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**‘MR. MALIK, TO REPRESENT THE PEOPLE OF DEWSBURY DO YOU NEED A £2,600 CINEMA SYSTEM PAID FOR BY THE TAXPAYER?’ AN ANALYSIS OF BRITISH TELEVISION NEWS COVERAGE OF THE 2009 MPS ‘EXPENSES SCANDAL’**

This paper explores British television news coverage of the 2009 MPs expenses scandal as part of a broader analysis of television coverage of politics. Drawing on an analysis of the content of the coverage and examples of interviews aired, it argues that routine journalistic practices closed down the space available for a thorough and open-ended exploration of the claims made by MPs. Instead, coverage concentrated on the moral and financial laxity of MPs and the allegations made against them.

**Keywords**

Mediatisation, media scandals, MPs expenses scandal, political news coverage, television news coverage

In the Spring of 2009, the British political establishment was rocked by revelations in the Daily Telegraph of the expenses claims and alleged excesses of individual MPs. The nature of the coverage - large front-page headlines in all newspapers and top listing on broadcast news programmes - ensured that the claims made by MPs would be closely scrutinised, particularly if these were considered scandalous and excessive. Hence the allegations of claims for fixing tennis courts, moats, and for the purchase of duck houses. Across all media, the refrain was the same: MPs had ‘allowed abuses to flourish’ (Telegraph, 2009, p.1), they were spending ‘our’ money in a profligate way, and were making a mockery of a scheme that they themselves had designed.

Despite the seemingly outrageous (and fraudulent) nature of some of these claims, it should still be possible to ask whether ~~the nature of the~~ broadcast news coverage given to of the expenses scandal offered a measured approach to a difficult issue. More specifically, whether the broadcast news coverage created the appropriate space for an in-depth examination of the topic in such a way that MPs were not, as the default position seemed to be, always deemed guilty of scandalous behaviour?

By analyzing the ways in which two broadcast news services, BBC and Sky, dealt with the ‘expenses scandal’, this paper seeks not only to contribute to a discussion of the coverage of politics on television but also to a more timely discussion of the ways ‘journalistic interventions’ (Cushion and Thomas, 2013) in broadcast news potentially close down the space for debate and reflection. As we shall see in the course of this paper, common every-day journalistic practices made it almost impossible for those accused – all MPs - to counter the dominant narrative that journalists had established. Whilst this paper focuses on a specific period and a specific set of events, the argument that it develops could be applied more generally to studies of political news coverage on television. The issues it raises highlight the ways in which routine journalistic practices can themselves shape the content of news.

This paper is divided into four parts. The first part briefly outlines what the expenses scandal was about and in relation to scandal coverage in general; the second looks at recent contributions to the study of the coverage of political news outputs on

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television; the third part turns to our analysis of the expenses scandal coverage. In the final part of this paper, we review the findings and speculate on the implications of these findings for the possibility of political talk on television news. Before we proceed, it is important to note that this paper does not seek to establish the innocence or guilt of MPs or the honesty of their claims. It merely raises questions about the nature of political coverage in times of 'crisis' and the role of the media in the narration-framing of events that trouble a nation.

### 1. The expenses scandal, a mediated scandal

Whilst the newspaper headlines inevitably highlighted a collection of claims that were both newsworthy and scandalous - money spent on furnishings, properties, gardening, pergolas, porticos, etc... - it soon became clear that, in practice, the line between what was 'within the rules' (i.e. covered by 'the Green Book' and approved by the Commons Fees Office) and outside the rules and therefore possibly fraudulent was blurred. This is quite common in a common feature in the coverage of media scandals since the transgressions often highlighted are 'transgressions of certain values, norms or moral codes' (Thompson, 1997, p.39) rather than of specific rules and conventions. (See also YYYY, 2008)

Nevertheless, in the process of highlighting such transgressions, the media not only became 'the principal mechanisms through which the [scandalous] activities (were) made visible to others' (Thompson, 1997, p.51) but they also dictated how those activities were made visible framed, that is, how the problem is defined, the 'forces creating the problem; make moral judgments ... and suggest remedies...' (Entman, 1993, p.52). As Lengeaur, Esser and Berganza have observed, in the coverage of scandals journalistic practices often contain within them 'one-sided confrontational depictions [which] may manifest themselves as unidirectional accusations, ranging from mere critique to straight attacks and allegations of scandalous misconduct...' (Lengeaur, Esser and Berganza, 2012, p.-185) In so doing, the media can create an environment whereby even those who are 'innocent' of what they are allegedly accused of act as if they were guilty. So, for example, the MPs Hazel Blears and Phil Hope both 'decided' to pay back money for expenses claimed even though neither were believed or were found to be guilty of any misdemeanors. (See below) Similarly, the accusations leveled against MP Shahid Malik - and the question that forms part of the title of this paper - implies a transgression of an ill-defined code and not a crime per se.

