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The Intersection of Media Ownership and Political Coverage: Analysing
The *Daily Mail*'s Treatment of Sunak and Starmer before the General Election
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Abstract

Media ownership in the UK is highly concentrated, and that tends to spark debate about the potential for media impartiality and its effects on democracy. In the UK, just three entities - News UK, Reach Plc, and DMGT Media - control 90% of the national newspaper market (Media Reform, 2023, p. 6). In this media landscape, a few powerful owners may have disproportionate influence and affect political discourse to their own advantage, especially during key political events such as parliamentary elections.

This thesis examines the media coverage of the *Daily Mail* (its online edition, *MailOnline*) during the period leading up to the 2024 General Election and the effects its media ownership may have had on its editorial stance. The *Daily Mail* is known to be a historical supporter of the Conservative Party. This paper seeks to analyse the patterns in its reporting and editorial choices in order to confirm whether they align with Conservative values and ideological framing, potentially shaping public opinion and reinforcing partisan perspectives. In order to do so, this thesis will analyse the portrayal of Conservative Party Leader Rishi Sunak and Labour Party Leader Keir Starmer. The thesis includes a literature review chapter that examines the implications of concentrated media ownership on journalistic independence. It looks at crucial issues including media ownership models, the impact of owner influence on editorial decisions, trust in media, and the historical ties of the *Daily Mail* to the Conservative Party.

Using both levels of the agenda-setting theory, this thesis investigates headlines from the month preceding the election; it analyses the volume, frequency, overall sentiment, and language used. Based on this analysis, it will be possible to determine whether or not editorial bias took place and, if so, to what extent and in which ways. The findings reveal the dynamics between ownership interests and editorial choices, showcasing how the *Daily Mail* helped to shape political narratives during this critical period. In doing so, this study sheds light on the broader implications of media concentration on voter behaviour, raising questions about the media's impartiality, its role in maintaining democratic accountability, and its potential to disrupt it.

Keywords: *UK General Election 2024, agenda-setting, media ownership, British politics, public perception, journalism, Rishi Sunak, Keir Starmer*

1. Introduction

Politics has always been a central focus of nations' media landscapes, and in the UK it is no different. However, the depth and breadth of political discourse as well as political coverage in the UK are significant. This highlights the crucial role that the media plays not only in shaping public perception and influencing political dialogue but also in setting the agenda for national debate. In other words, framing the narratives that drive public understanding of key issues. As Hinde (2017, p. 80) states, "In British public life, the press, specifically the right-wing popular press, has long been accorded an almost supernatural power to influence the outcome of elections and referendums."

At no other point in time is this more evident than during politically charged events such as election campaigns. In the UK, News UK, Reach Plc, and DMGT Media own a substantial share of the national newspaper market, accounting for 90% of the total (Media Reform, 2024, p. 6), making this issue particularly evident. As such, where the media is highly concentrated, doubts have emerged regarding the potential influence of a limited number of dominant media proprietors (also known colloquially as 'press barons') on the political narrative and public debate.

Often referred to as the 'fourth estate', journalism is essential to democracy (Alvarado, 2024) and its system of 'checks and balances' alongside the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of political power. Moreover, the media holds power accountable and equips citizens with the necessary information to make informed decisions, ensuring access to a diverse range of views and opinions that foster healthy public democracy. Hence, the relationship between media ownership and political reporting is a critical area of academic study, particularly in highly concentrated media environments.

As Schudson (2003, p. 11) stated, "Journalism is the business of the practice of producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs of general public interest and importance." It is able to call out any of the powers should they exceed themselves and spread the information widely. It can also serve as a platform for different opinions, discussions, and debates in which journalists, politicians, as well as other influential leaders, express their views and arguments on politics, the state of national affairs, and wider societal issues. The concentration of media

ownership, though, raises concerns over the impartiality of political reporting and its inclination to distort public discourse in favour of the interests of owners or particular ideologies.

In recent years in the UK, this relationship has become even more noticeable, driven by a series of political turbulences that have dominated newspaper headlines. From the divisive Brexit referendum in 2016 to the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and the way it was handled, British political drama has provided beneficial circumstances for media sensationalism.

These turbulences encompassed not only international but also domestic issues. Notable examples include the fall of then-sitting Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the “Partygate” scandal in 2020 (BBC, 2022). It also included the brief premiership of only 49 days of Liz Truss, who was notoriously mocked and compared to the lifespan of a cabbage by the *Daily Star* newspaper (Waterson, 2022). It is, therefore, unsurprising that the media’s role in shaping public perceptions of political leaders remains a critical subject of academic study, particularly during pivotal moments such as the General Election in July 2024.

This study seeks to analyse 757 headlines from the *Daily Mail*, manually obtained over the period of one month prior to the General Election. A period in which, it can be argued, media coverage is intense and significant.

The aim of this thesis is to investigate and examine the intersection between media ownership and political reporting, with a specific focus on the *Daily Mail*’s coverage of the key British political figures of the 2024 General Election: the Leader of the Conservative Party and then Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, and the Leader of the Labour Party and the opposition, Keir Starmer, during the lead-up to voting day. This research seeks to evaluate how media ownership influences the portrayal of political figures and the implications for public perception and, thus, the voters’ decision and political discourse.

In order to achieve this aim, the following objectives were set:

1. To analyse theoretical frameworks on media ownership (e.g., ownership models, direct and indirect influences of ‘press barons’) and the impact these may have on editorial choices and practices;

2. To examine the historical relationship between media ownership and political ties in the UK, taking the *Daily Mail* as a case study;
3. To evaluate the *Daily Mail*'s pre-election coverage of Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer and to assess the patterns for potential bias or favouritism;
4. To assess the broader implications of media ownership on political diversity and public trust in the media, taking into consideration wider political implications.

A variety of methods were made use of:

1. Analysis of literature and previous academic work in the field of media ownership, the role of media and its role and effects on public opinion, political processes, and election agenda-setting, as well as a brief overview of British media. The thesis will also provide a deeper exploration of the *Daily Mail*'s origins and its relationship with the Conservative Party over the years, and how this relationship might have affected the way the elections were covered in 2024.
2. Synthesis and induction: combination of insights from various academic and media-related sources to develop a comprehensive framework for analysis media bias and favourable reporting.
3. Deduction: looking into hypotheses about media ownership's impact on reporting based on established theories (agenda-setting theory) to guide the thesis.

The following methods were applied for empirical research:

1. **Quantitative analysis:** raw data was collected from the *Daily Mail*'s (*MailOnline*) archives one month prior, leading up to the General Election on 4th July 2024. The following were quantified:
 - a. The total number of articles between 4th June and 3rd July 2024.
 - b. The total number of articles/articles in the headlines, mentioning 'Sunak,' 'Starmer' and 'Sunak and Starmer.'
 - c. The number of daily articles per 'Sunak,' 'Starmer,' 'Starmer and Sunak.'
 - d. The total number of articles with negative/positive/neutral sentiments (manually evaluated).

- e. The total number of articles per article type (commentary, feature, interview, news, newswire, and opinion).
2. **Qualitative analysis** conducted an interpretative content analysis of articles' headlines in order to explore how Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer as well as political issues were framed in the *Daily Mail*'s coverage. The analysis focused on headlines only, specifically searching for mentions of "Rishi Sunak," "Rishi," "Sunak," and "Keir Starmer," "Keir," "Starmer" to identify patterns in coverage while omitting terms like "Labour," "Conservative," or "Tory/Tories." Moreover, the sentiment of each headline was assessed via manual qualitative analysis.
3. **Interpretative qualitative analysis:** the headlines were manually assessed to identify and interpret patterns, as well as language used. This approach focused on identifying underlying themes, tones, and framing in the coverage of both politicians.

Finally, this thesis' findings carry key implications for media scholars and researchers, media as well as the public, showing the need for a deeper investigation into media ownership and its profound impact on the framing and delivery of political reporting.

2. British media and its role in shaping public opinion

London's iconic Fleet Street, the hub of British journalism and newspapers in the 16th century, has established the British press as one of the most prominent and prestigious worldwide. Home to titles such as *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Express*, and *The Sun*, over the years Fleet Street became a metaphor for the British press as a whole. While most newspapers relocated to other parts of London, its legacy stands strong, and it continues to be associated with journalism in the UK. The 'watchdog' function (McQuail, 2010, p. 283) - holding power to account - has been a hallmark of British journalism and a model that other media systems have looked to emulate globally (Hampton, 2009). Scholars like Curran and Seaton (2018) argue that the British press's commitment to public interest journalism set a standard for ethical practices, editorial independence, and accountability that remains influential to this day.

The British media model falls within what Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 3) term the "liberal model," characterised by a strong commercial press, minimal state intervention, and a focus on journalistic objectivity.

Within this framework, British journalism is known also for the existence of sensationalist tabloids (including such titles as *The Sun*), midmarket tabloids (such as the *Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*), and high-quality broadsheets (such as *The Financial Times* and *The Guardian*), catering to a wide audience spectrum (McNair, 2017, p. 4.). Conboy (2017, p. 96) highlights how this 'dual nature' of British journalism - balancing sensationalism with serious reporting - has inspired similar media diversity globally, especially in regions where the press serves both as a source of entertainment and a channel for critical political discourse.

Today British media outlets have moved toward a "hybrid media system," Chadwick (2013, p. 4), where traditional forms of journalism coexist with digital platforms, blogs, and social media. Naturally, this shift has forced British newspapers to evolve their practices, balancing the immediacy of digital reporting with the credibility traditionally associated with print journalism. Fenton (2010, p. 21) argues that this transformation mirrors global trends, as newspapers everywhere face declining readership, diminishing advertising revenue, and rising competition

from digital-only outlets: “[...] the internet can in many ways be seen as contributing to the stifling of journalism for the public good and in the public interest.”

The role of the British press also highlights its continued global relevance in shaping the public discourse: from politics to cultural debates, it underscores its continued global relevance. In this book, “News and Journalism in the UK,” McNair (2003) points out that the UK’s newspapers have often influenced global narratives, from coverage of wars and economic crises to social justice movements. As such, British journalism doesn’t just mirror global trends; it actively participates in setting them, providing a unique perspective on international events. In fact, many British publications are considered by private companies as part of the privileged group of ‘global top tier’, even though they are primarily national-focused publications.

Hence, it is no surprise that the British press still plays a crucial role in today’s society and remains a key source of national and international news through various means, from newspapers to TV to radio and now the internet, “The media absorb over thirty hours a week in the average person’s life. They are central to the democratic life of Britain” (Curran, Seaton, 2018, p. 1). Whereas a century ago the British public would receive its news via print newspapers, today news is “everywhere, all the time, and it is very, very difficult not to know what is going on in the world” (House of Lords, 2007-08, p. 12).

Despite the rise of digital media over the last few decades, traditional news companies continue to maintain their influence, especially as they remain the primary source of information for most readers. These organisations “continue to be the source of choice for most readers; they invest most in original journalism and still set the day’s political agenda” (House of Lords, 2007-08, p. 63). Traditional print media, despite declines in circulation (e.g., the *Daily Mail*’s print saw year-on-year drops of 8%; Press Gazette, 2024), still play an important role in shaping public opinion, particularly during key moments such as elections. Newspapers, whether in print or online, provide credibility and depth of reporting, distinguishing them from many digital platforms that focus on real-time news without necessarily providing extensive analysis alongside it.

