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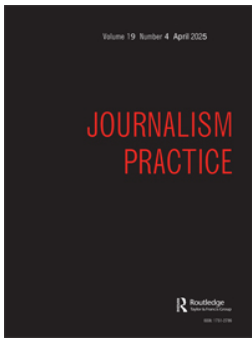
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Growing Government Secrecy: How and Why Information Access has Become Increasingly Restricted in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from interviews with thirty-one journalists, this article examines how and why information access has become increasingly restricted in the United Kingdom (UK). The UK government pledged to improve government transparency through measures such as passing and implementing the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA). However, despite acknowledging good levels of reporting freedom, participants reported that their FOI requests and daily journalistic access to government information have been facing increasing restrictions. Contributing factors identified include (1) governments' attempts to avoid embarrassment or public backlash; (2) their negative relationship with the media; (3) antagonism in politics; (4) their diminished ability to support journalistic information access due to prolonged austerity; and (5) legal exploitation and limitations. The mature news management system has facilitated the increase in restrictions on information access. To improve the situation, participants called for reforms to the FOIA and other laws, increased resources for handling FOI requests, a shift in governments' attitudes towards the media, and enhanced training for government departments and officials, particularly the police, to better engage with journalists. The opacity of UK governments at both the central and local levels indicates a growing trend of government secrecy, which may ultimately evolve into a propaganda regime, requiring urgent attention.

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Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) government has pledged to improve government transparency through measures such as passing and implementing the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA), opening up part of public records data, and launching data.gov.uk, an open government data portal. However, recently, observers have expressed concerns about media freedom in the UK. For example, Reporters Without Borders' 2023 Index ranked the UK 26 out of 180 countries for press freedom, two places down from 2022.¹ The UK's score dropped from 78.51 in 2023 to 77.51 in 2024, despite moving up to the

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23rd place in the Index.² Although we need to consider the potential limitations in its methodology and data when using the Index, this ranking provides a useful indication of the state of media freedom in the UK. In particular, recent events, such as the Cabinet Office setting up FOI clearing house (The Times, 2020), politicians and political parties “banning” journalists from attending press conferences (Garcia 2024; Mason 2023; Miller 2024; Stone 2020), and the arrests of journalists by the police (Morrison 2023), indicate the emergence of a restrictive political environment and restricted information access. These new developments thus lead to unanswered questions: Has information access become increasingly restricted in the UK? If so, why, to what extent and how?

This article offers an answer to these questions, drawing from in-depth interviews with thirty-one UK journalists. It will first discuss the literature on media freedom and information access in the UK to set the framework for the study. The methodology will be introduced next, followed by a discussion of the findings. In the last section, we will discuss the implication of these findings for the UK’s government transparency and media freedom before highlighting the main argument and reflecting on the limitations of this study.

Media Freedom, Government Transparency/Secrecy and Information Access in the UK

The existing discussion on media freedom in the UK (such as Borg-Barthet 2020; Crego and Monte 2023; Grun 2018; Hwa 2002) is often around the implications of media regulation and law for media freedom rather than other means of media control such as restricting information access. It is mainly because, with its parliamentary democracy and the relatively weak role of the state, the UK is deemed to have a free commercial press. The UK government has also shown its determination to improve government transparency by passing the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in 2000, launching its open data portal- data.gov.uk, and opening up part of public records data. There is, therefore, a general belief that UK journalists have good access to information, and they are unlikely to be told what (not) to publish. In particular, with the passage of the FOIA and its subsequent implementation in 2005, journalists have a legal right to (request to) access information held by governments and other public sector bodies.

However, the situation of information access in the UK is not straightforward. Despite the absence of an authoritarian style of direct media control, the UK is renowned for being a secretive democracy (Hennessy 2003). The adoption of the FOIA in the UK was thus seen as “turning the tide of secrecy”, especially in its early years. Journalists seized the chance to make the best use of the FOIA. One year after its passage, nearly all national newspapers and many regional newspapers had put in FOI requests with many exclusive stories covered. Previously secret materials, especially surrounding contentious issues, were made accessible to journalists. Local reporters were able to attend closed council meetings because of the FOIA (Brooke 2005).

Apart from the FOIA, central to journalistic access to information in the UK is the gradual establishment of a centralised news management system, employing supposedly politically neutral press (government public relations) officers at both the local and central levels, with an alleged initial intention to facilitate the presentation of government

information to the press and the public. At the local level, along with the financial difficulties of the news media and the recognition of the importance of the public relations sector in shaping agendas, the press officer system started to merge in the 1980s and was quickly expanded in the 1990s (Franklin, Lewis, and Williams 2009). By 2009, the public relations sector had already become a significant news source that set news agendas and informed journalists' stories (Franklin, Lewis, and Williams 2009). One main purpose of appointing press officers, who are civil servants, is to neutrally convey and present government information to news media, as they need to be "non-political government communications" officers (Gaber 2004).

