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**Press Coverage of the Debate that Followed the  
*News of the World* Phone Hacking Scandal:  
The Use of Sources in Journalistic Metadiscourse**

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**Keywords**

Journalistic metadiscourse

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Public sphere

## Abstract

This article examines the distribution of sources in journalistic metadiscourse (news coverage of journalism) and the implication of the manner of distribution for democracy. In this study, the way sources were distributed in the media representation of the debate that arose from the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal and the Leveson Inquiry is taken as representative of how sources are distributed in journalistic metadiscourse. The main method for this study is content analysis. Content analysis was supplemented by critical discourse analysis in the study of 870 new articles on the media policy debate, from 6 British national newspapers. My findings show that journalistic metadiscourse is characterised by a doubly narrow spectrum of sources with access tilting heavily in favour of the press. I argue that this is dangerous to democracy and that it may be unrealistic to expect the press to function as a democratic public sphere during debates about themselves without some level of external coercion.

## Contributor Note

Binakuromo Ogbemor, PhD, acquired her doctorate degree from the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University, UK. Her PhD dissertation examined how the press covered the debate that arose from the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal and the Leveson Inquiry and the implication of the manner of coverage for democracy. The focus of her research was to find out whether the press served as a democratic public sphere in their coverage of the debate. Binakuromo's thesis makes novel contributions to knowledge of how the media cover themselves. Her areas of research interest include media and democracy, journalistic metadiscourse, media policy, the public sphere, and media representation.

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## Introduction

This article investigates how sources are distributed in journalistic metadiscourse. The way sources were distributed in the media representation of the debate that followed the *News of the World* (NotW) phone hacking scandal is taken as representative of how sources are distributed in journalistic metadiscourse. The *News of the World* phone hacking scandal came to light in 2005 when some staff of the British tabloid newspaper were accused of hacking the phones of members of the British Royal Family (Keeble and Mair 2012, 9; Davies 2014). The police report on investigations carried out between 2005 and 2007 declared that the crime was perpetrated by one 'rogue' reporter, royal editor Clive Goodman, and a private detective, Glen Mulcaire (Keeble and Mair 2012, 10–11; Jones and Norton 2014, 147–148). The report concluded that the victims were a handful of public figures (Keeble and Mair 2012, 9; Lewis 2013, 72; Davies 2014).

However, further investigations in 2011 revealed that phone hacking was widespread at the *News of the World* (Keeble and Mair 2012, 9; Davies 2014). The case of hacking into the phone of the murdered school girl, 13-year-old Amanda Jane 'Milly' Dowler, resulted in public outcry against the British tabloid newspaper. News on the phone hacking scandal flooded front pages and headlines of the media worldwide; advertisers withdrew patronage from the newspaper and on the 7th of July 2011, the company announced the closure of the *News of the World*, bringing to an end its one hundred and sixty-eight years of publication (Keeble and Mair 2012, 12; Davies 2014).

Importantly, this scandal led to the setting up of the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press, and stirred up a debate on how to reform the press to make it more accountable to society. This debate was widely covered by the press, presenting an excellent opportunity to investigate how the media cover themselves, an aspect of which is the study of how sources are distributed during press coverage of media policy debates. This article is part of a wider study on how the press cover themselves. The main research question for this study is 'How were sources distributed in the media representation of the debate that arose from the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal and the Leveson Inquiry; and what is the implication of the manner of distribution for democracy?' One way to sustain democracy is to hold the powerful in society to account. The media are powerful and as such should be held to account through regular analyses of journalistic metadiscourse. The following section elaborates on the importance of studying journalistic metadiscourse.

## Why study journalistic metadiscourse?

The study of journalistic metadiscourse (news coverage of journalism) is important because of the susceptibility of the media to abuse their gatekeeping powers and the adverse effect this could have on democracy (Putnis 2000; Christopher 2007; Stiegler 2013; Finneman and Thompson 2014; Carlson 2014). The process by which the media decide which stories among the enormity of information available to tell, which not to tell, who speaks about them (sources) and what versions of interpretation to relay to the public, is

what is referred to as gatekeeping (Shoemaker and Vos 2009; White 1950 cited in Vos and Heinderyckx 2015, 3).

In the words of Shoemaker and Vos (2009, 1), gatekeeping 'is the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day'. This process of selection can be based on cultural, economic and ideological factors (Shoemaker and Vos 2009, 1–4). This gatekeeping function endows the media with enormous powers because they have the power to decide whether to allow some arguments or sources into the news or whether to give them limited access or to keep them out completely (Rozell and Mayer 2008, 328; Stiegler 2013, 137). This gatekeeping power, if not checked, can be used in a way that gives the press undue advantage in their transmission of debates, especially debates about themselves (Van Heerden 1996 cited in Fourie 2001, 205; Rozell and Mayer 2008, 328).