The way the media landscape has changed, especially with the rise of digital platforms, has raised new concerns regarding the authority and influence that particular media outlets possess. While traditional print newspapers may no longer have as many readers as they once did, the

ownership and power of major news organisations are still significant today. These media platforms continue to play an integral role in elections and political coverage even with the shift in news consumption towards digital platforms. According to Ofcom's 'News consumption in the UK: Interactive Report' (2024), the regulatory and competition authority for the media and telecommunications industries in the UK, 39% of readers of newspapers in the UK, both print and online, thought these resources were "helpful" during the July 2024 General Election.

2.1. Move from "newspaper to 'viewpaper'"

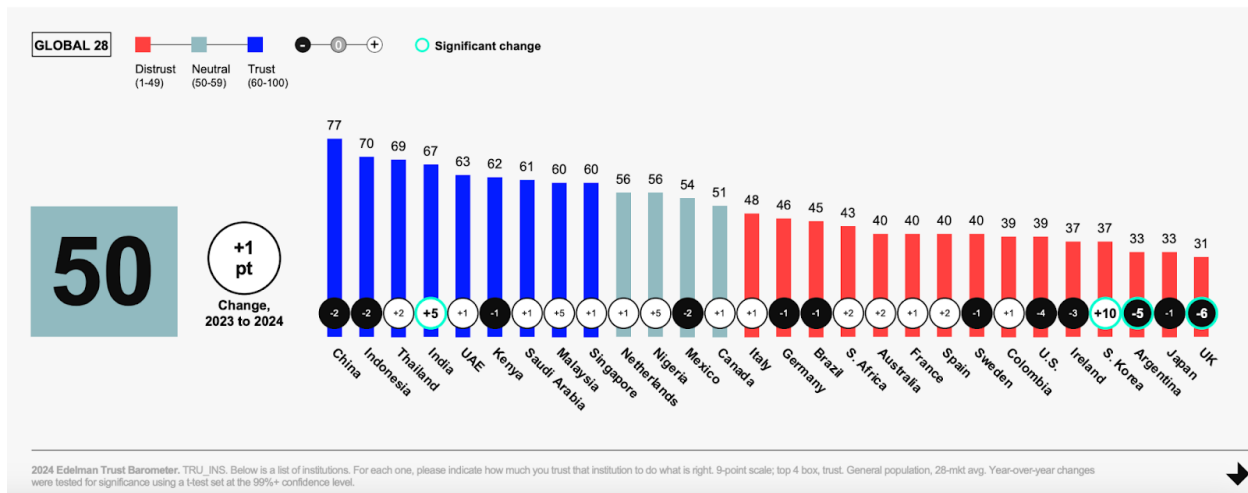
It is also crucial to understand how newspapers have adapted to the pressures of evolving media consumption and competition with digital platforms over the last decade.

One notable trend is the shift from traditional reporting to more opinion-driven content, leading to what is often referred to as the move from "newspaper to 'viewpaper'" (House of Lords 2007-08, p. 18). This is particularly evident in the UK, where newspapers have increasingly embraced opinion-driven content as a way to distinguish themselves from other forms of media. The House of Lords (2007-08, p. 18) report discovered that this shift enables newspapers to offer a unique alternative to television and radio news, which are legally bound to uphold impartiality. Newspapers, on the other hand, are not bound by such legal restrictions and can incorporate more subjective and editorialised viewpoints.

According to Edelman's 'Trust Barometer Global Report' (2024, p. 9), it is believed that 63% of government leaders, 61% of business leaders, and 64% of journalists and reporters are "purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are false or gross exaggerations." Moreover, according to this report, the media is the most distrusted in the UK with the lowest scores in the world, with only 31% of people trusting it (2024, p. 43; Source 1).

Media Distrusted in 15 of 28 Countries

Percent trust, in media



Source 1: Edelman's Trust Barometer Global Report, 2024 (p. 43)

This shift toward commentary and analysis gives newspapers the flexibility to delve deeper into political and social issues, often offering interpretations or perspectives that may resonate more personally with their readers.

However, this move to 'viewpapers' has also impacted public perceptions of trust in different media. According to Ofcom's report (2024), particularly in the context of the General Election in 2024, television and radio news sources tend to be trusted more by the public precisely because they are held to impartiality standards; TV was the most popular way to get information with regards to the General Election (49%) (Ofcom 2024, p. 5).

When it comes to traditional media (be it print or online), it is common for UK residents to categorise the main newspapers within a left-right political spectrum, with publications like *The Guardian* perceived as left-wing and *The Sun* considered as right-wing.

This relationship extends to politicians and other prominent figures. For example, former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, a prominent Conservative figure, has written opinion columns for the *Daily Mail*, a newspaper known for its conservative-leaning editorial stance. This type of relationship between high-profile politicians and newspapers further contributes to the perception

of bias in print media: “Intentional political bias certainly exists on the news media” (Schudson, 2003, p. 34).

Having said that, it is also worth noting that other politicians, including Labour leaders such as Tony Blair and Ed Miliband, have also used the *Daily Mail* as a platform for opinion pieces, reinforcing the idea that newspapers, particularly in the UK, can serve as tools for advancing specific political ideologies and viewpoints. It is also evident that, over time, politicians have attempted to galvanise voters from outside their traditional support base, as well as the support of newspapers themselves.

On the whole, differentiation through affinity with certain political parties creates a complex dynamic where newspapers provide in-depth commentary and opinions that appeal to certain segments of the population but simultaneously face declining trust from those who seek unbiased information.

The rise of ‘viewpapers’ thus represents both an opportunity and a challenge for newspapers in the UK. While it allows them to provide something distinct from television and radio news, it also risks alienating a portion of the public that prioritises impartiality and balanced reporting. This evolution underscores the changing landscape of journalism in the UK, where the media’s role in shaping public opinion becomes more complicated, influenced by both the format and the perceived objectivity of the medium.

3. Media ownership, its influence and effects

At the heart of media influence is the issue of ownership. Who controls the media and how they use that control has been a topic of ongoing debate for decades, with potential implications for journalistic integrity, media plurality, and the functioning of democracy.

As Bagdikian (2004, p. 5) puts it, “The media oligopoly is a serious threat to democratic discourse, reducing the diversity of information and viewpoints available to the public, thus impairing the public’s ability to make informed decisions.”. In the UK, concerns have been raised about whether a small number of powerful media owners can sway the political narrative and shape public discourse.

Before diving into the general overview of news media ownership in the UK, it is crucial to define what ‘media ownership’ is. According to McChesney (2004, p. 23): “Media ownership refers to the control and governance of media organisations, including newspapers, television, radio, and online platforms, which significantly impacts the editorial direction, content production, and dissemination processes.”

Furthermore, media ownership issues have historically been linked to the understanding that influential voices have a substantial impact on the “perceptions, cognitions, and preferences” of the general population (Scholsberg, 2017, p. 3). Critical problems concerning who controls the dominant narratives in public discourse and how these narratives shape society's attitudes, opinions, and beliefs are brought up by the concentration of media power.

When only a small number of entities hold substantial control over media channels, they can dictate not only what information is shared but also how it is presented, limiting diverse viewpoints and potentially eroding democratic discourse. As McChesney (1999) argues, concentrated media ownership can restrict perspectives and undermine the foundations of democratic debate.

This particular dynamic and its threat to the quality of a nation’s democracy highlights the importance of examining the implications of media ownership, as it can impact the diversity of

opinions, the representation of marginalised voices, as well as the overall health of the public sphere during politically charged events, such as elections. Understanding these influences is also essential for assessing the role of media in shaping collective consciousness and for advocating for more equitable media practices in a more effective way.

Roy Greenslade, British author and journalist, suggested that there are “four reasons for owning a newspaper... **profit, propaganda, prestige, and public service**” (House of Lords, 2007-08, p. 36). Each of these motivations carries significant implications for the production, presentation, and consumption of news, reflecting the diverse intentions behind media ownership.

Profit is often a key driver for many media owners (House of Lords, p. 36). The commercialisation of news media means that financial gain plays a central role in shaping editorial decisions, particularly as newspapers rely heavily on advertising revenue and subscriptions. In the digital era, this drive for profit has intensified as media outlets compete for audience attention in a fragmented landscape. However, this focus on profitability can come at the expense of journalistic quality, as content is often tailored to generate clicks and engagement rather than to serve the public interest and provide journalists with tools for in-depth research (House of Lords, pp. 18-20).

The pressure to increase readership through sensationalist headlines or entertainment-driven content risks diluting serious investigative journalism and reducing the media’s ability to inform the electorate on critical issues. For existing newspapers, succumbing to this pressure can also mean losing their sense of ‘brand’ and identity and eventually alienating their traditional readership. In order to overcome this conundrum in a world in which news is increasingly consumed online, many of those wanting to preserve journalistic quality have been able to transition into new business models, including paywalls, subscriptions (*The Times*, *The Telegraph*), or managed to effectively fundraise to keep its news free and available for all (*The Guardian*).

The use of the media as a tool for **propaganda** is another significant motivation for owning newspapers. In 1928, Bernays (2005, p. 48), also known as the ‘father’ of modern-day public relations industry, stated that “[...] whether in politics, finance, manufacture, agriculture, charity,

education, or other fields, must be done with the help of propaganda. Propaganda is the executive arm of the invisible government.”

Historically, newspapers have been instrumental in shaping political discourse, and ownership of media outlets offers a strategic platform for promoting specific ideologies or political agendas: “Modern propaganda is consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea or group” (Bernays, 2005, p. 51).

When media ownership is concentrated in a few hands, the risk of biased reporting increases, as owners may use their influence to selectively report on issues or present news through a particular political lens. This can have profound effects on public opinion and the democratic process, as media outlets wield the power to shape narratives and influence election outcomes. The use of newspapers for propaganda purposes not only affects the diversity of perspectives but also undermines the role of the press as a neutral informer of the public.

Additionally, owning a newspaper can provide a significant amount of **prestige**. Media owners often gain social and political capital through their ownership of influential outlets, positioning themselves as key players in public life; this was noted by Roy Greenslade in the House of Lords Report (p. 36): “Tony O’Reilly owns *The Independent* newspapers which have always made a loss ever since he bought them; he calls them a calling card, he clearly owns them for prestige.” This can enhance their standing within elite circles, offering them a voice in societal debates and political processes.

The prestige associated with media ownership thus serves not only as a symbol of power but also as a means of access to influential networks that further reinforce their control over public discourse. Media ownership may lend more power than is otherwise attainable for the same amount of money and shorten distances between owners and the political elite. This particular dynamic is highlighted in the House of Lords Report (pp. 32-39), which discusses how ownership enables media proprietors to exert both direct and indirect influence over editorial content, thereby shaping public opinion and limiting political diversity. Similarly, Herman and Chomsky (1994) argue that media ownership allows elites to maintain control over the flow of information, amplifying their political and economic power.

It is possible to observe how the growing number of billionaires globally is also leading to the buying up of media companies, social networks, and newspapers: “[...] media tycoons have long been at pains to downplay their agenda influence, preferring to portray themselves as entrepreneurs who direct the political leanings of their outlets merely to reflect rather than shape the views of the audience” (Scholsber, 2017, p. 12). The purchase of *The Washington Post* by Jeff Bezos, an American business magnate and the CEO of Amazon, and the acquisition of *Twitter* by Elon Musk, a South African-born businessman, investor, and the largest shareholder of Tesla and SpaceX, are just a few examples of this trend.

Lastly, **public service** is often seen as a motivation, particularly among those who view journalism as a crucial component of a healthy democracy (House of Commons, p. 36). Some media owners may emphasise the importance of serving the public by providing reliable, unbiased information that holds power to account and informs citizens. However, as the balance between public service and profitability shifts, which has been especially evident in the past decades and with the rise of technology, there is an increasing tension between the media’s role as a public ‘watchdog’ and its operation as a commercial enterprise. When ownership leans too heavily towards the pursuit of profit or propaganda, the commitment to public service journalism can be compromised, leading to a less informed electorate and a weakened democratic process.