Nevertheless, requesting information through press officers means the setting up of unhelpful barriers to journalists' access to information (Harrison 2006). As early as 1986, Franklin spotted a tendency of covering positive images of local governments by the local press as a result of local government's public relations practices, controlling press releases provided to the press (Franklin 1986). Government public relations professionals had become "reputation guardians" by 2010 (Brown, Gaudin, and Moran 2013).

At the central level, two systems run government communications: press officers as politically neutral civil servants and special advisers hired by politicians and political parties. The former have been increasingly marginalised and the latter are accused of explicitly politicising news storytelling (Garland 2018). No 10 has been criticised for exercising the art of spin and politicising, centralising and controlling government communications with "aggressive political PR" (Gaber 2004; Moloney 2001).

The caution exercised by UK government authorities and politicians towards journalism has a long history. Under Thatcher, for example, suspicion of journalism greatly increased (Garner 2006). Although Thatcher developed a close relationship with news media (Garland 2023), more care was taken to manage political communications with dramatic changes such as the growth in the use of (political) advertising (Franklin 2004; Scammell 1995). When it came to the New Labour Government in 1997, the tightening centralised control on government communication was implemented under Tony Blair with his press secretary Alastair Campbell. The Government Information Services was modernised by Alastair Campbell (Campbell 2011). There was a noticeable trend of partisanising and personalising government information (Garland 2018). Even when the Labour Party was the opposition before the election in 1997, its news management was considered to be very effective (Parliament 2003). The new Labour government's approach was later adopted by the Conservative government in 2010 (there was a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government between 2010 and 2015).

Over the past decade, the UK government has shown a strong intention to further centralise government communications. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the Johnson government, with Lee Cain as the journalist-turned-director of communications, was revealed to have planned to cut down the number of communication staff across the government and adopt Whitehouse-style televised press briefings (Hughes 2020). The centralisation of the government communications plan was compared to Alastair Campbell's measures, which "professionalised the operation and hauled processes into the late twentieth century". It was also criticised for tightening "its grip on the entire machine" of government communications (Ball 2020; Rutter 2020). Information access in the UK thus blends freedom and control, with the implementation of the FOIA and the establishment and development of a robust news management system at both central and local levels.

The current literature on information access in the UK has two main streams. The first is on the relationship between journalists and press officers or public relations professionals (spin doctors), as well as UK government communications. Studies on this topic started to boom in the 1980s when the press officer system began to emerge in the UK and extended to the new century (such as Esser, Reinemann, and Fan 2000 Franklin 1986; Harrison 2006; Quinn 2012; Scammell 1995; Schlesinger 2019). One major focus of these studies was on the influence of press officers and public relations professionals on news content and agenda as news sources and its implications for British society (such as Davis 2000; Franklin 1998; Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008). However, most studies examining how the press officers became barriers to journalists' information access (such as Franklin 1986; Harrison 2006) were conducted about the situations at the local level and before the 2010s. Later on, researchers paid more attention to examine the UK government communications itself (such as Gregory 2012; Maartens 2016; Sanders 2019). Few studies have updated the knowledge about journalistic information access through press officers after the 2010s.

The second is on the FOIA and its use in journalistic practices in the UK. Most studies on the FOIA evaluate the FOIA regime as a whole rather than focusing on how journalists use it (such as Birkinshaw 2010; Glover and Holsen 2020; Hazell and Worthy 2010; Hazell, Bourke, and Worthy 2012; Hazell, Worthy, and Glover 2010; Shepherd 2015; Shepherd and Ennion 2007; Worthy and Hazell 2017). There has been a small but burgeoning literature on FOI and journalism (such as Brooke 2006; Burgess 2015; Kusakabe 2017; Žuffová, 2021; Tong 2022). The findings of these studies flag up the obstacles in journalists' access to government information through sending FOI requests. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem was further exacerbated.

The literature has partly addressed the questions surrounding journalistic information access in the UK. However, it has not offered a fuller and up-to-date answer to these questions, in particular:

1. How accessible is government information to journalists through press officers? Does the situation differ at the local and central levels?
2. How accessible is government information to journalists through FOI requests? Have there been any changes compared to earlier years of the FOIA, as well as during and after the COVID-19 pandemic as a global emergency?
3. If there have been changes in information access, what are the reasons behind these changes?