The study of journalistic metadiscourse can stimulate the media to watch against the abuse of their gatekeeping powers and cover themselves based on democratic principles. Such studies can identify when the media are taking advantage of their power to control information, and make recommendations accordingly. It can also equip the public with the knowledge of how the media cover themselves so that they know how to 'sift the chaff from the wheat' when they consume journalistic metadiscourse. Previous studies on press self-coverage claim that the media do a poor job of covering themselves (Carey 1974, 235; Chyi et al. 2012, 305; Christopher 2007). One of the criticisms against press self-coverage is that the press gives disproportionate

access to its interpretations, to the detriment of the arguments of other stakeholders in debates about press reform (Christopher 2007, 42; Stiegler 2013, 137; Savigny 2016, 12). Previous studies claim that the press avoids or gives limited coverage to criticisms against themselves and that journalistic metadiscourse is characterised by a lack of self-critique (Carey 1974; Eason 1988; Lule 1992; Christopher 2007, 42; Haas 2006, cited in Carlson 2015, 9). A consequence of such a coverage is the emergence of weak media policies that cannot guarantee a democratic public sphere. The normative expectation is that the media ought to serve as a democratic public sphere where all stakeholders, regardless of their status, can contribute to debates that concern them; and that includes the press reform debate that followed the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal (Habermas 1989).

### **The media as a democratic public sphere**

Habermas conceptualises the public sphere as an arena where people meet to discuss societal concerns and through their arguments influence political decisions (Habermas 1989, 1–4). According to Habermas, equality was brought about by a complete disregard for status because all voices regardless of their status were allowed to air their views and decisions were not based on societal standing but on the best rational argument (1989, 4). Habermas (1989, 32–41) observed that in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, coffee houses, salons and clubs sufficed as meeting points for these public deliberations, but in modern democracies, discussions in salons (coffee shops and bars) rarely

carry the same weight due to the large numbers of people that make up most political communities today. This places a premium on the role of the media as a democratic public sphere: a public space where citizens can debate issues that concern them without any form of marginalisation (Benhabib 1992, 81–87; Ornebring and Jonsson 2004, 283).

According to Habermas' (1989, 83; 1989 cited in Calhoun 1992, 137) account of the 'golden age of the liberal public sphere', discussions were centred on issues of common concern. However, from the late 19th century, the public sphere began to degenerate and commercialism began to override public interest within this public space (Habermas 1989, 184; Dahlgren 1995, 34; Street 2001, 42; 2010, 56). Habermas argued that commercial interest merged with private interests, including the interests of policymakers, to turn the public sphere from a democratic forum for public debate into a capitalist haven where prioritisation of profit became the order of the day (1989, 189–193). Facilitators of debates in the media's public sphere became more concerned about 'what interests the public' rather than what was 'in the public interest' with the goal being to increase readership and attract advertisers.

This study argues that the commodification of the public sphere is more complex than previous studies have shown. Most studies on the media as a public sphere have focussed on the media representation of others and not of themselves. As such, scholars have not taken into consideration the commodification of a public sphere in which the deliberation relates to the facilitator of the sphere. The result was that commercialism was limited to

prioritisation of gains made from advertising ('selling customers to advertisers'), adopting paywalls and direct product sales (Picard 1985; McQuail 2010, 222–224), whereas in the media coverage of debates on journalism, commodification of the public sphere can go beyond the aforementioned to the prioritisation of the media's personal interests (giving priority to the 'sale' of the newspaper's argument to the public). In this case, the media's personal interests can override 'what interests the public'. This can result in the marginalisation of sources or discourses that are perceived as not being in the interest of media owners (Christopher 2007).

In a democratic society, it is expected that all sections of society will have access to the press because it serves as a major medium of information and communication. If individuals are to contribute to government policy through participating in public debates, then all sections of society will need to have access to the press, especially when issues that concern them are the subjects of debate. Studies claim that this has not been the case. The media have often been accused of advancing elite discourses to the detriment of the less powerful in society (Galtung and Ruge 1965, cited in Harcup and O'Neill 2010, 270), thereby not giving equal opportunities to various stakeholders in debates that take place in the media's public sphere. It is alleged that inequality in communicative discourse in such a sphere is heightened when the media becomes the subject of the debate, riskily advantaging the press (Christopher 2007, 42; Stiegler 2013, 137; Savigny 2016, 12). The danger of favouring elite or media sources in press reform debates is that the views of a stratum of

society dominate the public sphere while those of the less powerful are hardly heard. This can result in the expression of a narrow spectrum of views in the media's public sphere and poor policy decisions.

Contesting Habermas' concept of one central public sphere where issues of common interest are discussed and decisions are reached based on the best rational judgement, Fraser argues that democracy is enhanced not with a single comprehensive public sphere but with 'arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics' (1992, 122 cited in Butsch 2007, 5). She emphasized that because the common good is difficult to determine, contestation within the public sphere rather than a consensus is closer to the democratic ideal. This study agrees. It posits that democracy is enhanced not with a single comprehensive discursive public sphere, but with a situation that makes room for contestations among diverse competing discursive publics (Fraser 1992, 122 cited in Butsch 2007, 5).