Greenslade’s four motivations - profit, propaganda, prestige and public service - highlight the complex and often conflicting interests that drive media ownership in the present day. Each of these factors influences how news is reported and can have far-reaching consequences for journalistic integrity and democratic accountability. Understanding these motivations is crucial for evaluating the role of media ownership in shaping both public opinion and political narratives.

Baker (2007, p. 5) emphasised that “the health of democracies [...] depends on having a free press.” A media landscape dominated by a few powerful voices risks limiting public access to diverse perspectives. When media plurality is compromised, the public’s ability to critically assess political issues and engage in informed debate diminishes (Barnett, 2010, p. 2).

A concentration of media ownership can amplify specific political ideologies while sidelining or silencing others. In this way, it is undeniable that media ownership has direct implications for the vibrancy of democratic processes: “News is not a mirror of reality. It is a representation of the world, and all representations are selective” (Schudson, 2003, p. 33). A truly democratic society relies on the availability of varied and independent sources of information. Without it, citizens may have the right to choose but may lack the information needed to make the choice they really intend. At worst, as opposed to enriching the capacity to make an informed decision, ownership may attempt to shape people’s opinions and choices into voting, acting, and thinking in a way that advances the owner’s own interests and suppresses or undermines alternative ways of thinking.

The House of Lords report (2007-08, p. 9) emphasised that “a media concentrated in too few hands could have the effect of limiting the freedom of expression and diversity of views, which is the hallmark of a democratic state.” The Media Reform Report (2023, p. 6) claims that [in the UK]: “Current regulations have utterly failed to tackle the systemic abuses of media power that are destroying our democracy.” In 2012, Ofcom issued its *Measuring Plurality report*, reinforcing that media plurality and diverse viewpoints are essential in order to “[prevent] any one media owner or voice from having too much influence over public opinion and the political agenda” (Ofcom, 2012, p. 3). This raises a significant concern: when media ownership is concentrated among a few powerful entities, it risks distorting the public sphere. Fewer independent voices mean that media organisations can shape the narrative, potentially influencing public opinion and political discourse to serve the specific interests of those who control the outlets.

Such an imbalance limits the range of perspectives and diverse views available to the public, undermining the democratic need for a well-informed electorate. Ensuring a plurality of media voices is therefore not just a question of diversity but a crucial safeguard for maintaining a healthy and functioning democracy, where no single entity can dominate the conversation or dictate the political agenda.

3.1. Allocational and operational control in media ownership

To understand the level of influence a media proprietor can exert, Sjøvaag and Ohlsson (2019, p. 8) discuss how proprietors can assert their ownership through two primary mechanisms: allocation and operational control.

Allocation control relates to managing the company's finances and resources, shaping policies and strategies, overseeing mergers, acquisitions, or cutbacks, as well as handling profit control.

The media industry worldwide, particularly in 2023-2024, has been in a steep downturn, as evidenced by significant layoffs in the news sector (Becker, 2024): "For a sector that has struggled for decades to find viable business models, the last year has been especially grim." The current media business model relies heavily on advertising and subscriptions, which may push decision-makers to prioritise profitability over quality.

This form of control allows proprietors to prioritise certain initiatives or narratives, ultimately determining which stories receive funding and attention: "These influences can be manifested through what kind of journalism is invested in and what kinds of stories are followed or not followed. Such influence may be reflected as much in what does not appear in a newspaper or news bulletin as what does" (House of Lords, 2007-08, p. 37).

By influencing budgetary decisions, media owners can direct resources toward specific projects or editorial angles that align with their interests or agendas, hence shaping the overall media and content landscapes. For instance, a proprietor may choose to invest heavily in entertainment stories while scaling back on investigative journalism, which is arguably expensive to sustain, subtly guiding the public's focus toward less critical issues, which may not be bringing much profit due to its complex nature: "The commercialization of journalism undercuts the profession's public service function, transforming news into a commodity. As media firms pursue ratings and profits, investigative journalism and critical reporting decline, while sensationalism and entertainment-based news rise" (McChesney, 2004, p. 57).

Furthermore, this financial oversight extends to determining which partnerships or collaborations are pursued, potentially sidelining voices or topics that do not align with the proprietor's vision.

Operational control, on the other hand, involves decisions about the internal distribution of resources, such as setting editorial directions, establishing leadership models, and appointing leaders and managers, as originally outlined by McManus (1994). This level of control is crucial to understand because it can shape the day-to-day functioning of a media organisation and directly impact the kind of content produced for the wider public. By influencing the editorial team and their priorities, media owners can sway the tone and focus of reporting, potentially marginalising dissenting viewpoints or alternative narratives. For example, if a media owner appoints an editor who shares their ideological leanings, this can lead to a homogenisation of perspectives, where certain issues are emphasised while others are downplayed or ignored altogether. The operational control was also noted in the House of Lords report (2007-08, p. 35): “Usually the appointment of a newspaper’s editor is down to the owner of that paper. This gives the owner a clear mechanism of influence over his title’s editorial agenda. If an owner of a newspaper appoints an editor that he trusts to act in his image, then there is no real need for that owner to become involved in particular stories or editorial lines.”

This observation from the House of Lords report underscores a critical point about media ownership: the appointment of a trusted editor acts as a powerful yet subtle tool for shaping a newspaper’s editorial direction. By selecting an editor who mirrors their values, a media owner can ensure and enforce that their vision and preferences are reflected in the newspaper’s content without needing to interfere directly with day-to-day journalism. As a result, the editorial agenda - what stories are covered, how they are framed and what voices are amplified - can be aligned with the owner’s interests.

This has far-reaching consequences for journalistic independence: “The media system could not be democratic if journalists aligned their interests with the publishers, advertisers, and powerful government and business leaders and not the readers” (McChesney, 1999, p. 67). When ownership influences the editorial stance, the boundary between impartial journalism and partisan reporting can blur. In cases where ownership is highly concentrated, the diversity of viewpoints and the objectivity of news coverage may diminish, potentially limiting the breadth of information available to the public to make informed decisions. In democracies, a free and independent press is vital for well-informed citizenry. Consequently, the convergence of

ownership and editorial control poses a challenge to media pluralism and the health of public discourse.

It is crucial to recognise these dynamics, as media ownership has the potential to distort news coverage and influence public opinion, thereby impacting the health of a democratic society. On the one hand, the interplay between allocation and operational control shapes the content audiences receive and determines the broader implications for civic engagement and informed citizenship. On the other hand, democracies in the 21st century are closely intertwined with free markets. Newspapers tend to be the property of either private enterprises or publicly listed companies. While certain regulations apply to these entities, another tension relating to the potential impact on democratic principles when balancing free speech protections against state intervention in private sector media could emerge.

3.2. Private, Public and Concentrated media ownership models

Traditionally, news media ownership in many regions worldwide was largely in private, but not corporate, hands. In Europe and the United States during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, newspapers were often owned by families, local business leaders, or political figures, commonly known as ‘press barons’: “The traditional image of the newspaper proprietor was that of a hands-on owner who expected his publication to mirror his political views and interests” (House of Lords, 2007-08, p. 32). It wasn’t until the 1980s and 1990s that corporate consolidation began to take hold.

Today, media ownership takes various forms:

- **private ownership**, where individuals or corporations control media outlets: “In the twenty first century the production of news, and journalism of all kinds, is big business” (McNair, 2003, p. 3);
- **public ownership**, typically funded and run by the government to serve the public interest;
- **concentrated ownership**, where a small number of companies or individuals dominate the media market, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives.

Privately owned media often prioritises profit, driving strategies focused on increasing viewership and advertising revenue, sometimes at the expense of journalistic standards: “Privately owned media are funded predominantly by advertising. This means that advertisers - not citizens - are effectively the primary customers of the media. The content is shaped accordingly to serve their interests, often at the expense of public accountability and political diversity” (McChesney, 2004, p. 35). This profit-driven approach means that content is often shaped by what is trending or sensational, aiming to attract maximum clicks and engagement, although there are differences across the publications depending on the readership profile and their business model - which in some cases has allowed newspapers to avoid relying on ads.

However, in recent years, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) has amplified this trend even further. Today, media outlets and journalists face competition from AI-generated content that can be produced rapidly and tailored for optimal engagement (Simon, 2024). AI tools can analyse audience preferences, quickly identify trending topics, and generate large volumes of content, making it more difficult for traditional journalism to keep up. This dynamic further pressures media companies to prioritise speed and virality over investigative journalism or comprehensive reporting as they strive to remain competitive in a landscape where algorithms increasingly dictate content visibility and audience reach. Consequently, the race for clicks has intensified, further eroding journalistic standards and potentially diminishing the diversity and depth of the information available to the public (Adami, 2024).

Private ownership can lead to conflicts of interest, where media outlets may avoid criticising certain businesses or political figures that are closely linked to their advertisers or owners (Herman & Chomsky, 1995). As a result, news coverage may become biased, with certain issues being underreported or framed in a way that aligns with the interests of those funding the media. This can limit political diversity in media content, skewing public discourse and reducing the media's ability to serve as an impartial platform for different perspectives.

It does have to be noted that sophisticated readers are neither silent nor happy about the issue. The rise of technology and the lowering of entry barriers also mean that a number of niche, quality-driven journalistic media outlets have emerged. Nevertheless, they are not as widely read

and tend to be paywalled and limited to affluent niches that were already capable of challenging the editorial lines of newspapers. The same goes for news apps or platforms that help provide balanced reading diets, such as *GroundNews*. So far, the emergence of these is more indicative of the issue than a real solution to it.

In contrast, **publicly funded media** focuses on public service and educational content, though it can be susceptible to governmental influence:

“Unlike privately owned media, whose content is shaped by the demands of advertisers, public service broadcasters are obligated to provide a wider range of content, catering to both mainstream and minority audiences, which contributes to a more informed and engaged public” (Freedman, 2008, p. 168).

This media model is designed to cater to a broad audience, ensuring that both mainstream and minority groups are represented. By providing diverse content, public service broadcasters and publishers aim to create a more informed and engaged citizenry, supporting democratic discourse and fostering social cohesion.

However, while publicly funded media does not operate under the same profit-driven imperatives as privately owned outlets, it can still be vulnerable to governmental influence. Since its funding often comes from state budgets or public fees, government bodies may exert pressure over content and editorial choices: “While publicly funded media aim to ensure diversity and accountability, they are not immune to governmental pressures, as their funding and policy frameworks are often influenced by political considerations” (Freedman, 2008, p. 162). This can potentially lead to biased reporting or underrepresentation of issues that may be critical of the government or ruling parties.

This type of media ownership can affect political diversity and the transparency of information. For example, if public broadcasters are overly influenced by the government, they may avoid certain topics or present information in ways that align with governmental priorities, thus limiting public debate. There are certainly plenty of cases of states in which the media is severely influenced or totally controlled, including illiberal or populist-influenced democracies. And it is

no surprise that modern dictatorships or authoritarian regimes are the ones to tightly limit free speech, control media narratives, and block social networks. However, when properly regulated and insulated from undue political pressure, publicly funded media can act as a vital counterbalance to the market-driven tendencies of private media, offering a wider variety of perspectives and more in-depth, less sensationalist coverage.