Methodology

To answer these questions, this study conducted in-depth interviews with thirty-one UK journalists in 2023 (ethics approval received). The participants collectively possessed an average of 17.7 years of work experience as a journalist or editor, with individual experience ranging from a minimum experience of 2 years to a maximum of 45 years in the UK. Thirteen of the participants worked as journalists before 2005 when the FOIA was implemented. The participants were from UK national newspapers, public broadcasters, local newspapers, news agencies and NGO newsrooms. They were editors (including an editor-in-chief), investigative journalists, data journalists,

and those covering topics related to politics, law enforcement/crime, education, transportation, defence, environment, and public affairs. Purposive sampling was used in identifying and inviting participants to join the research. The questions focused on journalists' access to information and their self-evaluation of the state of media freedom in the UK. Apart from one email interview, all other interviews were carried out through Google Meet and lasted mostly around one hour (54.3 min on average). The interviews were recorded after the participants gave permission, transcribed verbatim and uploaded onto NVivo for a qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The transcripts were thoroughly analysed through iterative exploration to uncover recurring themes. All participants and their employers remain anonymous, and most of their backgrounds, including names, genders, employers, and their beats, were not revealed in this article to avoid them being identified, due to the sensitive nature of the topic. The interviews were used to answer research questions 1–2 and contribute to answering research question 3, the answer to which was also supported by desktop research.

Increasingly Restricted Information Access

Overall, the participants' responses portrayed a mixed picture of media freedom in the UK. They regarded the UK as having a relatively good level of media freedom if compared with many other countries where journalists could be murdered or imprisoned for the stories they published. They considered themselves to have good levels of reporting freedom. However, all participants expressed frustrations over the increasing restrictions on their information access and the growing government secrecy surrounding it. The following sections will sketch the main aspects of these restrictions.

Press Officers as Huge Barriers (RQ1)

Participants pointed out that the obstacles originating from press officers' role as the sole contact point for all media queries had become increasingly severe, whether local or central. Those who had more than 20 years of journalism experience pointed out that the situation had become worse at the time of the interviews than when they just started their journalism career. For example, a senior editor at a national news outlet commented "That breakdown, I think, between communications departments, the communications teams, and journalists has been a real problem these last few years." (Participant 30, December 20, 2023) The majority of the participants regarded that press officers were adept at providing press releases but were reluctant or exercised caution when handling press enquiries on other issues that they perceived as potentially troublesome or damaging to the reputation of the department they worked for. A participant reported the great difficulties they encountered in accessing information about the British military and defence:

I reached out to the Ministry of Defence (for information regarding the Ukraine-Russia war) and they just didn't answer at all. ... It's information that will be really strategic, they just don't want us to write about. The way they do this is just not providing comments. Sometimes I couldn't write about the topics I wanted because I just couldn't find people to interview (Participant 15, March 3, 2023).

Participants reported that they had been banned from talking directly to government staff and all communications with the press should go through press officers. A local journalist gave an example in which

the council press office actually rang me up and basically told me off for having done that (talking directly to a staff member) and basically told me I shouldn't be doing that. Because their line is that the political representatives or the spokespeople for this organisation and the officers should not be putting themselves up for talking to reporters.

And "local council staff members had even been asked to sign a contract that required them not to talk to the press" (Participant 29, Dec 13, 2023). What the participant described can be found in local councils' code of conduct, as exemplified in that of Rutland County Council: "Any engagement with the media by a Council employee in a work capacity is to be managed through the Communications Team".³

The difficulties in working with press officers also lie in the information verification process. A senior political correspondent of a national newspaper with 15 years of journalistic experience said:

A lot of the time when you're dealing with government press officers for departments, it feels as though they are trying to prevent you from getting information, rather than sharing information with you. Because for example, you may have a question for them, that is half-correct. Maybe you're in the right area, but it's not 100% correct. But because it's not 100% correct, they just dismiss it, and say, 'That's wrong. I'm not going to answer it.' (Participant 24, Nov 17, 2023).

Another participant with 8 years of experience in journalism echoed this point:

government press officers, they're not going to give you granular detail on what's going on, right? They're going to give you general talking points, mostly. Even if it is that you're asking them to check whether your information is correct, sometimes they don't even bother checking that. (Participant 28, Dec 13, 2023).

