom to the public (and, particularly through his broadsheet newspapers, to opinion formers) so as to undermine and discredit these British institutions and further promote his own corporate agenda.

In conducting the analysis, the aim was to determine whether the Murdoch press coverage of the BBC and Ofcom demonstrated fair and unbiased reporting, or if indeed it was overly negative or critical when compared to equivalent publications. A significantly greater volume of negative reporting would support the hypothesis underlying this thesis.

As detailed in the methodology chapter, three News UK newspapers were analysed and compared with three equivalent non-News UK newspapers. The analysis considered the tone of the articles, word count, focus of the articles, type of article, and the sources quoted. This chapter presents the results of the content analysis, followed by analysis and discussion of the results.

Total number of articles

The total number of articles published about the BBC across all six newspapers was 1648. The News UK owned newspapers (the Sun, Times, and Sunday Times) published 61% of the total articles (998). The graph below depicts the number of articles published by each newspaper analysed:

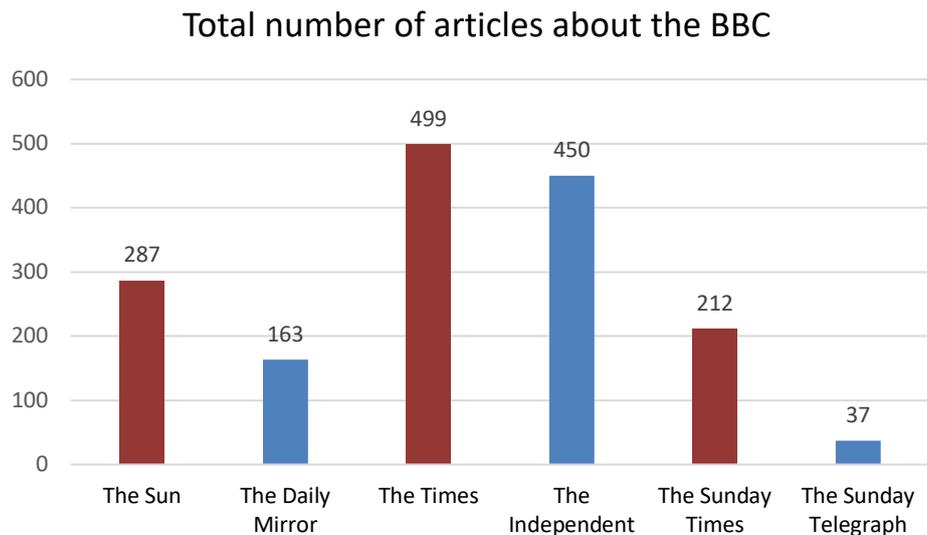


Fig 9.1

As shown above, News UK published a greater number of articles about the BBC than its counterparts (the Daily Mirror, Independent and Sunday Telegraph), however the ratio was much closer between the broadsheets, whereby the Times published 499, and The Independent published 450. However, overall News UK published 54% more articles than its non-News UK counterparts.

The number of articles published in each time period considered were as follows:

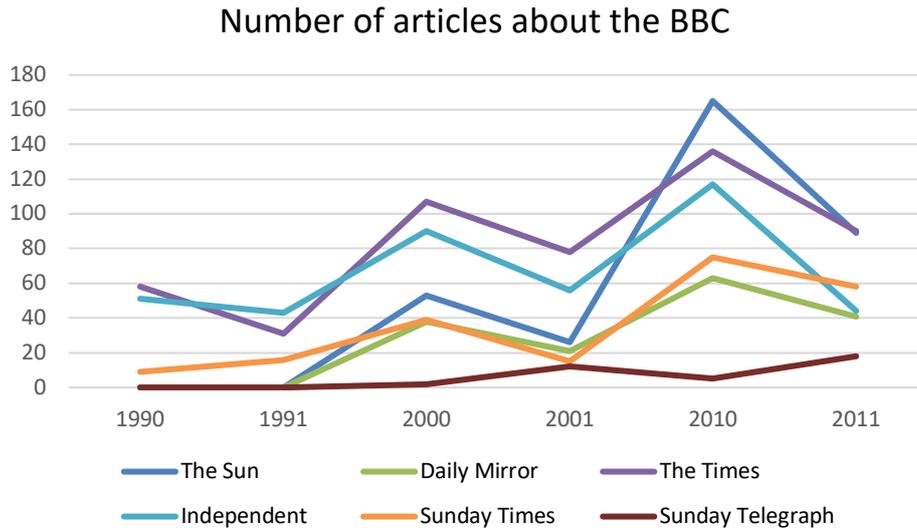


Fig 9.2

As can be seen in Fig. 9.2, the number of articles published about the BBC followed a general upward trend, with peaks of increased reporting around the year 2000 and 2010. Data was unavailable for the years 1990 and 1991 for the Sun, Daily Mirror and Sunday Telegraph. The lack of data for those years for the Sun and Daily Mirror does not pose an issue for the validity of the results, as they are the comparator papers. The lack of data for the Sunday Telegraph does mean that the data collected for the Sunday Times in that time period has no comparator in the same category. However, this only effects a sum total of 25 articles, and with a substantial amount of data collected in the time periods thereafter, it should not impede the results or analysis.

The word count for each newspaper in relation to its coverage of the BBC is relatively in keeping with the number of articles published, with the exception of the non-News UK broadsheet, the Independent, which published a marginally higher word count across marginally fewer articles. The graph in Fig. 9.3 depicts the total word count for all articles about the BBC in each newspaper:

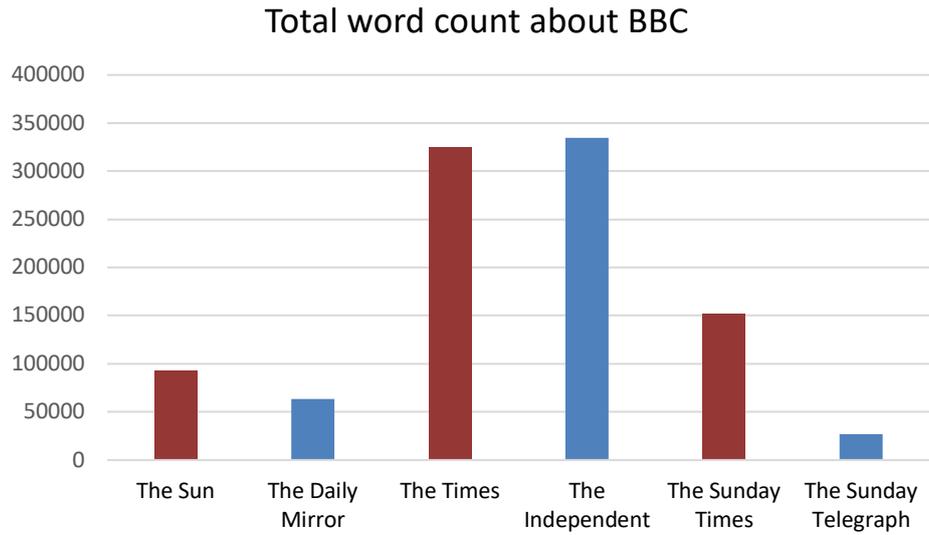


Fig 9.3

In total, across all six newspapers, News UK papers published 34% more words relating to the BBC than their non-News UK counterparts; the word count correlates with the number of articles published in each newspaper. However, again it is notable that the ratio between the broadsheets is very close, and in fact the Independent published a greater number of words than that of The Times, despite publishing slightly fewer articles.

Tone of coverage

The tone of each article was recorded against one of three categories: negative, positive or neutral. The graphs below display the number of articles and percentage weighting for each tonal category for the 1648 articles analysed.

All articles about BBC by tone

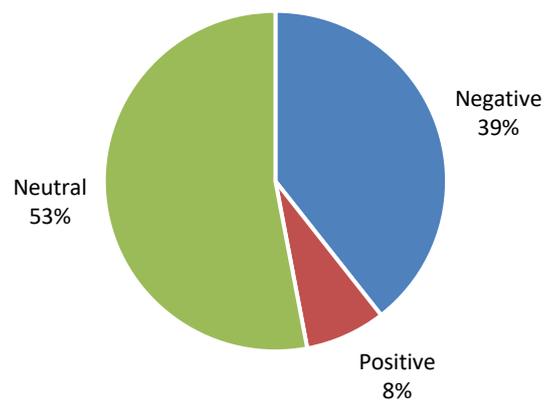


Fig 9.4

In total, 39% of all articles about the BBC were categorised as negative. This equates to 650 negative articles; 72% of these negative articles were published by News UK (467 articles).

The graphs below depict the percentage of negative, positive and neutral articles as printed by each of the six newspapers.

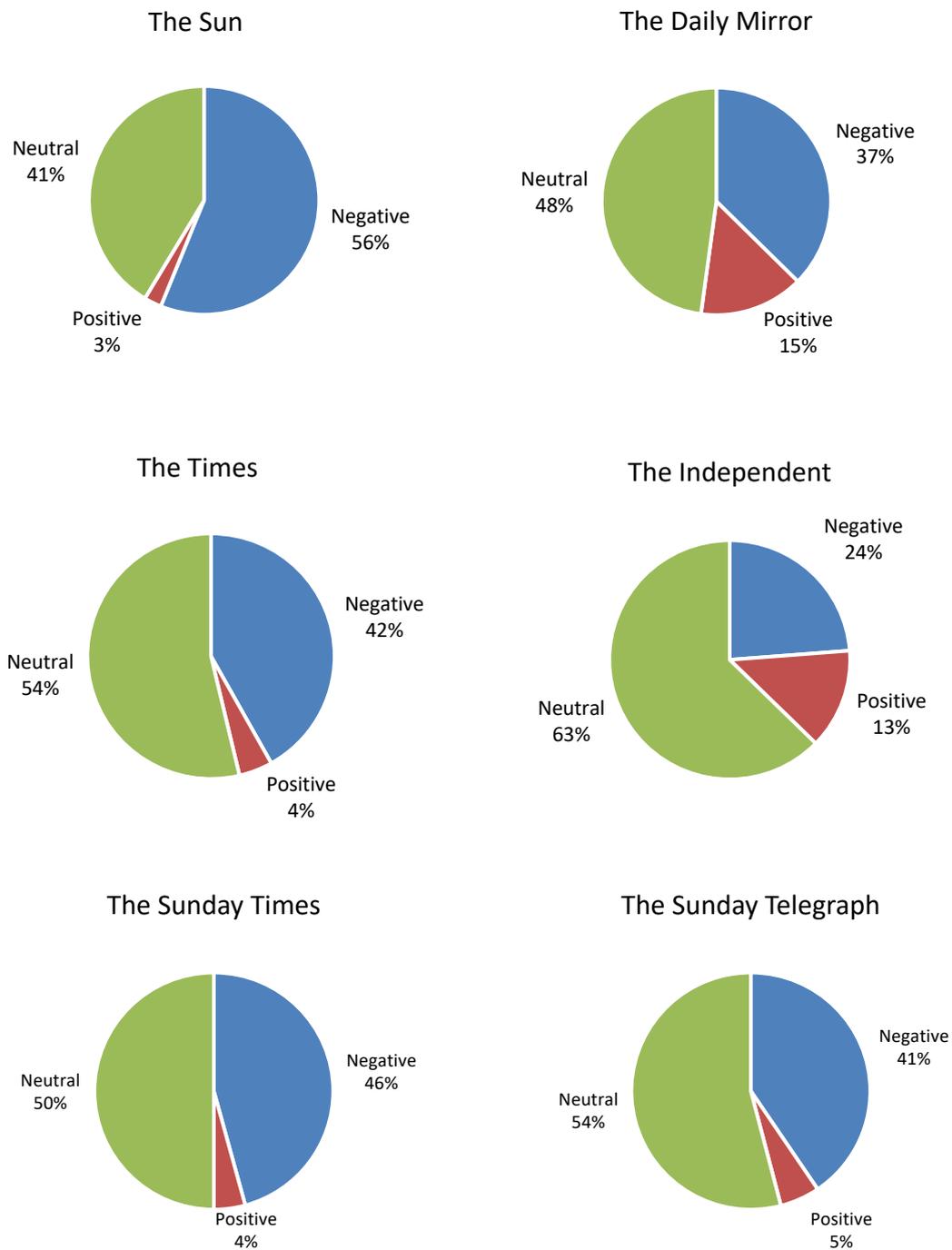


Fig 9.5

As can be seen from the charts above, the News International newspapers published at least twice the number of negative articles about the BBC in comparison with their

non-News UK counterparts, with the exception of the Sunday newspapers which published a similar amount (albeit the Sunday Telegraph only published a total of 37 articles, whereas the Sunday Times published 212).

The expectation was that News UK would have published a greater number of negative articles and fewer positive articles in comparison with its counterparts. For the most part, this was the case: each News UK newspaper published a disproportionately greater number of negative articles than its counterpart in the same market category.

The percentage of neutral articles compared with negative (almost equal for all News UK newspapers) was unexpected; it could be argued that this result might indicate a measure of balance in the reporting. However, this study asserts that a greater number of neutral articles does not offer 'balanced reporting' as the number of positive articles published by News UK is so small. An example of balanced reporting could either be an equal number of positive, negative and neutral articles, or at the least an equal number of negative and positive (with an increased or decreased number of neutral). The chart in Fig 9.8 provides an overall view of the number and percentage of negative articles versus neutral or positive for the News UK newspapers, followed by the same in Fig 9.9 for the non-News UK papers:

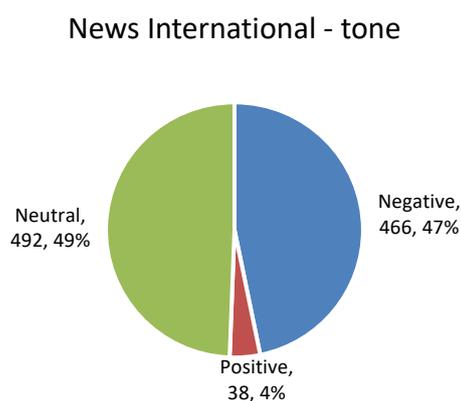


Fig. 9.6

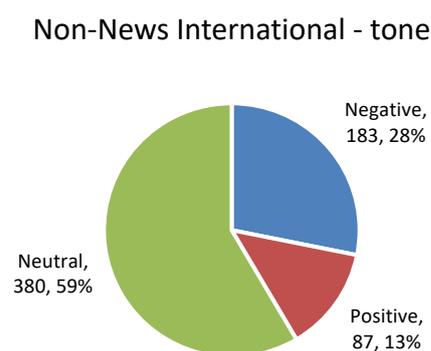


Fig. 9.7

As can be seen in these two charts, the percentage of negative articles in the News UK newspapers is far greater than that in their counterparts; this result is further amplified by News UK having published 54% more articles about the BBC than its

counterparts. Additionally, while News UK published an almost equal percentage of neutral articles as it did negative, the non-News UK newspapers published a greater percentage of neutral and positive articles, and a smaller percentage of negative, suggesting a more balanced approach to their reporting.

Fig. 9.10 displays the timeline of the negative coverage across the six years analysed for the News International newspapers vs the non-News International owned newspapers:

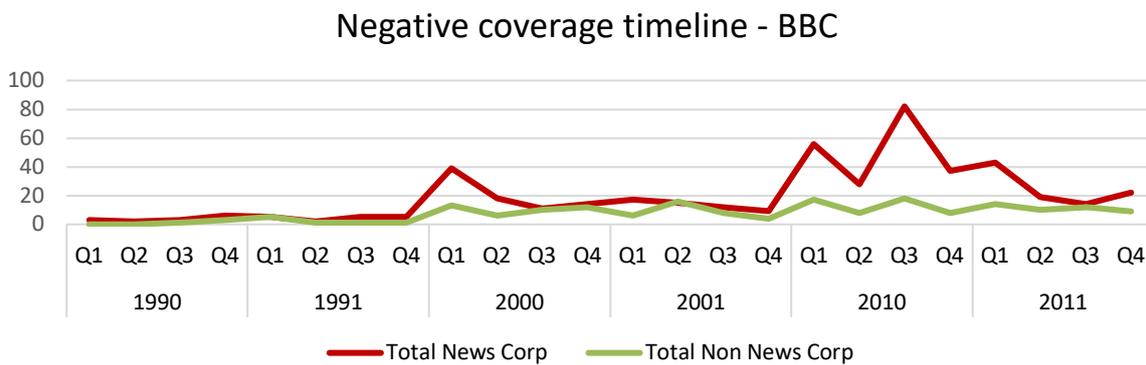


Fig. 9.8

The timeline shows a consistently low level of negative reporting on the part of the non-News International newspapers, compared with the News International reporting, which saw extreme peaks in negative coverage of the BBC. This offers a significant finding in that, at times when the non-News International newspapers found far less to cover in terms of criticism of the BBC, the News International papers found far more.

Fig. 9.11 provides a timeline view of the negative reporting for the three News International owned newspapers:

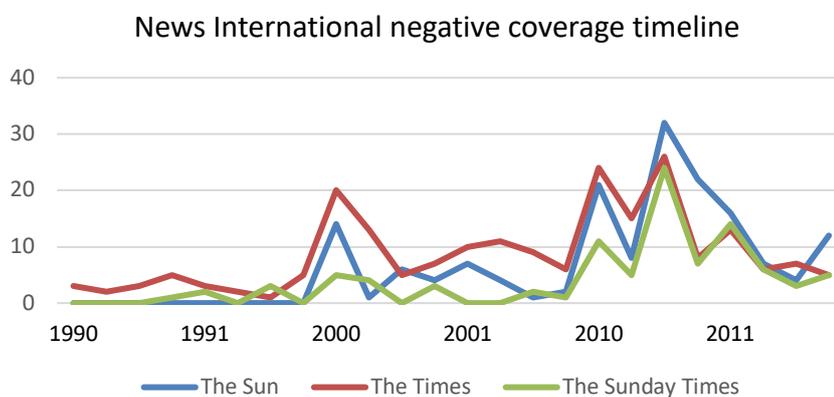
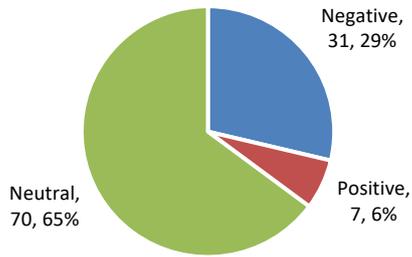


Fig. 9.9

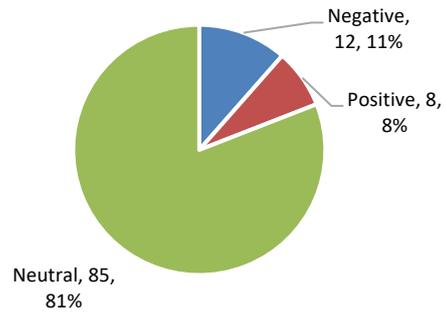
As can be seen from the timeline, there is a strong correlation in the data for the three News International owned newspapers, i.e. when there has been a rise in the number of negative articles published, it has occurred across all three newspapers. This supports the hypothesis that the reporting is biased in its agenda against the BBC, and that the newspapers are all operating according to a consistent approach.