Another type of media ownership is **concentrated media ownership**. Concentrated media ownership, as seen with, for example, Rupert Murdoch's News UK (a subsidiary of the US-based News Corp) or Daily Mail and General Trust (DMGT), which became once again privately owned by the Rothemere family after a buyout in 2021 for approx £850m (Sweeney, 2021), may result in reduced content diversity and a narrower range of viewpoints available to the public: "There may be a large number of outlets giving the appearance of diversity, but a concern is that so many are owned by one of the few media giants [...] If the number of outlets is growing and the number of owners declining, then each owner controls even more formidable communications power" (Bagdikian, 2004, p. 222).

Concentrated media ownership has broader implications for democratic societies and public access to a diverse range of information. When only a few corporations or certain individuals control a large number of media outlets, it limits the diversity of perspectives available to audiences, despite the appearance of choice. Bagdikian (2004, p. 222) notes that even though there may be a growing number of outlets, the declining number of owners results in a concentration of power, giving those few owners immense control over public discourse: "There may be a large number of outlets giving the appearance of diversity, but a concern is that so many are owned by one of the few media giants [...] If the number of outlets is growing and the number of owners declining, then each owner controls even more formidable communications power."

This consolidation can lead to several potential consequences. First, it creates an environment where only a narrow range of viewpoints is represented, often reflecting the interests of the corporate owners rather than the public it is meant to serve and represent. Since media plays a critical role in shaping public opinion and providing checks on power (hence, the media being the fourth estate), concentrated ownership can reduce the critical role of journalism in holding

governments, politicians, corporations, or certain individuals accountable. Moreover, content becomes more uniform and less responsive to local or minority interests as media conglomerates streamline operations for efficiency and profitability, prioritising broad appeal over niche or dissenting perspectives.

Additionally, concentrated ownership can foster a homogenisation of media content, where different outlets, though seemingly independent, often present similar stories or angles due to shared ownership. This undermines the diversity of information necessary for an informed public and limits the ability of citizens to engage with a broad spectrum of ideas. Thus, the concentration of media ownership represents a significant challenge to both the diversity of media content and the robustness of democratic discourse.

3.3. The direct and indirect influence of media ownership on journalistic practices

Media ownership, regardless of its type, plays a critical role in shaping how journalism functions in society. As Barnett (2004, p. 6) argues, it is essential to “ensure that the civic and democratic values of journalism will be prioritised above the interest of share-holders and corporate profits.” This highlights a key challenge within media operations - balancing the financial pressures of running a profitable business while also upholding the journalistic values of truth, accountability, and serving the public interest.

In many cases, the drive for profitability can lead media organisations to prioritise content that maximises engagement, often at the expense of more rigorous and costly investigative journalism: “Journalists working for profit-oriented media corporations are frequently constrained by the economic goals of their employers, resulting in a focus on stories that attract audiences and advertisers rather than those that serve the public interest” (McManus, 1994, p. 33). Sensationalism, entertainment, and trending stories may overshadow deep, thoughtful reporting on important public issues, which are less likely to attract the same level of immediate attention or advertising revenue. This dynamic can skew media content away from its democratic role of informing citizens and holding power accountable.

On the other hand, media organisations that commit to prioritising journalistic ethics and democratic values are better positioned to maintain a strong public service role. These outlets

may invest more in investigative journalism, offer diverse viewpoints, and present critical issues that contribute to informed citizenship. However, maintaining this balance often requires a commitment to editorial independence and a willingness to resist the pressures of commercial interests or political influence.

Thus, the ownership structure and business model of media outlets directly impact the type of journalism they produce. The tension between profit-making and public service is a fundamental challenge in today's media industry, affecting not only the quality of news but also the broader democratic process: "The influence can emanate from the particular vision of an owner or an editor-in-chief, from a family ownership tradition, or from structural or organisational principles that dictate a particular editorial direction. These influences can be manifested through what kind of journalism is invested in and what kinds of stories are followed or not followed. Such influence may be reflected as much in what does not appear in a newspaper or news bulletin as what does" (House of Lords, 2007-08, p. 37).

The impact of media ownership on both journalistic independence and public opinion has been explored by numerous scholars. Wagner and Collins (2014, p. 761) argue that "ownership and the editorial page focus on how a diversity of voices could be drowned out when one owner controls the media in a given market." This phenomenon poses a significant threat to the media as a voice for diverse perspectives and open debate. When one entity, whether corporate or individual, dominates a market, the range of viewpoints that are published can become limited to those that align with the owner's interests. As a result, public opinion may be shaped by a narrow set of narratives, which could distort public understanding of complex issues.

Journalists working for a media conglomerate or a specific person may feel pressured to align their reporting with the political, economic, or ideological leanings of the media owners. This can result in self-censorship or the avoidance of controversial subjects that conflict with the owner's interests.

The ownership of media outlets can also affect the nature and independence of news content in several ways.

As noted in the report of the House of Lords (2007-08, p. 32):

“There is a range of ways that ownership can impact on news output. These include:

- 1) direct intervention by an owner;
- 2) indirect influence of an owner through the appointment of an editor who shares his views;
- 3) the influences of the business approaches that an owner can take;
- 4) different approaches to journalism.”

In practice, these forms of influence are pervasive and can significantly undermine the editorial independence of newsrooms. Owners who **intervene directly** in the editorial process may push specific political or commercial agendas, thus steering news coverage in a way that reflects their personal and/or corporate interests rather than serving the interests of the broader public. This can lead to a narrowing of perspectives on news content, where critical issues are either downplayed or ignored. Over time, such intervention can erode public trust in the press and diminish its role as a watchdog in a democratic society.

Direct intervention was an especially popular exercise during wartime when media owners aligned themselves with government agendas (either out of patriotism or to protect their business interests), pushing narratives that supported the war effort while suppressing dissenting voices.

Direct intervention was evident in major conflicts such as the World Wars, where media outlets were either co-opted or willingly participated in shaping public opinion to foster unity or justify military actions. One of the most notable examples of direct media intervention during wartime comes from World War I in the UK, when Lord Northcliffe, owner of the *Daily Mail* and *The Times*, used his newspapers to strongly advocate for British participation in the war and support the war effort. Northcliffe’s media outlets pushed patriotic narratives, vilified Germany, and actively encouraged enlistment. The *Daily Mail*, in particular, became known for its fervent pro-war stance, often prioritising sensationalism and patriotism over balanced reporting. As Curran and Seaton (2018) note, Northcliffe was able to wield significant influence over public sentiment during this period, illustrating the power media owners had in shaping national perspectives.

Northcliffe’s influence extended beyond just shaping public opinion; it was so substantial that he was appointed as the Director of Propaganda for Enemy Countries by the British government,

further intertwining his media interests with state objectives. This role effectively blurred the line between independent journalism and government propaganda, showing how media owners could directly influence public discourse in favour of national interests. According to Curran and Seaton (2018, p. 50), this appointment showcases the potential for media ownership to compromise journalistic independence, especially during times of national and political crises when government and media objectives align: “the economic structure of the press and the ambitions of proprietors like Northcliffe created a press that was often subservient to political interests.”

In such cases, the line between journalism and propaganda becomes blurred, as news coverage is manipulated to promote specific ideological goals, thus undermining the media’s role as an impartial informer of the public.

This type of direct intervention isn't limited to historical contexts either. As mentioned before, restrictions on press freedom can be seen today in various countries, such as Russia, Belarus, China, and many more (Reporters Without Borders, 2024), where media owners with political connections or vested interests heavily influence reporting, framing events to serve governmental or corporate narratives, further eroding press freedom.

Indirect influence is, perhaps, much more insidious, as it allows owners to install editors who subtly align with their perspectives, ensuring that content remains consistent with the owner's objectives without overt interference: “[...] the powerful do not shape the agenda; it merely bends according to their will” (Scholsberg, 2017, p. 14). Considering that it is usually the owner who decides what editor to appoint or fire, it might be argued that it is in the editor’s interest to serve the interests of the media owner:

“Once an editor is in place it is usually the owner who has the power to fire him so even when the editor and owner have different views there is considerable incentive for the editor to avoid upsetting his owner” (House of Lords, 2007-08, p. 35).

For example, the Rothemere family’s solidified control over DMGT gives them significant sway in appointing editors and shaping the editorial direction of their publications, including the *Daily Mail* and *MailOnline*. While the Rothermere family, particularly Jonathan Harmsworth (4th

Viscount Rothermere), may not overtly dictate every editorial decision, but he has the power to appoint or dismiss editors, which, it might be argued, ensures that the content aligns with his broader interests and perspectives.

This form of indirect influence is subtle yet powerful. Editors, knowing that their job security depends on the approval of the media owner, may be more likely to self-censor or shape content in ways that avoid clashing with the Rothermere family's views or commercial interests. As Curran and Seaton (2018, p. 345) argue, this indirect method allows owners to set parameters for debate by controlling key appointments, which ensures that content does not stray too far from the owner's preferences without the need for overt intervention.

In the case of DMGT, this indirect influence is evident in the *Daily Mail's* editorial stance, which has consistently aligned with conservative and populist viewpoints, reflective of the Rothermere family's ideological leanings. Editors may craft the paper's coverage in ways that suit these preferences, ensuring harmony between the ownership's expectations and the paper's output.

This type of influence can also set the tone and agenda for national debates, deciding what topics to focus on or amplify and which to ignore: "[...] some human beings must do the selecting; certain people make decisions about what to present as news and how to present it" (Schudson, 2003, p. 33)

This also aligns with the broader academic observation, such as by Doyle (2002), who argues that media owners exert a powerful, albeit indirect, influence by hiring editors who naturally align with their political and business views.

Additionally, the **business models adopted** by media owners, often driven by profit maximisation, can skew the type of journalism that is produced. For example, a focus on sensationalism or click-driven content, which is especially evident in tabloid-like publications such as the *Daily Mail* or the *Sun*, can result in the prioritisation of superficial stories over in-depth investigative journalism.

This trend can lead to a dilution of journalistic quality, with serious political or social issues receiving less coverage in favour of stories that are more likely to attract advertising revenue or audience engagement, or to simply serve the interests of the media owner (which tend to either

be politically or commercially motivated). Ultimately, the owner's influence, whether direct or indirect, compromises the diversity of perspectives and the journalistic standards that are essential for a healthy, democratic society.

For example, the *Daily Mail*, particularly its online platform, *MailOnline*, is often cited as one of the most visited news websites globally, driven by its prioritisation of viral stories, celebrity gossip, and emotionally charged headlines (Freedman, 2014, p. 86). *MailOnline*'s strategy, which focuses heavily on sensational content designed to attract clicks and engagement, illustrates how commercial pressures can shape editorial decisions, often at the expense of more substantial investigative journalism.

This focus on click-driven content helps maximise advertising revenue but often comes at the expense of in-depth reporting on critical social or political issues. Stories that are sensational, trending, or focused on human interest topics are given priority because they generate high traffic, which is essential for ad revenue.

In contrast, serious investigative journalism, which requires more time and financial resources and may not attract the same level of immediate public engagement, is often sidelined. This business model exemplifies how a profit-maximisation strategy can dilute journalistic quality. The content, shaped by these commercial imperatives, tends to reinforce shallow or repetitive narratives, leaving less room for a diversity of perspectives or deep exploration of issues vital to democracy, such as corruption, inequality, or governance.

This trend illustrates how media owners' business models, whether consciously or unconsciously, skew the type of content produced, compromising the diversity and quality of journalism necessary for a well-informed public. The influence of media ownership, therefore, significantly shapes the landscape of public discourse, often to the detriment of deeper, investigative journalism.

Sjøvaag and Ohlsson (2019, p. 1) also highlight that “the issue of ownership is primarily of interest [...] due to the assumption that ownership can have an effect on news content, journalistic autonomy, freedom of expression, and organisational and professional practices.”