It is through the use of language, then, that the media attack their prey: whether in the way questions are phrased, words used to describe things - 'country estates', 'swimming pool repairs', 'moats', 'porticos'<sup>1</sup> - or in exchanges during interviews. In this process doing so, the media drive a wedge between those they accuse and everyone else ('the public', 'the ordinary person'). As the extract (below) from a phone interview with retired MP Tam Dalyell on Sky News (15 May 2009) illustrates, the default position is one of assumed guilt of breaking codes, moral or otherwise, with the broadcast media taking on the role of public-defender of the public and the public interest and the morality police judge of moral values. Although Dalyell sought to explain in full the background to the claim-, the reporter continues to suggest that the claims were not justified.

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<sup>1</sup> A Sky News reporter observed that the MP David Davies had 'claimed for a portico. I think that's a posh porch to you and me, Gillian' (Sky News, 12 May 2009).

Sky reporter: You see, people would look at that expense claim Mr Dalyell, I mean, and it's not clear from the details I have whether it was paid in full or in part or refused –

Dalyell: Well that's why – you see, this is the difficulty, I can't remember – (...Reporter: but, but the, but ...) – exactly what the details were.

Sky reporter: But, but in a sense isn't that almost academic because people are looking at this now and saying, well it's a fact that MPs are putting in these claims for these sort of figures whether it's mortgage interest on mortgages that have been repaid or extravagant claims as this would be perhaps classed as being extravagant, £18 grand for two bookcases, I mean, that –

Dalyell: Hang on.

Sky reporter: – would seem to be –

Dalyell: Hang on. Hang on. Hang on.

Sky reporter: – beyond the realms of what –

Dalyell: Look.

Sky reporter: – people would consider normal under any circumstances.

Dalyell: I didn't, I didn't go demanding £18 grand. What I did do was to go to the Fees Office to have a sensible discussion as to what proportion was a fair claim in this. And as I say I was the cheapest MP in Scotland. And it was against this background that we came to this arrangement. Now, you have the receipts and I don't.

The clash of world-views is evident in this extract: MPs believing their actions were (most often) 'within the rules', the media – with the public suitably primed to echo media rhetoric – questioning the claims in disbelief. [Whilst the relationship between these two sets of actors is generally acknowledged to be adversarial, we would argue that the outlandish nature of some of the reported claims made it very unlikely that the media would adopt anything other than a critical, outraged and disbelieving tone.](#)

~~Yet~~ this, and other examples, illustrate a broader point: namely, that during the Spring of 2009, the media had taken on the self-appointed role of opposition [since the opposition party was itself mired in the scandal. As along the lines described by Adam Boulton of Sky News argued in his evidence to the Leveson inquiry in 2012, when an opposition is weakened or – 'In politics there are sometimes periods', he argued, 'when an opposition is' – sunk in infighting and introspection ... – at such moments I believe](#) it is all the more the role of the media to hold government to account.' (Boulton, 2012. Emphasis supplied.) ~~But~~ in holding politicians to account [in the way that they had](#), so our argument goes, the broadcasters were not only acting as an opposition to all politicians but they also [potentially](#) closed down the space available for politicians to respond and for the possibility of a full engagement in a wider conversation about expenses. It is that closure that will feature prominently in our examples, examples that illustrate a more extreme and heightened form of the mediatization<sup>2</sup> of politics as currently understood.

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<sup>2</sup> [Whilst the words mediation and mediatization are sometimes used synonymously, we have opted in this paper for mediatization as developed and understood by Jesper Stromback. For a discussion and exploration of the contested meanings of these concepts and the different ways in which they have been used see Jesper Stromback's site <http://mediatization-of-politics.com/defining-mediatization/>; and Cushion and Thomas, 2013 for a general review.](#)

## 2. Political coverage, mediatization

The dominant role of journalists in the coverage of political news on television, expressed both in terms of visuals and the control of the narrative, is something that is widely acknowledged as significant in the literature on the mediatization of politics, understood here as 'a multidimensional concept where at least four dimensions can be identified.' If the first two of the four dimensions focus on the media as channels of communication and information and their degrees of independence from other institutions, the third and the fourth relate much more specifically to the ways in which media and politics interact: the third dimension brings to the fore the question of media content and the degree to which it 'is mainly governed by media logic or political logic' and the fourth dimension relates to the extent and degree to which 'political actors.. are governed by media logic or political logic.' (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011, 34)

In order to test empirically the degrees of mediatization of politics, Strömbäck and Dimitrova employ 'six potential indicators of the degree to which media content is mediatized'. These indicators touch on the ways in which journalistic dominance and related 'journalistic interventions' (Cushion and Thomas, 2013) give shape to political coverage. They include: 'length of politicians' sound bites, journalistic visibility, wrap-ups granted to journalists, lip flaps, an interpretive journalistic style, and framing of politics as a strategic game or horse race. The common thread is that they are all about degree of media interventionism and the extent to which media content is shaped to suit the media's formats, production routines, news values, and needs...' (2011, p.36) (see also Strömbäck, 2008)