The exclusion or marginalisation of any segment of the population (of stakeholders) from a debate will run contrary to 'democracy's claim of universalism' (Dahlgren 1995; 36). Normatively, the type of space or amount of coverage given ought not to be based on the media's self-interest. The media ought to remain a free marketplace of ideas when they represent others as well as when they represent themselves. The following section outlines the methods used to investigate how the press served as a public sphere in relation to the use of sources during their coverage of the debate that followed the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal.

## Method

As earlier stated, the main research question for this study is 'How were sources distributed in the media representation of the debate that arose from the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal and the Leveson Inquiry; and what is the implication of the manner of distribution for democracy?' This central question was broken down into two:

RQ1: What sources were used and which of them was most frequently quoted?

RQ2: What quality of space did the press give the various stakeholders and their arguments in the debate that followed the phone hacking scandal?

RQ1 is concerned with the diversity of sources used by the press in their coverage of the media policy debate and how frequently the various sources were used. In a democracy, the normative expectation is that all stakeholders in a debate will have proportionate access to the public sphere. RQ1 is in response to claims that elite sources dominate the public sphere and that ordinary citizens and sources critical of the press are allotted a weak position of access to the public sphere (Galtung and Ruge 1965 cited in Harcup and O'Neill 2010, 270). This question prompted my exploration of how the press used sources in the debate that arose from the *NotW* phone hacking scandal and the Leveson inquiry.

RQ2 requires a close study of the narrative structure of each story in the study sample to identify the importance accorded to the arguments of various stakeholders in the debate. Studying the priority accorded to certain arguments and issues of concern in the debate is

important because it helps me evaluate how well the media served as a democratic public sphere, a sphere where the hierarchy of importance of an argument is not based on status (who the debater is) but on the strength of his or her argument (Habermas 1989). This line of enquiry follows accusations that the media use their gatekeeping powers to prevent arguments not in their favour from gaining access to the public sphere.

### Research sample

My study sample comprises all news articles on the debate that arose from the NotW phone hacking scandal and the Leveson inquiry, in six of the top ten British national newspapers (based on combined print and online readership figures for April 2011 to March 2012 – Source: NRS PADD 2012): two newspapers from each category of the main newspaper classification in the UK. My decision to do only two from each category is for the purpose of manageability. I chose to look at national papers because of their nationwide reach. The national newspapers in Britain are categorised in terms of social class, although this classification does not always reflect reality (McNAir 2000, 14). From the broadsheet (hard or ‘serious-minded’ news content) category, I examined the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Guardian*; from the mid-market (‘less serious’) category, I studied the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*; and from the tabloids (celebrity, sensational and entertainment-style news) I looked at *The Sun* and the *Daily Mirror*.

My unit of analysis consists of all news articles on the media policy debate that arose from the NotW phone hacking scandal and the Leveson inquiry as

contained in the *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror* and *The Sun*; from the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 2011 (when the hearing began at the Leveson Inquiry) to the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 2013 (the aftermath of the Privy Council’s approval of a Royal Charter on press regulation). This two-year period falls within the time frame when media coverage of the press reform debate was at its peak in the UK (Macfarlane and Torpey 2012, n.p.; *Independent*, 28 December 2013, n.p.).

Although editorials are where the newspaper’s opinions are often heard (Hindman 2003, 671), I decided against limiting my study sample to editorials because as Wahl-Jorgensen (2008, 67) pointed out, ‘in the British context ... expression of judgements and opinions is frequently not limited to the op-ed and editorial pages, but increasingly pervades every section of the newspaper’. Therefore, limiting the study to editorials risks leaving out interpretations of the debate that featured in the news section of the newspapers. My data, thus, included both opinion and news articles that captured the media policy debate which followed the NotW phone hacking scandal.

### Data collection

My study sample was obtained from Nexis UK, an electronic archive service with full text access to all UK national newspapers. Using the search terms, ‘press regulation’ or ‘press laws’ or ‘public trust’ or ‘media ownership’ or ‘public interest’ or ‘privacy’ (anywhere in the text) and ‘Leveson’ or ‘News of the World’ or ‘phone hacking’ (anywhere in the text), my search produced a total of 1485 news articles. After cleaning the

sample by deleting repeats and unrelated stories, the sample was reduced to 870; 323 from the *Guardian*, 199 from the *Daily Telegraph*, 173 from the *Daily Mail*, 28 from the *Daily Express*, 96 from *The Sun* and 51 from the *Daily Mirror*. The large reduction in the number of articles from 1485 to 870 was largely due to the high number of duplicate articles in Nexis UK. To take care of the differences in the number of news articles per paper, measurements were mostly based on percentage within the paper rather than a percentage of the whole sample.