The charts on the following page display the percentage of articles by tone for the News International newspapers versus the non-News International newspapers for each time period (1990-91, 2000-01, 2010-11):

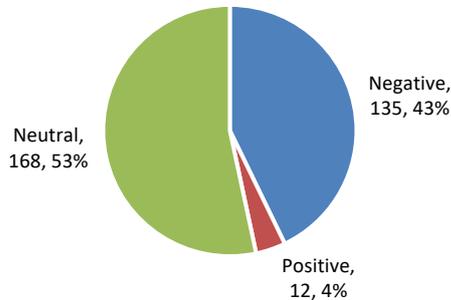
News International - Tone 1990-91



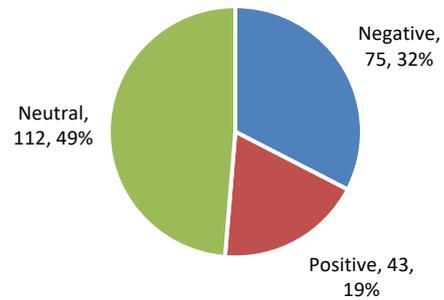
Non-News International - Tone 1990-91



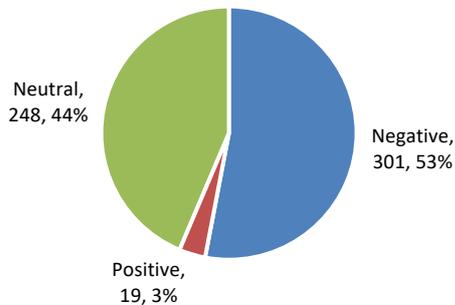
News International - Tone 2000-01



Non-News International - Tone 2000-01



News International - Tone 2010-11



Non-News International - Tone 2010-11

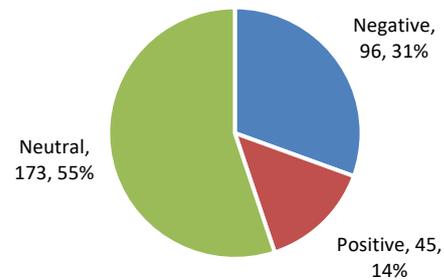


Fig 9.10

Comparison of these charts shows that negative reporting in the News International owned newspapers consistently increased across the three time periods, whereas in the non-News International newspapers, it increased from 1990-91 to 2000-01, after which it remained consistent. The News International newspapers also published a significantly higher number of articles; in particular negative articles.

Focus of articles

The chart in Fig 9.13 depicts the number of articles categorised by focus, i.e. if the BBC was the primary or secondary focus of the article, or if it was 'mentioned in passing'. For all six newspapers, the BBC featured as the primary focus of the majority of the relevant articles:

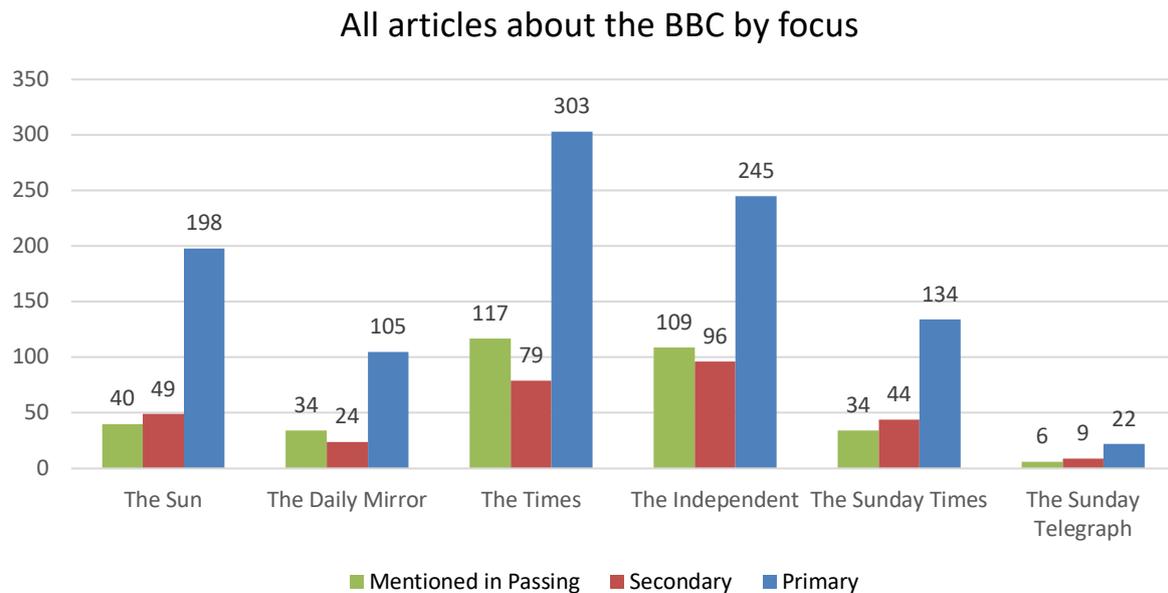


Fig. 9.11

Fig 9.13 shows that the News UK newspapers generally published a far greater number of articles where the BBC was the primary focus; the exception is the Independent, which published a similar number (245) to its News UK counterpart, the Times (which published 303).

Of the 649 negative articles about the BBC, 66% featured the BBC as the primary focus (equalling 429 articles). The next charts display the proportion of articles both categorised as both negative and where the BBC was the primary focus for the News International newspapers (Fig. 9.14) versus the non-News International newspapers (Fig 9.15).

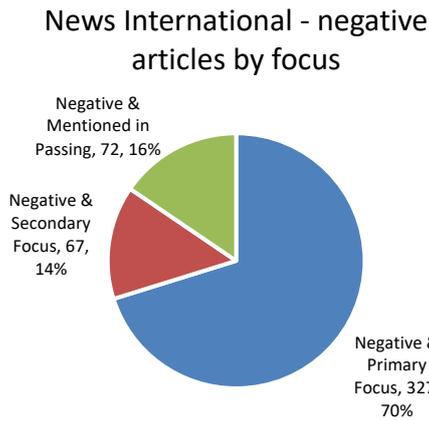


Fig. 9.12

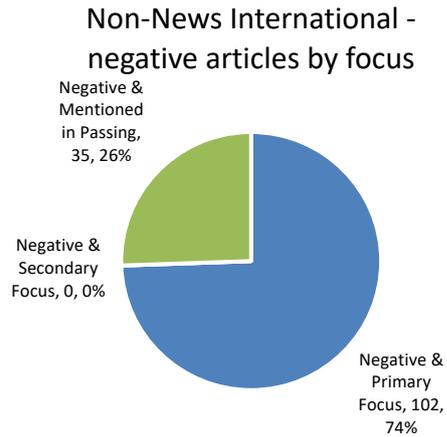


Fig 9.13

Fig. 9.14 and Fig. 9.15 identify an interesting result in that, while News UK is responsible for a significantly larger percentage of negative articles overall (regardless of focus), the majority occur in articles where the BBC is the primary focus, suggesting a greater tendency to criticise the BBC when it is the main focus of a story. This was also the case for the non-News International newspapers. However, these charts distort the view slightly, given that the difference in number of articles is significant. In addition to this, the analysis identified that News UK published a significantly larger number of negative articles where the BBC was the secondary focus (67 articles versus 0).

Types of article

The content analysis allowed the articles to be categorised into five types: news, feature, editorial, business or other. Typically, 'other' accounted for articles in the sports or lifestyle sections. As explained in the methodology section, data regarding the type of article was not available for 59 of the 163 articles published by the Daily Mirror. However, given that the total number of articles across all newspapers analysed was 1648, the missing data for the 59 only equates to 4%, and it was therefore considered that this would have a negligible impact on the overall result. Furthermore, the missing data relates to the *type* of article only, and not any other category (i.e. tone, focus etc). While assertions could be made as to whether an article was a piece of news or a piece of editorial, this could not be verified and therefore was not recorded.

For all articles written about the BBC, Fig. 9.16 depicts the percentage that fall into each of the five 'type' categories:

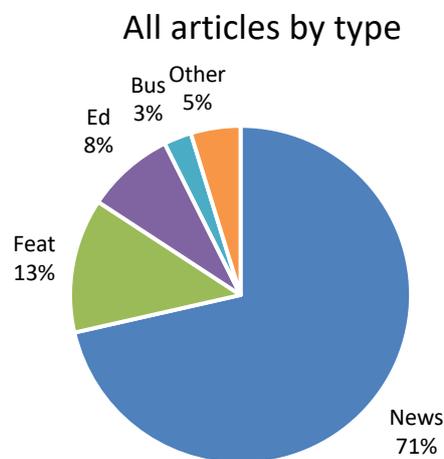


Fig. 9.14

As Fig. 9.16 indicates, the majority of articles about the BBC were categorised as 'news' pieces. The second largest category was features.

Fig 9.17 again categorises articles by type, but this time, specifically for those articles about the BBC that were categorised as negative:

Negative articles by type

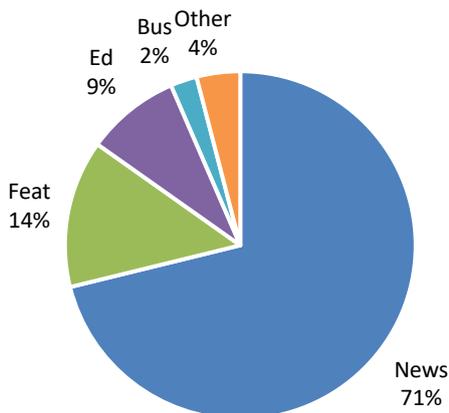


Fig. 9.15

Results for the two perspectives are similar, but with a marginally higher percentage of negative features and negative editorials.

The following charts provide a comparison of the percentage of negative articles that fall into each category for the News UK newspapers (Fig. 9.18) versus the non-News UK papers (Fig. 9.19).

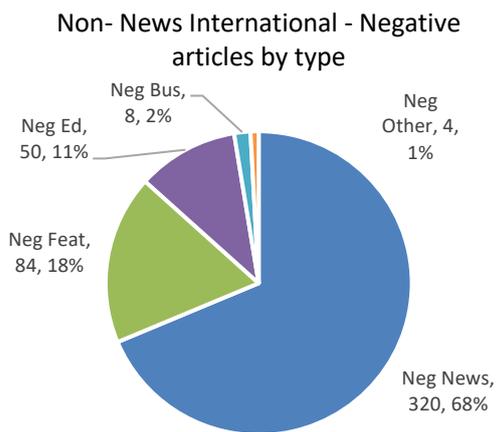


Fig. 9.16

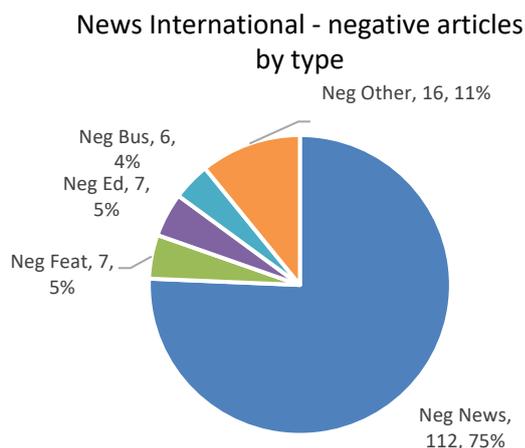


Fig 9.17

As Fig. 9.18 shows, the News UK newspapers have a significantly larger proportion of negative features and negative editorials: 18% of News UK articles were categorised

as both negative and a feature article. Fig. 9.19 shows only 5% of the articles published by the non-News UK newspapers were categorised in the same way. Similarly, 11% of the News UK articles were categorised as both negative and as editorial pieces; only 5% of the non-News UK articles were categorised as the same.

Again, while these results show that a significant proportion of the negative stories published by both the News International and non-News International newspapers were categorised as news, considering this as a percentage can distort the view, given the significant difference in the actual numbers of stories. Furthermore, consideration should be given to how many negative news pieces each group of newspapers published as a percentage of their overall number of news pieces. A total of 42% of the News International 'news' stories about the BBC were negative, compared with 23% in the comparative newspapers.

When considering editorial pieces, 70% of the News International editorials about the BBC were negative, compared with 26% in the comparative newspapers.

Sources quoted

There were seven categories under which the sources quoted in the articles about the BBC could be recorded:

1. BBC
2. Ofcom
3. Government
4. Independent voice/campaign
5. Other
6. Unsourced (no source quoted)
7. Vested interest

The chart in Fig. 9.20 depicts the percentage of each category in the 1648 articles about the BBC.

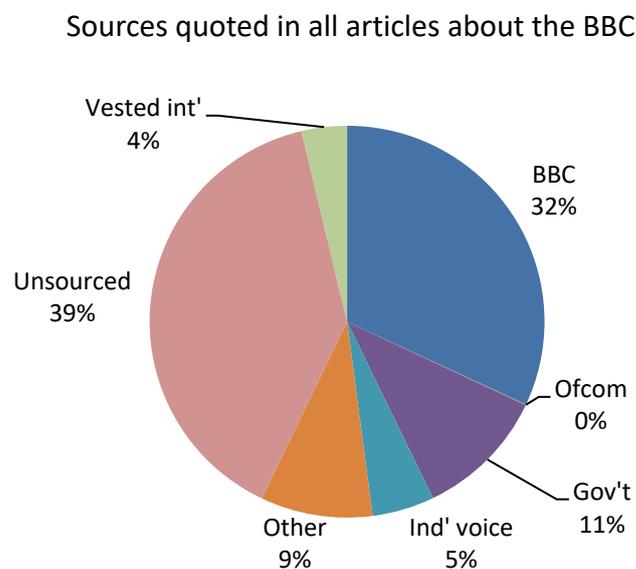


Fig. 9.18

As expected, the BBC featured as one of the most quoted sources in articles reporting on itself. However, there was a significant number of articles that referenced no source at all: 39%.

The charts in Fig 9.21 and Fig. 9.22 show that the percentage of articles that

referenced no source, referred to as 'unsourced', is greater across the News UK newspapers (albeit the non-News UK papers published a significant number of unsourced articles as well).

News International: sourced vs unsourced

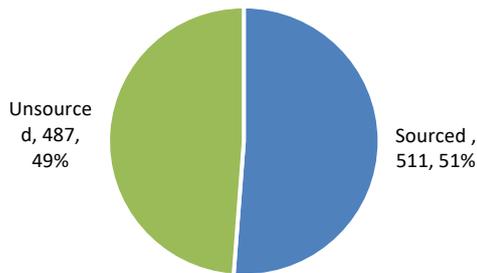


Fig. 9.19

Non-News International: sourced vs unsourced

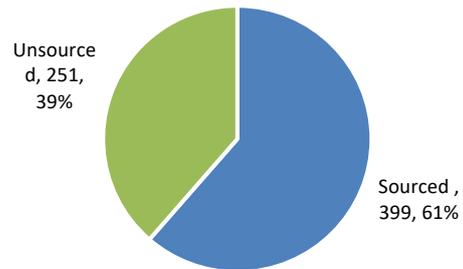


Fig. 9.20

Fig 9.23 provides a breakdown of the sources quoted in negative articles for the News UK papers, with Fig. 9.24 doing the same for the non-News UK papers.

News International negative articles by source

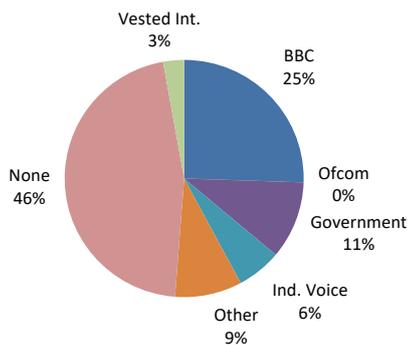


Fig 9.21

Non-News International negative articles by source

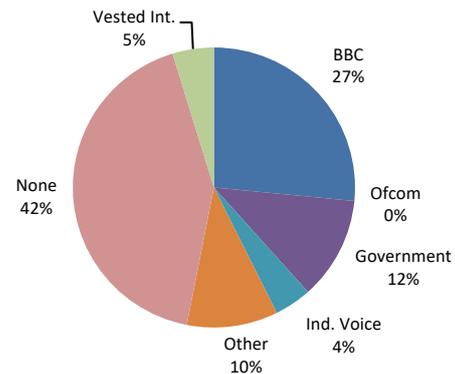


Fig. 9.22

Interestingly, this almost mirrors the percentage of sources for all articles about the BBC, regardless of tone (Fig. 9.5.1). However, both charts show a slight increase in the percentage of negative articles that were unsourced, and a slight decrease in the

number of negative articles that included the BBC as a source.

As the results are almost identical regardless of tone, it implies that the tone of the reporting had little impact on a newspaper's choice about whether to include a certain type of source or not. In all cases, whether the articles were negative, and whether published by the News UK or non-News UK newspapers, almost half of the articles were unsourced, and the second largest category of source across the board was the BBC. It could be argued that the inclusion of the BBC as a source in articles that are critical of it suggests a measure of balance in the reporting. However, it could also be argued that a quote (that often sits at the very end of the piece) from the BBC is added to give the illusion of balance, but does not change the overall tone.

Chapter Ten: The Results for Ofcom

Total number of articles

The total number of articles published about Ofcom across all six newspapers was 1688. Of those articles, 61% were published by News International (a total of 1037). The graph in Fig. 10.1 shows the number of articles published by each newspaper.

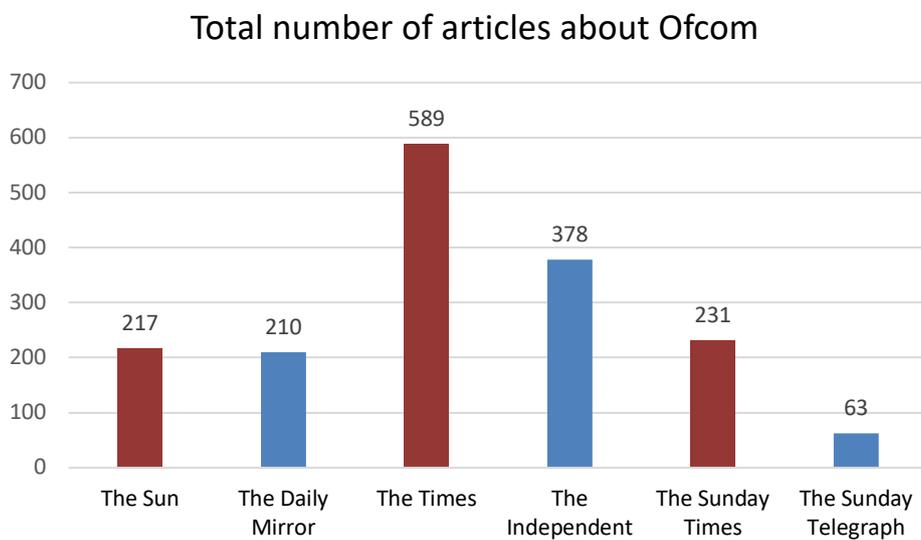


Fig. 10.1

The graph shows News International newspapers published a significantly larger number of articles about Ofcom, with the exception of the tabloid newspapers the Sun and the Daily Mirror, which published a similar number. The significant difference in the number of articles is primarily accounted for by the two broadsheet newspapers.

The number of articles published in each time period considered is shown in Fig. 10.2.

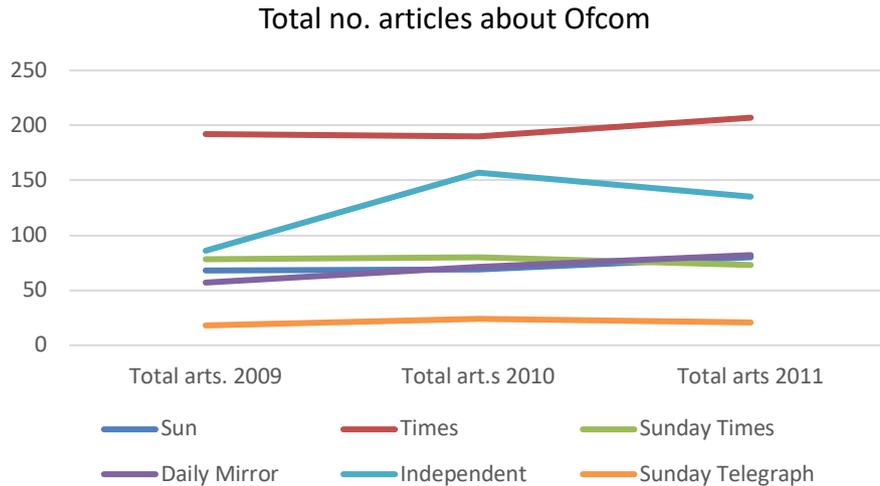


Fig. 10.2

This identifies a consistent trend of reporting, with only a slight peak between 2009 and 2010. Fig 10.3 provides an alternative view of the number of articles printed in each of the three years. 2009 was a particularly interesting year as it was the run-up to the 2010 general election, during which the Murdochs were making public statements about Ofcom and its overwhelming power; James Murdoch's 2009 MacTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh International Television Festival speaks to this and is discussed in the next chapter. 2009 also saw David Cameron make a public promise to remove Ofcom should he be elected Prime Minister, which is also discussed in the next chapter.

