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How the UK Press Framed the *News of the World* Phone-hacking Scandal

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How the UK Press Framed the *News of the World* Phone-hacking Scandal

The press industry as a media institution plays a definitive role in shaping public consciousness and

This research paper will begin with a theoretical framework outlining the dominant theories and concepts implicated in this research, followed by a conceptual framework that will situate these concepts within the context of the research. An outline of the research objectives, methodology and research design will be followed by an analysis of the findings, ending with considerations for further research into press coverage of the still ongoing event.

The following section will outline some of the key theories and concepts that will comprise

highlights an important consideration, however, when he says that 'most frames are defined by what they omit as well as include, and the omissions... may be as critical as the inclusions in guiding the audience' (1993: 54).

Debates regarding the perceived usefulness (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Van Gorp, 2007) versus the potential agenda-setting function (Lippman, 1922; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) that frames can inherit for media institutions demonstrate their potential, amid consequences good or bad, for conveying news narratives. Because the focus of this research is on how the press frame an issue rather than how audiences interpret the frame, audience effects will not be discussed here in detail. That being said, it is worth mentioning that dominant frames can be contested, and audiences do not always interpret news frames as intended (Gamson et al., 1992; Entman, 1993; Kitzinger, 2000).

Why certain frames?

Because framing has already been implicated as a manufactured process of selection and salience, that is, in both the choice and presentation of issues or events, questions arise as to why certain frames are present over others.

As already noted, cultural values and norms are a key component for understanding news frames; subsequently, they are a consideration for the *choice* of news frames as well (Van Gorp, 2007). Narratives which reflect dominant values or ideologies of society will undoubtedly take precedent over those which do not (Lule, 2001). Similarly, the concept of newsworthiness helps define for media institutions which narratives to include. When reporting on social problems, for example, Stuart Hall et al. (1978) note that in order to be appealing to media audiences, narratives must feature elements which illicit emotional reactions, seem to pose a legitimate threat to a large portion of the public, or feature

profitable for news agencies (O'Neill, 1992). Again, this notion will be discussed in further detail in later sections.

Having noted how frames work and why some narratives appear when others do not

During the Watergate scandal, for example, the *Washington Post*

changes in policy that allowed for the deregulation of British broadcasting and the growth of

charged. Finally, the 'aftermath' phase allows for a reflection on the events once the most dramatic revelations have subsided (Thompson, 2000: 72-77). As Thompson (2000) notes, these phases can last weeks, months, or even years (Thompson, 2000: 72-77). As Thompson (2000) notes, these phases can last weeks, months, or even years (Thompson, 2000: 72-77).

Michael Schudson (1992) explains how the initial *Washington Post* reports on the Watergate scandal were slow to be picked up by other news sources, but once the media's focus shifted

warrant enough mediated visibility or individual influence to be as prominently featured in an institutional mediated scandal. There have been, however, some examples of individual transgressions framed as scandal within the press industry.

The Janet Cooke scandal, for example, involved the fabrication of a Pulitzer Prize-winning story by a *Washington Post* journalist, Janet Cooke. Once it was discovered that her story was fabricated, criticism focused on the individual 'rogue' journalist, Cooke, as opposed to the equally guilty *Post*, who failed to thoroughly check the facts of the story (Eason, 1986); placing individual blame on the transgression is consistent with the typical framework of a media scandal (Thompson, 2000). Similarly, Cooke's actions were vehemently derided and reflected on publicly by other journalists (Eason, 1986). Literature of the event, notably by David Eason (1986), did not focus on the traditional notions of media scandals or on the framing of the event, but rather pointed to reflections made by journalists regarding the trends of the industry and the contradictions of authority implicated in the Cooke scandal. As one among few examples of events involving the press which could constitute a media scandal, it appears that individuals in the press industry can be implicated in moral transgressions of 'scandal' proportion. With no concrete analysis of its framework, however, what this research intends to do is pose the media scandal framework against the press industry in relation to the *News of the World* phone-hacking scandal.