An editor of a regional newspaper explained how things were different now from the past:

(when my parent) worked in xx (place removed to protect the participant's identity) in the 80s', back in the day, 'good old days', as a journalist, you would go around to the local police station and ask police officers, who you would have a relationship with, what was going on in your city that day. ... and you had a symbiotic relationship with the police. In my belief, that has completely broken down. (Now) The police are actively told ... that they shouldn't talk to the media, that the media are to be feared and to be basically told to go elsewhere and speak to the press office. And then, when you speak to the press office, they are incredibly protective of the information that they hold. (Participant 1, July 28, 2023).

This quote is very illustrative of the points made by other participants about UK government departments' increasingly cautious approach to news media and the issue posed by press officers being the single contact point. Such a frustrating situation is not limited to the police but can also be found in other government departments such as local councils, the cabinet office, and the Department for Transport.

Press officers have been found even often making efforts to play down the importance of journalists' stories or convince them not to publish their stories. A local reporter commented:

I've had sometimes where they've rung up, and said- they do this stupid thing of like, 'Can we talk off the record? Oh, yes, I just don't really think your story is that important. I don't know why you're writing it. I don't think it's really going to matter to people.' (Participant 5, January 27, 2023).

A senior correspondent with 20 years of journalistic experience also explained how press officers tried to kill a news story:

So, although they're supposed to be politically neutral civil servants, you always get the impression that their goal at heart is to kill the story or rubbish it. ... I suppose the point I'm just making is that the culture is one of, kind of, trying to knock down stories and secrecy. ... (On one occasion,) the press officer worked out who the whistleblower was and threatened to discipline them if they didn't retract it. The whistleblower was rattled by the situation and pleaded with us not to run the story. They may have even said that 'If you run the story, I'm going to kill myself because they've said they'll discipline me and stuff.' So it's really horrible. (Participant 7, January 25, 2023).

UK Public Authorities' Unsatisfying Handling of FOI Requests (RQ2)

Echoing the literature on FOI and journalism in the UK, all participants who used FOI requests in their practices voiced concerns about UK public authorities' handling of their FOI requests at both local and central levels. While most of the time they could get a response to their requests, a delay in responses was quite common and the responses they received from government departments and public bodies might not contain useful information. For example, a participant with 10 years of work experience as a journalist commented:

I would say that most of the time, they will comply. You do get a response. Often, the information that you need is buried within a very rambling, three-page letter that's full of their justifications for why they're giving you the data in a certain way. ... Generally, you need to give them a nudge and it (the response) will be at the very end of the legal window of 20 working days. (Participant 11, February 21, 2023).⁴

Another participant with more than 10 years of journalistic experience said:

where you get to 20 days they say, 'we need another 20 days' and then another and another and another, and they can keep delaying it (Participant 4, January 20, 2023).

The data received might not be useful or difficult to use. For example, another common problem was that data might not be in an accessible format. A participant who had worked 16 years as a journalist commented:

I asked for something to be put in a spreadsheet. And what the person did was do a 'screen-grab' from another spreadsheet and copied the image into a spreadsheet and sent it to me. That can be nothing but deliberate. (Participant 6, April 26, 2023).

Participants, whose journalism career started before the implementation of the FOIA in 2005, noticed that the situation had become worse, compared to when it was first implemented. A delay had become very common, making it difficult to plan and carry

out work. For example, a participant with more than 20 years of journalistic experience commented:

The amount of organisations who break the time limit is just- It's just par for the course now. Even 15 years ago you could put an FOI request in, put a note in your diary that says you'll get it back by 20 days on Thursday, and you could plan to do a story then. ... Now you can't ... It's breaking the law, it's against the law. (Participant 30, December 20, 2023)

The 33 borough councils are more difficult to get information out of now than they might have been 20 or 30 years ago. (Participant 12, February 24, 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, participants found it very difficult to get information and this was likely to stay, as exemplified in the following quotes by a senior editor of a national newspaper:

Covid-19 has had a big impact as many public bodies particularly NHS trusts argued that they should not have to spend time responding to FOI requests when they were fighting the pandemic. ... Covid also limited the number of stories as many requests were rejected on the grounds that staff were overworked. (Participant 22, January 10, 2023).

Rejections had become common, for example, a participant said,

I'd probably say, over the past year, 50% have been rejected and 50% have provided information. (Participant 26, November 17, 2023).

When it comes to rejection, participants regarded exemptions such as data protection and commercial confidentiality were applied more broadly than they should have been and not consistently across government bodies. A participant gave an example:

Quite often, ... some (health boards and local authorities) will accept a request, and some will reject the same request based on data protection, for instance, even though another organisation, which is actually part of the same overall organisation, has accepted it. (Participant 13, May 30, 2023).