This study's major method of investigation is content analysis. Content analysis is the systematic and objective analysis of texts such as can be found in newspaper articles, television clips, books, adverts etc. (Holsti 1969, 14 cited in Stemler 2001, 17; Neuman 2003, 310; Mosdell and Davies 2006, 98). In content analysis, textual components (example words, phrases, images etc.) relevant to the findings of one's research are counted, recorded and then calculated with the use of statistical methods (Krippendorff 1980/2004 cited in Zelizer 2004, 115; Riffe et al. 2005, 3). The understanding is that the results when analysed can provide answers to the research questions.

In this study, content analysis was supplemented by critical discourse analysis (CDA). I used some principles from Norman Fairclough's approach to CDA (1992a; 1992b; 1995a; 1995b; 2005) because it enabled me to link language to social issues of contention such as media ownership concentration and its resultant social consequences (Phillips and Jorgensen 2002, 65; Gee and Handford 2012b, 1). Since, CDA is only a supplementary method of analysis in this

study, it was only used to elucidate the results of my content analysis. Complementing content analysis with critical discourse analysis enabled me to provide comprehensive answers to my research questions. A coding scheme was designed to enable me to input the data for my content analysis.

### **Coding scheme**

Berelson (1952, 18 cited in Richardson 2007, 15) emphasized the characteristic of content analysis as an objective research procedure, free from the researcher's interference. This 'objectivity' requirement of content analysis also requires that the research be done in such a way that it can be replicated by anyone who chooses to do so (Altheide 1996, 15; Hansen et al., 1998, 91; Krippendorff 2004, 18–19). To ensure reliability, the coding sheet was drawn up with guidelines to make the study replicable, and was tested and re-tested by two trained postgraduate student coders.

Thirty stories randomly selected from the study sample were tested until the overall percentage agreement reached an average of 95.9 per cent with the lowest variable reaching 80 per cent agreement. The high level of percentage agreement across all variables helps to guarantee that this research can be replicated, and where this is done similar results can be achieved. The calculations were made using ReCal2 0.1 Alpha (dfreelon.org). ReCal2 is an online reliability calculator for two coders which calculates intercoder reliability coefficients for nominal data and produces results for percentage agreements. The result of my intercoder reliability test as computed by ReCal2

was Krippendorff's Alpha 0.822. The results of my content analysis are presented in the next section.

## Findings

As earlier stated, my study sample comprised 870 news articles; 323 from the *Guardian*, 199 from the *Daily Telegraph*, 173 from the *Daily Mail*, 28 from the *Daily Express*, 96 from *The Sun*, and 51 from the *Daily Mirror*. Table 1 presents statistical data on how sources were used in the coverage of the press reform debate that followed the NotW phone hacking scandal. In Table 2, the sources are grouped in related categories to show how each of these groups featured as sources in the debate. Table 3 shows the frequency at which different category of writers, wrote articles on the press reform debate. In Table 4, the writers are grouped in related categories to show how much space each of these groups was given to write articles on the press reform debate. Though these results have limitations in terms of generalisability, they give insight into how the press use sources during their representation of debates about themselves. The results from my investigation into the use of sources provided answers to RQ1 'What sources were used and which of them was most frequently quoted?'.  
  
Table 8.1 revealed that 46.1 per cent of news sources on the debate were press related; out of this number, 37.3 per cent were journalists (not editors), 3.7 per cent were news editors; 2.8 per cent were from press bodies such as the PCC and IPSO, while 2.3 per cent came from newspaper and magazine publishers (see Tables 1 and 2). Out of the remaining 53.9 per cent, policymakers (for the

purpose of this study policymakers include the government, government institutions and politicians) made up 24.5 per cent of sources. 6.5 per cent of the number were Conservative Party spokespersons, 4.8 per cent were from the Labour Party, 3.8 per cent were Government spokespersons, another 3.8 were 'other politicians', 2.7 per cent were from the Liberal Democratic Party who were then in coalition government with the Conservatives; 2.2 per cent of sources were from the Department of Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS) and 0.7 were cross-party – a team made up of the three major political parties – Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Labour (see Tables 2 and 3). Sources related to 'press abuse victims' featured in 9.2 per cent of the study sample; 4.5 per cent were campaigners for victims of press abuse, while 4.7 per cent were the victims themselves. The categorising of these two sources was a little difficult because some prominent campaigners for victims, like Hugh Grant, were also victims of press abuse. From the statistics, we see that these three groups alone (press related, policymakers and press abuse victims) made up 79.8 per cent of the sources (see Tables 1 and 2).

Press regulation document related sources (the Leveson Inquiry and the Royal Charter on press regulation) made up 7.8 per cent of the sources (See Tables 1 and 2). The voice of the judiciary made up 2.2 per cent of the sources; and the police 2.1 per cent – same as a variety of other sources labelled as 'other'. Ordinary members of the public made up only 1.6 per cent of the sources. This agrees with previous findings which posit that ordinary sources have a weak position in the hierarchy of access to the media (GUMG 1976, 244–245; Boyd-Barrett 1987, 109;

Allan 2005, 55–56; Boler et al. 2010, 215).