The concepts of framing, ownership structure and mediated scandal are all imperative to understanding the coverage of the *News of the World* phone-hacking scandal in the UK press. Primarily, the concept of framing is the basis of this research, which aims to distinguish differences between coverage among six UK newspapers. To understand framing is to acknowledge the fact that there are various ways in which the press covers the same event; this research intends to highlight these differences, where apparent, looking specifically for the presence of a media scandal framework. Subsequently, this will be done within the context of ownership structure as a key consideration for the explanation of varying frames.

As previously mentioned, the politics of news organizations and its owners are a distinctive factor when considering why certain frames are present within a news text. Similarly, the dominance of a few large corporations that now control much of the UK (and international) press and larger media industry points to the incredible power that these corporations have in defining issues for an ever increasing audience; the *News of the World's* parent company,

News Corporation, and its publishing branch, News International, certainly exemplify one of these large organizations. Because News International controls both the *Sun* and the *Times*, a compariso0 Tm7(a) -28 (o) -1 (f) 3(a) -28 (t]] TJ ET Q q 0.24 0 0 0.2155.99958 721.64 cm BT 0..008 T

consequence of its owner, Rupert Murdoch, minimizing the extent to which phone-hacking was considered a common practice within the press industry.

Sampling

Sampling for this research was relatively straightforward. The primary concern was the inclusion of a representative sample of UK newspapers, both tabloids and 'quality' or broadsheet papers, as well as considering newspapers that were owned by both News International and rival organizations, allowing for a comparison of framing. The *Times* and the *Sun* were imperative for inclusion as both being owned by News International; the *Guardian* was also imperative because it first broke the story of the phone-hacking allegations and was most active in reporting on the scandal. The sources were rounded out with the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror*, both tabloids which comprise two of the top three highest circulation newspapers in the UK, as well as the *Telegraph*, a broadsheet paper which also boasts a place as one of the three highest circulation broadsheet newspapers (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2012). The Sunday versions of corresponding newspapers were grouped together with the daily editions when relevant.

The subsequent consideration was the time-frame from which to pull the sample. Because of the still ongoing investigations and emerging revelations into phone-hacking at the time of writing, the body of literature from which to pull articles was extensive and unmanageable. For this reason, the focus of this research was on the initial framing of the phone-hacking scandal when allegations first surfaced in the *Guardian* on July 4th, 2011. Considering the primary framing of allegations was also of interest because of the more reactionary nature of the coverage, demonstrating the immediate narrative which was chosen by newspapers to frame the event. Articles were pulled from the first month of coverage using LexisNexis and a combination of search terms including 'phone-hacking', 'News of the World', and 'Murdoch', among others; still, the body of literature (over 900 articles) proved too big for the confines of this study. To further narrow down the literature, articles were pulled from every second day, starting with the initial coverage on July 5th through to July 29th. After eliminating duplicate articles that appeared in different versions on the same day, eliminating articles that only very briefly mentioned phone-hacking in relation to a different feature story, and eliminating audience opinion and commentary pieces, the final sample was narrowed down to include a total of 200 articles.

Research Tools

An appropriate coding frame is the fundamental component for a reliable and valid content analysis. For a more qualitative content analysis like this one, thoroughly defining variables is crucial, especially to ensure inter-coder reliability, which is the degree to which the results are replicable (Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2002). Variables 1 to 8 were standard variables to help identify each article and included: an assigned *ID number*; identifying which *newspaper* each article appeared in; the *type of newspaper* that it appeared in; the *date* in which it appeared; the *day of the week* and the *page number* that it appeared on; and the *number of words* in each article. Another variable, *owner*, identifying whether or not the newspaper was owned by News International, was also added. Variables *newspaper* and *owner* were especially important for cross-referencing results based on ownership structure.

was established to determine whether or not those newspapers owned by News International acknowledged it.

The straightforward variables (variables 1 to 8) were coded before reading the article, followed by a reading and then re-reading of each article before coding more complex variables, such as *theme* or *sub-theme*; this was to ensure that the entire article was considered in the analysis, not just what was first apparent. Any confusion between the equal distribution of two categories of variables in one article, such as those of *theme* or *sub-theme*, primary or secondary *blame*, and *topic* or *sub-topic*, however, was amended by coding what was first presented in the article as the primary code. After having coded 200 articles in the same way, the next section will outline the results.