Commercial confidentiality is another main exemption, which participants found lacking clarity and ground. Not only were outsourcing companies not covered by the FOIA, but also in cases where governments had deals with private companies, participants' FOI requests usually faced significant delays and rejections. A participant commented:

They were arguing that it (disclosing information) would affect the council's finances, because if these details were revealed that would dissuade other companies from doing business with them, and that they'd agreed with their business partners that this information wouldn't be released. So (a rejection based on commercial confidentiality is) pretty standard responses from the local authority, whenever you ask for information that's connected to their dealings with the private sector, which obviously is increasingly more common. (Participant 6, April 26, 2023).

But participants questioned, as shown in this quote: "it's public money, why is any of this subject to commercial confidentiality?" (Participant 4, January 20, 2023)

Another reason government bodies used to reject FOI requests was the information had already been on their websites, but they would not give specific information about where to find this information. In this case, participants felt government transparency becomes a barrier, as shown in the following quote by a senior journalist:

This flood of information, under the guise of transparency, has actually made things more opaque because how do you find that data? ... On occasions, we've had journalists put in FOIs and they've come back at the 20-day deadline and said, 'This is available on our website.' and then not said where (So it was very hard for us to find where the data was). (Participant 30, Dec 20, 2023).

Sometimes, participants' FOI requests were rejected not on a legal basis but to cover up relevant information. A participant reported that their FOI request to a council was rejected because the person who decided on FOI requests' results was the same person responsible for the problem the journalist wanted to reveal:

He, as the director responsible for that particular department, not only did he arrange all these deals, all the borrowing, the finance, and then all the actual investments, he was also in charge of deciding whether or not to agree that the information should be released under the Freedom of Information Act.

And of course, he didn't want that information to be released, and he indicated to me, during our conversation, on the record, that he was going to turn it down. Which was a completely bizarre arrangement. And so they did reject the FOIs. (Participant 6, April 26, 2023).

The need for resources to appeal the rejection of their FOI requests, and the amount of time needed to go through this, also mean that most of the time, journalists would not appeal to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) for a review. Even if they appeal, it takes time for the ICO to respond, which is not suitable for timely news reporting. A participant commented:

Definitely from government departments and associated public bodies, we are seeing more and more information requests rejected, and that leads us to having to appeal, and go to the ICO, who's the Information Commissioner's Office. I think public bodies are feeling more encouraged to reject freedom of information requests, because they know that the ICO is so overwhelmed, and it takes them so long to respond to an appeal. (Participant 26, November 17, 2023).

FOI requests to some government departments, such as police forces and local councils were particularly difficult; and there were variations in their responses to the same FOI requests, as shown in the following quotes:

If you file off, let's say, FOIs to all police forces, to all councils, you're lucky if you get two-thirds back. So, I would generally expect just over 50%. Sometimes it's less. It can be 40%. So, you'll find that you're not getting replies. (Participant 16, August 15, 2023)

Local councils, on the other hand, vary much more wildly. ... (For one FOI request) there will be maybe about 10 local authorities out of 30, or 5–10 that will just completely ignore all of your emails and not respond. (Participant 11, February 21, 2023).

Environmental topics are thought to have more accessible access than other topics due to the effectiveness of the Environmental Information Regulations and the related data of relatively good quality. A participant reported:

The Environmental Information Regulations are, stronger than the FOI Act. So, you are entitled to more information that is environmental in nature than you are other public policy documents, so you have more ... You can leverage transparency legislation better,

as well as the government and relative – relevant – agencies providing more public data (Participant 21, September 18, 2023).

The discussions in these two sections portray a bleak situation in which UK government departments and officials intend not to disclose information but try to stop journalists from accessing it. This trend is going to be further discussed in the next section.

A Growing, Troubling Trend of not Revealing Information (RQs 1 and 2)

Participants identified an increasingly worrisome trend among government departments and public bodies at both the central and local levels of not revealing information regarding not only FOI requests but also the work of press officers. Government bodies tried hard to prevent – rather than assisting- them from accessing information in order to protect the reputation of their own organisations. Two senior participants from national newspapers said:

Unfortunately, we've seen at the very centre of government in Downing Street and the Cabinet Office, they've taken a very proactive approach to preventing information. We've had, as you know, reports of a clearing house, as someone called it, within the Cabinet Office. I've found that with others, with hospitals, with health authorities, with other departments, you can run up against an instinctive mentality that information should not be released in the first place and reasons have to be given for why it should be released. (Participant 3, Feb 27, 2023).

I feel as though, as a journalist lodging an FOI, it's first passed through the press office, who will think, "How would this information coming out affect us? How could it be written about? Would it be detrimental to us?" (Participant 16, August 15, 2023).