Barnett (2004, pp. 4-5) refers to the Pilkington Committee, raised in the House of Commons in 1961, which argued that if mass media is controlled by the same individual or group, there is a risk of biased political coverage, resulting in a one-sided perspective on issues. Furthermore, “owners can influence the news in a variety of ways. They are in a position to have significant political impact” (House of Lords, 2007-08, p. 7).

Thus, having overly concentrated media ownership may sway public opinion, influence how situations are showcased, and result in coverage that is too “one-sided” (Barnett, 2004, p. 5): “A free and diverse media are an indispensable part of the democratic process [...] If one becomes too powerful, this process is placed in jeopardy and democracy is damaged” (Department of National Heritage, 1995).

4. Trust in media and government

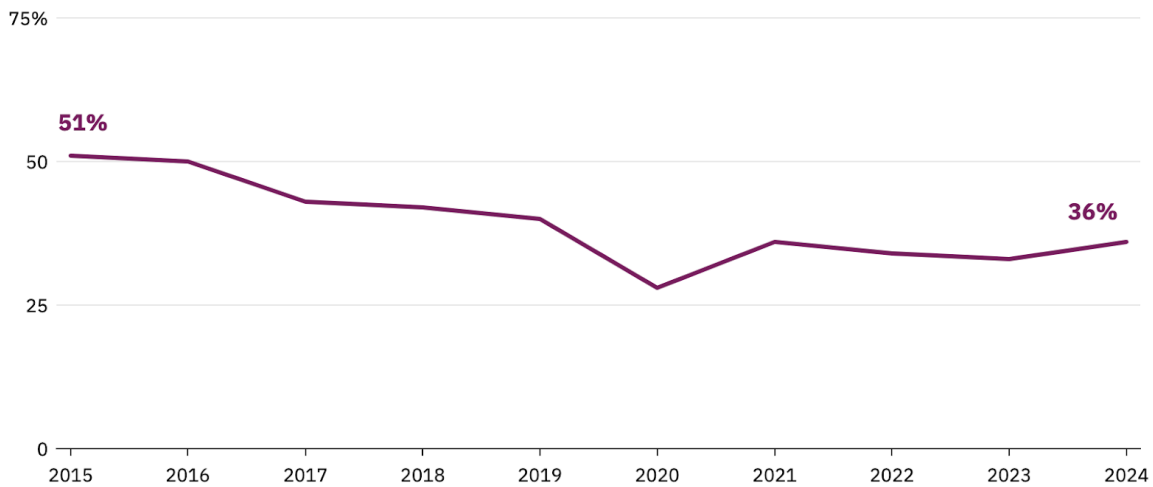
Over the past decade (between 2015 and 2024), trust in the UK media has experienced a notable decline, as reflected in the overall trust score dropping from 51% in 2015 to 36% in 2024 (Reuters Institute, 2024; Source 2).

This downward trend highlights growing public scepticism towards traditional news sources, which may be attributed to various factors, including increased polarisation, concerns about misinformation, and the rise of sensationalism.

Overall trust score

Change over time 2015–2024

United Kingdom

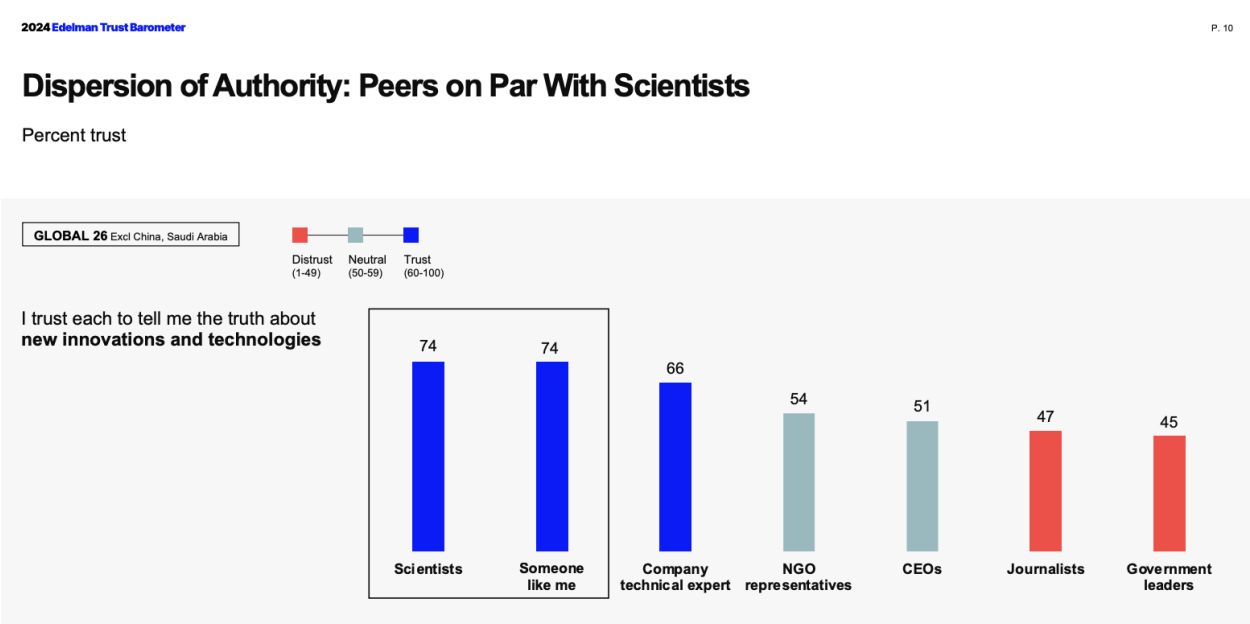


Source 2: Reuters Institute (June, 2024)

The decline in trust reached its lowest point in 2020 (28%), likely exacerbated by heightened scrutiny during the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread misinformation. Although there has been a slight recovery since 2021, the overall trend shows a significant erosion of trust, underscoring challenges for UK media in maintaining credibility and public confidence in an era where digital and alternative media sources continue to reshape the information landscape.

The 2024 Edelman ‘Trust Barometer’ report (Source 3) highlights the varying levels of trust in different sources when it comes to conveying truthful information about new innovations and technologies. Notably, journalists receive a relatively low trust rating of 47% (Edelman Trust Baromter, p. 10), indicating that less than half of the surveyed population trusts journalists to provide accurate and truthful information in this area. This figure places journalists below scientists (74%), company technical experts (66%) and NGO representatives (54%) in terms of perceived reliability (Edelman Trust Baromter, p. 10).

The data underscores a broader trend of declining trust in media professionals, with journalists being perceived as less credible sources compared to technical experts and peers (e.g., “someone like me,” Edelman Trust Report, p. 10).

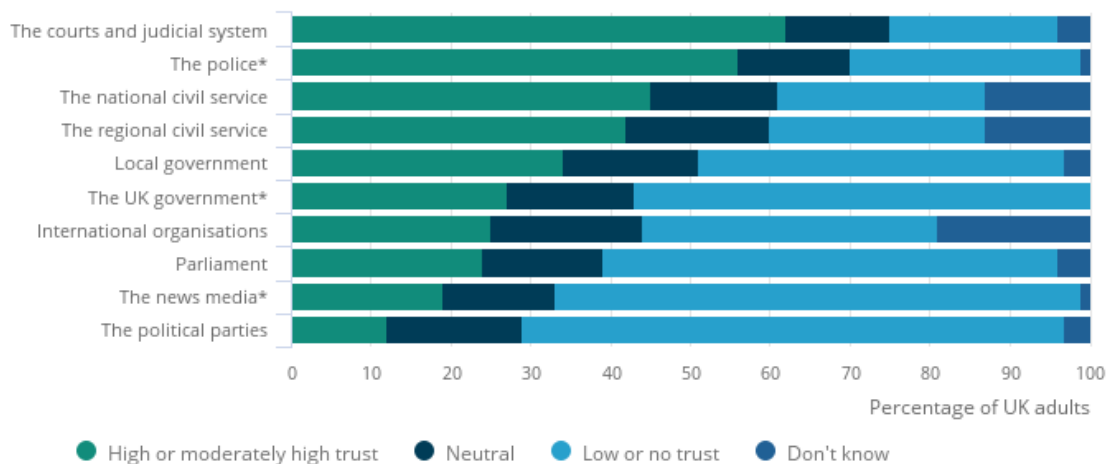


Source 3: Edelman Trust Barometer Report, 2024

This lower trust level reflects and supports concerns over media accuracy, bias, and sensationalism, which may be contributing factors to the overall decline in trust in media, as seen in the UK's trust trend from 2015 to 2024.

When it comes to the overall trust in institutions, the UK political parties (68%), the news media (66%), and the parliament (57%) are the least trusted, according to the Office for National Statistics, 2023 (Source 4).

Figure 1: Courts, police and civil service were the most trusted institutions
Levels of trust in public institutions, UK, 2023

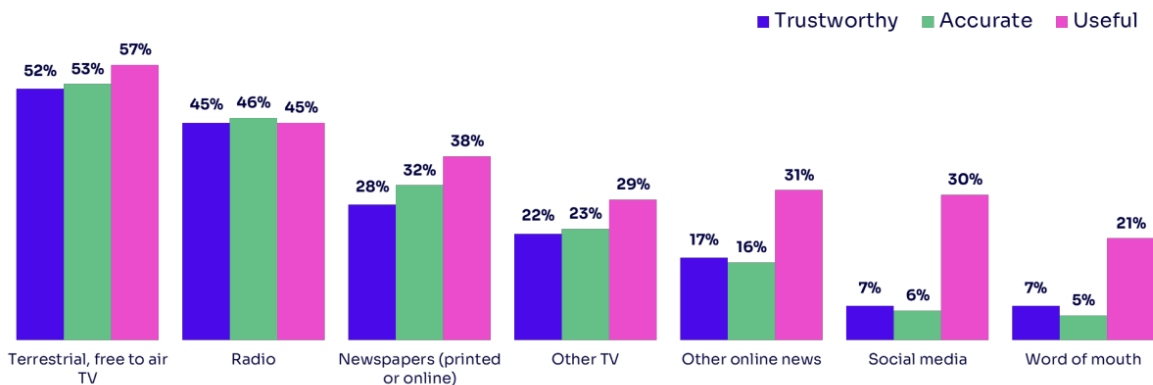


Source 4: Trust in Government Survey, UK: 2023. Office for National Statistics

When it comes to the General Election in 2024, Ofcom's UK General Election news and opinion formation survey 2024 (p. 8; Source 5) reveals significant variation in public perceptions of different news sources regarding trustworthiness, accuracy, as well as usefulness. Traditional media outlets, such as terrestrial free-to-air TV (with 52% trustworthiness) and radio (45% trustworthiness), are generally perceived as more reliable compared to online news sources and social media, which are rated much lower in trust and accuracy. Social media, in particular, ranks poorly across all metrics, with only 7% of respondents considering it trustworthy. Newspapers, while somewhat more trusted than online sources, still lag behind TV and radio. These findings

highlight the enduring value of traditional media as a credible information source during key events, such as elections, even as digital platforms grow in reach. However, the divergence in trust levels indicates a persistent challenge for online and social media platforms to establish credibility among UK audiences.

Figure 3: Proportion of respondents that agree with the description of different sources as trustworthy, accurate and useful



Source: UK General Election survey 2024 Q12/13. Generally speaking, how trustworthy or untrustworthy/accurate or inaccurate do you rate the following sources of information? Q14. And how useful do you find the following sources to find information about the General Election?