Data collected in the content analysis will be outlined using frequencies and results from cross-tabulations, as well as highlighting examples of coded variable categorizations in context using excerpts from news articles. Results will then be discussed and interpreted in relation to the research question and subsequent considerations of framing and media scandals.

The primary concern is to identify both the main topi

distribution of other themes was 20.4% commercial implications, 15.3% politics, 12.7% moral and ethical considerations, and 5.7% victimization. Sub-

Another variable for consideration is the presence of *quotes from News International representatives*, quotes which typically defended the knowledge of phone-hacking by executives; in non-News International-owned newspapers, these quotes were present in 23% of articles coded.

Given these considerations, it appears that the most common frame adopted by the UK press was to focus on the phone-hacking incidents as isolated events within the *News of the World*, made possible by the structure of the organization as run by Rupert Murdoch and his son James. The next consideration is determining whether or not these same trends were apparent in News International newspapers.

Noticeably, the *Sun* had the lowest number of reports on the event with only 11 articles, compared to a range of between 25 and 57 articles among the other five newspapers, averaging to 37 articles per paper. The most featured *topics* in the *Sun* were reactions to allegations of phone-hacking by politicians (3 articles), followed by reactions from Rupert Murdoch and other News International representatives (2 articles), and actions or behaviours of *News of the World* employees (2 articles). Notably, the presence of *quotes from News International representatives* was visible in 54.5% of *Sun* articles coded. The most featured theme, in 7 of the 11 articles that appeared, was of criminal behaviours. The blame for phone-hacking was distributed evenly between *News of the World* journalists, *News of the World* in general, and former editor Andy Coulson, each with 2 articles. The Murdochs were implicated in 1 article, as were private investigators and journalists in the industry generally; the remaining two articles did not pose blame to anyone. What News International newspapers did that other newspapers did not do is consider phone-hacking as a practice of the industry, as demonstrated in an article from the *Sun* below:

The newspaper group that owns the Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday as well as the Daily Mirror have also been hit with allegations of phone hacking in the past week. And 305 journalists from across almost every title on Fleet Street were identified as having paid for illegally obtained data by the Information Commissioner in 2006. Four reporters working for The Guardian or The Observer were among those identified (Dunn, 2011: 4-5).

The *Times* featured 32 articles related to phone-hacking, significantly more than the *Sun* but still not as many as competing broadsheets the *Guardian* (57 articles) and the *Telegraph* (41 articles). The most featured *topics*