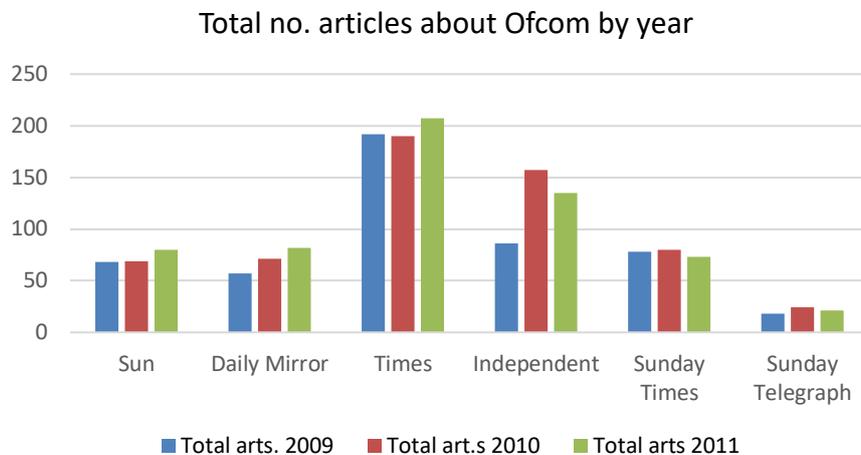


Fig. 10.3

The graph in Fig. 10.4 provides details of the word count of the coverage of Ofcom per newspaper analysed.

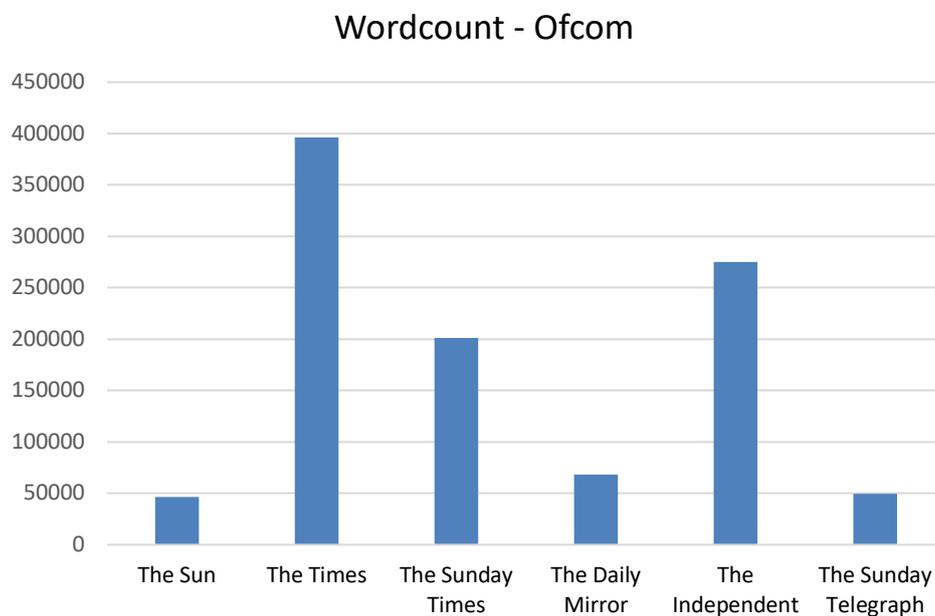


Fig 10.4

The word count correlates to some extent with the total number of articles printed. However, there is a noticeable difference in the number of articles published in the Sun versus the number of words belonging to those articles, indicating that the coverage was brief (as it was, to an extent, in the Daily Mirror).

Tone of coverage

The tone of each article was placed in one of three categories: negative, positive or neutral. The graph in Fig. 10.5 displays the number of articles and percentage for each tone category for the 1688 articles analysed:

All articles about Ofcom by tone

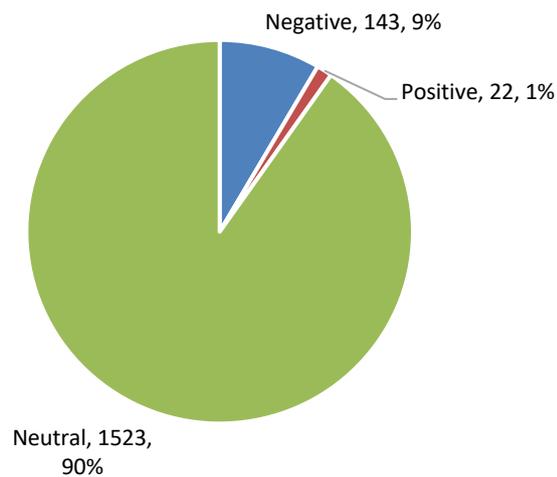


Fig. 10.5

Of the total number of articles about Ofcom published in all six newspapers, only 9% were categorised as negative, equating to 143 articles. Of the total number of negative articles about Ofcom, 78% were published by News International (112 articles). The charts below depict the proportion of each newspaper's articles that were categorised as negative:

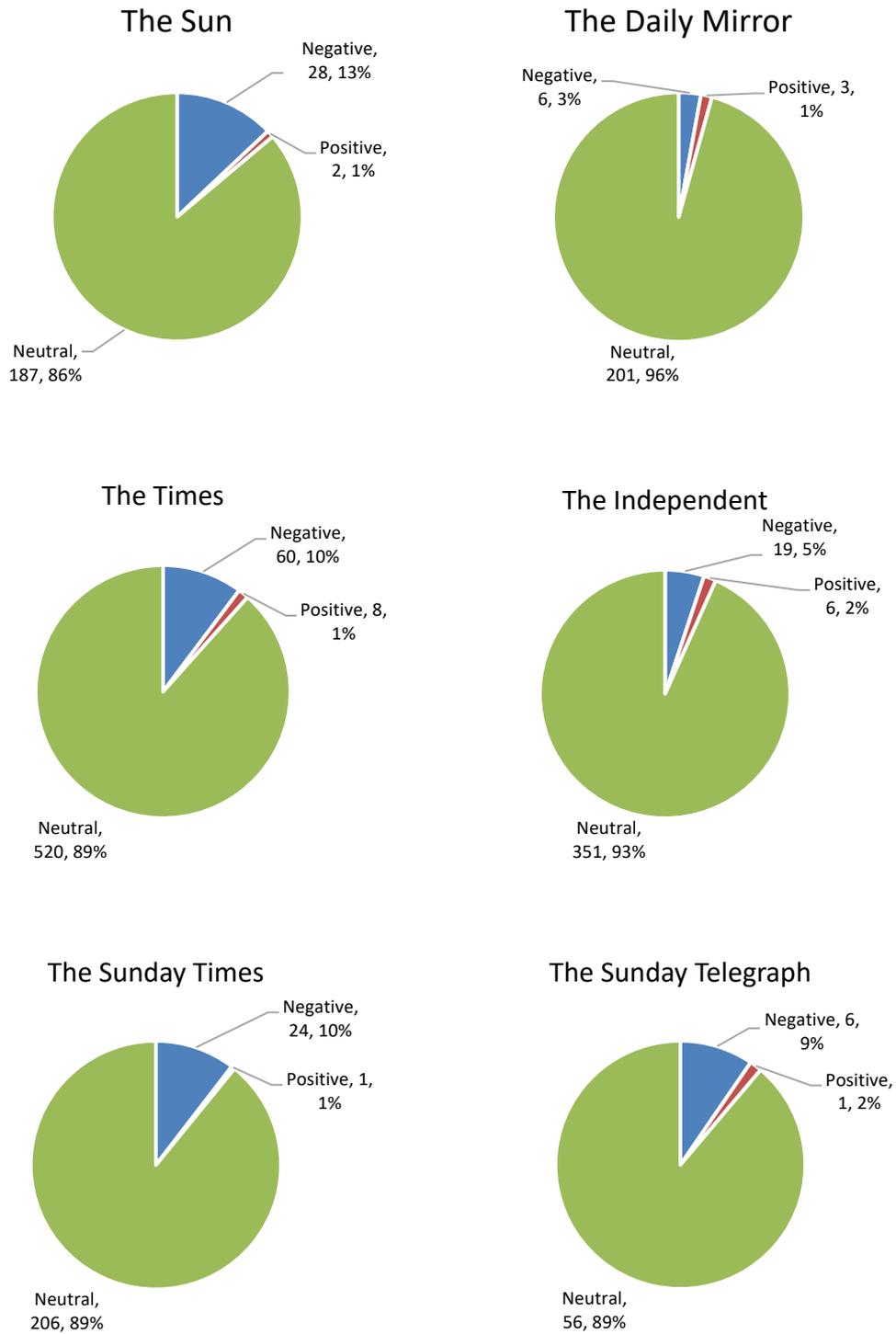


Fig 10.6

As expected, and as with the results relating to the BBC, the News International newspapers published a greater number of negative articles; albeit the difference is

smaller. However, in contrast to the results for coverage of the BBC, the number of positive articles published by the News International newspapers was almost exactly equal to their non-News International counterparts. News International also published a greater number of neutral articles than its counterparts, with the exception of the tabloids.

The graph in Fig. 10.7 shows the percentage of articles in each tonal category (negative, positive and neutral) published in the News International newspapers, while Fig. 10.8 shows this for the non-News International papers.

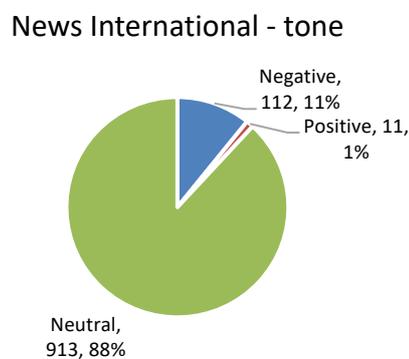


Fig. 10.7

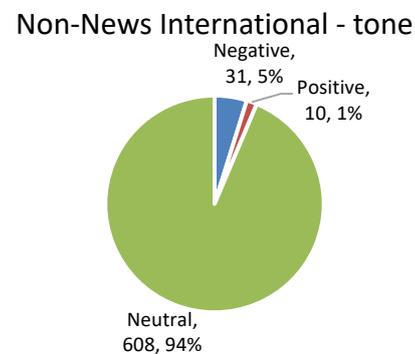


Fig. 10.8

As can be seen in Fig. 10.7 and Fig. 10.8, the ratio of tonal reporting between the two categories is very similar, with the exception of News International having published over twice the number of negative articles. However, unlike the results for the BBC, News International printed exactly the same percentage of positive articles about Ofcom as the comparator group of newspapers. The majority of articles printed about Ofcom by both the News International and non-News International newspapers were neutral. That said, notwithstanding the significance of the ratio view, it must be noted that this does not account for the vast difference in the number of articles printed, with News International publishing 386 more.

The timeline in Fig. 10.9 provides a comparative view of the negative coverage for 2009-11 across both groups of newspapers:

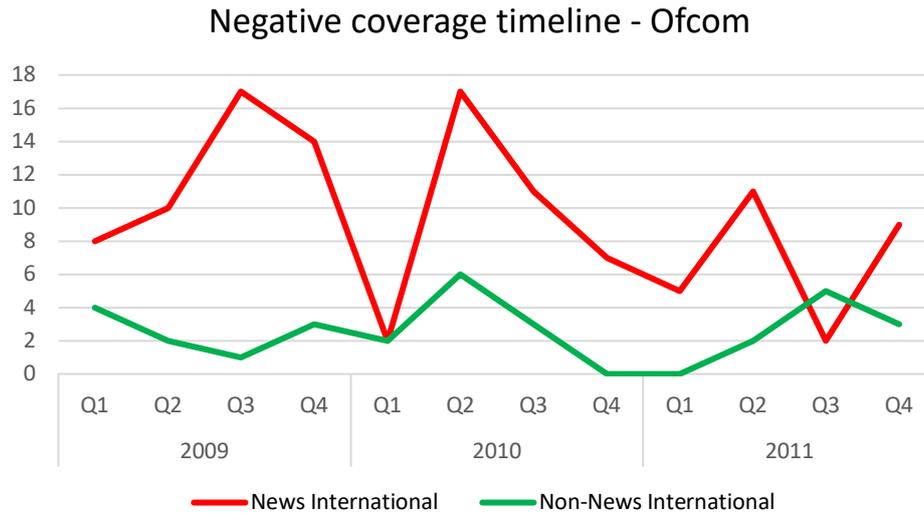


Fig. 10.9

Fig. 10.9 identifies a consistently low level of negative reporting in the non-News International newspapers, whereas there are far more exaggerated peaks of negative coverage in the News International papers. The peak that occurs for both groups of newspapers in Q2 2010 related to coverage on the Ofcom announcement that the rates people pay to terminate their mobile phone contracts should be cut. This was highly criticised by the mobile operating firms at the time.

The increase in negative reporting on News International's part during this time period was further amplified by Ofcom having ordered BSkyB to reduce the price it charged rival TV companies to broadcast its premium sports channels. The peak of negativity that occurred in Q3 2009 related to general criticism of Ofcom, not pertaining to any one particular topic, but it did coincide with James Murdoch's speech at the Edinburgh International Television Festival that year, which was highly critical of the BBC and Ofcom, referring to both as "unaccountable institutions" (Murdoch, 2009).

This timeline offers a significant finding in that, in periods when the non-News International newspapers found far less to cover in terms of criticism of Ofcom, the News International papers found far more.

Fig. 10.10 provides a timeline view of the negative reporting in the three News International owned newspapers.

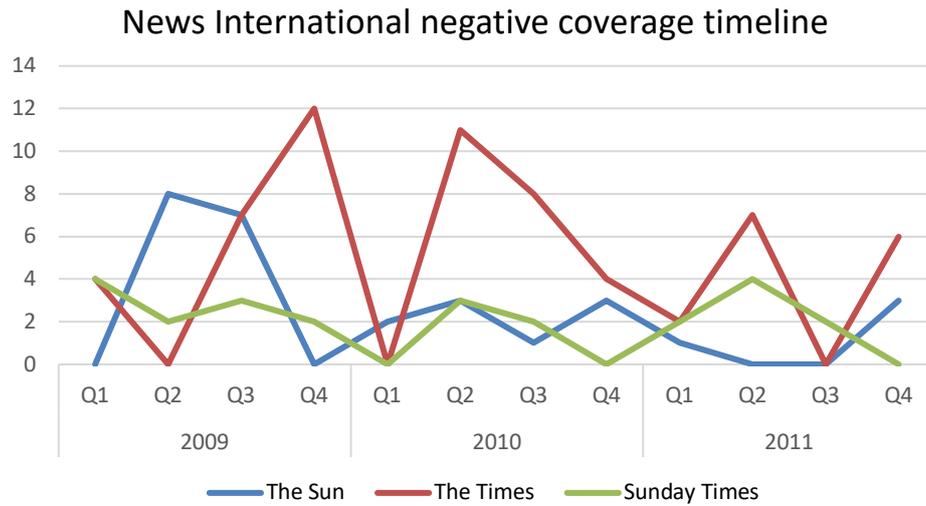


Fig. 10.10

Fig. 10.10 shows extreme peaks in negative reporting for the Times, which speaks to the theoretical assumption that the broadsheet papers would look to influence opinion formers. There are fewer extremities in the reporting in the Sun and Sunday Times.

Focus of articles

The chart in Fig 10.11 depicts the number of articles categorised by focus, i.e. whether Ofcom was the primary or secondary focus of the article, or if it was 'mentioned in passing'.

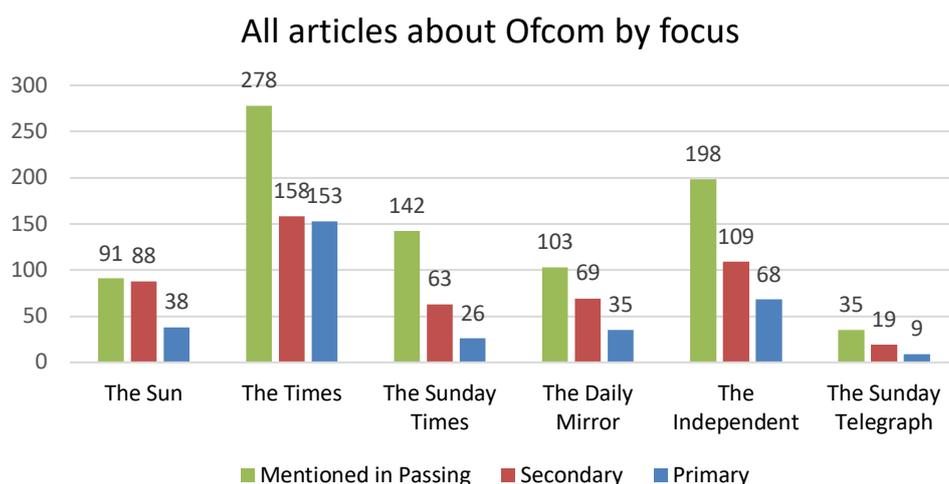


Fig. 10.11

An interesting finding identified in Fig. 10.11 is that, for all newspapers, the number of articles where Ofcom was only mentioned in passing far outweighs those where Ofcom was the primary or secondary focus; this is in stark contrast to the findings relating to the BBC. To provide an alternative view, Fig. 10.12 displays the breakdown by focus for the News International newspapers, while Fig 10.13 give this information for the non-News International newspapers.

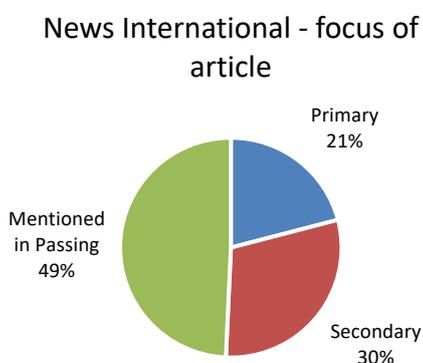


Fig. 10.12

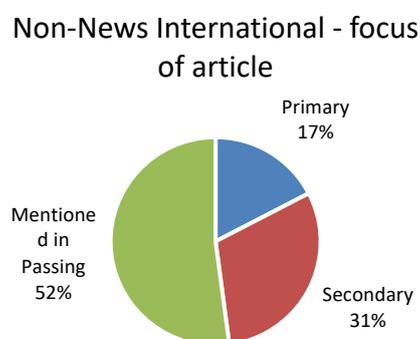


Fig. 10.13

Ofcom features in less than a quarter of all articles as the primary focus; in both the News International and non-News International newspapers, virtually half of the coverage only mentions Ofcom in passing. Furthermore, Ofcom features as the secondary focus for a significant percentage of the articles for both groups of newspapers.