A participant who had more than 10 years' journalistic experience and expertise in FOI and submitted thousands of FOI requests commented:

Like I said, generalising, my general experience is councils overwhelmingly lean to the side of not disclosing information, particularly of anything that they might believe to be controversial in any way. (Participant 6, April 26, 2023).

Another participant also with a specialism in FOI requests and 34 years of journalistic experience said:

(After the first year or two of FOI) I think then a new default view of FOI became established in the police, as in most public authorities FOI is a bit of a nuisance, maybe even more a big nuisance, let's clamp down on it. It was an initial phase of enthusiasm which dissipated, I think. (Participant 23, October 16, 2023).

Participants felt they were singled out in submitting FOI requests. A senior reporter said:

The other thing I find is that sometimes when I phone up a government department (name deleted to avoid the journalist being identified) to get a response from their press office to a Freedom of Information request I've obtained from their department, the press office is fully informed and aware of the FOI I had. That does mean that communications departments are well aware of what is being released under the Act. It raises the possibility that they may have a say in whether or not a piece of information should or should not be released after they

have considered the headlines it could create. It may also have been flagged to them because I may have identified myself as a journalist when making the application. So, on occasions, I might get friends and family to file an FOI, so I don't come up. (Participant 16, August 15, 2023).

Governments had even been found lying to journalists, which was not only hiding the information but also greatly disrupted journalists' work. A senior journalist gave an example:

During COVID we were told by someone who was 100% trustworthy that patients were being moved out of London to Newcastle because the health service in London was about to collapse. We put that to the Department of Health and ... Whatever it's called now, Department of Health and Social Care. They flatly denied it even though we knew, for a fact, that it had happened. ... We still did the story because we knew it was true. ...

So, when you're working with that level of bad faith argument, it's very, very, hard to report on stories. We had to have a very serious conversation about, "Are we going to do this story?" In the end, we decided to do it despite the fact the Department of Health said it hadn't happened. We knew it had. (Participant 30, Dec 20, 2023).

What are the Reasons Behind These Changes? (RQ3)

Participants identified several factors contributing to the increasingly restricted information access and the growth in government secrecy: (1) UK governments' attempts to avoid embarrassment or public backlash; (2) antagonism in politics; (3) governments' negative relationship with the media; (4) its diminished ability to support journalistic information access due to prolonged austerity; and (5) legal exploitation and limitations. This section will discuss the points raised in the interviews within the broader context of the literature and the social background of the UK.

UK Government's Attempts to Avoid Embarrassment or Public Backlash

UK governments' efforts to avoid embarrassment or public backlash, supported by the mature news management system, were believed to be partially responsible for the increasing restrictions on information access, especially concerning sensitive issues, as shown in the following comments:

it was, I believe, a London council who has refused information to me. I had initiated an internal appeal, and the internal appeal was successful within the council and the council officer wrote back to me and they said, 'The information was declined or refused or not provided to you in the first place because the person processing the information decided it would cause embarrassment to the council' (Participant 3, February 27, 2023)

I think that certainly London borough councils are reluctant to share information on what they're doing because of the potential for huge public backlash. And it's primarily about LTNs (Low Traffic Neighbourhoods) and road schemes seems to be the real flashpoint in London. ...

This would have been around the time of the local borough elections as well in 2022. So, councils became very scared about talking about LTNs, fearing that they would then face a backlash at the polls. So, they were trying to sort of safeguard their own power by almost saying nothing. (Participant 12, February 24, 2023)

When I'm using the freedom of information to try to prove or establish something, I can encounter what feels like a brick wall. There can seem to be an element of 'Let's not let that get out there because it would be embarrassing. It would be problematic.' (Participant 16, August 15, 2023).

Such attempts suggest a decline in the confidence of governments, likely driven by the unstable political landscape, which has created significant uncertainty for both central and local governments. Not only significant national and global issues such as Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the decline of Unionism, but also local issues such as council tax or building roundabouts, have contributed to social tensions. This has resulted in governments' declining confidence, increased fear of public outrage, and heightened anxiety about losing control.