This inequality in the distribution of sources was also identified in the category of writers of articles in the study sample. Understandably, newspaper staff wrote the bulk of the stories in the study sample, accounting for 91.5 per cent of writers of articles on the debate (see Table 3). What is of interest is the distribution of other contributors.

Table 3 shows that out of the remaining 8.5 per cent of contributors (outside the newspaper's staff), 4.3 per cent were press related: 2.2 per cent were from 'other media' organisations; 1.4 per cent were written by campaigners for press freedom; and 0.7 per cent were former media executives (see Tables 3 and 4). The remaining 4.1 per cent were shared among eight other contributors. Policymakers ('politicians' and 'government') made up 1.4 per cent of that amount making them another significant group used as sources (see Tables 3 and 4). Sources related to 'press abuse victims' made up 1 per cent of the amount: 0.7 per cent were campaigners for victims of the press and 0.3 per cent were written by the victims themselves (see Tables 3 and 4). Though this amount is less than the percentage of sources from policymakers and far less than the number of contributors that were press related, the victims of press abuse and their campaigners still emerged as one of the stakeholders whose voices featured in a significant proportion of the debate, accounting for 9.2 per cent of the sources and 1 per cent of contributors to the debate. Academics also came close to one per cent (0.9) (see Tables 3 and 4). Representatives of associations, members of the public and, surprisingly, corporate organisations

each had under 0.4 per cent representation among sources used in the journalistic metadiscourse (see Table 4).

This result does not reflect a democratic public sphere for a number of reasons which are explained in the following section.

## Discussion

The findings of this study show that journalistic metadiscourse is characterised by a doubly narrow spectrum of sources. 'Doubly narrow' because the range of sources are narrow and within the narrow spectrum of sources, press-related sources dominate the discourse. This agrees with arguments by previous studies that the media is dominated by a narrow spectrum of sources (Graber and Dunaway 2014). While I share the view that the press were vital participants because the debate was about them; the policymakers were vital because they were the decision-making sphere; and the victims were vital because they had first-hand experience relevant to the debate, I argue that limiting the debate in the media's public sphere to this narrow spectrum of stakeholders risks leaving out large sections of the society that do not fall within these major categories but are inarguably stakeholders in the debate on press standards. It can be argued that this narrow spectrum of sources reduced the diversity of views about press reform expressed in the media's public sphere and limited the options that were available to policymakers from which they made decisions on how to regulate the press.

## Press-related sources

The dominance of the media as sources within an already narrow spectrum of sources is a double cause for concern. The gap between press-related sources and other sources in the study sample (see Table 2) demonstrates how the gatekeeping power of the press can be used to their advantage (Lewin 1947, 1951, cited in Reese and Vos, 2009, 11–14; Shoemaker and Vos 2009, 1; White 1950, cited in Vos and Heinderyckx 2015, 3). The press became the powerful elite with the dominant voice while the rest of society were, apparently, at its mercy in the debate. Though it can be argued that there are various channels through which the public can participate in this debate, such as via online news websites and blogs that advance counter discourses, studies have established that considerable numbers of people still depend on the mainstream press for hard news content (Wall 2004, 13, cited in Haas 2012, 147; Haas 2012, 148). Despite the dive in newspaper readership in the UK (Newsworks 2015), the national press represented by this study sample still has an average daily readership of 12.2 million, which demonstrates the number of people in society consuming discourse from this doubly narrow spectrum of sources. The danger is that the views and interpretations of a particular stratum of society dominate the media discourse (Galtung and Ruge 1965 cited in Harcup and O'Neill 2010, 270). Interestingly, the views of the press were not only expressed by press-related sources but were also passed across through other sources as can be seen in the next section.

## 'It takes two to tango': the media and policymakers

A close look at the context within which sources were used in the press coverage of the debate that arose from the phone hacking scandal and the Leveson Inquiry revealed that the press had the dominant position in their relationship with policymakers during the media policy debate. The press apparently used their gatekeeping powers to see to it that only policymakers who expressed support for their position in the debate featured as contributors of opinion articles on the debate in their newspapers. For instance, policymakers who were contributors to the *Daily Telegraph* were largely in support of the argument that statutory underpinning was a threat to press freedom (Mason 2012, 26; Johnson 2012a, 4), while those who were contributors to news articles in the *Guardian* countered the argument that statutory underpinning posed a threat to press freedom (Lester 2012, 30; Fowler 2013, 24; Huhne 2013, 36). And in the articles, some policymakers virtually reproduced the newspaper's position in the debate. For example, Boris Johnson, the then Mayor of London, wrote a two-page opinion article in *The Sun* titled 'It's one of the glories of this country that we have free, exuberant media. They keep public life much cleaner & that makes Britain a wonderful place to live' (Johnson 2012b, 11–12). The dominant theme of that report was 'against press law and statutory underpinning'.