BSkyB's shares fell to a 2½-

Figure 1: Distribution in UK Press Publications

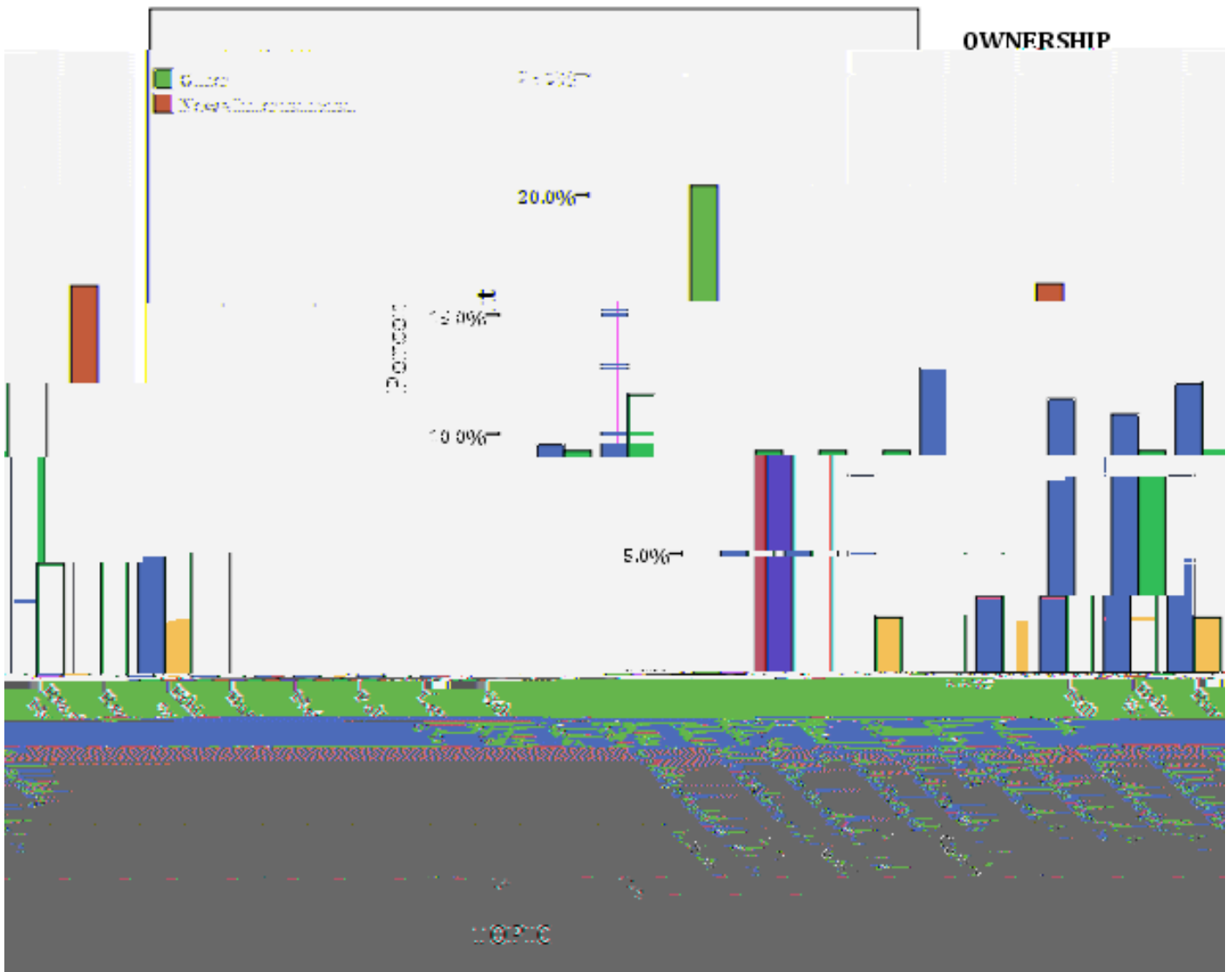