Such indicators clearly help us better understand how routine journalistic practices come to play a significant part in the ways political news on television is produced. To take a simple example, if journalists 'wrap-up' the news item, they are likely to offer an account or a way of framing contextualization—an interpretation, perhaps—of what had just been reported in the news package. Similarly, if they talk over visuals, what they say explains and so frames what is on screen. In this way, a discussion of mediatization can also segue into a discussion of the shift to interpretive journalism that some have observed in television news practices whereby journalists no longer simply report in a descriptive way but provide analysis and context. (See Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011; Salgado and Strömbäck, 2011) This, according to Patterson, 'empowers journalists by giving them more control over the message.' (200: 250)

Studies of the nature and structure of the political interview on television offer other insights into how routine practices can underpin journalistic dominance. As such studies show, whilst putting together ['constructing'] a television news package, journalists can exercise a number of choices that have important consequences. They can choose, for instance, which extracts of an interview (or utterances) to use and they can also choose how to use them (in what order, what precedes them, etc.), and so on. (See, for example, Ekström, 2001; Erikson, 2011; Ekström, 2009; Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Xxxx, 2003; Voltmer, K. and K. Brants, 2011) Such choices are important and they can lead to a variety of outcomes: for example, the phrasing of questions can create situations in which political actors are permanently on the back foot - they bluster, they equivocate, they avoid answering questions - and are unable to defend themselves. (see Xxxx, 2003)

If we explore the constituent elements of broadcast political news in this way, we can begin to appreciate the extent to which news is no more than a collection of very

carefully, and seamlessly, constructed packages and not a vehicle in which there is necessarily a continuous and careful exchange of ideas and comments. To take one fairly obvious if not always apparent example, utterances (sound-bites) from politicians are rarely preceded directly by a question posed by the journalist to which the utterance is meant to be a direct or full reply. In fact, it is not always possible to tell whether or not a broadcast sound bite comes from an actual interview with that particular journalist since viewers rarely have the clues that would [enable](#) them to do so. More often than not, utterances are taken out of their original context (de-contextualised) and placed into a different context (re-contextualised), i.e. the television news package. (Ekström, 2001, pp. 566-568) This is the most common way in which utterances are used: Ekström (2001, p. 569) found that 60% of the 235 political news interview sequences on Swedish television that he analysed 'were isolated answers'. Only 5% were made up of two questions with their respective answers and 6% 'included five or more turns' [question and answer sequences]. Put differently, the political interview, understood as an interaction consisting of questions followed by answers, is rare in television news programmes. As Ekström notes, in news programmes, answers are 'divorced' from questions. (Ekström, 2001, p.569) In this way, utterances are transformed 'into a specific action that fits into the narrative' (Ekström, 2001, p. 574. Italics in original) and '... the interview answers of politicians are fitted into simplified, schematic representations of reality, i.e. the more or less sensational events that make up the news.' (Ekström, 2001, p. 576)

Such practices in the production of news are so common and ingrained that they are rarely questioned (see Cushion and Thomas, 2013); indeed, they are so common that one does not often query whether or not they lead to a better understanding of complex issues. By focusing on the study of the MPs expenses scandal, we wish to argue that such practices can be a barrier to a more open-ended, more inclusive discussion of political issues. The greater dominance of journalistic interventions in broadcast news output comes at a price, namely, the more restricted contributions of political actors; granting journalists the power to ask the questions and to choose the answers, as well as giving them the power to decide on how those questions and answers will be used, can silence the voices of others. Whilst none of this should necessarily be taken to be an intentional act to limit the processes and content of communication and explication, it can, in practice, lead to the same outcome. This is one of the conclusions that it is possible to draw from a closer reading of the broadcast news coverage of the expenses scandal: journalistic dominance and journalistic interventions closed down the spaces for political actors to seek to represent their positions. More significantly, since the journalistic narrative was one [which that](#) tarred the whole political class with the same broad brush, any attempt to counter that narrative proved impossible.

[There is, though, one other conclusion that we wish to draw from our study and this touches on the understanding of mediatization as encompassing the ways in which the political world and political actors are obliged to adapt to the logic of the media. We wish to argue that ~~Indeed, it was the brave \(foolhardy?\) politician who dared to defend himself/herself!~~ even in those circumstances in which a political actor could be shown to have adapted to the media world by, for example, incorporating a media dimension to defending their claims and granting interviews.](#)

[As our analysis shows, there was only one story and it was told and re-told many times and in the same way the media narrative continued to reign supreme. In this sense, the politician who tried to offer a defence was truly foolhardy; the only way to satisfy the appetite of the media \(and the public\) for retribution was to apologise.](#)

arguably a strategy of adaptation to media logic albeit from a position of weakness. This suggests, and we return to this in our discussion, that in scandal coverage media logic trumps everything else. As our analysis shows, there was only one story and it was told and re-told many times but always in the same way.

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### 3. TV coverage of the ‘expenses scandal’ of 2009

Broadly speaking, the main television evening news bulletins on British television are broadcast around 10pm and at the end of the traditional newscast. During the three-week period analysed here, those bulletins reported all developments that had taken place throughout the day, e.g. morning papers, lunchtime bulletins, etc., but often also the headlines from the following day’s newspapers as these came off the presses in the evening. In this way, the expenses scandal stories moved from newspapers to television to newspapers, and so on in a cyclical way.