Source 5: UK General Election News & Consumption (2024)

5. The dynamics between media owners and journalists

The relationship between media owners and journalists carries significant weight in shaping the news that reaches the public. As the House of Lords (2007-08, p. 97) observes: “The owners of the media and the editors who work for them have immense power.” This power dynamic is particularly important because it not only enables owners to exert influence over editorial content but also fosters an environment where editors may feel pressured to align with the owners’ perspectives, even without direct interference. This dynamic can lead to subtle shifts in how news stories are selected, framed, and reported, with potentially profound implications for public opinion and political discourse.

In fact, the immense power held by media owners and their editors can lead to the promotion of specific agendas, subtly influencing the public's understanding of key issues. McChesney (2004, p. 60) argues that “journalism in concentrated media systems often prioritises corporate and elite interests over democratic needs.” This is particularly concerning in the context of political journalism, where biased or selective coverage can sway public opinion and even impact election outcomes. As echoed by Scholsberg (2017, p. 78), who also emphasises the role of selective decision-making in shaping news coverage: “[...] the exercise of voice - the critical dimension of media plurality concerns - consists not just in the expression of words and pictures of a given news story, but in the aggregation of stories and design of the news package, whether it be on paper, on air or on screen.”

The relationship and dynamics between media owners and journalists, therefore, has far-reaching consequences for both the diversity of viewpoints available to the public and the functioning of democracy itself.

McChesney’s observation (1999, p. 45) underscores the subtle, yet powerful, ways in which media ownership shapes journalistic content: “media owners do not need to directly tell journalists what to write; the structure of ownership and the pursuit of profit ensure that journalists know what is expected of them without explicit commands”; this reflects the broader systemic pressures that influence the media industry. This dynamic, McChesney suggests, creates an environment where journalists are acutely aware of the need to align their reporting

with the economic and political interests of the media owner, whether directly expressed or implied.

The “structure of ownership” refers to the hierarchical nature of media organisations, where editorial decisions are often made with profitability or ‘agenda’ in mind. Journalists working within these structures understand that stories that attract higher engagement - whether through sensationalism, controversy, or political alignment - are more likely to be supported by management, as they generate advertising revenue and audience engagement. This pressure to conform is not overt but manifests through self-censorship, story selection, and framing choices. Hesmondhalgh (2007, p. 167) similarly argues that ownership structures create an implicit expectation that journalists will naturally produce content aligned with the owner’s interests, thereby eliminating the need for direct editorial interference.

Schudson (2003, p. 166) notes that editors and journalists are aware of the political and economic priorities of their employers, leading to a subtle yet pervasive alignment of journalistic output with ownership interests. In other words, also for Schudson, as with many of the cited authors above, journalists will inevitably flex towards owners.

As most of the literature suggests, ensuring a balance between media independence and ownership is essential to maintaining a healthy democratic society, as unchecked owner influence can distort the public’s access to diverse and impartial information. The next logical steps, outside of the remit of this particular analysis, would be to focus more on the ‘how’, in consideration of the need to coexist in a democratic society that also values and needs freedom of speech and sufficient freedom in the markets, including media.

6. The role of media in society and political processes

Media serves a fundamental role in democratic societies, acting as a conduit for information, a forum for public discourse, and a mechanism for holding power to account. One of the primary functions of the media is to inform citizens, enabling them to make knowledgeable decisions about their lives and their governments. According to McQuail (2010, p. 283), the media functions as a “public watchdog,” monitoring the actions of government officials and institutions. This role is particularly crucial in democratic societies, where the media’s ability to inform and educate the public is directly tied to the quality of civic engagement and the functioning of democracy itself.

The media also plays a significant educational role, shaping public understanding of complex issues through analysis, commentary, and expert perspectives. By breaking down the complex political topics into more accessible formats, the media enables citizens to engage with policy debates and understand their implications, which is especially relevant during such important events as the General Election. Norris (2000, p. 121) emphasises that media coverage can stimulate “civic engagement,” helping citizens comprehend the stakes involved in political processes. Furthermore, media literacy initiatives often stem from the need to educate citizens on discerning credible information from misinformation, particularly in an age of proliferating digital media sources (Livingstone, 2004).

In addition to information and education, the media enhances public awareness, not only of political issues but also of social injustices and cultural debates. Agenda-setting theory, as articulated by McCombs and Shaw (2004), suggests that by choosing which topics to cover, the media shapes public priorities and concerns.

The media’s role in the political process is especially visible during elections, where it provides a platform for candidates and parties to communicate their policies and values. Political communication scholars such as Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 272) note that the media’s coverage of electoral campaigns influences voter perceptions and choices, making it a critical player in shaping election outcomes. The 2024 elections in the US were a prime example of this theory being put in action, as well as the relationship between politicians and the media owners “Donald Trump has called on Rupert Murdoch to stop Fox News from airing “negative

commercials” that might damage his re-election campaign, saying the conservative media billionaire should help deliver “victory” for him in November (Fedor, Nicolau, 2024).

The media’s investigative function serves as a counterbalance to government power, with investigative journalism uncovering corruption and holding officials accountable to the public. Waisbord (2000) argues that this ‘accountability journalism’ is essential for democracy, as it fosters transparency and builds public trust in political processes.

However, the role of media in society is not without challenges. In the digital age, the media faces pressures from economic models reliant on advertising revenue, leading to a focus on sensationalism and clickbait content (Fenton, 2010). These tendencies can detract from the media’s capacity to inform, educate, and promote awareness as coverage shifts toward generating high engagement rather than balanced information. Moreover, polarisation within media landscapes has created echo chambers, where audiences encounter views that reinforce rather than challenge their beliefs (Ulen, 2001).

The media plays a multifaceted role in society, functioning as an informant, educator, agenda-setter, and watchdog. Each of these roles supports democratic governance by equipping citizens with the knowledge necessary for active participation and by holding power accountable. However, as media organisations adapt to the digital landscape, the balance between public service and commercial interests becomes increasingly delicate, challenging the media’s ability to fulfil its democratic functions effectively.

6.1. Elections and public opinion

Election periods play a crucial role in shaping public opinion, and hence, public opinion significantly influences electoral outcomes. Scholars like Bennett and Iyengar (2008) highlight the relationship between public opinion and election campaigns, where media coverage amplifies specific political issues, shaping voter preferences. Elections are not only a time when citizens express their preferences but also a period during which public opinion is more actively shaped by campaigns, media, and political discourse. Public opinion acts as both a reflection of the electorate’s views and a tool used by politicians to frame their messaging, making it a key element in democratic processes.

According to McCombs (2004), during election campaigns, the media frequently shapes the issues that the public believes are most important by presenting them in a particular way over other topics or by focusing on them more often and loudly than others. This phenomenon, known as the agenda-setting theory (which will be discussed later in this paper), suggests that public opinion is versatile and greatly impacted by the importance that particular issues receive during election seasons: “As the saying goes, the media do not necessarily tell you what to think, but they tell you what to think about and how to think about it” (McChesney, 2004, p. 71).

The influence of the media on public opinion during elections cannot be understated. Strömbäck and Kaid (2008) argue that elections have increasingly become media-driven, with coverage focusing on ‘horse-race’ elements like polling numbers and candidate personalities, which can sway public opinion by focusing attention on certain aspects of the electoral process rather than substantive policy debates. This form of coverage, where the media portrays elections as a race between candidates, has significant implications for how the public forms its opinions. It can lead to a focus on the competitiveness of the race rather than the ideological or policy-based differences between candidates. As Wring and Ward (2019, p. 273) note, “the coverage of elections tends to focus heavily on the competitive aspects, often sidelining in-depth discussion of policies,” which may lead to a more superficial understanding of political issues among the electorate.

Public opinion during elections is also influenced by political communication strategies, particularly the use of targeted advertising and campaign messaging. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) explore the role of negative campaigning in shaping voter attitudes, arguing that negative messages are particularly effective at influencing public opinion by increasing voter cynicism towards opponents. Negative campaigns, often amplified by media coverage, can polarise voters and reinforce existing biases, contributing to a more divided electorate. This strategic manipulation of public opinion by political actors shows the power of messaging in shaping how the electorate views candidates and issues, especially in tightly contested elections.

Furthermore, political polls, a key component of election coverage, are instrumental in shaping public opinion. Gallup (1972) suggests that polling data can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy, where media coverage of polls affects voter perceptions of a candidate’s viability. When voters

perceive a candidate as leading or trailing based on poll results, this can influence their voting behaviour.

Polling often introduces a *bandwagon effect* (Nadeau, Cloutier, & Guay, 1993), where individuals support the candidate they believe is most likely to win, or an *underdog effect* (McAllister & Studlar, 1991), where they rally behind the perceived losing candidate. These dynamics show how the reporting of public opinion, through polls, becomes a driver of public sentiment itself, thus influencing the outcome of elections.

Therefore, elections and public opinion are deeply intertwined, with media coverage, political campaigns, and polling data all playing a role in shaping voter preferences. The media's ability to set the public agenda, the strategies used by political actors to influence voter behaviour, and the presentation of polling data all contribute to the shaping of public opinion in the lead-up to elections. As Bennett and Iyengar (2008, p. 725) note, "the media has become a central player in the construction of public opinion during elections," illustrating the profound impact that coverage and communication strategies have on the democratic process. This is particularly true in the UK, where the media serves as an anchor and a central forum for discussing politics, particularly during elections.

7. Agenda-setting theory

Agenda-setting theory, first developed by McCombs and Shaw in their work on the 1968 U.S. Presidential election, examines the media's role in shaping public priorities by determining what topics are salient as well as "test and support their ideas of media influence within the realm of political news" (Dainton, Zelley, 2019, p. 202). This theory posits that while the media may not dictate public opinion directly, it significantly influences the issues that the public considers important.

The theory has since been extended to consider two levels of agenda-setting, expanding the understanding of how media not only influences *what* issues people think about but also *how* they think about them.

- The theory's **first level (primary agenda-setting)** involves the volume and frequency of news being disseminated (whether positive or negative), focusing on the selection and prioritisation of topics or issues, thereby determining the issue agenda as well as increasing the perceived importance among the public. There are two criteria to measure the media's agenda: "length and position of a news story" (Dainton, Zelley, 2019, p. 203)
- The **second level of agenda-setting (or 'framing')** goes beyond issue prominence to examine specific attributes or qualities associated with those topics, hence influencing public perception on a deeper and more nuanced level, i.e., it influences the extent to which the agenda-setting function shapes public thought (Dainton, Zelley, 2019, p. 202). "News media gatekeepers - the handful of news editors who set the agenda - also select, emphasise, elaborate, and even exclude news stories or parts of news stories to create a certain effect for the audience" (Dainton, Zelley, 2019, p. 203).

Agenda-setting theory offers a valuable framework for understanding media influence on public perception and opinion formation. The theory's two levels demonstrate how media can shape not only what issues people consider important but also their nuanced perceptions of those issues.

In contexts like the UK, where media ownership is highly concentrated, this agenda-setting power becomes particularly significant. This paper will look at how both levels of agenda-setting

theory work in the context of political media coverage. It will do this by connecting theoretical ideas to the case of concentrated media ownership and how it affects political stories, using the *Daily Mail*'s editorial position on Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer in the lead-up to the 2024 election as an example.

7.1. First-level agenda-setting: frequency and volume of coverage

The first level of agenda-setting theory emphasises the process by which media outlets shape public awareness by choosing which issues to highlight or ignore. This concept stems from the idea that the media acts as a gatekeeper, selectively filtering information to set the agenda for public discourse (McQuail, 2010). McCombs and Shaw's (2004) study found a strong correlation between the topics voters perceived as important and those most frequently covered by the media, thus suggesting that media coverage patterns significantly influence issue salience.