On the other hand, an article written by a member of the House of Lords, Norman Fowler and published by the *Guardian* newspaper expressed support for statutory underpinning of a new press regulatory body (Fowler 2013, 24). The fact that Norman Fowler, a former

Conservative Cabinet minister and party chairman, gained access to publish his view on the debate in the left-wing leaning *Guardian*, goes a long way to show that the primary criteria for access in this self-coverage, may have been tied to the position of the newspaper in the debate. It appears as if the press had said 'you either dance to our tune or find somewhere else to publish your view'. This trend can, arguably, be described as collusion between politicians and the media.

Some politicians have been accused of supporting the arguments of the press in order to receive their backing in the elections which were not far off at the time. For instance, when it was revealed in 2016 that four newspapers (*The Sun*, *Independent*, *Mail on Sunday* and *Independent on Sunday*) were privy to information that the then chairman of the Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee, John Whittingdale had previously been involved in a relationship with a woman he met on an online dating website who happened to be a sex worker, and had not published it, some press reform campaigners and the Labour Party alleged that some sort of deal may have taken place between this executive and the press (BBC News, 13 April 2016, n.p.). John Whittingdale who was then the Conservative MP for Maldon and East Chelmsford denied any such deal with the press and the papers claimed they decided not to publish because he was not a minister at the time of the relationship and as such it was not in the public interest (BBC News, 13 April 2016, n.p.).

There were also assumptions that Boris Johnson may have danced to the tune of the bulk of the national press in the press reform debate because he had an

ambition to become the next Prime Minister of Britain after David Cameron and would, therefore, need the support of this large section of the national press. Whether or not there was a deal between the press and John Whittingdale or even a personal move by Boris Johnson to seek the press' favour for political ambition, the fact remains that some politicians in both spheres largely reproduced arguments of the press in the debate. In this case, though it still takes two to tango, the press leads. It is worthy of note that while the Leveson Inquiry condemned the relationship between the press and politicians for being 'too cosy' (Leveson Inquiry Report Volume 4, 1969; The *Daily Telegraph*, 30 November 2012, 11), the very coverage of the inquiry and that of the rest of the debate appear to have been shaped by a similar level of closeness. The consequence for democracy here is that checks needed to prevent abuse of power by both the fourth and third estates of the realm gradually become eroded (Allan and Zelizer 2010, 48). A tango between the press and politicians poses a threat to democracy. It can, for instance, result in the emergence to power of a politician who though without the quality to lead, cosied up to the press or benefited its financial interest in some way.

### **Victims as 'stakeholders'**

Though the number of victim-related sources is far less than the number of press-and policy-related sources as shown on Tables 1 and 2, the victims of press abuse and their campaigners still emerged as one of the stakeholders whose voices featured in a significant proportion of the debate, accounting for 9.2 per cent of the sources and 1 per

cent of contributors to the debate (see Tables 1–4). While I agree that this demographic is very important to the debate and ought to have been given more space in the journalistic metadiscourse, I argue that the construction of victims as ‘the stakeholders’ further marginalizes other sections of society.

One major problem with the construction of victims as ‘the stakeholders’ is its composition. A look at the victims used as sources revealed that they were mostly famous (well-known) people. They included persons whose life stories attained the status of newsworthiness because of their celebrity status or high public profile (Harcup and O’Neill’s 2010, 168; 2010, 270; 2016, 2). Among them were actor Hugh Grant (Sweeney 2013, n.p.), comedian Steve Coogan (O’Carroll 2012, n.p.), singer Charlotte Church (Glover 2012, n.p.) and author JK Rowling (Luckhurst 2012, 25).

Another group of victims used as sources included persons who became famous because of their connection to a newsworthy event such as the Dowlers (Rayner 2012, 6), the McCanns (Beattie 2013, 26), Christopher Jefferies (Allen and Evans 2012, n.p.), the 7 July 2005 London bombing survivor (Hill 2012, n.p.), or persons closely related to any of the two categories of victims (Cohen 2013, n.p.). So, famous people that have been hurt by the press were constructed as ‘the stakeholders’. That is of course a narrow spectrum of stakeholders of the British press. Though it may be argued that the press would more likely invade the privacy of the rich or famous than the ordinary citizen in society, studies show that ordinary citizens are also affected by press excesses: an example

is minority groups who are often stereotyped in the news. Such people ought to have been adequately represented in the debate on press standards in the media’s public sphere.

Though the academic community made up nearly one per cent of the contributors, some were former journalists (for example, Professors Tim Luckhurst and Brian Cathcart), it was mainly lecturers speaking in the press. The student population which form part of the 21 per cent of young adult readership (ages 18–34) of the national dailies in the country (NRS October 2015–September 2016, cited by Newsworks 2015) had little or no input in the debate in the journalistic metadiscourse. The works of academics on the phone hacking and press standards were occasionally reviewed as part of expert analysis of the NotW phone hacking scandal and press standards in general (The *Guardian*, 26 March 2013, n.; 21 March 2013, n.; the *Daily Telegraph*, 25 October 2012, 25). This made them another recognisable voice in the journalistic metadiscourse.