Table 1 provides an overview of the amount of coverage time that was devoted to the expenses scandal story during the three week-day (Monday to Friday) period between 11 May and 3 June 2009 on the three main British television news programmes: BBC *10 O’Clock News* and Sky News at Ten and Channel 4 News<sup>3</sup>. All three programmes were recorded and all news items relating to the expenses scandal story were then edited and transcribed.<sup>4</sup> Some differences in coverage can be accounted for by the nature of the news programmes in question: BBC News is the most popular evening news programme on British television and has a regular audience of about 4 million viewers. It is 25 minutes long and tightly scripted. Sky News and Channel Four News are the flagship news programme within their respective media organizations. Both have relatively modest audiences – Channel Four News at about 750,000 viewers daily, and Sky News with well under half-a-million. Both are, whilst the other two news programmes are scheduled for one hour long (inclusive of commercial breaks) though Sky News is part of a rolling 24-hour news service. Given their length, one finds that they and so present a greater number of opportunities for longer interviews, packages and discussions. One obvious outcome of this is that they longer news bulletins gave devoted more time to the coverage of the scandal, though not necessarily as a proportion of the overall total time of the news programme: Channel 4 News devoted 291 minutes across three weeks (approximately 34% of the total length of all the news programmes<sup>5</sup>), Sky News at 10, 193 minutes (about 24% of total time) and BBC *10 O’Clock News*, 138 minutes (about 32% of total time). As Table 1 also shows, the proportions of time taken up by the different actors varies quite widely but in no case do political actors dominate the news programmes: journalists (including anchors) were on screen (or off-screen) talking for 54% of total time on Channel 4 News, 68% of time on Sky News and 72% of time on BBC1.

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#### Table 1 about here

Although politicians were given opportunities to speak on-screen, those utterances – be they statements, answers, responses - were pared down to fairly short snippets of

<sup>3</sup> Outline quantitative data for Channel 4 is provided here for comparison only. The paper does not draw on other material from Channel 4 for analysis.

<sup>4</sup> Newspaper reviews on Sky News were not included in our analysis.

<sup>5</sup> These figures assume that BBC news is 25 minutes long and that the other two are notionally 60 minutes but have several ad breaks within them amounting to about 10 minutes per programme.

information. On the BBC News, the longest utterance from a politician was 38 seconds but the average was just under 11 seconds (compared with journalists where the respective figures are 86 seconds and 26 seconds); on Sky News, the average utterance from a politician was 17 seconds (in part because Sky News carried some long interviews) with the longest political utterance - in the course of an interview - 217 seconds. (Table 2) These findings are broadly in line with other work that has analysed journalistic practices in news and the length of sound bites. (See Steele and Barnhurst, 1996; Hallin, 1992; Cushion and Thomas, 2013; Grabe and Bucy, 2009).

### **Table 2 about here**

Given the length of these utterances, it is obvious that they can rarely consist of any more than a single point or comment or, at best, a series of short points. In our study, we identified only 11 instances where an interview was aired in the news programmes, that is, where there was a sequence of two or more questions followed by answers. As Ekström (2001) has shown in his work, if we understand an interview as an opportunity for an exchange of comments in a sequence of questions and answers then we find that these are rare events in news programmes. In his study, only 26 out of 235 interview sequences (11%) that he analysed consisted of 4 turns (Q-A-Q-A) or more (Ekström, 2001, p. 569). In other words, television news does not normally contain opportunities for discussions and the same was true during the 2009 expenses scandal.

The 11 interviews that we identified in the course of the 5 hours and 31 minutes of broadcast time devoted to the scandal on the BBC and Sky news programmes took up a total of 38 minutes and 3 seconds (approximately 11.5% of total time). Of these 11 interviews, nine were on Sky News - and took up 35 minutes and 2 seconds - and were broadcast after the commercial break in the middle of the news bulletin where fuller discussions are usually placed. Of the two interviews on BBC News, Nick Robinson's interview with the Prime Minister lasts 96 seconds with PM Gordon Brown speaking for 80 seconds interspersed with questions and interruptions (33,8,23,16) and his interview with then Chancellor Darling lasts 85 seconds with Darling speaking for 37 seconds (14,5,11,7).<sup>6</sup> Importantly, there were many occasions when the utterances from those interviewed did come from what, to all intents and purposes, looked like interviews: for example, the reporter would sometimes be in the shot in front of, or to the side of, the interviewee but, and this is significant, he/she would paraphrase a question to which the utterance would appear to be a reply to the supposedly asked question. On such occasions - of which there were many - the utterance is not preceded by a question but by a paraphrase of a question. As viewers, we therefore do not know what the actual question was nor what the full answer was. As in Ekström's (2001) work, it was more common to find a statement or paraphrased question from a reporter followed by a statement (utterance/ soundbite) from a political actor. The following example illustrates how this works in news production:

BBC Robinson [off-screen]: ... and the Shadow Leader of the Commons Alan Duncan repays around £5,000 in gardening bills.

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<sup>6</sup> In this instance, extracts from the interview are included earlier on and later on in the news programme.