With events such as Brexit, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the recent conflict between Israel and Palestine, the shifting international political landscape has also placed immense pressure on the UK government. Confronted with uncertainty both domestically and internationally, it is natural for the UK government to seek to conceal weaknesses or issues that could undermine domestic stability and international standing, as shown in the following comments by a defence reporter:

If you are speaking about reserves, stockpiles, and you say they (the UK government) don't have enough stockpiles, it would be a weakness of the country. I understand the fact they don't want people to know that, but I think people have the right to know what is going on in this area, because it will impact their lives eventually, just like the war in Ukraine is impacting everybody's lives. (Participant 15, March 3, 2023)

Governments' Negative Relationship with the Media

Participants noted that the UK governments' negative relationship with the media also played a role in limiting their access to government information. Governments and political parties were found to refuse media interviews, granting access only to "friendly" journalists while banning critical ones to avoid negative stories. For example, a political reporter said:

I think this government has had quite a negative relationship with the media, picking friendly outlets, particularly during the many leadership elections that we've had. The idea that they've been restricting a few journalists from attending certain events or attending certain briefings I think is a worry. And their general cautiousness about doing any sort of media interviews, that goes for the ministers and the Prime Minister. I think that needs to change. (Participant 11, February 21, 2023)

Another participant commented:

Like at the recent Conservative party conference they wouldn't give any of us an interview in Wales. In Scotland they'd only give selected journalists interviews, which is a really unacceptable situation. ... We saw that during the 2019 election as well, and during COVID, certain journalists were given priority access because they write for organisations that politicians feel are favourable to them. (Participant 13, May 30, 2023)

Antagonism and polarisation in politics, exacerbated by events like Brexit, were believed to have strained the relationship between the government and the media, impacting journalists' access to government information and the quality of information they receive. Two senior reporters commented:

I think that local government has become more difficult because of the Cabinet system and because it has become much more risk averse at sharing information. I think possibly the antagonism that has entered local politics in the past five, six, seven years. Probably you can trace it back to Brexit, to the referendum. (Participant 12, February 24, 2023)

I think during the referendum and campaign itself, obviously, it was incredibly partisan and divided. And so, this whole question, and agenda, and trying to examine people's biases was more important, and that continues, as well. Because a lot of people do have a vested interest, either in trying to persuade that Brexit has failed, or that it has succeeded. And so, again, you have to be quite critical of the information you're given, when people are talking about Brexit. (Participant 24, November 17, 2023)

Austerity and Lack of Resources

Another major contributing factor identified by participants was austerity. Against the backdrop of national austerity and local councils' financial struggles, the lack of resources has become particularly severe for both central and local governments, especially during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The UK government's borrowing had a sharp increase, followed by spending cuts (IFS 2021). Civil service stopped any further expansion and related jobs were cut (GOV.UK, 2023). Local councils' chronic financial problems have been worsened by the austerity programme of the central government. There was a 40% cut in real terms between 2009/2010 and 2019/2020 (Atkins and Hoddinott 2020). The sudden bankruptcy of the Labour-run Birmingham City Council in 2023 underscores the extensive financial crisis local councils are currently confronting. This issue suggests a likely shortage of resources for daily tasks, including handling the FOI and press requests from journalists. As a result, this may lead to inevitable delays, backlogs, and the perception of the FOI as a burden. A participant's comments were representative:

across the board, quite a noticeable deterioration due to the impact of 10 years of austerity and cuts to councils. ... 10 years ago, press offices could turn around information a lot more quickly, and would probably be more likely to meet your deadlines.

...

some of the departments in the council are so overstretched that apparently, when they see emails come through from the press team, they will deliberately try to ignore them or not answer them because they're too busy doing other stuff, basically, because they haven't got enough staff left. But obviously, the knock-on effect of that is that things are less transparent than they used to be.

...

there were a lot more phone numbers published on the sites where you could pick up the phone and try and chase an enquiry. Whereas now, quite a lot of councils, there's just a single communication or press office email address which you have to use, and until a named officer gets back to you, and only then if they've got a mobile number in their email signature, that's the only route to get them.

And that probably is a resourcing thing as well that there seems to be a closing down of the different ways in which you can reach people. (Participant 29, December 13, 2023)

Participants regarded that councils were particularly impacted by austerity, while both central and local governments were concerned about sensitivity:

Probably, with central government, sometimes it would appear that there's much more of a heightened sensitivity towards releasing information but, equally, you can find examples of heightened sensitivity on the part of councils as well. Resources may, also, play a role. In terms of some local councils, they're obviously under-resourced, they don't have enough resources to provide the information that one wants and, in some cases, equally, there's a deliberate strategy of not releasing information. (Participant 3, February 27, 2023)

There might be variations in different locations, but participants thought these potential differences were primarily due to "the nature of what you've requested and who is dealing with that request." (Participant 13, May 30, 2023).

Participants believed that the growing restrictions on information access contributed to undermining media freedom in the UK. Participants called for a shift in the government's attitudes towards the media, increased resources for councils to handle FOI requests, and improved training for government officials, including the police, to enhance their engagement with journalists.