People from other sectors of society such as those who have not faced any form of press misconduct should have also formed a relevant demographic as their views may be much more neutral in relation to how to balance the issue of privacy with that of press freedom. My intention here is not to belittle the importance of the victims of press misconduct to the debate but to argue that they are only one relevant demographic out of a number and that should have been reflected in the journalistic metadiscourse. There is the tendency that victims advocating for press reform can make suggestions out of anger and frustration at the press.

Therefore, a mix of those that have experienced press abuse and those that have not been directly hurt would have made a more balanced group of stakeholders.

What emerged instead was a rhetoric or discourse that constructed the victims of press abuse as the only demographic that needed the service of an accountable press. As such, whatever proposal was going to be made by the Leveson Inquiry must pass 'the victims test'. Policymakers, the press and even the victims themselves all advanced this rhetoric as can be seen in this statement written by the *Guardian's* Dan Sabbagh:

Victims have a veto. David Cameron, giving evidence, said that the test of the effectiveness of the Leveson Inquiry would be its impact on those who have suffered from press intrusion. 'If families like the Dowlers feel this has really changed the way they would have been treated, we would have done our job properly', he said. (Sabbagh 2012, 11)

The victims were thus, what I refer to as the 'steakholders' in the debate. According to symbols scholar Ivan J. Thomas:

To dream of a steak represents situations that allow you to have total control, to make the important decisions, have authority, or feel all powerful. Having things your way. It usually symbolizes decision making that is in your best interest or situations that allow you to dictate terms. (Thomas 2016, 149)

My use of steak here is not to engage in a discussion on symbols but to explicate the construction of press abuse victims in the journalistic metadiscourse on the journalism debate. This construction of victims as 'steakholders' may have accounted for victim-related sources emerging among the top three sources used in the study sample as shown in Table 2. Having examined how sources were distributed in the press coverage of the media policy debate that followed the NotW phone hacking scandal, the next section presents my findings on the importance accorded diverse issues of concern in the public sphere.

### **Hierarchy of importance: issues of concern**

Table 5 reveals that that the top three subjects in the hierarchy of importance were press freedom (16.7 per cent); arguments against press law and statutory regulation (12.4 per cent); and public interest (6.9 per cent). The least in the order of importance within this category was 'against self-regulation' (0.4 per cent) along with '[neutral] comments on statutory underpinning' (0.4). Though the *Guardian* gave much space to countering that argument, the 'press freedom' theme did not appear at the top of the *Guardian's* narrative structure as frequently as it did in the other newspapers.

Though the *Guardian* also claimed to be against full-blown statutory regulation of the press, arguments against statutory regulation were not given much space at the top of its narrative structure, appearing at the top in only 3.2 per cent of its sample as opposed to 26.3 per cent of the *Daily Mirror*, 19.8 per cent of the *Daily Sun*, 17.9 per cent of the *Daily*

*Telegraph* and 17.6 per cent of the *Daily Mail* (see Table 5). While this shows the *Guardian's* voice against statutory regulation was weak, it also confirms how averse much of the press was to statutory regulation.

Though the subject of 'media owners/ownership' was high up in the *Daily Mirror's* hierarchy of importance, emerging third place with 13.2 per cent of appearances at the top, the discussions were not on concentration of media ownership but were on the trouble that had befallen Rupert Murdoch, owner of the *News of the World*, and his staff as a result of the phone hacking scandal (Flanagan 2012, 4; Dixon 2013, 7). This served more as infotainment, a dramatic narration of their ordeal.

Some key issues in the debate did not gain entrance into this sphere of importance (top of the narrative structure) in the *Daily Mirror*. They include arguments against the new press regulatory system formed by the press; support for statutory underpinning; and support for the Leveson Inquiry and arguments in support of an independent press regulatory system, along with some neutral comments (see Table 5). A close look at the issues that received no space at the top of the *Daily Mirror's* narrative structure reveals that they are arguments that are considered as not in the interest of the commercial press. This trend of giving prime place in the narrative structure to arguments perceived to be in their interest, with little or no mention of opposing views within that sphere of importance was more prominent in *The Sun*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph* compared to the *Guardian* (see Table 5). This

demonstrates that the commercial press gives more quality space to arguments or issues they perceive to be in their interest during their representation of media policy debates. This finding affirms the claim by previous studies that the gatekeeping powers of the media are prone to abuse when the media cover themselves (McQuail 2002, cited in Miller 2006, 41; Shoemaker and Vos 2009, 1; White 1950, cited in Vos and Heinderyckx 2015, 3). This manner of coverage can have an adverse effect on democracy because it privileges the voice of the press above those of other stakeholders in debates about media policy. This finding confirms the claim by previous studies which say the press avoids or gives limited coverage to criticisms against themselves and that journalistic metadiscourse is characterised by a lack of self-critique (Carey 1974; Eason 1988; Lule 1992; Christopher 2007b, 42; Haas 2006, cited in Carlson 2015, 9).