Of the 1688 articles written about Ofcom, only 329 featured Ofcom as the primary focus; 14% of these were categorised as negative. The charts in Fig 10.3.4 break down the articles about Ofcom that were categorised as negative into those where Ofcom was the primary focus, secondary focus or mentioned in passing:

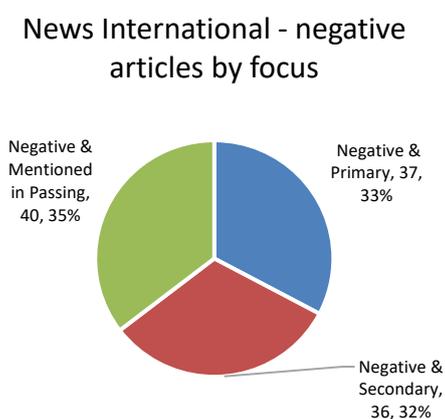


Fig 10.14

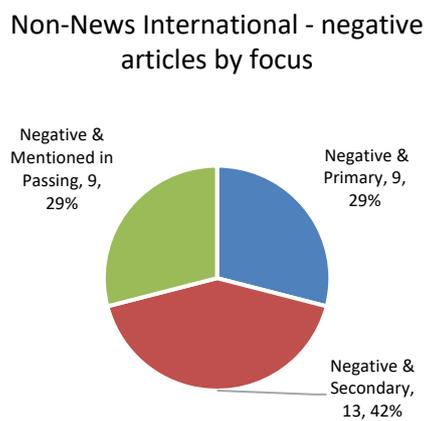


Fig 10.15

Fig. 10.14 identifies that News International published a larger percentage of negative articles with Ofcom as the primary focus; it also published considerably more articles in total (327 versus 102).

Fig. 10.16 provides an alternative view that presents the percentage of negative articles each newspaper published with Ofcom as the primary focus, while Fig. 10.17 does the same for articles where Ofcom was 'mentioned in passing'.

Negative articles where Ofcom is primary focus

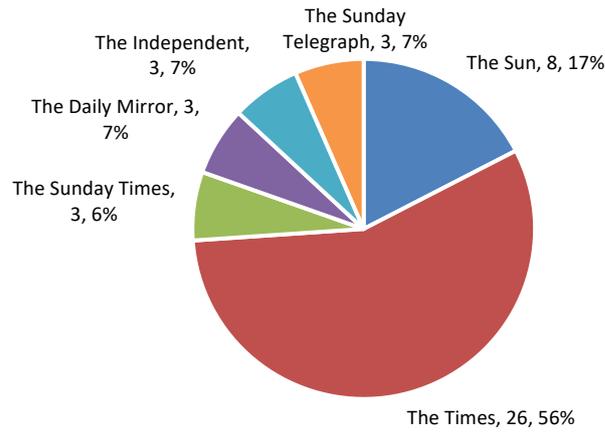


Fig. 10.16

Negative articles where Ofcom was mentioned in passing

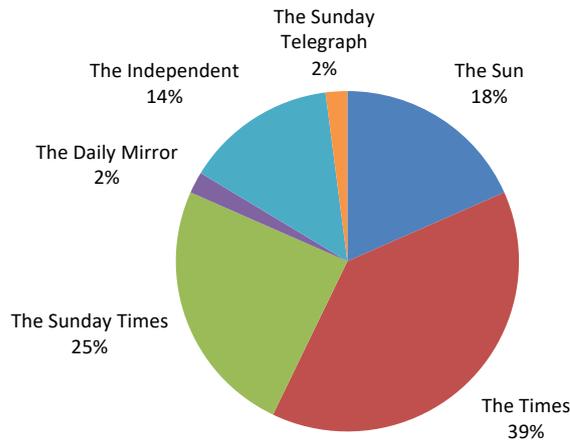


Fig. 10.17

Fig 10.16 shows the News International newspapers published 79% of the total number of articles where Ofcom was the primary focus of a negative piece. Where Ofcom was only mentioned in passing, Fig 10.17 shows News International published 82% of the negative articles (equating to 40 articles), whereas the non-News International newspapers only published a total of nine. The breakdown of the percentage of articles in each 'focus' and 'tone' category, per newspaper, can be found in the appendices.

It is notable that the Times was responsible for the largest proportion of negative articles in both cases; this differs from the results for the BBC, where the Sun was responsible for a larger proportion of the negative articles. In the case of Ofcom, both the Times and Sunday Times are responsible for larger proportions of negative articles than the Sun. Both papers can be considered to be more influential in terms of reaching ‘opinion formers’ and setting the agenda.

If Murdoch and News UK were attempting to influence public opinion via the negative reporting identified in this research, it follows logically that they would ensure an increased number of negative stories about the BBC in their tabloid newspaper, the Sun, as its audience consist primarily of the ‘general public’ who have a direct connection with the BBC and will likely pay the licence fee. When looking to influence opinion on Ofcom, sustained criticism has a higher chance of reaching an audience of ‘opinion formers’ via its broadsheet and Sunday newspapers.

Types of article

The chart in Fig. 10.18 depicts the total number of articles about Ofcom categorised by ‘type’ (news, feature, editorial, business or other).

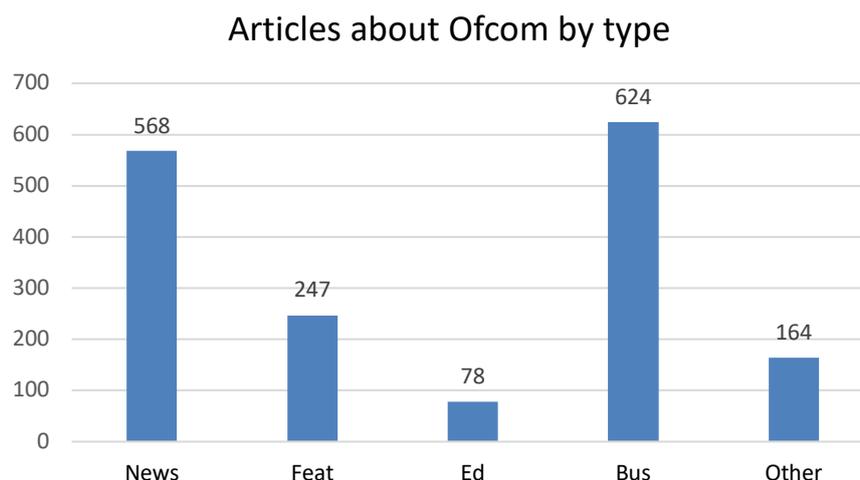


Fig. 10.18

Fig. 10.18 identifies another result that notably contrasts with the BBC results; while a significant proportion of the articles about Ofcom were categorised as ‘news’, a larger

proportion were categorised as ‘business’ stories.

Fig. 10.19 focuses on the negative articles by category.

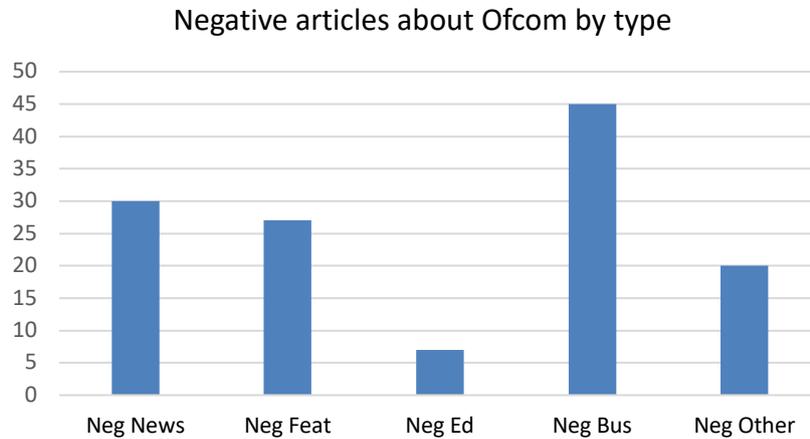


Fig. 10.19

The negative articles generally follow the same weighting pattern as that for all articles (regardless of tone). However, there is a notable increase in the number of negative articles categorised as ‘feature’ pieces.

Fig. 10.20 depicts the negative articles about Ofcom by type for the News International newspapers, while Fig. 10.21 does the same for the non-News International papers.

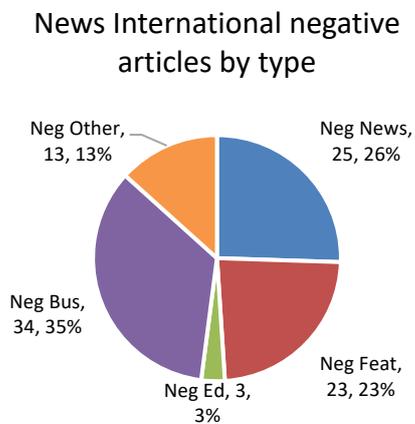


Fig. 10.20

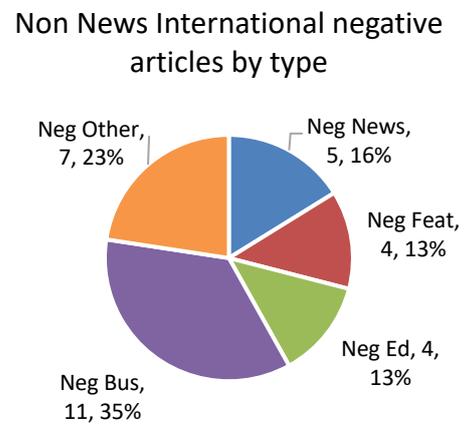


Fig. 10.21

Interestingly, Fig 10.21 identifies an increased number of negative editorials published by the non-News International newspapers compared with the News International papers in Fig. 10.20. This was unexpected, given that this study's hypothesis assumes negative reporting on the part of News International newspapers in light of their parent company's owner, Rupert Murdoch, and his dislike of regulation of the media markets via quangos such as Ofcom. However, the data reveals that the total number of negative editorials for the non-News International newspapers was four. All four featured Ofcom as the primary focus of a negative editorial piece and were published by the Independent. The News International newspapers published three negative editorials about Ofcom: one was published by the Sun, and two by the Times.

Sources quoted

The chart in Fig. 10.22 depicts the percentages for each category of sources quoted in the 1688 articles about Ofcom.

Sources quoted in articles about Ofcom

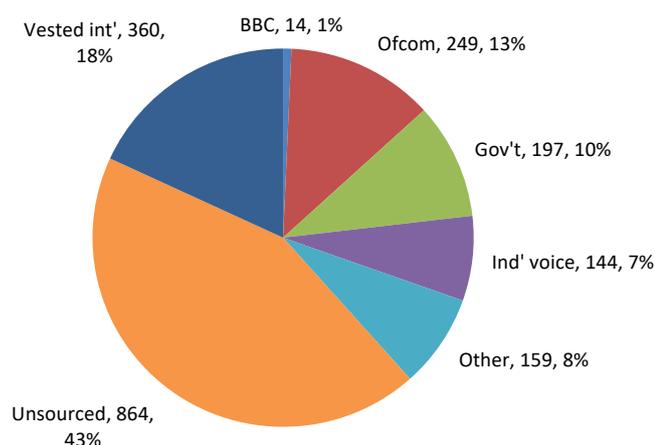


Fig. 10.22

A number of notable findings can be drawn from Fig. 10.22. Firstly, a significant number of the articles published about Ofcom across all six of the newspapers were unsourced. Additionally, with the exception of the BBC as a source, the types of sources quoted in the articles are spread relatively evenly across all categories, though a larger number of articles do quote a 'vested interest'. As outlined in the coding schedule, the 'vested interest' category is used for any source quoted who in some way has a vested interest in the subject matter, be it commercial or otherwise. For example, if an article discussed a decision taken by Ofcom, any party that would be affected by that decision, be it directly or indirectly, would be considered to be a 'vested interest'.

To establish how many articles the News International newspapers published that were unsourced, Fig. 10.23 depicts the percentage of articles that were sourced versus unsourced, while Fig. 10.24 presents the same information for the non-News International papers.

News International about Ofcom:
sourced vs unsourced

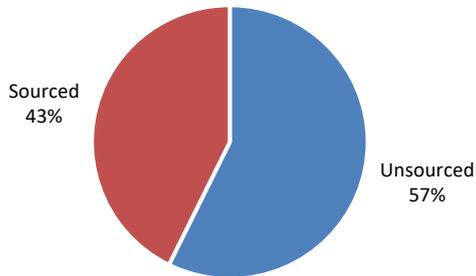


Fig. 10.23

Non-News International about
Ofcom: sourced vs unsourced

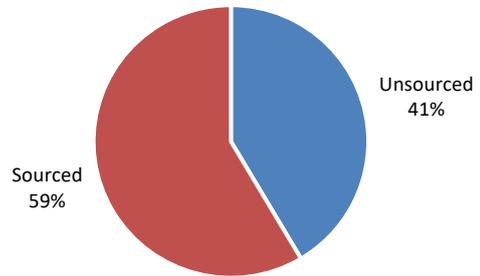


Fig. 10.24

While the non-News International newspapers published a significant proportion of articles that were unsourced (a total of 270), News International published over twice as many (a total of 594).

The chart in Fig. 10.25 provides percentages for each source quoted in the articles about Ofcom that were categorised as negative in the News International newspapers, with Fig. 10.26 presenting the same information for the non-News International papers.

News International - negative articles by source

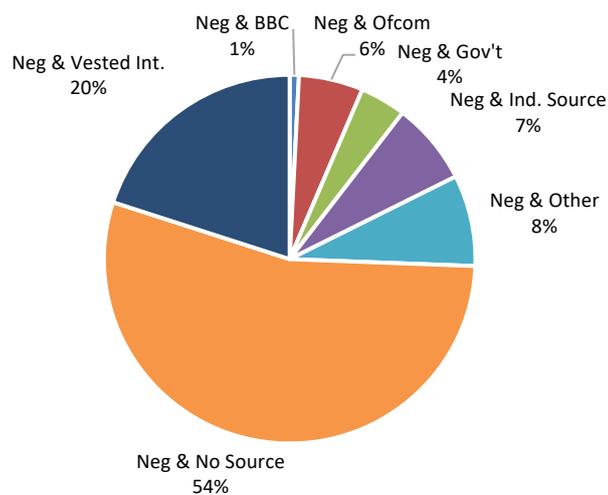


Fig. 10.25

Non-News Int - negative articles by source

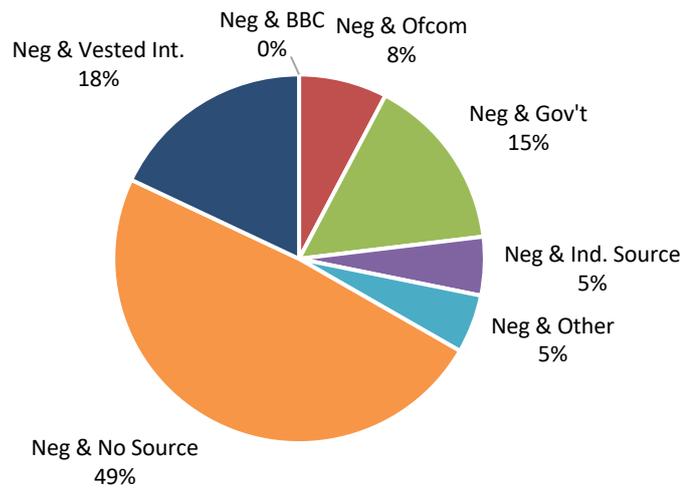


Fig 10.26

Fig. 10.25 and Fig. 10.26 display similar patterns, though a greater percentage of the non-News International articles featured Ofcom and the government as sources. Again, the percentages of articles featuring no source at all are very similar, as are the percentages featuring a quote from a 'vested interest'.

Chapter Eleven: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings of this work within the context of all of the information put forward thus far, calling upon the existing theories and relevant literature. It will consider a number of broader themes within the context of which the results of the content analysis and the implications can be considered, including the following: the current status of the UK Newspaper market, online news and news aggregators, the empirical evidence that proves that the negative reporting does indeed exist, and its potential to influence the public and politicians. The chapter will finish with a section summarising the key findings of this work and the concluding arguments.

Current status of the UK Newspaper Market

According to the Media Reform Coalition 2019 report 'Who Owns the UK Media', News UK's newspapers have 35.4% of the market share for national daily newspapers; this is spread across the Sun and the Times. The Sun enjoys the largest market share of all daily newspapers at 27.3%, followed closely by the Daily Mail at 23.8%. News UK newspapers enjoy 42.7% of the market share for Sunday newspapers, spread across the Sun on Sunday and Sunday Times. The Sun on Sunday has the largest market share for Sunday newspapers at 26.5%, followed by the Mail on Sunday at 22.95%.

The Media Reform Coalition reported that as at November 2018, News UK had the highest 'weekly combined market share of national newspaper circulation' at 36.35%. News UK is one of three media groups that dominate the UK newspaper market: DMG Media, who own the Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday have 23.69%, and Reach Plc who own The Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror and Sunday People and have 23.19% of the market share. All newspapers have seen a decline in circulation since 2015 (when the MRC first published this report), with the exception of The Times which saw a five per cent increase.

The report also considers the market share for each newspaper in the context of both

printed and online news; this was measured according to the 'reach' of each newspaper. Again, the Sun dominated, with a share of 20.20%, followed closely by the Daily Mail with a share of 18.22%. By newspaper Group, the DMG Media have the largest share of reach at 28.36%, followed closely by News UK at 24.83%.

The picture changes when considering the reach of news websites: The BBC has a 74% reach, followed by The Sun at 71%, and The Daily Mail at 58%. Sky News website has a 37% reach. The Media Reform Coalition report also considered what percentage of the public follow news organisations on social media, focusing on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. The BBC has the highest percentage in all cases, with between 32 and 37%. Sky News is the second highest on Twitter and Instagram, at between 17 and 19%. It features as the third highest on Facebook at 19%.

Turning to the share of television audience, the Media Reform Coalition states "The BBC leads the way with 58 per cent, followed by ITV on 38 per cent. Sky, despite considerably larger revenues than the BBC, accounts for under one-tenth of terrestrial television viewing in the UK" (2019, p18). In the on-demand video subscription sector, Netflix dominates, reaching 9.1, million viewers, followed by Amazon Prime Video at 4.8 million, and Now TV (owned by Sky) at 1.5 million.

The Media Reform Coalition concluded its report by stating that the levels of concentration in the UK media market "demonstrate that we need action that will challenge blockbuster media and tech companies and the influence that flows from their dominance of infrastructure, content and distribution". The report asserts that any policy in the UK with regard to the public responsibilities attached to media have been assigned to broadcasting alone, however, in an era of increasingly converging media markets, a combined, holistic approach is now needed. "The Media Reform Coalition believes that media plurality is not a luxury in the digital age but an essential part of a media system in which vested interests should not be allowed to dominate. We want to see independent media that are able to hold power to account and to serve their audiences and the public in general as opposed to shareholders, proprietors or politicians... we need a new system of regulation that addresses both the enduring (and in many ways intensifying) grip of legacy media on public debate; as well as the

control over news and information ‘flow’ wielded by tech giants” (2019, p22).

This conclusion aligns with much of what is being asserted in this thesis; that major media corporations are more concerned with serving the needs of the shareholders, proprietors and politicians, or indeed the media owners themselves, than the needs of the public and democracy. It cannot be an issue that policy makers consider from the perspective of the newspaper market alone, but must be considered holistically, taking into account the total media holdings of any one media corporation and the potential for the cross-promotion of information that may have the potential to undermine the democratic process.

News UK application for Times & Sunday Times to share resources

On 10 January 2019, News UK made an application to the government for the undertakings placed upon The Times and Sunday Times in 1981 so as to ensure they maintained editorially independent from one another. News UK’s application asks for the two newspapers to share journalistic resources, so as to “mitigate the financial challenges that the two titles will face going forward²¹” (2019). News UK reference two primary issues its newspaper face: a sharp decline in circulation due to news consumption moving online that has eroded newspaper revenue from copy sales and advertising; and that the digital advertising market is dominated by technical giants such as Google and Facebook. Because of the latter, News UK claims not to be able to offset the revenue it has lost due to declining hard copy sales.

The application was met with much criticism, primarily due to concerns regarding the threat it poses to the quality of the content contained within the two newspapers, and the threat to plurality. A number of high-profile organisations provided a response to the consultation, including the Media Reform Coalition (MRC), National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and Hacked Off.

The Hacked Off response to the public consultation on the matter states:

²¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-times-sunday-times>

“Subsection 58.2(b) of the Enterprise Act 2002, which sets out the considerations for proposed media mergers, specifies a need for “a sufficient plurality of views” in the newspaper market. The new clause proposed by News UK would actively undermine plurality in the newspaper market, by permitting increased journalistic and, effectively, editorial, exchange and convergence between the titles”²² (Hacked Off, 2019).