In politically concentrated media environments, like that of the UK, where a few large entities control significant media shares, the agenda-setting process is influenced not only by journalistic choice but also by ownership interests (Curran & Seaton, 2018).

This prioritisation shapes public perception by directing attention toward specific narratives that reinforce the paper's ideological stance. During elections, as Wring and Ward (2019) note, the media's agenda-setting power becomes more pronounced, focusing public attention on the "horse race" dynamics of political candidates rather than substantive policy debates. Such selective coverage can therefore influence public understanding of what issues are "worthy" of consideration in political decision-making.

7.2. Second-level agenda-setting: framing

While the first level of agenda-setting theory addresses which topics are discussed, the second level delves into *how* these topics are portrayed. This level involves framing the attributes of issues or figures, shaping not only *what* the public thinks about but also *how* they think about it: "framing through the process of **selection, emphasis, elaboration, and exclusion**" (Dainton, Zelley, 2019, p. 203-204).

By shaping the way issues or politicians are portrayed, the media can implicitly guide public perceptions, making certain political candidates appear more credible or trustworthy than others.

7.3. The role of media ownership in agenda-setting

Ownership concentration in media profoundly impacts agenda-setting, particularly in environments where a limited number of powerful entities control large segments of media.

Bagdikian (2004) argues that when few owners dominate the media landscape, diversity in news coverage diminishes, as these owners can exercise significant editorial influence. This reality poses a democratic challenge as it allows media owners to shape public discourse by selectively setting both first- and second-level agendas.

For instance, the Rothermere family's ownership of the *Daily Mail* exemplifies how media ownership affects agenda-setting by aligning coverage with political ideologies that favour specific agendas. The *Daily Mail*'s editorial stance often aligns with the Conservative Party, systematically prioritising and framing issues to support right-leaning policies and candidates (Curran & Seaton, 2018).

By controlling the narrative and deciding which issues or candidates receive favourable or unfavourable coverage, media owners not only influence public opinion but can also potentially affect electoral outcomes.

7.4. Implications of agenda-setting on public discourse and democracy

The implications of agenda-setting are profound for public discourse and democracy.

In electoral contexts, this influence becomes critical as it affects voter perceptions of candidates and issues, potentially altering electoral outcomes. By repeatedly associating certain candidates with positive attributes and others with negative ones, the media can subtly guide public opinion in a way that serves ownership interests (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995). This phenomenon

underscores the power of agenda-setting in shaping not just public discourse but also the broader democratic process.

8. Media ownership and political coverage in the UK

Media ownership in the UK can significantly influence political coverage, considering a handful of major players control a substantial portion of the press. This concentration of ownership can shape the tone and focus of political reporting, impacting the diversity and impartiality of viewpoints presented to the public: “The fewer owners, the greater their potential political power. Newspapers have sought to influence politics since the immemorial, and that has not changed” (House of Lords, 2007-08, p. 60).

In March 2024, The Press Gazette collected data that explains the newspapers’ political leanings (Source 6), with the total circulation for left-leaning newspapers being 300,000, neutral 1,395,000, and right 2,100,000.

Publication	Jan 2024 circulation	Political leaning
Metro (free)	953,233	Neutral
Daily Mail	705,311	Right
The Sun	700,000	Right
Daily Mirror	240,799	Left
Evening Standard (free)	234,492	Right
The Times	180,000	Right
Daily Telegraph	190,000	Right
Daily Express	147,267	Right
Daily Star	131,640	Neutral
i	126,001	Neutral
FT	108,125	Neutral
City AM (free)	68,009	Neutral
The Guardian	60,000	Left

Source 6: Press Gazette (March, 2024)

The Leveson enquiry, a public investigation into the practices and ethics of the British press due to the News of the World phone-hacking scandal in 2012, has “revealed intensely intimate relations between media and political elites and the private exchanges and reassurances offered during key moments of media policymaking” (Scholsberg, 2017, p. 6-7). Moreover, this public

enquiry revealed that the upper levels of British politics and the press were intertwined, functioning both as a close-knit social group and a professional network; this highlighted the close relationships and influence shared between media executives and political leaders (Scholsberg, 2017, p. 12-13).

Compared to other Western media systems, the British press is noted for its strong political engagement, where editorial opinion often plays a prominent role in news reporting. Hinde (2017, p. 81) observes that opinion increasingly permeates reportage in the British press, diminishing the traditional separation between objective news coverage and editorial commentary.

In the UK, both government and opposition politicians prioritise maintaining favourable relations with the media, recognising the press as a vital tool for shaping public opinion. According to the House of Lords (2007-08, p. 60), politicians across the political spectrum work diligently to ensure positive media coverage, as they understand its significant influence on public perception and, by extension, their political fortunes. For some, this could be seen as a positive and a way to keep politicians in check. After all, they could face scrutiny from the media. This symbiotic relationship between politicians and the media, however, raises concerns about the balance of power:

“If a politician is that concerned about media coverage, then it makes sense that they will want to have good relationships with powerful media owners. Should the relationship turn symbiotic in a way that the media will also want to conserve more than good relations with politics or specific politicians, then the scrutiny aspect disappears. This illustrates a potential conflict of interests” (House of Lords, 2007-08, p. 73).

If politicians rely on their reputation and image to become reelected, and the media has a say over that image, it is unavoidable to expect politicians to seek to cultivate strong relationships with influential media owners, which can eventually lead to potential conflicts of interest.

One prominent example is the relationship between former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair and Rupert Murdoch, the owner of *The Sun* and *The Times*. During Blair’s time as leader of the Labour Party, he made efforts to win Murdoch’s support, which many believe helped him secure

the backing of *The Sun* in the 1997 general election: “[Blair’s] courting of Rupert Murdoch’s support was one of the most cynical deals in modern British political history” (Jones, 2014, p. 146). This relationship itself was often scrutinised, particularly as Murdoch’s media outlets had significant influence over public opinion. Many critics raised concerns about whether this relationship led to undue media influence over government decisions and policy-making during Blair’s tenure (Jones, 2014; Freedman, 2014).

Another example is the close connection between former Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and Rebekah Brooks, former editor of *The Sun* and CEO of News International. Cameron faced significant public scrutiny over his friendship with Brooks, particularly during the phone-hacking scandal in 2011. The scandal, which revealed unethical practices within Murdoch’s media empire, led to questions about how much influence Brooks’ and Murdoch’s media outlets may have had over political decisions under Cameron’s leadership: “Cameron’s frequent meetings with Brooks while she was CEO of News International coincided with *The Sun*’s continued support for his policies, underscoring how political leaders cultivate media relationships to secure positive coverage” (Davies, 2014, p. 89).

As the House of Lords (2007-08, pp. 61, 73) suggests, politicians may feel pressured to align their policies with media interests in exchange for favourable coverage, highlighting the risk of undue influence over government policy when media ownership becomes too concentrated. In other words, in cases in which the media becomes a monopoly or oligopoly, its ownership may obtain the ability to exert political power indirectly through its power relationship with politicians.

There is genuine concern about the possible influence that media ownership could have on the results of journalistic work in the UK. The Labour and Conservative governments have voiced similar concerns about media plurality despite having different ideologies: “This unanimity of principle is agreed across the political spectrum in almost every democratic country and contains within it an important economic truth which is rarely made explicit: that the mechanisms of the market-place on their own cannot be trusted because, in a world of privately owned media, owners influence content” (Barnett, 2004, p. 13). In other words, it is suggested that the dynamics of democracy and free markets may need balancing, as entirely unregulated markets

may lead to the erosion of democracy and a departure from the very same principles that are responsible for free markets themselves.

Senior politicians view the press as a critical tool for shaping public opinion, and they invest considerable effort in securing positive media coverage, particularly during election periods when the stakes are highest. Traditionally, campaign news is dominated by coverage of the ‘electoral process,’ focusing on the competitive aspects of elections. This includes the analysis of voter demographics, party strategies, candidate personalities, and polling data - often referred to as the ‘horse race’ elements of election reporting (Wring & Ward, 2019, p. 273). As noted in the House of Lords report (2007-08, p. 60), politicians recognise the media's power to shape voter perceptions and influence political discourse. Securing favourable press coverage becomes especially critical in the lead-up to general elections, where public perception can have a direct impact on electoral outcomes. In these high-stakes periods, political leaders often seek to cultivate beneficial relationships with media owners and editors, hoping the media will portray them positively or align coverage with their key messaging. As the House of Lords report (2007-08, p. 61) unsurprisingly states: “All senior politicians, in both the Government and opposition, have an interest in having good relations with the media.”

8.1. Interrelationship of media ownership and political power

In environments of concentrated media ownership, such as the UK and in the case of the *Daily Mail*, this agenda-setting power becomes amplified, as editorial decisions can often be shaped by the ideological and/or economic interests of media owners. This dynamic raises critical questions about the interplay between media ownership and political power, especially during the election season, when public opinion is at its highest and most vulnerable to shifting loyalties.

Building on the theoretical foundation, the next section will explore the correlation between media ownership and political framing by examining the *Daily Mail*'s coverage of the General Election in the UK. By analysing both levels of agenda-setting (the sheer volume and frequency of news articles as well as the framing of political figures and the issues surrounding them), this research aims to uncover the extent to which media ownership influences the portrayal of political narratives. It will specifically investigate whether the *Daily Mail*'s editorial stance

aligns with ownership interests historically linked to the Conservative Party and how this alignment shapes public perceptions of the Labour and Conservative Party leadership.

This approach will help not only to comprehend how the media sets agendas in the context of concentrated ownership, but it also aims to evaluate the wider effects of this symbiotic connection on democracy and public discourse. The research results are meant to connect theoretical ideas with real-world examples, giving a full picture of how political power and media ownership affect election stories.

8.2. Media ownership overview: the *Daily Mail*

The *Daily Mail* was first published on May 4, 1896, by Alfred Harmsworth (later known as Lord Northcliffe) and his brother Harold Harmsworth, who later became Viscount Rothermere. Alfred Harmsworth founded the paper as a “new journalism” experiment, seeking to blend sensational stories with a middle-class appeal: “[...] the complexities of politics or diplomacy were passed over in favour of intriguing material from everyday life” (Bingham, 2004, p. 26). The Harmsworth brothers’ intent was to create a paper that combined investigative reporting with lighter content, a model that was both commercially successful and influential in shaping the future of British tabloid journalism (Conboy, 2017).

From its inception, the *Daily Mail* was notable for its innovative approach to media ownership and editorial control. Lord Northcliffe was deeply involved in the editorial direction of the paper, creating a model where the owner exerted significant influence over the content. As Bingham (2004, p. 3) points out, Northcliffe was among the earliest media moguls to recognise how influential the press could be in moulding public opinion, setting the tone for future media owners who would also blur the lines between business interests and editorial integrity: “[...] the leading newspaper proprietors, so called ‘press barons’, such as Lord Northcliffe, and Beaverbrook, had higher profile than ever before or since, and unashamedly involved themselves in political intrigue.” Under Northcliffe’s leadership, the *Daily Mail* became a platform that openly promoted imperialism, militarism, and conservative values, which would remain hallmarks of its editorial stance in the years to come.