Figure 2: Distribution in UK Press Publications

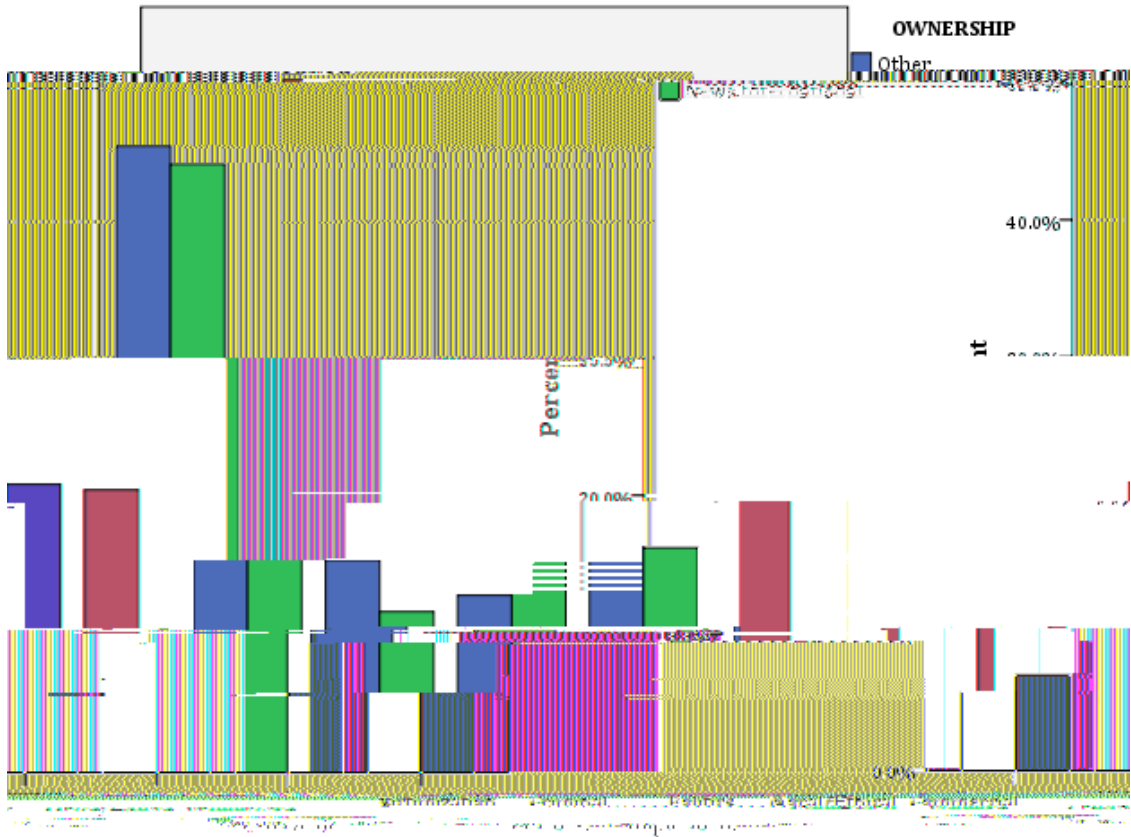
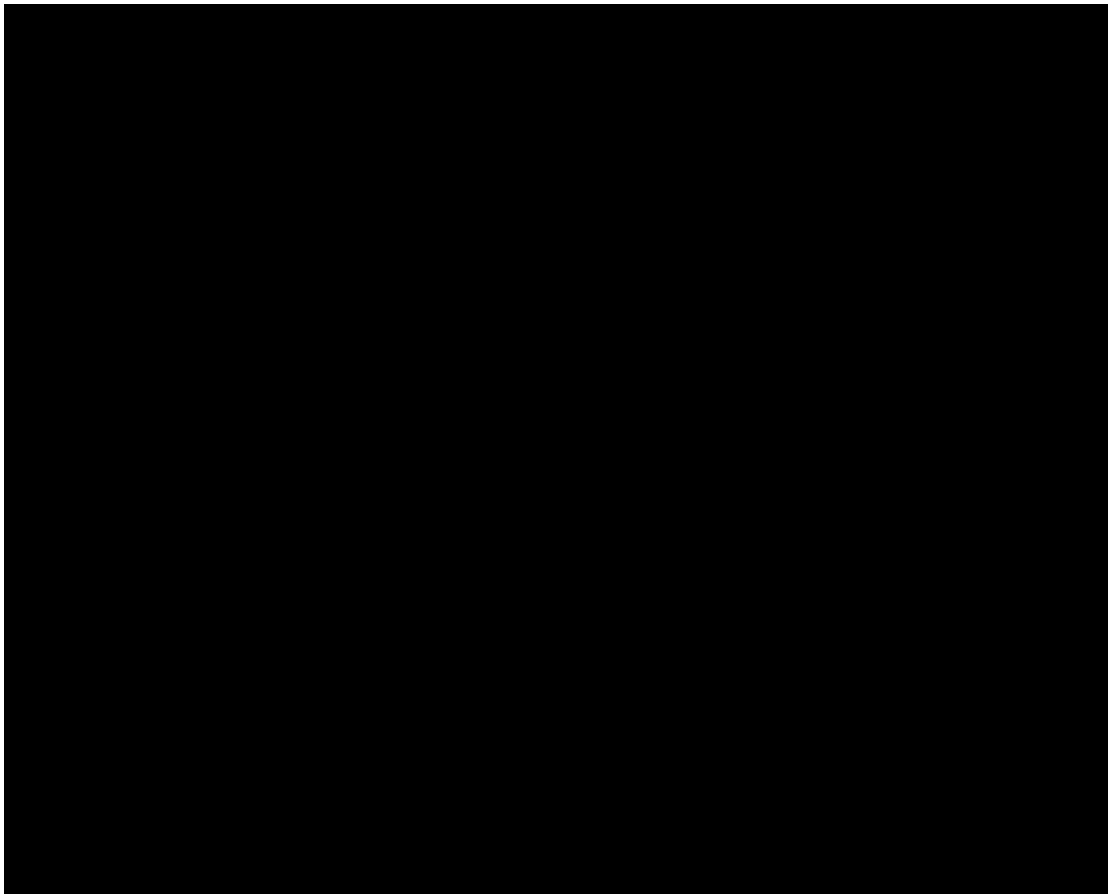