This research has already proven that the News International titles take a similar editorial stance on issues of interest to Rupert Murdoch which has, in the case of The BBC and Ofcom, resulted in a disproportionate amount of negative reporting across all of his titles. To merge the editorial departments of The Times and The Sunday Times would only increase the potential for this type of practice across a broader range of topics, and so removing one of the ‘independent views’ available to the public.

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) was understandably concerned with the impact such a merger would have on the journalists employed by the two newspapers, and the effect on their ability to produce quality content. The MRC focused much of its response on the basis of News UK’s application; that there have been material changes since 1981, such as the decline in circulation figures and therefore revenue, that have negatively impacted its ability to operate the two newspapers cost effectively. The MRC responded to this by stating:

“...we believe the request should be rejected on the basis that there have been no material changes in circumstances that would justify any diminution or revision of the agreed conditions. The print circulation of newspapers may be shrinking, but the prevailing evidence suggests that the audience reach of the largest titles – including those owned by News Corp – is increasing. What’s more, recent studies have shown the enduring influence that national newspapers have over the wider news agenda, including television news and the BBC²³” (MRC,2019).

The MRC’s statement highlights a crucial issue in the argument against News UKs

²²https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/794817/Hacked_Off_response_to_Times_undertaking_consultation.pdf

²³

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/794822/media_reform_coalition_11_Feb.pdf

application, and in the arguments presented in this these: that there remains the prevalent threat that powerful media companies are able to use the plethora of resources at their disposal to influence the news agenda, and therefore public opinion; and that this threat is not seen to be diminishing (thus far) in the new digital environment. The large players continue to dominate in setting the agenda and audience reach in spite of the very arguments put forth by News UK with regard to declining circulation.

On 10 April 2019, the Secretary of State published that he was 'minded to accept' the application on the grounds that there has been material change in circumstance in 1981, and that it would not operate against the public interest He did, however, ask that News UK look to provide the government with a revised set of undertakings to address his concerns with regards to the 'lack of clarity' in governance. The revised undertakings include provisions that state the two newspapers shall continue to be published as separate publications and that the editors shall not be appointed or removed without the approval of the Independent National Directors (of which there are six). It also retains the following undertaking with regard to the editors and proprietors working relationship:

"The Editor of each Newspaper shall retain control over any political comment published in their newspaper and, in particular, shall not be subject to any restraint or inhibition in expressing opinion or in reporting news that might directly or indirectly conflict with the opinions or interests of any of the newspaper proprietors..."²⁴ (News UK, 2019).

The context for this piece of research as explored in the literature review chapters identifies much in the way of theory and evidence that Rupert Murdoch (the 'proprietor') has influenced or instructed his editors with regards to the political stance of the newspaper, and even with regard to content. The results of the content analysis for this piece of research provide a measure of tangible evidence to this effect: where Murdoch holds a particular ideological view, and/ or where there is commercial gain to be had, consistent messaging can be found in all of his newspapers.

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-final-version-of-the-revised-undertakings-from-news-uk>

There is argument to be had that the two newspapers do not operate with editorial independence from their proprietor as it stands today, let alone should their editorial departments begin to operate on a 'shared resource' basis. In 2012 the editor of The Times, James Harding, was said to be sacked by Murdoch; some of the reasons cited in the press reporting at the time was because Murdoch was unhappy with both how the newspaper reported on the phone hacking scandal, and that it was supporting Barack Obama in the upcoming US presidential election. Murdoch is said to have sacked Harding without the permission of the Independent Directors, as is required by the 1981 undertakings.²⁵

Online news

The new digital environment and online news is an important factor to consider in the context of this thesis, as it can be challenged that the issue of Murdoch using the power of his press to undermine competitors and regulators becomes less relevant as more and more people turn to online news sources. It is a valid challenge where considering the new digital environment, but it very much depends on to what extent online news is really offering an increased, diversified range of 'news voices' for consumers to choose from.

Furthermore, online news becomes even more relevant where the BBC has established itself as one of the most popular and trusted online news sources in the UK; where previously Murdoch's media business was competing with the BBC in the broadcasting industry alone, it now faces yet another market in which it is competing with the Public Service Broadcaster. The following section of the discussion chapter establishes that in spite of the rise of technology and the 'new digital environment', the traditional news providers continue to dominate the online news agenda. As such, plurality concerns are not mitigated by the move to online news, and therefore the issue of Murdoch having the ability to undermine regulators and competitors so as to satisfy a corporate agenda and expand his business does not go away in the new digital environment.

²⁵ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/mediatechnologyandtelecoms/media/9740384/James-Harding-steps-down-as-editor-of-The-Times.html>

In 2019 Ofcom published its report on News Consumption (Ofcom, 2019). The report identified that 66% of adults in the UK access news content online. However, the research found that the frequency with which people were consuming news online could have been under-reported, as many associate 'news' with content that is published in newspapers and on TV. Furthermore, through the growing use of smart phones and devices, and social media, news content is often 'mixed in' with other types of content, and so the reader doesn't always recognise that they are consuming news content.

The report states that "social media is the most popular type of online news, used by 44% of UK adults, compared to 37% that use any other type of internet source" (Ofcom, 2018). However, it also states that while this percentage of the survey respondents can recall the social media site through which they consume news (76% said they use Facebook), some cannot remember the news source itself. "Qualitative research suggests that this may be partly because social media sites display news content from a wide range of different sources and alongside other types of content, making it harder to distinguish news from other kinds of content and to identify the original source" (2018, p9).

A second report about the news in the UK was published by Ofcom in 2018, titled 'The Changing World of the News' (Ofcom, 2018). The research was undertaken with 96 participants in a qualitative format. The overall findings detail that participants consider the term 'news' to mean more than just content that derives from journalistic sources. News could, therefore, be considered to include 'status updates' on social media informing the reader of something that is going on in the world that they consider themselves to be a part of.

News was seen by the participants to be most important to them in the context of their personal and social lives, and for some, at a 'societal level' as well. However, it would appear from the results that while the participants consider the news to have the important duty of holding power to account and alerting the general public to information that they would either want or need to know, the report states that "many participants took longer to realise this, and questioned how well the news was fulfilling its role in the democratic process..." (op cit).

An additional report published by Ofcom in 2018 was titled ‘Scrolling News: the changing face of online news consumption’. The report (Ofcom, 2018) focused solely on news consumption online, and was undertaken with 22 respondents who were selected to be demographically representative of the country. The respondents filled out a media diary for one week and took part in individual interviews in which they were asked about their news consumption, attitude towards online news, and the broader news landscape. The high-level results identified three key findings: the primary device for news consumption is a smartphone; social media is the primary source for online news consumption; and the mindset with which participants consume the news is passive.

Again, this report identified the potential for the ‘under-reporting’ of how much people consume news online, and states in its executive summary that “these findings – not just how and why people access the news, but also how much this differs from what they think they are doing – have potentially huge implications for how news consumption is understood, and how it is measured in future” (2018, p3). A critical finding of the study is that news is typically delivered online in ‘news feed’ style, i.e. A continuous provision of content that can be ‘scrolled’ through, clicked on, etc. The report states that: “This style of delivery often made judging or evaluating news content difficult, and news was increasingly indistinguishable from purely social media and entertainment. Respondents were often unsure of the sources of news articles, whether a particular article was news at all (rather than an advert or promoted content), or how it had reached them” (2018, p6).

The findings for both reports are in keeping with the literature examined and discussed in chapter two (The New Digital Environment); however, it presents a challenge to the argument that the availability of so many sources of news online means that the reader is no longer reliant on a single, or handful of newspapers. As discussed in chapter two, Bakker and Sadaba (2009) claim that internet users are in many cases ‘active’ and seek out content to suit their clearly defined needs; however, the reports published by Ofcom in 2018 assert the opposite, that the majority of users consuming news online are doing so in a passive manner. So much so that in many cases the amount of news consumed was not always easily identifiable by the respondent.

As so much of people's lives are now centered around 'online', it can be asserted that for some people news is consumed actively, but for many it is done so passively. This raises considerable concern both in the context of this piece of research and in the broader context of the concentration of ownership and the impact on democracy. The issue is two-fold: firstly, as social media evolves and becomes more and more engrained in everyday lives, the likelihood (based on the findings of Ofcom) is that news content will be consumed on an increasingly passive basis. Secondly, at present, there is a distinct lack of regulation to address concerns with regards to online news aggregators. An increasingly passive audience receiving news content that derives from only a handful of sources controlled by major media corporations has the potential to do considerable harm to the democratic process.

As considered in chapter two, 'The New Digital Environment', and six, 'Growing Awareness', to date, plurality concerns have not been mitigated by any additional sources of news that can be found online. There are then two main concerns that remain with regard to plurality: that the traditional major news providers in the UK continue as the major providers online; and the lack of transparency to the 'general' reader with regard to the source of the news. In the absence of an updated regulatory framework that takes a holistic approach to media ownership and plurality concerns, there is the potential for the issue to worsen. As Feintuck and Varney state, the trend towards online news consumption is further compounding the existing issue of concentration of ownership in the British media market: "In Britain, with the pattern of concentration in the press and cross-media... there is a clear and present threat to diversity of views in circulation. If, in addition, the leading market players were also to control technological gateways in distribution such as those present in the digital television markets (E. Varney, 2005) than a still more virulent form of the problem is presented" (2006, p59).

In Ofcom's 2018 report to the Secretary of State, titled 'The operation of the media ownership rules listed under Section 391 of the Communications Act 2003', it considered whether growth in online news and the subsequent increase in the number of news providers publishing content online has the potential to 'strengthen plurality' and reduce the influence of the major media providers/ owners. However, Ofcom

states in the report's executive summary that "At present, the evidence indicates that the rise of news online has not yet materially reduced the influence of traditional news providers. These providers have established themselves online through their own websites and apps and the available evidence suggests that their content is widely consumed in third party platforms such as social media" (2018, p2).

Ofcom's findings echo much of what was discussed in chapter two with regard to the new digital environment; that despite there being a virtually limitless platform upon which a multitude of actors can publish, it remains the case that the traditional news providers dominate. Furthermore, the issue is no longer confined to content providers. The Ofcom report states that "Other risks include popular online providers such as social media and search engines influencing public opinion by controlling what news stories people see (through algorithms that manage the prominence of items in a news feed or in response to a search query)" (2018, p2). This should feature as a key issue for any future consideration of media ownership and plurality online. Measuring the dominance of a media corporation in terms of influence is complex, particularly where considering issues of cross-media ownership; this becomes more complex where a media corporation enters into deals or partnerships with news aggregators or gatekeepers i.e. Social media sites and search engines that ensure their online content featured in the 'news feed' of the majority of the public.

A House of Lords report (2019) titled 'Regulating in a digital world', argues that there is indeed a need for regulation to address such issues, and that as is the case in the traditional media market, the digital world is also dominated by a very small number of very large companies. Despite the report considering the issue from a much broader perspective than just news provision, it directly acknowledges the potential for major corporations to take advantage of the major profits to be gained in what is a largely unregulated space. The report (HoL, paper 299, p3) states:

"The digital world has become dominated by a small number of very large companies. These companies enjoy a substantial advantage, operating with an unprecedented knowledge of users and other businesses. Without intervention the largest tech companies are likely to gain more control of technologies which disseminate media content, extract data from the home and individuals or make decisions affecting

people's lives.... Regulation of the digital environment is fragmented with overlaps and gaps. Notably, there is no specific content regulator for the internet. We recommend the development of a comprehensive and holistic strategy for regulation.”

Much like the traditional press in the UK, the digital world is similarly dominated by a small number of large, well established and wealthy companies. While they are not the same companies as those dominating in the 'offline' media markets, it demonstrates that such oligopolistic, market structures can be achieved even on such a limitless platform as the internet. The traditional media companies are already exploring new and innovative ways to provide their content online and establish themselves as mainstream providers.

Given the issues that exist today with regard to media plurality in the traditional markets (in particular the press), even if regulation in the digital environment were to be developed on the basis of the same caps and thresholds, it may not be enough to mitigate the potential threat to plurality, and therefore democracy. There is no evidence to date that suggests Murdoch's ability to use his news content to criticise the BBC or Ofcom and negatively influence the audience with regard to such institutions, is in any way under threat as a result of the move to online news.

Social Media, News Aggregators

As explored in chapter two and within this discussion chapter, it remains to be seen that the move to online news consumption has mitigated any concerns with regards to the plurality of original news sources; the traditional content providers continue to dominate the news agenda. The issue of a sufficient plurality of original sources is complicated by online news where social media and news aggregators are involved. Using Facebook as an example, it uses algorithms to generate news content for an individual's 'feed', and a team of 'moderators' to monitor the algorithm.

In 2016, it was reported that the Facebook staff responsible for 'trending topics' had been routinely suppressing conservative news stories²⁶. Facebook does not create

²⁶ <https://www.wired.com/story/inside-facebook-mark-zuckerberg-2-years-of-hell/>

content, and so is protected by the 'Communications Decency Act 1996', which means online platforms cannot be considered liable for the content published on their websites. As long as Facebook continues to host and share news, it is not responsible for the messages being conveyed to the audience.

In the summer of 2016, the Donald Trump presidential campaign began to use Facebook to its advantage; it uploaded the details of its registered voters to Facebook and, using the 'audience lookalike tool' began sending targeted advertisements to a much wider group of people with similar traits to their registered voters. Simultaneously, unknown actors were using Facebook to share 'fake news stories', such as the Pope endorsing Donald Trump for president. "By the end of the campaign, the top fake stories on the platform were generating more engagement than the top real ones".

In 2018, a whistleblower from the firm 'Cambridge Analytica' revealed that it had illegally harvested the Facebook data of some 50 million users and sold this to politicians in America to be used in their election campaigns (<https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/cambridge-analytica-files>). The targeted messaging, combined with fake news stories that were being shared at an exponential rate thanks to the Facebook algorithm, is thought to be responsible for influencing voter opinion. It has also been reported in the same year-long investigation by the Guardian that a data company associated with Cambridge Analytica undertook similar practices to influence the results of the 'vote leave' campaign in Britain, resulting in 'Brexit'.

While this matter is not a direct consequence of a concentration of ownership, it is relevant to the arguments put forward with regards to the need for the plurality of original news sources. The MRC work discussed earlier in this chapter clearly identifies the passive nature with which the audience consumes news via social media, and that there is often a lack of engagement with the news source. This is supported by the Wired reporting that the fake news stories published during the Trump election campaign were generating more engagement than the real news stories; the audience is at risk of consuming information, unaware of its credibility. Where this occurs, they are subject to undue influence and the potential to form political opinion based on

falsities.

All of the above demonstrates that policy makers need to understand the insidious process by which overly powerful media and technical actors use their own outlets to further their own agendas and commercial self-interest. Google and Facebook might do it through their own algorithms, but corporations involved in the production of news remain more potent in their ability to constrain or dictate what journalists do, what stories they pursue, and what editorial lines are taken.

The Negative Reporting Exists

The empirical evidence found in this study proves that a negative bias in the reporting of the Murdoch owned newspapers in the UK about the BBC exists, as does a less established but still obvious bias in the reporting about Ofcom. There are a number of potential implications that will be explored in this chapter: the impact of such bias on News International's competitors and regulators alike; the effect it has on their standing in the eye of the public; and the impact of such reporting in the eyes of the policy makers/ decision makers where they are considering issues relating to the regulation of the media markets, and in particular the BBC given its unique position as a public service broadcaster with a licence fee determined by the government.

It is worth repeating evidence of the clear agenda which News International's owners have themselves expressed in respect of the BBC and Ofcom, in order to dispel any consideration that evidence of editorial bias in their newspapers might be coincidental or separate from that of the Murdochs' personal opinions. The following statements are taken from speeches by members of the Murdoch family (as previously referred to in chapter three).

The first are comments taken from the Mactaggart lecture delivered by Rupert Murdoch at the Edinburgh International Television Festival in 1989, in which he stated that the evolution of broadcasting in the UK had come about in a fashion that was "very appealing to the British Establishment, with its dislike of money-making and its notion that public service is the preserve of paternalists" (Murdoch, 1989). Much of the speech focused on competition and regulation within the television market, often

referring to the press and its liberation from regulation. Murdoch argued in favour of competition and against monopolies, asking why television should be exempt from the laws of supply and demand that the newspaper market operated in. He asserted that "...a largely market-led television system, with viewers choosing from a wide variety of channels financed in various ways, will produce a better television system than today's" (op cit).

The speech was timely given it came in the same year that Murdoch launched Sky Television, and that at the time the BBC was the most popular broadcaster in Britain with guaranteed funding from the licence fee. Murdoch claimed to be "...suspicious of elites including the British broadcasting elite, which argue for special privileges and favours because they are supposed to be in the public interest as a whole". The elites he spoke of included the BBC, and its supporters in government, both of which had allowed for a system that he felt had "...debilitating effects on British society, by producing a TV output which is so often obsessed with class, dominated by anti-commercial attitudes..."(op cit). While not calling for the BBC to be abolished, he was arguing for a system similar to PBS in the United States: a public sector that still had a place in British society, but in a scaled-down form.

Perhaps one of Murdoch's most interesting statements during this speech was when he referred to criticism of the amount of media he owned at that time. Referring to his newspaper titles, he explained that News International held three daily and two Sunday national titles, and not all were profitable. He rightly pointed out that News International's readers were free to choose what to read, and to select newspapers from other newspaper groups aside from his own. He also stated that with only 24% of the market he could hardly be accused of having a monopoly; he stated that "add to this the fact our newspapers have widely divergent views, and that our readers also buy magazines, watch television and listen to radio. It is clear that we are but one of many competing voices. This is as it should be in a democracy" (op cit). The empirical evidence that derives from this study challenges Murdoch's assertion that his newspapers have widely divergent views, when clearly, decades after this speech was given all of his newspapers were reporting similar views and a consistently negative editorial agenda that supports Murdoch's disdain for the BBC.

Twenty years after Rupert Murdoch gave his speech, his son, James Murdoch, also delivered the Mactaggart lecture at the 2009 Edinburgh International Television Festival. His speech was titled 'The Absence of Trust', and he opened with remarks regarding the British Establishment and being comforted in the knowledge that he would not be included following his speech. His speech echoed much of his father's that came twenty years before and opened with comment on the current status of the television market, the policy framework, and how "the result is lost opportunities for enterprise, free choice and commercial investment" (p3, 2009).

James Murdoch re-visited much of the criticism his father previously offered with regard to regulation of the media industry, referring to Ofcom specifically and the supposedly large-scale activities it undertakes. He stated that it is not rational for the authorities to manage the media industry in such a way. He used the example of the decision of the European Commission to ban a single broadcaster from securing the rights to the Premier League Football (the EU had ordered that, for competition reasons, at least two of the broadcast packages had to be won by a broadcaster other than Sky). Murdoch stated that Ofcom's assertion that it was not in the business of intervening was "...becoming impossible to believe in the face of so much evidence of the exact opposite" (2009,p7). It was a clear statement of disdain for Ofcom in light of a decision that directly affected the business of Sky, that was part owned and effectively controlled by News International.

Moving to the BBC, James Murdoch's comments were arguably more pointed and critical. He stated that "The BBC is dominant. Other organisations might rise and fall but the BBC's income is guaranteed and growing. In stark contrast, the other terrestrial networks are struggling" (2009, p8). Interestingly, James Murdoch pointed out that "...we no longer have a TV market, a newspaper market, a publishing market. We have, indisputably, an all-media market" (2009, p3). p It is for this very reason that this thesis asserts the need for a policy framework that looks to address ownership in a comprehensive manner; that takes into account not only how much of each media sector one media group owns, but to consider them in context of each other, and furthermore, the reach of such groups when it comes to online journalism and the availability of original news sources.