Legal Exploitations and Limitations

Participants noted that the law might have been abused to reject their information access. As discussed above, commercial confidentiality and privacy appeared to be the two most prominent reasons cited to support the refusal of information. For example, a participant reported that a government department (name deleted to avoid the journalist being identified) rejected their information request based on privacy: "the individuals could be identified by the information being pieced with other information", despite the participant "wasn't trying to identify people but was trying to identify the companies who had provided personnel for that department" and felt the Department "using a knee-jerk approach to the exemptions, which allowed them to refuse information" (Participant 3, February 27, 2023).

Recent changes in law such as the passage of the National Security Bill in 2023, the rise of SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) injunctions, and recent legal cases such as that of *ZXC v Bloomberg LP* [2020] EWCA 611 were seen as bringing further restrictions to their information access. The Bloomberg judgement "limited reporting on people when they're being investigated" (Participant 7, January 25, 2023). In addition, government departments and officials, particularly the police, seemed unfamiliar with how to effectively engage with the media. As a result, some participants suggested that reforms to the FOIA and other laws, as well as improving training for government departments and officials would be helpful, as shown in the following comments:

On the legislation, I think we really do need reform of the Freedom of Information Act to open it up to large outsourcing firms. ...

The police need lots more training on how to engage with journalists. There needs to be an overhaul of that. I hope the Public Order Bill, the protections in there will be listened to in terms of journalists covering protests. And yes, I think there needs to be changes to the National Security Bill as well, because there is a clear concern that it will limit journalists' freedom or even just willingness to research topics that cover national security issues. (Participant 11, February 21, 2023)

Discussion and Conclusion

The above discussions suggest that information access in the UK has become increasingly restricted, with growing government secrecy but a decline in government transparency. These developments have occurred in an environment where the confidence of the governments has diminished due to social tensions. When those in power feel uncertain about their leadership, they may resist the revelation of information that undermines their rule, viewing such disclosures as an interference with the government's daily operations. The fear of losing control and power, combined with the desire to avoid embarrassing questions, often leads to withholding information from the public (Michael 1979).

The UK's commercial press has played a significant role in shaping British politics, as demonstrated by the influence of Murdoch's newspapers in the General Elections (Morgan 2021; Thomas 1998; Wring and Deacon 2010), the role of the tabloid press in the Brexit debates and referendum (Startin 2015), and the contribution of UK newspapers in propagating neo-liberal ideas (Petley 2022). Boris Johnson, who struggled to control the news narratives during 2019 and 2022, suffered reputational damage and experienced a downfall in 2022 (Garland 2023). Therefore, effectively managing the news media and controlling information would be crucial for the UK government and politicians to maintain political stability. There are other social dynamics such as austerity that offer contextual explanations for why journalists found it difficult to access government information, despite considering they had reporting freedom. The establishment of the mature news management system at the central and local levels also reinforces the increase in restrictions on information access, as it enables governments to control both access to and the flow of government information.

Journalists play an important role in informing the public, stimulating public debates and holding power accountable. Without good access to information from public bodies, journalists cannot properly do their job to serve democracy. Increasingly restricted information access is not direct media control or censorship, but it is subtle and embedded in everyday journalistic practices. This would result in the alignment of official agendas and discourse of events with those of the media, suppressing critical voices and concealing the secrets of governments or powerful individuals. This situation has the alarming potential to evolve into a propaganda regime over time, requiring urgent attention.

The case of the UK, which is a parliamentary democracy, has profound implications for understanding media control and media freedom in a democracy. For future research, it would be interesting to examine if similar restricted information access is emerging in other democracies such as the United States. This study shows the perspectives of participants and contributes to our knowledge of the journalism-politics relationship in the UK. However, it is limited by the fact that no accounts from press officers or public relations professionals have been included. It is also limited by the fact that the areas covered by most participants, such as political, legal, or public affairs, were more likely to experience restrictions than other areas such as culture. Therefore, it would be useful for future research to examine what accounts press officers, public relations professionals, and other types of journalists provide about journalistic information access.

Notes

1. <https://rsf.org/en/country/united-kingdom> (Accessed on November 2, 2023)
2. <https://rsf.org/en/country/united-kingdom#:~:text=funding%2C%20our%20governance%E2%80%A6-,United%20Kingdom,Score%20:%2077.51> (Accessed on February 25, 2025)
3. <https://rutlandcounty.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s18932/Part%205b%20-%20Codes%20and%20Protcols%20-%20Officers%20Code%20of%20Conduct%20May%202023.pdf> (Accessed on January 6th, 2024)
4. In all quotes, the content in parentheses was added by the author.

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