Figure 3: Distribution in UK Press Publications



The above findings help answer the question of how the phone-hacking scandal was framed and how that frame differed in the context of newspaper ownership, but the question remains whether or not press coverage of the *News of the World* phone-hacking 'scandal' acu924 17.46614 665.8

these criteria may have been visible, they were extremely limited in their presentation, especially in non-News Internationally-owned newspapers. Coverage avoided focus on moral and ethical considerations of the journalism industry, as well as avoiding extensive critical commentary by claims makers or primary definers, in this case, politicians. By choosing to focus more on other aspects of phone-hacking, the press adopted a scandal framework to delegitimize the possibility of creating a moral panic. The weakness in the scandal framework was, as mentioned, the lack of individual blame characteristic of a media scandal. Amidst this weakness, the press' determination for avoiding panic was solidified through its self-referential identification of the phone-hacking as a scandal. Notably, implications of these practices throughout the industry and a comparatively greater focus on moral and ethical considerations means that News International newspapers were more inclined to frame phone-hacking with aspects characteristic of a moral panic.

When considering the potential implications for the press industry that could have resulted from the creation of a moral panic, including decreased press freedom, investigations into the practices of other publications, weakened trust from its readers, and ultimately, a decrease in sales, it is safe to assume that the UK press would want to avoid legitimizing this frame. Even further, newspapers not owned by News International were more likely to benefit from the use of a scandal framework, a framework which was more apparent in these newspapers. The *News of the World* was, at the time, the highest selling newspaper in the UK and in direct competition with all other tabloid publications. By placing accountability on both the *News of the World* and the Murdochs, other newspapers were discrediting not only the *News of the World*, but all other News International publications, including the *Times* and the *Sun*, who were similarly in competition for readership with the *Guardian*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Telegraph* and the *Daily Mirror*. Implicating Rupert Murdoch specifically was beneficial for delegitimizing other News International titles given his known intrusive involvement in all of his press publications. As noted, News International newspapers were more likely to focus on the topics and themes conducive to creating a moral panic; presumably, News International publications had nothing to lose by attempting to create a moral panic because its publications were already being questioned as part of News International. It may have even benefitted from the creation of a moral panic if other publications were seen as participating in this practice as well.

Given the subsequent considerations of this research, it appears that the traditional scandal framework was apparent in the majority of the UK press, with the general lack of individual accountability slightly weakening this framework. News International newspapers did have a distinctly different focus than other UK press publications, demonstrating that ownership structure can have a legitimate influence on the framing of events. Because of the prominent

scandal framework in the majority of the UK press, however, it appears that a consensus among the *entire* press industry is not necessary for an event to become a media scandal.

in a way that highlighted its potential of becoming a moral panic. Notably, the power of the UK press was not as much challenged as it was legitimized through its majority framing of the *News of the World* phone-hacking 'scandal' as a proper media scandal, when the conditions for creating a moral panic were evident. Similarly, because there has been little research on scandals *involving* the media, its ability to frame the incident according to its own agenda were tested, and proven successful, through this research.

More than one year after the *Guardian's* revelations, the phone-hacking scandal is still being featured in the press, with the July 24th 2012 conclusion of 8 months of testimonials in the Leveson Inquiry, which featured hundreds of witnesses and ended with formal charges being brought against former *News of the World* executives Rebekah Brooks and Andy Coulson, as well as six other *News of the World* journalists. Given the time and space constraints of this research, and the ongoing coverage of the event, it was only feasible to analyze press coverage during the first month of t

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