In the clearest statement of his overall approach, James Murdoch said “A heavily regulated environment with a large public sector crowds out the opportunity for profit, hinders the creation of new jobs, and dampens innovation in our sector” (2009, p9). Like his father, he was setting out a corporate and a personal political agenda that was hostile towards the BBC and regulators such as Ofcom, on both philosophical and self-interested commercial grounds, thus setting the groundwork for this study on editorial bias.

The potential to influence the public

It is often quoted and discussed that to prove the effects of negative reporting on an audience is notoriously difficult to establish. As discussed, this work does not assert that the negative reporting it has identified with regards to the BBC and Ofcom does indeed affect readers opinion of the respective organisations, but it does speak to the potential for such reporting to do so.

However, the impact of such report on readers opinion has been studied before. In 1989, S Barnett undertook a study on behalf of the Broadcasting Research Unit that looked to understand the impact of cross-media ownership on public opinion. Undertaken in the context of News International’s ownership of six of the nine available satellite channels due to be broadcast by the end of 1989, the study considered the opinions of readers of News International’s five newspapers with regards to media and broadcasting issues, and whether they were influenced by the newspaper’s parent organisations interest in new channels. Its focus was the comparison of the opinions of readers of News International newspapers compared with non-News International owned newspapers.

Barnett (1989, pi) states that the results of the study “...suggests the presence of a measurable effect on public opinion which goes beyond the acceptable boundaries of promoting the commercial interests of proprietors.” The study established this via an extensive survey that covered a many number of questions, including whether readers deemed certain changes to existing channels as a good idea, whether the level of supervision and regulation over the broadcast industry was appropriate, readers’ attitudes to new channel, and so on.

The study offers some key insights into the opinions of News International readers that are key to the central theme of this these. Firstly, Barnett's study found that readers of the News International newspapers were far less supportive of the BBC licence fee compared with readers of non-News International owned newspapers:

"The BBC licence fee has majority support amongst viewers as a whole: 49% approve of it as a means of funding BBC television, while 44% disapprove. By a substantial margin, the majority amongst News International readers is reversed: over half, 56%, oppose the licence fee compared to 37% who approve it" (Barnett, 1989, pii).

Barnett's study also considered audience opinions of the regulation and policies surrounding the broadcast industry, which again, were clearly influenced by the parent organisations approach to reporting on such matters. Barnett (1989, piii) explains:

"Readership of newspapers owned by News International is irrefutably associated with opinions about broadcasting policy which are out of step with the population as a whole. Such readers tend to be more opposed to current and future regulation of commercial channels; more hostile to existing terrestrial channels; better disposed to new channels, with higher expectations of their quality; and more critical of the licence fee."

While the impact on audience opinion is not the primary focus of this thesis, the findings of Barnett's study provide strong indication that the negative reporting identified via the content analysis in this work would have likely had a similar effect. Furthermore, it provides strong and reliable evidence that such negative reporting that aims to be persuasive in pursuit of the parent organisation's corporate agenda. Barnett (1989, p19) summarises the study as follows:

"Overwhelmingly, the weight of this evidence suggests that the editorial and reporting approach to broadcasting matters being pursued by News International is having a material effect on the opinions of readers... Most reporting and editorial comment involving the BBC has been relentlessly negative, whether dealing with the iniquity of licence fee levels; programme content; payment to staff; or Government intervention

in contentious programming. Similarly, both news and editorial columns have warmly embraced the concepts of deregulation and choice, frequently advertising the new viewing opportunities available through satellite channels and criticising any recommendation which involve regulation of these channels.”

The study identifies an obvious and concerning trend of reporting that aims to persuade the readers against both the BBC and broadcast regulators, both of which represented either significant competition in a market in which the newspapers parent organisation, News International, was looking to participate.

Naturally, it begs the question of how any such influence over reader opinion will have a tangible effect on News International's business and its ability to participate in the UK broadcast markets. As discussed earlier in this work, it can have such tangible effects in one of two ways. Firstly, persuading the reader against the BBC, or certain areas of regulation and policy, may have an impact on that readers' choice of vote in an election; for example, if a particular party is promising to review the BBC licence fee should it be voted into power, the News International readers may be more inclined to vote for that party given the continuously negative rhetoric about the licence fee that they will have read in their daily newspaper.

Secondly, should the News International newspapers continuously print negative content regarding the BBC or certain areas of regulation, or both, the politicians may be more inclined to agree policies or initiatives that are aligned with News International's desires within these areas so as to ensure its support when it comes to an election. The effects of reporting on election outcomes are widely discussed in a number of academic sources; securing the support of popular newspapers, such as those owned by News International, can help a political party win an election, and as such is often considered the reason that politicians will look to remain 'in favour' with proprietors like Rupert Murdoch.

Colin Seymour-Ure (1997) explored the effects of the national press reporting on the 1997 general election. His study looked at the partisanship of each newspaper during the 1992 election, if and how they changed, and the type of editorial commentary each published in the run up to the 1997 election. He explained that leading up to the 1997

election the UK newspapers' attitudes and approaches came under a lot of scrutiny, and that editorial partisanship became a political issue.

He discussed the 'unclear' influences that would have been a factor in a newspaper's decision with regard to which political party to support. Noting that readers tend to share the papers' political views, it would then become a somewhat risky decision for a paper to move away from long-standing support for one particular party, given it could alienate some of its loyal readers. In discussing the Sun in particular, Seymoure-Ure notes that its readers were typically from the social classes that Labour considered as its constituency, and yet The Sun had chosen to back the Conservatives during the Thatcher and Major reign. He questioned whether, given Labour's sharp rise in popularity leading up to the 1997 election, could the Sun afford to go on supporting the Conservatives, and furthermore, risk losing irritated readers to its main competitor, The Daily Mail.

Seymoure-Ure reports that The Sun did indeed lose readers, and sales fell by 204,000; while the Editors at the time were not said to be pleased with the decision to change as instructed to do so by Murdoch, it was recognised that to support the Conservatives during a 'Labour landslide' would have resulted in worse losses. His commercial motives were therefore clear with regard to ensuring maintained readership and sales. However, Seymoure-Ure states that Murdoch's 'policy motive' could only be inferred, though it was not unreasonable to assume it played a role in his decision. "His media empire would be at risk from controls on concentration and cross-ownership, including the coming digital TV systems... His tabloid papers would also be hit by privacy legislation... Tony Blair was said not to have done a deal but certainly to have indicated that if Murdoch behaved responsibly, his British interests would not be damaged" (1997, p592).

This revisits one of the themes explored in chapter three, 'Murdoch and News Corporation', whereby Murdoch has been well known to change his political allegiance to suit his business needs, and that knowing he could secure the support of Tony Blair at a time when there was the potential for policy decisions that would likely be to the detriment of his plans for commercial expansion, he assigned his newspapers' political support accordingly. However, there is also an alternative view to be considered, as

explained by McChesney (2013) and also referenced in chapter three, that Murdoch likes winners. Contrary to the theory that his assignment of political support amongst his newspapers is what secured Blair's win, McChesney (2013) considers that in fact Murdoch foresaw the likely outcome of the election, and needing the support of the winner, chose to support the Labour party instead move his support to the Labour Party.

Seymoure-Ure's study focussed on the language used, and percentage of articles that were attributed to certain issues, for editorial pieces only. This was likely due to in part to the nature of an editorial being the legitimate place in which a newspaper can establish its owners' voice and opinion, as opposed to simply reporting the facts (which is what one would hope 'news' stories would do). This thesis, however, includes empirical evidence that looked at all types of articles including news and editorial, and whether they were reporting positive, negative or neutral messaging. We might normally expect a newspaper to be neutral in its news stories, confining its negative or positive opinions to the editorial pieces.

However, as this study proves, negative messages about the subject matter were conveyed in the news stories as well as editorial, and indeed the 'others' (i.e. a piece in the sports section). As outlined in the 'key findings' section at the beginning of this chapter, 47% of the 'news' stories about the BBC in the News International papers were categorised as negative, vs 28% categorised as the same in the non-News International. 70% of the editorials were categorised as negative. This would indicate that the ideologies of the newspaper, or indeed the newspaper group given the correlation across the News International newspapers, have bled into the news reporting. The demarcation between news and editorial has become blurred. Results for Ofcom were not quite as clear-cut, as was expected. Only 9% of the News International news stories about Ofcom were negative, and less than 8% for the editorials. That being said, when considering the total number of negative articles about Ofcom across all six newspapers (News International owned and non-News International owned), News International was responsible for publishing 78%.

Des Freedman reflects on the press coverage of the 1997 election, stating it was just as much Blair who chose to make peace with media moguls such as Murdoch, as it

was Murdoch's choice to support him and persuade him away from Labour's manifesto proposals with regard to a monopolies and mergers investigation into media concentration in the UK. However, Freedman asserts that "the argument that Labour's defeat in 1992 was due to tabloid hostility has been decisively rejected" (2014, p93); there is no concrete evidence to support the theory that the press have such an influence on the public vote in an election.

During the 2015 election, following a sustained and scathing attack on the Labour party in the press, the Conservatives unexpectedly won an overall majority. However, as Barnett explains it is well known that voter 'effects' research is questionable, and so it is not possible to make solid assertions with regard to the impact of the press on the public's decision; the same issue can be found with this study (2015, p91). While it can confidently claim to have found a clear editorial bias in News International reporting about the BBC, it cannot infer a direct causal link with readers' opinion of the BBC; a recognised limitation of this study.

However, Barnett (2015) does explain that there are a number of factors that point to the mitigation of any argument that the decline in newspaper readership as a result of the 'new digital environment' means a 'waning influence'. Firstly, online news sites have broadened the reach of the already existing news providers in the UK; this issue was explored in detail in chapter two and suggests that traditional news providers still remain dominant in overall reach. This is further supported by the Media Reform Coalition 2019 report 'Who Owns the News' that outlined similar findings; however, Barnett (2015) notes that it has to be considered whether the metrics for online readership can really be counted as thus, as an online 'view' does not necessarily mean the content has been consumed.

Furthermore, through their exploitation of social media and online platforms, journalists and commentators have the ability to further promote opinions and information from personal and professional 'accounts' online (i.e. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram). Similarly, there is no mechanism at present that can provide reliable data regarding the influence this has on the reader (i.e. Does 'following' journalists and commentators encourage readers to turn to the newspaper or TV they are employed by?) Barnett (2015, p91) concludes on this point that while social media has changed the way in

which a growing number of people engage with content, it remains unknown whether social media platforms are able to compete with the power of the 'one-to-many' model of the traditional mass media.

Barnett also argues that, whether or not the press has any real influence on voter decision, they do have the ability to 'drive the agenda'. This in itself affords them considerable power, particularly during an election campaign, as it will determine which issues are discussed and therefore what information is put forward to the public. The 2015 election was often described as a 'social media election', however Barnett asserts "the UK press therefore still dominates Britain's national conversation and was instrumental in setting the campaign agenda. Its influence operates in inchoate and intangible ways which defies empirical measurement..²⁷." (Barnett, 2015). If applied in the context of reporting on the BBC and Ofcom, while it cannot or has not been proven that News International's overtly negative coverage would have an impact on the reader, we can at least hypothesise that they would have been influential in driving an anti-BBC and anti-Ofcom agenda within the news arena.

The issue of negative reporting and its potential to influence the public is not only concerned with elections; there are other examples of issues covered in the press in a consistently negative way that have had the potential to damage society. The News Corporation owned newspaper coverage of climate change has been considered and referenced by a number of authors and academics. David McKnight states that "News Corporation had been a major outlet of climate change denial in the ten years before its owners' 2007 'conversion'. Moreover, Murdoch himself had been personally involved in the Cato Institute, a Washington based think tank that specialised in the denial; in 1997, he joined its board" (2013, p197).

McKnight further states that "in the decade before Murdoch's 2007 climate change 'conversion', almost all of Fox news' 'voice-of-authority' program hosts routinely scorned the idea of global warming and criticised those who accepted it. Climate change was presented as merely a political issue" (op cit). McKnight notes that the

²⁷ <https://inform.org/2015/05/15/four-reasons-why-a-partisan-press-helped-win-it-for-the-tories-steven-barnett/>

Murdoch-owned New York Post also published stories with regard to climate change being an over-exaggerated, 'non-scientific' issue, but that "Murdochian climate change scepticism was not confined to the United States." The British Murdoch-owned newspapers also included climate change scepticism, with the Sun including various columnists who wrote polemical pieces claiming climate change to be a 'false-science' or 'tax-raising' scheme.

McKnight explains that Murdoch's erratic approach to climate change as an issue was particularly revealing of the power exercised by such powerful conglomerates with access to a global audience: "At its most basic, it demonstrates that News Corporation adopts policy attitudes to particular issues and then campaigns on those issues. When the parent company and its CEO announce such attitudes, it is expected to affect the kind of news and opinion published or broadcast by its media outlets." (2013, p209). McKnight also discuss the 'policy attitude' Murdoch and his media outlets took with regard to the Iraq war. His journalists and editors were said to have rallied behind him to support his message, and even went as far as to consistently publish unsubstantiated claims that Iraq had a meaningful connection with the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York. McKnight states that "it simply bypassed the normal process of trying to establish facts, understand them and convey them to readers" (2013, p210).

Both examples align with the premise upon which this thesis and the hypothesis is based; that a concentration of ownership in the hands of a powerful media mogul can lead to a sustained level of reporting driven by the commercial and/or personal interests of the owner, and can therefore contribute to the degradation of the democratic process. J Lidberg (2019) discusses this in his writings for the online blog 'The Conversation', in which he observes the press coverage of the 2019 Australian general election, claiming it to be deeply partisan in such a way that it must be entrenched within News Corporation as a global entity. Lidberg (2019) explains that "...if the dominant outlet in such a media landscape decides to wholeheartedly back one side of politics, it will undoubtedly impact the tenor of a campaign and skew the information voters rely on to make up their minds."

The Potential to influence policy makers

In April 2019 the New York Times published the results of its six-month investigation into how the Murdoch family turned their media outlets into 'right-wing political influence machines that have destabilised democracy in North America, Europe and Australia' (Stack, 2019). The investigation included 150 interviews with people across three continents who either knew the family intimately, helped the family achieve their aims, or fought against the family in some form. Much of it focused on the election of President Trump in 2016; a success in part credited to the strong support of the Murdoch-owned Fox News channel, and 'Brexit', again credited in part to the sustained reporting in the Murdoch-owned newspaper The Sun (Murdoch is well known for his dislike of the European Union).

Stack (2019) makes strong assertions with regard to the influence and power that the Murdoch's wield over the political systems in those countries News Corporation predominantly operates in: The United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. He argues that "...to see Fox News as an arm of the Trump White House risks missing the larger picture. It may be more accurate to say that the White House - just like the prime ministers' offices in Britain and Australia - is just one tool among many that his family uses to exert influence over world events." He believes that the level of power and influence the Murdochs have gained is as a result of the culmination of years' worth of 'transactional relationships with elected officials'. A recurring theme identified in chapter one, 'Media and Democracy', and chapter three, 'Rupert Murdoch and News International', Stack agrees with the consensus that Murdoch owes much of his success to his relationships with prime ministers and presidents, even if he can rightly claim to have 'never asked a prime minister for anything'. Much like the findings of the Leveson inquiry, Stack states that "...press barons don't have to ask when their media outlets can broadcast their desires. Politicians know what Murdoch wants, and they know what he can deliver: the base, their voters – power" (Stack, 2019).

A number of examples of Murdoch using the power of his press to express his desires, and politicians responding accordingly, have been discussed in this work. Firstly, there is the Peacock Committee. The committee was set up in 1985 by then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to assess the possibility of advertising revenue as a funding model for the BBC, so as to eradicate the existing guaranteed funding from

the licence fee. It was also said to be created as a result of Thatcher's ideological misgivings about the BBC, its size and funding, and her desire to move the broadcasting industry towards a commercially driven, free market model. It was a fortunate coincidence that Murdoch shared very similar ideological misgivings and free market desires.

It was even more fortunate that the same time that Thatcher decided to set up and announce the Peacock Committee, Murdoch's press (in particular The Times) began to run a scathing campaign against the BBC, condemning its requests for a rise in the licence fee, and questioning the need for the broadcaster in Britain at all. As expected, the newspaper denied that the negative reporting had anything to do with its parent organisation's opinion on the matter. However, as Barnett and Curry (1994, p22) stated "although the editor, Charles Douglas-Home, angrily denied any proprietorial interference, it was scarcely credible that the correspondence with his boss's interests as pure accident."

Another example comes in the form of the Labour party's media policy 'volte-face' in the 1990s, just as Tony Blair was set to come into power. In contrast to the Conservative government that had held office for a long time under Thatcher, Labour had lobbied against the concentration of power within the media industry and had even tried to introduce bills to prevent proprietors from owning more than one national newspaper. However, as Blair came into the running to be the next Prime Minister, it is said that an 'understanding' was reached between himself and Murdoch.

McKnight (2012, p160) explains that Murdoch realised Blair represented less of a threat to his organisation than his predecessor, John Major, and Blair realised that he needed the support of Murdoch's press to win. Suspicions of such an agreement between the pair were further fuelled when in 1995 an inquiry was launched by the Monopolies and Mergers commission to examine Murdoch's dominance in the cable and satellite television market; in traditional Labour style, the inquiry was supported by a Labour shadow minister, however, in contrast to what was expected of Labour, the minister was 'ordered' to withdraw his support by Blair's office.

If there was any doubt of an alliance between Murdoch and Blair, it was thought to be

all but confirmed when it came to the drafting of the Communications Act 2003. The draft bill that preceded the act was introduced under a Labour government, with Tony Blair as Prime Minister. The bill was deemed as 'de-regulatory', and in spite of Labour's history of lobbying against concentrated power in the media industry, the bill offered a number of very fortunate relaxations in regulation from which Murdoch stood to gain enormously. Of particular note, Murdoch stood to gain from two particular clauses that would see the removal of restrictions on national newspaper owners purchasing Channel Five (which would allow Murdoch to enter the terrestrial broadcasting market), and the removal of the ban on foreign ownership of UK broadcasters.

Freedman (2008, p118) explains that coincidentally, during the time the bill was being drafted, BskyB lobbyists met with Downing Street officials on six different occasions seeking to gain assurance that plurality concerns would not be used to block mergers, and that there would not be a change in approach to the proposed new rules allowing the purchase of Channel Five. It was felt at the time that Labour were proposing such rules so as to appease Murdoch, whose newspapers had helped Labour win the 1997 election and had continued to support since then. In the end, Labour had to compromise in light of considerable dissent within the House of Lords and included a 'plurality test' for mergers and acquisitions. However, many doubted the robustness of the test being included in the Communications Act 2003, as historically proprietors such as Murdoch had been successful in exerting influence persuading Prime Ministers to waive protocol in their favour.

During the Leveson inquiry, a number of witnesses gave statements supporting the view that powerful media moguls, and Rupert Murdoch in particular, have the ability to exert considerable influence over politicians and prime ministers. Conservative MP Jonathan Aitken stated, "One could give numerous examples of resignations by reporters, of the Australian Press Council upholding allegations of bias by Murdoch papers in their political reporting and of Mr Murdoch openly pushing his commercial interests by using his newspaper powers." This supports the theory that the 'Murdoch approach' with regard to the use of his media holding to exert influence is common

across all his media outlets, regardless of which country they operate in, and what type of regulatory framework they are subject to.

Lord Justice Leveson concluded that there is no evidence the owner of The Times and The Sun made any explicit deals with prime ministers in return for support from his newspapers; however, he asserted that politicians were competing for Mr Murdoch's support and knew that "taking him on" would likely lead to a backlash from his popular press titles: "Sometimes the very greatest power is exercised without having to ask, because to ask would be to state the blindingly obvious and thereby diminish the very power which is being displayed," he wrote. "Just as Mr Murdoch's editors knew the basic ground-rules, so did politicians... The language of trades and deals is far too crude in this context. In their discussions with him, whether directly or by proxy, politicians knew that the prize was personal and political support in his mass circulation newspapers" (P1432, 2011).