MP Duncan [on-screen]: I agreed with the Fees Office that a proportion of the maintenance and cleaning of my house ... should be on the Parliamentary allowance.<sup>7</sup> (BBC News, 12 May 2009)

On the BBC News during the period of analysis, there were 154 instances where an utterance was not preceded by a question (of which the above is an example). Some of these were utterances drawn from a variety of sources such as news conferences but many were what one could think of as an answer to a question that had been paraphrased and to which the response was (possibly part of a fuller) answer. On only 4 occasions was an answer preceded by an actual question. The same pattern is broadly true for Sky News (109 'answers' and 7 Q & As).

Advanced editing techniques have clearly simplified the process of seamlessly linking together disparate images and sound to create a more visual and flowing representation of news content. In such circumstances, the 'role of the politicians', in Eriksson's view, 'is no longer to deliver arguments, policies, or proposals. Instead, when they appear in news stories their role is primarily to confirm that news journalism's analyses or explanations are reliable.' (2011, p.66) With the length of the utterances what they are, the spaces for reflection and ~~contradiction~~ discussion are clearly very limited. Whether or not journalists can legitimately argue that the selected utterances are always true to their origin is a question that we do not have space to address here.

What is clear though is that findings of this kind not only reflect commonly accepted and routine newsroom practices but also the very limited number of opportunities that those in the news have for articulating positions or, in this case, a defence. As we will illustrate in the next section, on those occasions when politicians were given the opportunity to speak at length - or decided to put their heads above the parapet - so as to challenge the established journalistic narrative, the imperatives of scandal coverage ensured that they always remained guilty of their alleged transgressions. Journalistic interventions, journalistic dominance and journalistic practices – different ways of expressing similar things, perhaps - worked to make attempts at explanation very difficult.

### 3.1 Challenging the narrative

There are many examples that could be used to illustrate the ways in which journalistic practices closed down the space for appropriate discussion of the MPs' expenses claims. Some of these examples are drawn from interviews shown during the broadcast news bulletins and these illustrate how the structure of an interview - the phrasing of questions, interruptions, editing techniques – often make it impossible for individuals to defend themselves and to counter the established narrative (of guilt). On other occasions, we find that even those MPs who sought to atone for their (unsubstantiated) wrongdoings were undermined by journalistic interventions. We begin our analysis with two such examples, the first looks at Hazel Blear's attempt to return money ~~claimed~~ in lieu of Capital Gains Tax, the second to the return of a large sum of money (£40,000) by Phil Hope, MP.

#### 3.1.1 Hazel Blears and Phil Hope - caving in to pressure?

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<sup>7</sup> Note that Robinson refers to 'gardening' whilst Duncan refers to 'maintenance and cleaning'.

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Early on in the coverage, the Communities Secretary Hazel Blears – labeled by the broadcasters as ‘the queen of the flips’ [switching properties] - was accused of buying and selling properties and ‘charging us for the costs and making a healthy tax-free profit on transactions that, without careful financial planning, she would have otherwise had to pay Capital Gains Tax on.’ (David Bowden, Sky News, 11 May 2009) Although she denied this, she did acknowledge that she had moved homes when it was had been necessary to do so. On the day that other MPs were ‘rushing to write cheques to the taxpayer’ (Robinson, 12 May 2009), Blears brandished a cheque in front of the cameras and announced~~Yet when she announced~~ that she was paying back £13,000 - the Capital Gains Tax that would have been owed had she intentionally done what she had been accused of doing. In the course of an interview, –Sky’s Jon Craig accused her of making a pointless and costly gesture:

Sky Craig: You’ve seen the stories. People are tipping you for the sack ... Now there’s this embarrassment over your second homes. You’re doing this just to save face, ... keep your job; and it might turn out you get sacked in the reshuffle and you might have wasted £13,000. (...) (12 May 2009)

The simple fact that she may not have been guilty of anything seemed to make no difference to the scandal narrative, as the BBC’s Nick Robinson pointed out in a report a week later:

BBC Robinson: Well, she in a sense is a symbol of the difficult position that party leaders, all party leaders now find themselves in. *Let’s be clear, she did not break the rules, she did not break the law, she did not have to pay any money back, she chose voluntarily to do so, and yet the Prime Minister has declared her behaviour unacceptable, totally unacceptable, leading voters to think surely she should be out of the cabinet. ...* (20 May 2009. Emphasis supplied)<sup>8</sup>

Another example of an MP who sought to deal with media and public pressure by paying money~~seeking to do the ‘right thing’ and pay money~~ back was MP Phil Hope. In a BBC interview, he explained that~~Under pressure,~~ he felt he had to pay £40,000 back even though his claims were, in his eyes, within the rules. As journalist Clare Marshall noted, this was an ‘eye-watering sum of money that he’s now preparing to write out a cheque for.’

MP Hope: It’s going to be quite a challenge and I will be looking at a variety of ways of ... myself and my wife of putting that money together, but we will do that. The things that people are saying about me hurt because they oppose my values and that’s why I’ve had to think long and hard about what I do, and that’s why I’ve chosen to take this route to pay all the money back.