## Conclusion

This article has shown that the journalistic metadiscourse on the debate that followed the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal featured a doubly narrow spectrum of sources; 'doubly narrow' because the range of sources was narrow, and within the narrow spectrum, access tilted heavily in favour of press-related sources. Policymakers came next to the press in the hierarchy of access to deliberations about media policy in the public sphere. The media's dependence on policymakers as sources can be attributed to the fact that they serve as credible sources of information, and because they have the power to make decisions on media policy. The power of

political leaders to make policy decisions on the media and the power of the press to either make or mar a political career make them collaborate with one another for 'favourable' press coverage to promote a political career in exchange for 'favourable' media policies that advance the interest of the commercial press.

My findings revealed that newspapers used as sources political leaders who reproduced the paper's views in the debate. The situation suggests a tango between the press and politicians in which the press played the leading role. Applying Gans' (Gans 1979, 116) use of the dance metaphor, I argued that in the case of the press use of sources during its coverage of the debate that arose from the phone hacking scandal and the Leveson Inquiry, 'it takes two to tango, but the press leads'. This study found that victims of press abuse were represented as 'the stakeholders' rather than 'a stakeholder' of the debate. While acknowledging the importance of the victims to the debate, I contend that limiting the stakeholder status to those who have been hurt by the press results in a limited range of views and risks shutting down more neutral voices that could have enriched the debate in the media's public sphere.

On how different subjects of the debate were accorded priority in the debate, my findings revealed a trend in which arguments perceived to be in the

media's self-interest were given more quality space (high up in the narrative structure) than those considered to be against their interest. For example, 'press freedom' featured more frequently than any other theme at the top of the narrative structure while the arguments, 'against self-regulation' and 'against new press regulatory system formed by the press' were among issues that had the fewest occurrences within this sphere of importance. In sum, the sources used were too narrow as such the debate lacked robustness such that other options, for example, non-governmental public reformism, were not explored as a means of achieving press accountability.

In sum, my findings affirm that the gatekeeping powers of the media are prone to abuse when the media cover themselves (McQuail 2002 cited in Miller 2006, 41; Shoemaker and Vos 2009; 1; White 1950, cited in Vos and Heinderyckx 2015, 3). This study highlights the need for the press to expand their use of sources, and function as a democratic public sphere in debates about themselves. I argue that because bias is inevitable (Kieran 1997, 57; Elmessiri 2006, 49), it is difficult for the press to function as a democratic public sphere in debates about themselves; as such some form of external intervention, for example public reformism, may be necessary to compel the press to serve as a democratic public sphere during self-coverage.

Sources	Frequency of sources	Percentage of sources
Campaigners for victims of press abuse	537	4.5%
Leveson Inquiry	827	7.0%
Royal Charter	97	0.8%
Campaigners for press freedom	495	4.2%
The press	4420	37.3%
Press body such as IPSO	331	2.8%
News editors	441	3.7%
Newspaper and magazine publishers	278	2.3%
Conservative spokesperson	776	6.5%
Police	253	2.1%
Labour shadow government	573	4.8%
Coalition Liberal Democrats	325	2.7%
Cross-party	85	0.7%
Culture, Media and Sport	255	2.2%
Government spokesperson	453	3.8%
Other politicians	454	3.8%
Victims of press abuse	559	4.7%
Ordinary members of the public	184	1.6%
Judiciary	263	2.2%
Other	252	2.1%
Total	11858	100.0%

*Table 1. Frequency of sources*

Source Type	Percentages
Press-related sources	46.1%
Policymakers	24.5%
Press abuse victims related sources	9.2%
Leveson and Royal Charter	7.8%
Judiciary	2.2%
Police	2.1%
Ordinary members of the public	1.6%
Other	2.1
Total	100.0%

*Table 2. Source types in related categories*

Category of Writers	The Guardian	The Daily Mail	The Daily Mirror	The Daily Telegraph	The Daily Express	The Sun	Total
The newspaper's staff/representative	88.2%	98.3%	94.1%	91.5%	92.9%	88.5%	91.5%
Campaigners for victims of the press	0.9%			1.0%		1.0%	0.7%
Victims of press abuse	0.9%						0.3%
Campaigners for the press	1.2%	1.2%	2.0%	0.5%		4.2%	1.4%
Representatives of associations	0.9%						0.3%
Former media executives	0.6%			0.5%	7.1%	1.0%	0.7%
A member of the public			2.0%	1.0%			0.3%
Government				1.5%			0.3%
Politicians	1.2%			2.5%		1.0%	1.1%
Business/corporate organisations		0.6%					0.1%
Academics	1.5%		2.0%	0.5%		1.0%	0.9%
Other media	4.3%			1.0%		3.1%	2.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*Table 3. Category of Writers*

Writers	Percent
Newspaper staff	91.5%
Press related	4.3%
Policymakers	1.4%
Press abuse victims	1.0%
Academics	0.9
Representative of associations	0.3%
Corporate organisations	0.1%
Ordinary members of the public	0.3%
Total	100.0%

*Table 4. Category of Writers in groups*

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