The judge said prime ministers would appreciate the consequences of "adopting policies which would damage Mr Murdoch's commercial interests" and "disturbing the status quo" by bringing in press regulation. He found that "politicians' interests... would find themselves highly aligned with Mr Murdoch's" (op cit), even if the newspaper owner never asked a single favour of them.

Chapter three of this thesis details the many prime ministers Murdoch has enjoyed friendships with; friendships that have often been of the utmost advantage to Murdoch and his global expansion plans. Following the failure of their original bid for total control of BskyB in 2010-11, the Murdochs decided to try again in 2016, and once again sought to secure the loyalties of a prime minister to ensure it would happen. Stack (2019) discusses the friendship James Murdoch struck up with then Prime Minister David Cameron, stating that "...the aims of both parties were clear. Cameron wanted the support of the Murdochs. James wanted Ofcom, the British regulatory agency that would rule on whether the Murdochs were "fit and proper" operators of

Sky, out of his way²⁸.” When Cameron publicly promised that under a Conservative government Ofcom would ‘cease to exist’, James Murdoch privately promised Cameron that the most popular of the Murdoch owned newspapers, The Sun, would reverse its 12-year stance of supporting the Labour Party and put its full weight behind the Conservatives and Cameron instead. This assumption forms the crux of this research; that where there is the potential for commercial gain, the Murdochs will use the full force of his political power via his newspapers, be it via the sustained criticism of a competitor in news content, the support of a political party and/ or leader, or both.

Rupert Murdoch has long been known for disliking the incumbent nature of the regulators in Britain, just as he has long been known for his dislike of the BBC. However, this assertion with regard to James Murdoch’s needing Ofcom ‘out of his way’ provides an apt description of the potential, and likely, motivations on the part of the Murdochs when it comes to criticising Ofcom in their British newspapers. The results of this research clearly identify an upward trend in negative reporting on the part of the News International newspapers on the lead up to and immediately after David Cameron’s statement with regard to Ofcom ‘ceasing to exist’ should the Conservatives win the 2010 general election. This was in stark contrast to a consistently low level of negative reporting in the non-News International owned newspapers (the comparative counterparts).

The literature review touched upon ‘other areas’ of reporting in the Murdoch-owned press, particularly in the US, that was seen to be out of touch with general opinion, but closely aligned with Rupert Murdoch’s personal and political agenda. Roy Greenslade (2003) wrote about the commonalities that can be found in the reporting in the 175 Murdoch-owned newspapers around the world. Greenslade reported that as Chief Executive of News Corporation, Murdoch owned “...more than 175 titles in three continents, publishes million papers a week and dominates the newspaper markets in Britain, Australia and New Zealand. His television reach is greater still, but broadcasting - even when less regulated than in Britain - is not so plainly partisan, it is newspapers which set the agenda”. Greenslade (2003) asserts that the agenda

²⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/03/magazine/james-murdoch-lachlan-succession.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=68E6DF32159D812036FC57E97BC2E6C6&gwt=pay&assetType=REGIWALL>

setting, Murdoch-owned newspapers took a unified approach to promoting the views of Murdoch with regard to the Iraq War: "...after an exhaustive survey of the highest-selling and most influential papers across the world owned by Murdoch's News Corporation, it is clear that all are singing from the same hymn sheet.²⁹" There was no doubt as to Murdoch's personal opinion on the war thanks to an interview he gave to an Australian magazine, 'The Bulletin', in which he clearly stated he was pro-war, and very supportive of the approach taken by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair and President Bush.

In keeping with the findings of McKnight (2013) with regard to the Murdoch-owned media outlets reporting on climate change and the Iraq war, Stack (2019) too claims that the Murdoch-owned media have continuously looked to push messages that suit the agenda of their owner, resulting in such instances as undermining efforts to combat climate change. Stack quotes a study by the Democratic firm 'Navigation Research' that states only 12 percent of Fox News viewers believe that climate change is a man-made problem, as opposed to 62 percent of non-Fox news viewers. Furthermore, as observed in an article by Stephen Glover for The Spectator³⁰, Murdoch's press not only took a vehemently pro-war stance, but they also took the opportunity to criticise the BBC for its reporting on the war. Murdoch's newspapers managed to champion two of their proprietor's opinions and/or ideological beliefs; the need for the war in Iraq, coupled with fierce criticism of the BBC. Unsurprisingly, Murdoch's press has also been known to criticise or undermine the BBC's coverage of climate change.

Referring to the 'Brexit' issue, Stack (2019) not only claims that Murdoch had a hand in the final decision for Britain to leave the EU via the Sun's pro-Brexit stance, but in discussing why Murdoch himself was 'anti-EU', he stated in an interview with the Evening Standard, "when I go into Downing Street, they do what I say; when I go to Brussels, they take no notice." Stack claims this to be the result of the Murdoch's world view that "... the government was the enemy of an independent media and a business model that depended nonetheless on government intervention to advance his interests and undermine those of his competitors. The Murdoch dynasty draws no

²⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2003/feb/17/mondaymediasection.iraq>

³⁰ <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-sinister-reason-why-the-murdoch-press-is-attacking-the-bbc>

lines among politics, money and power; they all work together seamlessly in service of the overarching goal of imperial expansion.”

If Murdoch and News International can be successful in this, it lends distinct credibility to the hypothesis upon which this thesis is based; that Murdoch and News International use sustained negative reporting that is critical of such organisations as the BBC and Ofcom to undermine their position in the mind of the public and the policy makers. The issue becomes more serious in nature where News International is communicating directly with the public in such a way that undermines those organisations that are responsible for the provision of news and content according to a strictly public service remit, or those that are responsible for the regulation of much of the market in which News International itself operates.

Conclusion

The hypothesis and research questions for this piece of work were as follows:

1. Does an agenda exist in News International’s publications that seek to undermine organisations and competitors, which in some way interfere with News International’s global expansion plans, specifically focusing on:

- Coverage of the BBC, its funding, structure, governance and ethos;
- Coverage relating to the notion of an independent regulator and Ofcom itself;

focussing on coverage of Ofcom’s legitimacy, governance, structure and decision making.

2. To what extent is this agenda manifested in News International’s publications, both through news stories and opinion i.e. The selection of news stories and the way they are reported.

The key findings from the empirical evidence (drawn from the content analysis) are summarised below. All statements are made in the context of the comparison between the News International owned newspapers compared with the equal standing, non-News International owned newspapers:

- News International published a far greater number of articles about the BBC & Ofcom overall
- News International published a far greater percentage of negative articles about both the BBC and Ofcom
- 47% of the articles News International published about the BBC were negative, compared to only 11% of those published about Ofcom; in both cases, News International published twice the number of negative articles than that of its counterpart newspapers
- In both cases, News International published a greater percentage of those articles that were negative and featured the BBC or Ofcom as the primary focus of the article
- In both cases, News International published a greater percentage of unsourced articles
- 42% of the News International 'news' stories about the BBC were negative, compared with 23% in the comparative newspapers
- 70% of the News International editorials about the BBC were negative, compared with 26% in the comparative newspapers
- 10% of the News International 'news' stories about Ofcom were negative, compared with 2% in the comparative newspapers
- 11% of the News International editorials about Ofcom were negative, compared with 10% in the comparative newspapers.

The results identify a clear, negative bias in the reporting of News International with regard to both the BBC and Ofcom; though as outlined in the results chapter, there is a more obvious negative bias towards the BBC. The literature review identified a number of areas of behaviour on the part of Murdoch and News International that demonstrates an aggressive approach to competitors and/or policy makers where it poses a threat to the corporation's expansion plans. The increased level of negative reporting about the BBC as a direct competitor, and one that represents a 'protected' institution that forms part of the elite British establishment Murdoch abhors, demonstrates support for these assertions. Equally, Ofcom being a regulatory authority that had the potential to stand in the way of News International's plans for expansion, as well as a representation of what Murdoch dislikes with regard to the fundamental premise of regulation and its restriction of a completely free market in

which he would likely dominate has made it another target.

The volume and percentage of negative stories highlights the extent to which Murdoch's agenda has manifested itself. The News International newspapers published a far greater number of stories about the BBC and Ofcom overall. Furthermore, the News International newspapers chose to publish a greater number of critical stories relating to the BBC or Ofcom than their non-News International counterparts. Consideration of further work that could be undertaken around language and types of issues covered forms part of the recommendations that are discussed further on in this chapter.

As identified in the analysis of the current policy framework, policy has, to date, lacked the required mechanisms to ensure ownership levels remain at an appropriate measure so as to avoid a newspaper market in which one or two newspaper groups can dominate. This research proves that News International owning a number of titles with separate editorial departments does not mitigate the potential for sustained criticism that is clearly influenced or affected by the views of the parent company and/or its owner. Furthermore, it supports the hypothesis that plurality and ownership legislation has not, to date, been able to address the ability of media businesses to exploit the scale of their enterprises to promote their own commercial interests and initiatives while denigrating their competitors. Legislation needs to address the percentage of ownership of the media market as a whole that a newspaper group holds as well as the percentage of the market it can reach. Moreover, given the issues identified in chapter two that considers the 'new digital environment' with regards to traditional news publishers dominating online news digital and social media sources, legislation and policy needs to do more to ensure the plurality of original news production so as to ensure there is no threat to the democratic process.

Writing about the evidence he submitted to Lord Justice Leveson ahead of the Leveson Inquiry, Julian Petley (2012) argues that at present the notion of 'press freedom' is applied in the context of the freedom of press owners and their ability to communicate with the public without the constraints of statutory regulation. The concept of 'freedom' is not in turn considered in the context of the reader who, as discussed in Chapter One, is heavily reliant on press content in order to function in a

democratic society. Petley (2012, p532) argues that the issue lies in the press' definition of freedom of expression, and the assumption that this applies to newspapers in the same way it does to an individual:

“In this view of freedom of expression, it is the interests of the press, not of its readers nor of the subjects of its coverage, which are fundamental. Such a view is based (albeit implicitly) on the property rights of press owners, on ‘free market’ economic theory, and on the closely related notion of the press as a marketplace of ideas”.

As discussed in Chapter four, if freedom of expression can be considered to be a fundamental right of the press, and the press play a fundamental role in the democratic process, the principles of ‘free market’ economic theory surely cannot be applied. Efficiency in media markets has for a long time depended on vertical and horizontal integration that has seen extensive consolidation within the market, compounded by the effects of declining readerships and the new digital environment. The press cannot necessarily produce goods of a quality that meet the criteria required by a democracy while also looking to produce goods that meet the criteria set by the advertisers keeping them in business.

This forms part of the problem of the ‘market model’ of the ‘free press’ in the UK. It operates according to a commercial business model that is profit driven while trying to deliver a public service product. Arguably, the press is therefore a slave to two masters; the advertisers, and the public. But where only one master can be served, the press will aim to first serve the needs of their business. Petley (2012, p533) discusses this where he quotes Sparks (1999) as stating:

“Newspapers in Britain are first and foremost businesses. They do not exist to report the news, to act as watchdogs for the public, to be a check on the doings of the government, to defend the ordinary citizen against the abuses of power, to unearth scandals or to do any of the other fine and noble things that are sometimes claimed for the press. They exist to make money, just as any other business does. To the extent that they discharge any of their public functions, they do so in order to succeed as a business.”

Petley (2012, p533) states that this becomes most apparent in the popular newspapers, i.e. the tabloid press, and that is certainly found to be the case in this research where the Murdoch-Owned newspapers were reporting negatively on the BBC. The Sun published the largest percentage of negative articles about the BBC (56%), though it was closely followed by The Times (42%) and the Sunday Times (46%). However, in this scenario the Murdoch-owned newspapers were not necessarily aiming to serve advertisers (there is no suggestion in the material reviewed that this would be the case), but rather the commercial agenda of the business and/ or owner by undermining a direct competitor. Petley (2012, p534) argues:

“...market power can be as damaging and corrosive as government power of the democratic purposes which newspapers are supposed to serve. Those who argue that press freedom is best served by the operations of the ‘free market’ are, frankly, either entirely blind to the shortcomings of actually existing markets or dogmatically wedded to the notion that the market is always a better means of allocating resources than any of the alternatives on offer, or both.”

Some insight into Murdoch’s attitude towards the issues discussed in this thesis can be derived from the evidence he gave to the Leveson Inquiry. When asked if it was correct that he was ‘completely oblivious’ to the commercial benefits to his company of a particular party winning an election, he responded that he was, ‘absolutely’. Murdoch stated, “I have no commercial interests except the newspaper. I love newspapers...I take a particularly strong pride in the fact that we have never pushed our commercial interests in our newspapers.”

This thesis asserts that, based on the evidence collected via the content analysis, Rupert Murdoch has used his newspapers to promote his commercial interests via the sustained criticism of the BBC and Ofcom. The number of negative articles published about both entities in comparison with the equal standing, non-News International owned comparative newspapers provides overwhelming evidence for this statement.

When asked during the Leveson inquiry if he did not have some duty to answer to the shareholders of his company to further its best interests (which would be its business

interests given it is a commercial, profit driven entity), Murdoch responded that his shareholders would have liked him to 'get rid of all' (meaning his newspapers). As discussed in chapter three, Murdoch has run some of his newspapers at a loss, a controversial choice from a business and economic perspective. It can be argued that it is to his credit that he does this, for it allows the continued provision of news content available to the public from a greater number of sources. Conversely, it also enables him to ensure he has a broad and wide-reaching ability to push forward his agenda.

Previous Prime Minister Tony Blair said in his witness statement to the Leveson inquiry "...certain newspapers are used by their owners or editors as instruments of political power... in which the boundary between news and comment is deliberately blurred. The Sun and the Mail frankly are the two most powerful of the papers, and the Sun in particular because it is prepared to shift, it makes it all the more important..."

The results derived from this research support this statement; that the boundaries between news and comment are deliberately blurred, and they are done so in order to solidify the message. In this case, it was done so as to reinforce negativity about the BBC and Ofcom, but also highlights the potential for reinforced messaging about much larger issues that may have direct and serious impact on the democratic process.

Arsenault and Castells' 2008 study on 'Switching Power' liken Murdoch's powerful position in the societies in which he operates (and in which his media dominate) to a 'network switch'. They argue that if society can be considered at the level of 'networked forms of organisation', Murdoch's ability to "...move between and to connect (or disconnect) critical nodes between political, media and economic networks creates a circuit that compounds his power to influence multiple networks, giving him disproportionate control over the networks of society as a whole." (2008, p501).

As touched upon in this thesis, they too note the difficulty of asserting whether Murdoch and his News Corporation media holdings have the ability to influence public opinion, which is notoriously difficult to measure and assess. All that can be reasonably measured, and is done so in this thesis, is a media corporation and/or owner's ability to do so; and it is this potential that arguably should be suitably restrained by adequate policies and regulatory frameworks, not least because of the

power of perceived influence. As Arsenault and Castells' (2008, p501) assert, "...the perception that Murdoch, via his editorial control over his properties, wields disproportionate control over public opinion provides him with considerable political leverage, which in turn advances the expansion of NewsCorp."

If it is arguable that the potential for a dominant voice in the media landscape in Britain is not suitably contained at present, the issue surely becomes more prevalent as news content moves online and is subject to algorithms and gate keeper control. The Media Reform Coalition (2019, p1) state that "...just three companies (News UK, DMG and Reach) dominate 83% of the national newspaper market (up from 71% in 2015). This is a market that may be shrinking in terms of print circulation but, assisted by large online audiences, is crucial when it comes to setting the agenda for the rest of the news media. When online readers are included, just five companies (News UK, Reach, Guardian and Telegraph) dominate some 80% of market share (up from 79% in 2015)." Based on MRC information to date, there has been a similar trend of consolidation and increased market share among the traditional, major news providers online.

Sumpter (2018) examines how algorithms affect and interact with user's online news feeds on social media, and the potential for the way in which these algorithms work to further promote certain news stories or areas of interest. Sumpter (2018, p138-139) uses the example of Facebook, explaining that a user's news feed is built by an algorithm that displays news stories based on the choices a user makes i.e. if the user 'likes', 'shares' or comments on a news story from The Sun, the algorithm will recognise this and 'suggest' further news content from the sun. Equally, if a user likes or comments on a news story about, for example, 'Brexit and the European Union, the algorithm will select further news stories on this topic to populate the users feed.

If such examples were to be applied in the context of this thesis, the issues explored could become exasperated because of this algorithmic technology. If the user clicks on, likes or shares a story from The Sun, the algorithm is automatically going to populate their feed with more content from that same newspaper. Equally, if the user does the same with a news story that is critical of, for example, the BBC licence fee, the same algorithm will apply the same logic and promote further, similar content in

the user's feed. Therefore, the user is not only subject to the biased, persuasive reporting found to be published by The Sun with regards to the BBC, but the user also becomes subject to the effects of an algorithm that will look to further promote such content, creating what Sumpter (2018) describes as the 'echo chamber' effect.

This argument is, of course, subject to a measure of challenge: it assumes the user will only interact with content from one news provider, when in fact it is likely they will do so with more than one, and the algorithm will factor in content from a number of sources into their daily feed. Additionally, its effects are based on the premise that Murdoch's newspapers are dominant online, and therefore more likely to be liked or shared on social media sites such as Facebook. While it is possible to establish what reach and what following a newspaper has online, metrics with regard to how many times a specific story (i.e. an article from The Sun regarding the BBC licence fee) have been clicked on, liked or shared are hard to come by.

It has already been established via the aforementioned work of the Media Reform Coalition (2019) that evidences News UK as being one of the five media organisations that enjoy 80% of the news market share (including online readers). Ofcom's 2019 report³¹ on news consumption shows the different news organisations 'following' on social media, broken down by platform (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat). In all cases the BBC has the highest share of followers, with 56% on Facebook and 54% on Twitter. The BBC is closely followed by Sky News. The Sun is the only of Rupert Murdoch's newspapers to have a following on three of the four platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat), and is one of only a handful of newspapers that do.

The move towards 'online' provides media companies with a limitless, popular, evolving and growing platform upon which to publish. Those global media companies with well-established wealth and power, such as News Corporation, are able to further their presence and dominance by making deals such as that between NewsCorp and Google; deals that will allow for their content to be the first to appear in users 'feeds'. If there is a trend towards the user becoming less engaged with the source of the news

³¹ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/157914/uk-news-consumption-2019-report.pdf

content they consume, this becomes a more dangerous threat to democracy. Careful consideration will need to be given to the dominant news providers in the coming years to understand their continuing potential to influence the public and the news agenda.

In Summary...

Concentration of media ownership is problematic not just because a single media proprietor can potentially wield enormous power and influence over popular opinion, political debate and policy-makers' decisions, but also because that power can be exploited to distort policy thinking with inaccurate or biased information. Thus, one corporation can potentially exert considerable influence over government both because of their ability to influence political debate and because of government fears (whether justified or not) that they can change voters' opinions. Moreover, the greater the economic power, the greater the potential of dominant owners to both influence and intimidate governments, and the greater the potential threat to democracy. There is, therefore, a dual element to the theory behind this research: a media conglomerate can reinforce its own dominance by using its media outlets to pursue a self-serving business-related agenda and thus influence public as well as political opinion.

Without doubt, one of the most dominant news operations in the English-speaking world has been operated for almost five decades by Rupert Murdoch. In Mahler and Rutenberg's (2019)³² 'Times Investigation into Murdoch and his family' they cite Murdoch's UK tabloid The Sun as leading the press campaign that was highly influential in producing the 'Brexit' vote, where the country voted to leave the European Union. Murdoch has long been renowned for his hostility towards the EU: journalist Anthony Hilton (2016) wrote in the Independent that when he interviewed Murdoch and asked why he was opposed to the European Union, Murdoch replied that "when I go into 10 Downing Street they do what I say; when I go to Brussels they take no notice³³".