BBC Marshall: And this is the staggering number of claims that Mr. Hope made including some £4,500 for kitchen equipment, £4,700 for putting in a wood floor, and about £800 for two bookcases. He has said he’ll pay it all back but his constituents here in Corby aren’t impressed. ...

BBC Marshall: How do you feel about the fact that he took it in the first place?

Member of Public-2: A rogue, a rogue. (13 May 2009. Emphasis supplied)

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<sup>8</sup> The Prime Minister did not refer to her behaviour as ‘unacceptable’ until a week after she paid back £13,000.

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In the face of accusations such as these ('eye watering', 'staggering number of claims', 'took it in the first place', '*extravagant claims*'), it is not surprising to find that some MPs adopted a much safer strategy of contrition and apology. As this next example shows some journalistic interventions are very gentle and perfunctory and those accused are not even challenged. Why some but not others were given this treatment and their transgressions, metaphorically, swept aside is unclear but certainly worthy of further investigation.

BBC Chakrabarti: Amid routine claims for council tax and cleaners comes the practice of flipping. Andrew Lansley's been accused of it, he did up a cottage in his constituency at taxpayers' expense, before redesignating his second home as the one nearer Westminster. He says that was fair enough because his family circumstances had changed.

MP Lansley: As a family we had two children in the space of two years. Those children were growing up. When they were very small we were living in London and going to Cambridgeshire at the weekend... the children [were] going to go to school in Cambridgeshire so we actually transferred to Cambridgeshire.

BBC Chakrabarti: and Michael Gove stayed one night in this hotel and claimed £500 for it. He's apologized.

MP Gove: I am sorry if people believe that in any individual case that I've been extravagant and I do believe that there are one or two cases where the amount of money that I've spent is more than I should have done. I accept that. (BBC News, 11 May 2009)

When politicians were granted the opportunity to appear in an interview or decided that they would brave it given the media onslaught – [put differently, sought to incorporate a media strategy into their political actions](#) – they found that despite their best efforts they were unable to counter the dominant narrative. If the examples of Blears and Hope (above) show how contrition was interpreted as a weakness and/or as cynical political tactics, fighting back achieved outcomes that were no better, as PM Gordon Brown and Justice Minister Shahid Malik found to their costs.

### 3.1.2 Gordon Brown and Shahid Malik - the impossibility of defence

In the first front-page Telegraph story on the scandal on the 8th May 2009, PM Gordon Brown was accused of paying his brother more than £6000 for 'cleaning services' (sic). Brown argued throughout, though, that this was perfectly legitimate expenditure but as this exchange with Craig (Sky News) on 12 May 2009 shows, denials and refutations made little impact on the narrative. [What it also shows, in passing, is the way in which media willingly participate, sometimes unquestioningly, in party political tactics by political leaders.](#)

Sky Craig: ... For example, what about your £6,000 cleaning bill for the cleaning you shared with your brother on a London flat, when you were living in Downing Street at the time? Why not pay some of that back?

Gordon Brown: ... you're completely wrong about this allegation. ... the Telegraph has already said there is no suggestion of impropriety ...

Sky Craig: So you don't accept there's ... any ... irregularity in... that cleaning bill then? I mean, Mr. Cameron is saying, look, held his hand up and says he's going to pay back some of the things he claimed for. Why don't you do the same?

Gordon Brown: But, but, but hold, but hold on... the money, it was paid to a professional cleaner who cleaned my flat. I issued to you and to other journalists the contract. The Daily Telegraph, who made the initial ... allegations, said there's no suggestion of impropriety at all and I hope that you too would accept what has already been accepted by the people who first made the allegations...

Sky Craig: I come back to the point, though, what about paying back some money, because people in other parties are going to do that. ... Did you say to Hazel Blears, "You ought to pay that Capital Gains Tax"?

Gordon Brown: Well, I talked to Hazel Blears and I think you'll find that there's a number of Members of Parliament who are going to repay money, but I have to say to you that that is not enough. We've got to go further than that.

...

Sky Craig: But you see, Mr. Cameron is saying, "If people don't pay this money back, they're not going to be in my Shadow Cabinet." Are you saying that nobody in your Cabinet...

Gordon Brown: I don't think you actually understand what's actually happened. ...

In the 'wrap-up' to this interview, Sky's Jon Craig notes with a degree of incredulity that Gordon Brown was 'pretty tetchy, also, when I asked him about his own circumstances about cleaning on a flat, and sharing the bills with his brother. Very angry about that, insists no impropriety there.'

Shahid Malik MP fared no better in his defence of his actions when he, perhaps foolishly, decided to face the cameras on the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup> May 2009. The phrasing of questions, the editing techniques, and the absence of discussion are all noteworthy in this extract.

Reporter: (Voice over) Shahid Malik may or may not be one of the worst offenders when it comes to expenses but early this morning he was sufficiently indignant about the accusations to fight his corner.

Reporter: Mr Malik, could you explain to the constituents and the viewers how a home cinema system for £2,600, how a claim for an iPod, how a claim too for a DVD screen –

MP Malik: Well let me respond. I'm happy to respond. (TV Edit) I did not over-claim. That's the point. Nobody is suggesting –

Reporter: Well you did, you had –

MP Malik: – over-claim

Reporter: – the home cinema system reduced by a half.

MP Malik: Absolutely wrong. (TV Edit) I don't accept that. If I thought it was incorrect for me to claim it I would have given the money back to the authorities. I'm not giving it back. (TV Edit) It's a non-story in the sense that I could be one of 500 MPs, I don't know why you're focused on me. (Sky News, 15 May 2009)

As it happens, and despite this exchange, what we see here is a technique whereby accusations are set out followed by responses but the matter remains unresolved. Did Malik have his claims reduced? By how much? The viewer never finds out. The same is true of Brown's claims: were the allegations withdrawn? Similarly, what of Gordon Brown's cleaning expenses? Because of the absence of a proper conclusion in both cases means that, one could argue that the accusations continue to dominate the narrative and the attempts at defence are then have the appearance seen as no more

~~than of individuals merely seeking to justify their actions. self-justificatory stances.~~

The politician remains always in the dock.

The same effect can be achieved when the journalist ‘wraps-ups’ the package and tells viewers what the content of the interview was really about ... and it is not what the politicians have been telling us! This is another common practice in news production and so common that, according to Cushion and Thomas, ‘most items – between 40 and 57 percent – featured a journalist interpreting the significance of the story.’ (2013, p.375). The use of such interpretive power raises important questions about the role of journalists and the function of utterances within news packages: should they, for example, have the power of ‘the last word’ and what is the purpose of everything that precedes it if ‘the last word’ is literally the final word on the subject? The relevance of these questions emerges most clearly in this next example in which BBC Political Editor Nick Robinson offers his own analysis of the truthfulness of the PM’s answers:

BBC Anchor: That was the Prime Minister talking to you earlier Nick, does he have the agreement he needs [to achieve the reforms he is looking for]?

BBC Robinson: Well he says he does, but I don't think he does. I've spoken to two senior representatives on the all party commons committee that he's referring to, the committee that advises the speaker of the house on how to deal with complex matters, and they have both used the word ‘misrepresented’ to describe what the Prime Minister says tonight. So yes, they did discuss it, yes, they hoped to reach agreement. Yes, they will meet again tomorrow night. Yes, Commons officials are looking at how to do this, but they are not there yet. ... (12 May 2009)

The conclusions we draw from this example echo those of Cushion and Thomas when they write that ‘while political editors might be well briefed by political elites, their significant air time allows them the space and agency to reinterpret the day’s political action and pass judgment.’ (2013, p.375) We would, however, go further than simply commenting on this journalistic practice as both common and possibly problematic. We would argue that this practice does raise important questions about not only the role of the reporter in the coverage of political news but, by extension, the rationale for the inclusion of utterances, soundbites or statements by others if these are merely there to create an edifice that is then demolished by a suitably analytical ‘wrap-up’. We return to this point in our concluding section, below.

#### **4. Discussion**

This paper began with a general discussion of media scandals and the nature of political coverage and the production of television news. It then turned the focus onto the coverage of the expenses scandal on two main national news services. It suggested that the coverage of the MPs expenses scandal raised some specific issues concerning scandal coverage and how journalists deal with those who had allegedly transgressed written or unwritten rules. By providing a more in-depth analysis of the place of political interviews and utterances in television news, it has also shown how common journalistic practices construct news items and create particular narratives of events. More significantly, we have argued that some of the most common journalistic practices – the use of utterances or sound-bites, the interview, the ‘wrap-up’ – closed down the space in which different and alternative narratives of the expenses scandal could be provided. One effect of that was that MPs were nearly always on the

defensive and nearly always simply used to underpin the dominant narrative of guilt and outrage that journalists developed and stuck to.

We have also shown how during those three weeks in 2009, those practices and interventions made it impossible for a class of people – MPs – to put forward a counter-argument, to seek to salvage their reputation and to show that, contrary to what the media were telling us all, some were innocent of what they had been accused of doing. The extracts from interviews offered above illustrate how the questions posed by journalists assume guilt and seek to put the MPs on the defensive rather than open up a conversation about the events in question. This last example from Sky News on 13 May 2009 does no more than underline many of these points. Sky News becomes the court, literally, in which the MP is urged to plead his innocence:

Sky Dixon: So you can... I, I mean, this is the time, now, isn't it, actually, live on television to, to hold your hand up if you think anything is going to be sniffed out by journalists who are going to be looking at your expenses in as much detail as they can now. You're saying that... you're absolutely confident that there was none of this lavish spending that's been described.

MP Maples: Well, I don't know what they mean by lavish, but I've told you I claimed mortgage interest, council tax and insurance in that year, ... you know, within the limit of the allowance...

In these and other ways, common journalistic practices played a part in developing and sustaining a particular narrative. At the same time, and this has not been explored in this paper, the media undoubtedly played a part in feeding the frenzy and then reflected it back - and amplified it - through the inclusion of particular public utterances ('*a rogue, a rogue*') to ratchet up the level of anxiety and concern.