In the US Murdoch owns a number of newspapers, publications and a popular

³² <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/03/magazine/rupert-murdoch-fox-news-trump.html>

³³ <https://www.standard.co.uk/comment/comment/anthony-hilton-stay-or-go-the-lack-of-solid-facts-means-it-s-all-a-leap-of-faith-a3189151.html>

television network. As in the UK, he exploits his media holdings to advance his worldview. Mahler and Rutenberg (2019) credit Murdoch and his Fox News Channel with helping to ensure Donald Trump won the presidential election in 2016: *“His 24-hour news-and-opinion network, the Fox News Channel, had by then fused with President Trump and his base of hard-core supporters, giving Murdoch an unparalleled degree of influence over the world’s most powerful democracy.”*³⁴

In Australia Murdoch is also believed to wield considerable influence over national politics, most recently when his newspapers launched a heavily negative campaign against the Australian Prime Minister Turnbull, which resulted in his resignation. Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd wrote for the Guardian of the *“gradual erosion of our democracy itself through a growing “pay for play” culture from financial donations to political parties, an increasing assault on the independence of the public service and the abuse of monopolistic media power”* (2019)³⁵.

More recently, anxieties with regard to media power have tended to focus on social media and large technology companies, such as Facebook and Google, and the role they play in the aggregation and dissemination of news. While important and justifiable concerns – particularly in the widespread distribution of conspiracy theories and “fake news” - most news production in the form of professional journalism still lies in the hands of global news publishers. As discussed in the literature review, the Media Reform Coalition (MRC) have found that in the UK just three companies, including News International, dominate 83% of the national newspaper market, and that figure has grown 12% in the last three years³⁶. The MRC state that *“This is a market that may be shrinking in terms of print circulation but, assisted by large online audiences, is crucial when it comes to setting the agenda for the rest of the news media”* (2019, p2). For online news audiences, just five companies dominate 80% of the market (again, including News International).

Within the media industry, that process of consolidation, mergers and acquisitions has

³⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/03/magazine/rupe-r-murdoch-fox-news-trump.html>

³⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/06/democracy-overboard-rupe-r-murdoch-s-long-war-on-australian-politics>

³⁶ <https://www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/FINALonline2.pdf>

continued as the business model of journalism becomes even more threatened by the rise of digital and social media behemoths. The Cairncross Review, which published its report in February 2019, reported on the “*dramatic changes in the market for news: the fall in print circulation of both national and local papers, and the changes in the ways people now navigate to news online and the ways they absorb it*” (2019, p7). It does not examine the originators of online news sources in depth, but there is no evidence that a shift to online news consumption leads to greater diversity of news exposure. Coupled with the MRC’s findings with regards to the continued dominance of the traditional news providers both off and online, the threat from powerful global media conglomerates which dominate the news agenda could become even more acute.

Much critical analysis has been, rightly, devoted to the threat of media concentration to diversity of expression and a plurality of views. What I have attempted to demonstrate via this research is the way in which the news agenda can also be deliberately manipulated to suit the commercial self-interest of dominant owners. I have done so by analysing to what extent an agenda exists in News International’s publications to undermine public organisations and competitors, which in some way interfere with News International’s global expansion plans. The empirical evidence that derives from this study challenges Murdoch’s assertion that his newspapers have widely divergent views, when clearly his newspapers having been reporting similar views, with a consistently negative editorial agenda towards the BBC and Ofcom.

On the basis of content analysis of relevant articles published in three of the News International owned newspapers, compared with three non-News International newspapers of equal standing, it was clear that an explicit editorial agenda was being pursued, though with more vigour towards the BBC than towards Ofcom. In both cases, however, the data provided incontrovertible evidence that Rupert Murdoch, and his sons are prepared to use the powerful voice of their newspapers to criticise and undermine both institutions in pursuit of their commercial self-interest.

I have distinguished between negative reporting in news stories and negative comment in editorial pieces; while it is legitimate for newspapers to use op-ed pages to express opinions – and even campaign or argue for positions that accord with their

proprietor's commercial self-interest, it is surely unacceptable for news articles that should adhere to normative principles of journalistic accuracy and integrity. This research found a disproportionate level of negative news stories about the BBC and Ofcom in News International newspapers compared to their non-NI counterparts: 42% versus 23% for the BBC, and 10% versus 2% for Ofcom.

When looking at the editorials, the results are even more pronounced: 70% of News International editorials about the BBC were negative, compared with 26% in comparator newspapers. Only for editorial content about Ofcom was there any equivalence: 11% of News International editorials were negative, compared with 10% in comparator newspapers. While this particular finding did not accord with the original hypothesis, it does provide reassurance that the coding frame was robust and that the findings in respect of the BBC and news stories about Ofcom were real.

Overall, these findings demonstrate categorically, for the first time, that Rupert Murdoch exploited his newspapers in pursuit of commercial self-interest, thus contradicting his categorical denial to the Leveson inquiry. They speak to assertions made by others in this field, such as Arsenault and Castells' 2008 study on 'Switching Power', in which they discuss *"...the perception that Murdoch, via his editorial control over his properties, wields disproportionate control over public opinion which provides him with considerable political leverage, which in turn advances the expansion of NewsCorp"* (2008, p501). It also builds on such work as that undertaken by Hardy that examined the level of cross promotion that can be found in the Murdoch owned newspapers for his other media holdings, such as (as it was then called) BSkyB.

Hardy states: *"that Murdoch-owned newspapers have been used as vehicles to promote News Corporation's other media and corporate interests is a largely accepted charge and commonplace observation... however... evidence remains largely anecdotal"* (2010, p119). While it differs from the focus of Hardy's study on cross-promotion, the results of this research contribute to a growing body of evidence that such 'anecdotal' assertions about Murdoch's use of his newspapers for commercial gain are grounded in empirical fact.

This work demonstrates the ability of a powerful media proprietor to use his or her

media companies to exploit their dominance in media markets through distorted or biased coverage of rival institutions or regulators, in a bid to influence both popular opinion and the decisions of politicians and policy makers, thus undermining the democratic process. This re-emphasises the need for policy makers to consider not only democratic issues with regard to the narrowing number of voices in the news market, but also the ability of the major news companies that dominate the market to further their dominance through their news and editorial columns.

Appendix B: Results for the BBC: The Sun

Please note the full set of data is available in Excel format in the electronic version of this document.

The Sun: BBC Data													
Total no. Articles	287	Total no. negative news articles	85	Sources:									
Total word count	92821	Total no. negative feature articles	52	BBC	105								
		Total no. negative editorial articles	22	Ofcom	1								
Total Negative	161	Total no. negative business articles	0	Government	30								
Total Positive	7	Total no. negative 'other' types of article	2	Independent Voice	28								
Total Neutral	119			Other	27								
		Total no. negative articles where BBC is primary focus	115	None	132								
Total News	190	Total no. negative articles where BBC is secondary focus	19	Vested Interest	2								
Total Features	69	Total no. negative articles where BBC is mentioned in passing	27	Negative articles by source:									
Total Editorials	24			BBC	42								
Total Business	2	Total no. articles unsourced	132	Ofcom	0								
Total Other	2	Total no. negative articles unsourced	87	Government	15								
				Independent Voice	15								
Total Primary Focus	198			Other	17								
Total Secondary Focus	49			None	87								
Total Mentioned in Passing	40			Vested Interest	2								

Appendix C: Results for the BBC: The Daily Mirror

Please note the full set of data is available in Excel format in the electronic version of this document.

The Daily Mirror: BBC Data

Total no. Articles	163
Total word count	63729

Total Negative	61
Total Positive	24
Total Neutral	78

Total News	83
Total Features	13
Total Editorials	8
Total Business	0
Total Other	0

Total Primary Focus	105
Total Secondary Focus	24
Total Mentioned in Passing	34

Total no. negative news articles	20
Total no. negative feature articles	5
Total no. negative editorial articles	1
Total no. negative business articles	0
Total no. negative 'other' types of article	0

Total no. negative articles where BBC is primary focus	39
Total no. negative articles where BBC is secondary focus	8
Total no. negative articles where BBC is mentioned in passing	14

Total no. articles unsourced	53
Total no. negative articles unsourced	23

Sources:	
BBC	71
Ofcom	0
Government	29
Independent Voice	11
Other	28
None	53
Vested Interest	7

Negative articles by source:	
BBC	21
Ofcom	0
Government	8
Independent Voice	3
Other	14
None	23
Vested Interest	3

Appendix D: Results for the BBC: The Times

Please note the full set of data is available in Excel format in the electronic version of this document.

The Times: BBC Data

Total no. Articles	499
Total word count	324806

Total Negative	209
Total Positive	22
Total Neutral	268

Total News	422
Total Features	28
Total Editorials	28
Total Business	19
Total Other	2

Total Primary Focus	303
Total Secondary Focus	79
Total Mentioned in Passing	117

Total no. negative news articles	174
Total no. negative feature articles	11
Total no. negative editorial articles	16
Total no. negative business articles	6
Total no. negative 'other' types of article	2

Total no. negative articles where BBC is primary focus	
Total no. negative articles where BBC is secondary focus	
Total no. negative articles where BBC is mentioned in passing	

Total no. articles unsourced	
Total no. negative articles unsourced	

Sources:	
BBC	157
Ofcom	0
Government	58
Independent Voice	21
Other	36
None	254
Vested Interest	23

Negative articles by source:	
BBC	60
Ofcom	0
Government	26
Independent Voice	9
Other	20
None	109
Vested Interest	12

Appendix E: Results for the BBC: The Independent

Please note the full set of data is available in Excel format in the electronic version of this document.

The Independent: BBC Data

Total no. Articles	450
Total word count	334371

Total Negative	107
Total Positive	61
Total Neutral	282

Total News	380
Total Features	1
Total Editorials	9
Total Business	16
Total Other	44

Total Primary Focus	245
Total Secondary Focus	96
Total Mentioned in Passing	109

Total no. negative news articles	81
Total no. negative feature articles	0
Total no. negative editorial articles	4
Total no. negative business articles	6
Total no. negative 'other' types of article	16

Total no. negative articles where BBC is primary focus	52
Total no. negative articles where BBC is secondary focus	24
Total no. negative articles where BBC is mentioned in passing	31

Total no. articles unsourced	187
Total no. negative articles unsourced	61

Sources:	
BBC	165
Ofcom	0
Government	59
Independent Voice	24
Other	46
None	187
Vested Interest	35

Negative articles by source:	
BBC	27
Ofcom	0
Government	15
Independent Voice	6
Other	4
None	61
Vested Interest	7

Appendix F: Results for the BBC: The Sunday Times

Please note the full set of data is available in Excel format in the electronic version of this document.

The Sunday Times: BBC Data

Total no. Articles	212
Total word count	152105

Total Negative	97
Total Positive	9
Total Neutral	106

Total News	144
Total Features	42
Total Editorials	19
Total Business	7
Total Other	0

Total Primary Focus	135
Total Secondary Focus	44
Total Mentioned in Passing	33

Total no. negative news articles	62
Total no. negative feature articles	21
Total no. negative editorial articles	12
Total no. negative business articles	2
Total no. negative 'other' types of article	0

Total no. negative articles where BBC is primary focus	69
Total no. negative articles where BBC is secondary focus	17
Total no. negative articles where BBC is mentioned in passing	11

Total no. articles unsourced	101
Total no. negative articles unsourced	47

Sources:	
BBC	82
Ofcom	0
Government	23
Independent Voice	11
Other	28
None	101
Vested Interest	2

Negative articles by source:	
BBC	34
Ofcom	0
Government	15
Independent Voice	8
Other	11
None	47
Vested Interest	1

Appendix G: Results for the BBC: The Sunday Telegraph

Please note the full set of data is available in Excel format in the electronic version of this document.

The Sunday Telegraph: BBC Data

Total no. Articles	37
Total word count	26660

Total Negative	15
Total Positive	2
Total Neutral	20

Total News	31
Total Features	4
Total Editorials	2
Total Business	0
Total Other	0

Total Primary Focus	22
Total Secondary Focus	9
Total Mentioned in Passing	6

Total no. negative news articles	13
Total no. negative feature articles	2
Total no. negative editorial articles	0
Total no. negative business articles	0
Total no. negative 'other' types of article	0

Total no. negative articles where BBC is primary focus	11
Total no. negative articles where BBC is secondary focus	3
Total no. negative articles where BBC is mentioned in passing	1

Total no. articles unsourced	11
Total no. negative articles unsourced	5

Sources:	
BBC	21
Ofcom	0
Government	5
Independent Voice	1
Other	7
None	11
Vested Interest	1

Negative articles by source:	
BBC	8
Ofcom	0
Government	2
Independent Voice	0
Other	4
None	5
Vested Interest	0

Appendix H: Results for Ofcom: The Sun

Please note the full set of data is available in Excel format in the electronic version of this document.

The Sun: Ofcom Data

Total no. Articles	217
Total word count	46743

Total Negative	28
Total Positive	2
Total Neutral	187

Total News	119
Total Features	79
Total Editorials	8
Total Business	10
Total Other	1

Total Primary Focus	38
Total Secondary Focus	88
Total Mentioned in Passing	91

Total no. negative news articles	8
Total no. negative feature articles	17
Total no. negative editorial articles	2
Total no. negative business articles	1
Total no. negative 'other' types of article	0

Total no. negative articles where BBC is primary focus	8
Total no. negative articles where BBC is secondary focus	11
Total no. negative articles where BBC is mentioned in passing	9

Total no. articles unsourced	114
Total no. negative articles unsourced	21

Sources:	
BBC	2
Ofcom	42
Government	9
Independent Voice	5
Other	29
None	114
Vested Interest	34

Negative articles by source:	
BBC	0
Ofcom	0
Government	1
Independent Voice	1
Other	2
None	21
Vested Interest	4

Appendix I: Results for Ofcom: The Daily Mirror

Please note the full set of data is available in Excel format in the electronic version of this document.

The Daily Mirror: Ofcom Data

Total no. Articles	210
Total word count	68218

Total Negative	6
Total Positive	3
Total Neutral	201

Total News	133
Total Features	23
Total Editorials	6
Total Business	41
Total Other	7

Total Primary Focus	35
Total Secondary Focus	69
Total Mentioned in Passing	103

Total no. negative news articles	3
Total no. negative feature articles	2
Total no. negative editorial articles	0
Total no. negative business articles	1
Total no. negative 'other' types of article	0

Total no. negative articles where BBC is primary focus	2
Total no. negative articles where BBC is secondary focus	0
Total no. negative articles where BBC is mentioned in passing	4

Total no. articles unsourced	68
Total no. negative articles unsourced	1

<u>Sources:</u>	
BBC	3
Ofcom	52
Government	19
Independent Voice	22
Other	32
None	68
Vested Interest	55

<u>Negative articles by source:</u>	
BBC	1
Ofcom	2
Government	0
Independent Voice	1
Other	2
None	1
Vested Interest	2

Appendix J: Results for the Ofcom: The Times

Please note the full set of data is available in Excel format in the electronic version of this document.

The Times: Ofcom Data

Total no. Articles	589
Total word count	396072

Total Negative	60
Total Positive	9
Total Neutral	520

Total News	133
Total Features	40
Total Editorials	18
Total Business	294
Total Other	104

Total Primary Focus	153
Total Secondary Focus	158
Total Mentioned in Passing	278

Total no. negative news articles	14
Total no. negative feature articles	7
Total no. negative editorial articles	2
Total no. negative business articles	26
Total no. negative 'other' types of article	11

Total no. negative articles where BBC is primary focus	25
Total no. negative articles where BBC is secondary focus	16
Total no. negative articles where BBC is mentioned in passing	19

Total no. articles unsourced	357
Total no. negative articles unsourced	33

Sources:	
BBC	11
Ofcom	60
Government	39
Independent Voice	39
Other	38
None	357
Vested Interest	109

Negative articles by source:	
BBC	1
Ofcom	5
Government	2
Independent Voice	3
Other	5
None	33
Vested Interest	16

Appendix K: Results for Ofcom: The Independent

Please note the full set of data is available in Excel format in the electronic version of this document.

The Independent: Ofcom Data

Total no. Articles	378
Total word count	275205

Total Negative	19
Total Positive	6
Total Neutral	353

Total News	127
Total Features	2
Total Editorials	33
Total Business	167
Total Other	49

Total Primary Focus	68
Total Secondary Focus	110
Total Mentioned in Passing	200

Total no. negative news articles	0
Total no. negative feature articles	0
Total no. negative editorial articles	4
Total no. negative business articles	8
Total no. negative 'other' types of article	7

Total no. negative articles where BBC is primary focus	3
Total no. negative articles where BBC is secondary focus	9
Total no. negative articles where BBC is mentioned in passing	7

Total no. articles unsourced	175
Total no. negative articles unsourced	14

Sources:	
BBC	3
Ofcom	69
Government	33
Independent Voice	45
Other	28
None	175
Vested Interest	96

Negative articles by source:	
BBC	0
Ofcom	1
Government	0
Independent Voice	0
Other	1
None	14
Vested Interest	4

Appendix L: Results for Ofcom: The Sunday Times

Please note the full set of data is available in Excel format in the electronic version of this document.

The Sunday Times: Ofcom Data

Total no. Articles	231
Total word count	201334

Total Negative	24
Total Positive	1
Total Neutral	206

Total News	34
Total Features	95
Total Editorials	11
Total Business	87
Total Other	4

Total Primary Focus	26
Total Secondary Focus	63
Total Mentioned in Passing	142

Total no. negative news articles	8
Total no. negative feature articles	8
Total no. negative editorial articles	0
Total no. negative business articles	6
Total no. negative 'other' types of article	2

Total no. negative articles where BBC is primary focus	3
Total no. negative articles where BBC is secondary focus	6
Total no. negative articles where BBC is mentioned in passing	15

Total no. articles unsourced	123
Total no. negative articles unsourced	12

Sources:	
BBC	1
Ofcom	20
Government	22
Independent Voice	23
Other	27
None	123
Vested Interest	43

Negative articles by source:	
BBC	1
Ofcom	2
Government	1
Independent Voice	2
Other	2
None	12
Vested Interest	7

Appendix M: Results for Ofcom: The Sunday Telegraph

Please note the full set of data is available in Excel format in the electronic version of this document.

The Sunday Telegraph: Ofcom Data

Total no. Articles	63
Total word count	49341

Total Negative	6
Total Positive	1
Total Neutral	56

Total News	22
Total Features	8
Total Editorials	2
Total Business	25
Total Other	6

Total Primary Focus	13
Total Secondary Focus	23
Total Mentioned in Passing	27

Total no. negative news articles	2
Total no. negative feature articles	2
Total no. negative editorial articles	0
Total no. negative business articles	2
Total no. negative 'other' types of article	0

Total no. negative articles where BBC is primary focus	2
Total no. negative articles where BBC is secondary focus	2
Total no. negative articles where BBC is mentioned in passing	2

Total no. articles unsourced	27
Total no. negative articles unsourced	4

<u>Sources:</u>	
BBC	2
Ofcom	10
Government	1
Independent Voice	10
Other	5
None	27
Vested Interest	23

<u>Negative articles by source:</u>	
BBC	0
Ofcom	0
Government	0
Independent Voice	0
Other	0
None	4
Vested Interest	2

Appendix N: Coding Schedule

Name of publication

1. The Sun
2. The Daily Mirror
3. The Times
4. The Independent
5. The Sunday Times
6. The Sunday Telegraph

Date article was published

Length of article (no. of words)

Type of article

1. News
2. Feature
3. Editorial
4. Business
5. Other

Tone of article

1. Negative coverage of BBC/Ofcom (regulator)
2. Positive coverage of BBC/Ofcom (regulator)
3. Neutral coverage of BBC/Ofcom (regulator)

Sources directly quoted in article

1. BBC
2. Ofcom
3. Government
4. Independent voice campaign/pressure group
5. Other
6. None
7. Vested interest

Focus of article

1. BBC/Ofcom is primary focus
2. BBC/Ofcom is secondary focus
3. BBC/Ofcom is mentioned in passing

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