~~Yet, three~~ our years after the scandal enveloped public and political life it is worth reflecting on the passage of time and this momentary crisis in the political system. ~~This had been a period when it seemed as if the the sky had fallen.~~ As Sky's Peter Spencer reminded his viewers at the time, '... a few months ago (the public) wanted to sort of line the Appian wall with the crucified remains of top bankers, well now it's the turn of MPs, and somehow it's just triggered that sort of wave of righteous anger, it's almost like a pandemic...' (Sky News, 15 May 2009)

~~Did the scandal and its coverage have longer-term consequences? But, and three years later, are these comments justified?~~ To seek answers to this question, we<sup>9</sup> We should perhaps consider three germane points: first, although turnout at the European Parliament election in June 2009 was down on the previous election – by some 4% - turnout at the 2010 general election was higher than in the two general elections preceding it (Electoral Commission, 2013) and seemed unaffected by the expenses scandal of the year before. Admittedly, many of the 149 MPs who retired before the 2009 election had been criticized for their expenses claims and this may have, in Pattie and Jonhson's words, 'partially assuaged the public desire to punish MPs.' ( ) They also point out that '...the longer-term impact seems surprisingly slight.' 748

‡ Ssecond, the new system of dealing with MPs expenses within the newly established rules has not been free of problems (BBC, 2013)<sup>9</sup>; finally, only a small handful of MPs have been found to have acted illegally in spite of the ~~bucketloads of~~ verbal

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<sup>9</sup> At the time of making final revisions to this paper (April 2014), the MP Maria Miller's case highlighted once more MPs behaviour and the weakness of the scrutiny system.

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assaults that they all had to endure. The volume of allegations and insults seems to have left us, more or less, as we were before. Yet, at the time and if the media were to be believed, we were all in the midst of the biggest crisis ever (or at the very least, since the last one). Little wonder then, that MPs looked at the newspaper hacking scandal with a sense of irony (and delight?).

Did it all have to be like this? Is it possible to argue that our analysis has identified a style of news delivery that has sacrificed content for form, that has all become a bit of a ritual and, if not empty of meaning, then empty of proper consideration for things and processes? Is the sound bite anything more than filling in another 10 seconds in a two and a half minute bulletin? Is the interview anything more than a pretence to a conversation? Did all these common-place practices of broadcast journalism take on a sharper and heightened level of activity as the imperatives of scandal coverage seduced everyone?

In the course of the expenses scandal of 2009, we certainly did learn of excesses – why had we not learned of these beforehand is an interesting question – but we rarely learned of the really complex problem of how you fund those who become MPs. That we are where we are suggests that that discussion still needs to take place.

As with all studies of this nature, there are some limitations that need careful consideration. The first, and most obvious, is that the study focuses on a two main broadcast news services and does not look at other media or different genres of news. The second, and a related one, is that it focuses on a three-week period. Not unusually, then, the conclusions arrived at in this paper are drawn from a limited sample, albeit one of the services being the prime news outlet of the BBC. The larger question that we need to address is whether or not these conclusions are appropriate. Whether, in other words, we can conclude that defence of positions was not possible and whether this is a function of scandal reporting dynamics of mediatization dynamics in general. As to the former, we have argued that on those occasions on BBC and Sky that attempts were made to defend claims, political actors were placed in positions in which those defences were in some ways held in suspicion. There were no instances CHECK where a political actor sought to defend their position and that position was not seen suspicious. Arguably, different news genres, such as Channel Four or BBC Radio Four Today might offer those appropriate spaces but this does not take away from our conclusions based on these specific media.

The more critical point is whether our findings are, as it were, a function of scandal reporting dynamics rather than journalistic practices more generally. To the extent that some of our data is not dissimilar from data drawn from other studies, we would argue that what we have described in the paper is part and parcel of routine journalistic practices and so adds to our understanding of mediatization. However, it cannot be denied that scandal coverage possesses its own dynamics

(see x) and individuals accused of transgressions are pilloried and such like. It is unusual, though, for a whole class of people to be in the dock, so to speak, which is why the expenses scandal is so unusual; more so given that a defence was possible, at least in theory. The absence of defence may thus suggest that scandal coverage of the intensity reported here employs routine journalistic practices commonly but within a context in which the usual compasses of balances, comprehensiveness and impartiality do not easily apply.

## Tables

Table 1: Distribution of total time by actors: *BBC 1 Ten O'Clock News*, *Sky News at 10* and *Channel Four News* (to nearest minutes). 11-16 May, 19-23 May, 26-30 May, 3-4 May, 2009

	Journalist (inc. anchors)	MPs	Public & other	Total
BBC 1 (17 days)	99	29	10	138
%	72%	21%	8%	
Sky News (16 days)	131	45	17	193
%	68%	23%	9%	
C4 (17 days)	158	96	37	291
	54%	33%	13%	

Table 2: Length of politician sound-bites in broadcast news coverage of the expenses scandal, 2009 (to nearest second).

	BBC1	Sky	Channel 4
Average (total time / number of utterances or bites)	11 (166 utterances)	17 (163 utterances)	13 (457 utterances)
Median (mid-point)	10	12	9
Longest single utterance	38	217	68

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