By the early 20th century, Alfred Harmsworth had expanded his media empire, acquiring control of *The Times* in 1908. His dominance in British media led to him being described as the “greatest figure who ever strode down Fleet Street” by Lord Beaverbrook (Bingham, 2004, p. 22). His death in 1922 marked a significant shift in the *Daily Mail*’s ownership structure, as his brother Harold Harmsworth (Viscount Rothermere) took over. Rothermere maintained many of the paper’s core values, although his personal politics sometimes led to more controversial editorial stances. During the 1930s, for instance, Rothermere’s ‘flirtation’ with fascism became a contentious part of the *Daily Mail*’s history: “The 1930s saw the Mail engaged in its most notorious political intervention. Harold Harmsworth, by then Viscount Rothermere, had met and admired both Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini and encouraged positive depictions of their regimes in the Mail and the Daily Mirror, of which he was a major shareholder” (The Week, 2017). He openly supported Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists and published articles praising Mussolini and Hitler, which led to a significant outcry (Curran & Seaton, 2018).

Despite these controversies, the Harmsworth family retained control of the paper, and after Harold Harmsworth’s death in 1940, his descendants continued to manage the paper through the *Daily Mail* and General Trust (DMGT), a holding company established in 1932. DMGT would eventually become one of the largest media conglomerates in Britain, expanding beyond print journalism to invest in online media, events, and data analytics. The fourth Viscount Rothermere, Jonathan Harmsworth, currently oversees DMGT, maintaining the family’s involvement in the business.

The *Daily Mail* has also long been associated with conservative political values, both in its editorial stance and in its coverage of British politics. Since its founding in 1896, the newspaper has supported right-leaning political causes, often aligning with the Conservative Party in its editorials and news coverage. Under the ownership of the Rothermere family, the paper has consistently championed conservative ideologies, including a strong focus on nationalism, law and order, and economic policies that favour free markets. The paper’s conservative stance is further reinforced by its focus on traditional family values and its opposition to what it sees as excessive government intervention, particularly in the areas of welfare and immigration policy (Curran & Seaton, 2003).

Historically, the *Daily Mail* has been a staunch supporter of the Conservative Party during general elections, too: “Downing Street quickly realised the importance of keeping the newly resurgent Mail on its side. A recently released tranche of files from Thatcher’s premiership show that the PM’s press secretary cautioned her to “look after the *Daily Mail*” in the run-up to the 1987 general election” (The Week, 2017). The paper played a significant role in promoting Margaret Thatcher’s leadership in the 1980s, highlighting her economic reforms and strong stance on foreign policy. Throughout the Thatcher years, the paper praised her approach to reducing the power of the unions and pushing for deregulation of the economy. According to Bingham (2010), the *Daily Mail*’s endorsement of Thatcher’s policies helped solidify its reputation as a bastion of conservative values, reinforcing its influence over middle-class voters.

To understand the extent of editorial bias of the *Daily Mail*, it is worth mentioning Paul Dacre, the longest-serving editor of the *Daily Mail*. Dacre held the position from 1992 to 2018 (retiring at the age of 80), shaping the paper’s tone and editorial stance during a period of significant political and cultural change in the UK. Under his leadership, the *Daily Mail* solidified its reputation as a staunchly conservative publication, often accused of sensationalism and fostering divisive narratives. Dacre’s tenure was characterised by controversial headlines and campaigns, including the paper’s support for Brexit and its attacks on judges, famously labelling them as “Enemies of the People” after a Brexit-related High Court ruling (Thomas, 2024). Scandals surrounding Dacre’s editorship also include accusations of ethical lapses. For example, the *Daily Mail*’s involvement in stories connected to the phone-hacking scandal that shook British journalism, although the paper itself denied direct involvement. Moreover, Dacre’s fierce editorial line often crossed into contentious territory, such as his relentless campaign against former Labour leader Ed Miliband. The campaign included a highly controversial article about Miliband’s late father, labelling him “The Man Who Hated Britain” (Wright, Burrell, 2023). Dacre’s critics argued that he prioritised ideological loyalty over balanced reporting.

In more recent political reporting and coverage, during the Brexit referendum, the *Daily Mail* was one of the most vocal proponents of the Leave campaign. It published numerous articles critical of the European Union and celebrated prominent Conservative figures like Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, who were key proponents of Brexit. This editorial support for Brexit aligns

with the paper's long-standing Euroskepticism, which has been a defining feature of its political coverage for decades (Freedman, 2014).

In its coverage of contemporary political figures, the *Daily Mail* has often been critical of left-leaning leaders, particularly those from the Labour Party, while offering more favourable coverage of Conservative politicians. For example, during Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, the paper frequently criticised his policies, describing them as "hard-left" and out of touch with mainstream British values. By contrast, it has generally offered more positive coverage of Conservative leaders like Rishi Sunak, particularly when aligned with its editorial positions on economic policy and immigration reform.

The *Daily Mail Online* (the *MailOnline*) has become one of the most visited news websites globally, known for its mix of celebrity gossip, sensationalist stories, and political commentary. According to Freedman (2014), the *Daily Mail* has demonstrated remarkable adaptability in transitioning to the digital era while preserving its core editorial principles, showcasing the enduring strength of its brand amidst a rapidly evolving media environment.

According to Tobitt (2024) of the *Press Gazette*, as of November 2024, "The *Daily Mail*, *Mail on Sunday* and *Mail Online* had an estimated monthly reach of 27.3 million (or 50.4% of the adult population)," as well as the *Daily Mail* having the highest monthly digital audience in both May and June 2024.

However, the site has also attracted criticism for its focus on clickbait content, often at the expense of in-depth journalism. The digital transformation allowed DMGT to maintain profitability in an era when many traditional print outlets were struggling.

Despite the growing prominence of *MailOnline*, the *Daily Mail*'s print edition remains a significant player in British media. Under Jonathan Harmsworth's leadership, the paper has continued its long-standing editorial stance that leans towards conservative politics, often critiquing left-leaning figures and supporting right-wing causes. During the Brexit referendum, for example, the *Daily Mail* was a staunch supporter of the Leave campaign, publishing numerous articles endorsing the movement.

One of the key aspects of DMGT's ownership model is the level of control the Rothermere family has maintained; DMGT remains firmly in family hands. In 2021, the Rothermere family fully bought out the remaining shareholders, taking the company private (Turvil, 2021). This move allowed the family to consolidate control over the company, avoiding the pressures and scrutiny associated with being a publicly listed entity (Freedman, 2014).

This high level of family control has led to ongoing concerns about the concentration of media ownership in the UK. Scholars such as Curran and Seaton (2018) have argued that concentrated media ownership can limit the diversity of viewpoints in public discourse. The *Daily Mail's* significant reach, both in print (average daily circulation of approximately 667,662 copies; ABC, 2024) and online (24.7 million monthly unique visitors as of March 2024; Fisherman, 2024), means that its owners have a substantial influence over the framing of news and political coverage in the UK.

According to the House of Lords report (2007-08, p. 35), the current owner of the *Daily Mail* "Lord Rothermere and the DMGT Board believe in giving their editors 'a lot of discretion, particularly in the editorial area' but nevertheless a considerable amount of power still rests with one man whom the Chairman of DMGT appoints."

The history of the *Daily Mail* reflects the complex relationship between media ownership, editorial control, and public discourse. From its origins under Lord Northcliffe to its current ownership by Jonathan Harmsworth, the paper has remained a powerful force in British media, both shaping and reflecting conservative politics. As DMGT continues to navigate the challenges of modern media, the influence of the Rothermere family on the paper's editorial direction remains strong, raising important questions about the impact of concentrated media ownership on journalism and democracy in the UK.

The case of the *Daily Mail* underscores the importance of scrutinising concentrated media ownership's impact on democratic discourse, as selective agenda-setting can reinforce political biases and limit public access to diverse perspectives. Agenda-setting theory, therefore, highlights a critical intersection between media, public opinion, and democracy, illustrating the implications of media ownership on political discourse.

9. Methodology

9.1. Research context

The aim of this paper is to investigate the intersection between media ownership and political coverage by examining the *Daily Mail*'s (online) coverage of two key political figures in the UK: the Leader of the Conservative Party and then Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, and the Leader of the Labour Party and the opposition, Keir Starmer, in the lead-up to the 2024 General Election, which was held on 4th July 2024.

The period analysed, 4 June to 3 July 2024, one month before the election, captures the heightened media coverage typically observed in election cycles. The *Daily Mail*, known for its conservative-leaning editorial stance and owned by DMG Media under Jonathan Harmsworth, provides an illustrative case study for analysing potential media bias due to its established alignment with supporting the Conservative party.

9.2. Problem statement

The influence of media ownership on political coverage remains a critical area of concern in media and communication studies, given its implications and potential influence on public opinion, voter perception, and the overall integrity of democratic processes.

With the *Daily Mail*'s established history of support for the Conservative Party, it is essential to explore whether its ownership biases contribute to differential treatment of political figures during election cycles.

This research examines whether the newspaper's conservative ownership and editorial stance result in a more favourable portrayal of the Conservative Leader and then Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, compared to the Labour Leader, Keir Starmer, thereby reflecting a skew in political reporting.

9.3. Aims and objectives

The objectives of these research are:

- Analyse the portrayal of Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer in the *Daily Mail*'s headlines leading up to the 2024 General Election campaign.
- Apply the agenda-setting theory and investigate the influence of media ownership and editorial alignment on the frequency, sentiment, and framing of articles about these political leaders.
- Contribute to the broader discourse on media bias by identifying coverage patterns and topics within a major UK newspaper known for its conservative ownership and editorial stance.

9.4. Research questions

This research explores how the *Daily Mail*'s portrayal of Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer may reflect broader patterns of media bias that emerge under specific ownership and editorial stances.

To guide this investigation, the research asks:

1. Does the *Daily Mail*'s conservative ownership result in more positive coverage of Rishi Sunak compared to Keir Starmer?
2. What patterns emerge in headlines' frequency, sentiment, framing, and topics discussed regarding these political figures in the *Daily Mail*?
3. How does the nature of the article (commentary, feature, interview, news, newswire, opinion) influence the portrayal of Sunak and Starmer?

9.5. Research method

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the intersection of media ownership and political coverage.

The quantitative analysis focuses on:

- Frequency of headlines per politician (overall and on a daily basis between 4 June and 3 July 2024);
- Sentiment analysis (negative, positive, neutral);
- Article types (commentary, feature, interview, news, newswire, and opinion).

These quantitative elements provide an empirical overview of coverage patterns, offering a solid foundation for further qualitative exploration.

Articles were selected based on the timeframe specified and focusing on the headlines, which contained the terms “Rishi Sunak,” “Sunak,” “Rishi,” “Keir Starmer,” “Keir,” “Starmer” and/or mentioning both politicians, while omitting terms like “Labour,” “Conservative,” or “Tory/Tories.”

Qualitative analysis conducted an interpretative content analysis to explore how specific political issues were framed in the *Daily Mail*’s coverage of Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer.

This method allowed for an in-depth examination of the language, sentiment, narratives, and topics, uncovering underlying themes and biases in reporting.

By integrating interpretative content analysis with an awareness of the wider political landscape, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how media narratives align with or diverge from prevailing political dynamics and public sentiment.

Both the quantitative and qualitative analyses in this research were conducted manually. The quantitative analysis involved meticulously sifting through the *Daily Mail* archives, selecting articles based on specific criteria, and categorising them into an Excel database, which was later further categorised into:

- Total number of articles
- Total number of articles per Sunak, Starmer, Sunak and Starmer,
- The number of daily articles per Sunak, Starmer, and Sunak and Starmer
- Total number of articles with the negative/positive/neutral sentiments per politician and both
- Total number of articles per article type (identified as commentary, feature, interview, news, newswire, and opinion)

Similarly, the qualitative analysis was performed manually to ensure that the sentiment of each headline was thoroughly assessed, allowing for a nuanced and accurate interpretation of the tone and framing.

The analysis also considered broader political trends and the overarching political context, including public discourse surrounding the 2024 General Election.

9.6. Research design

1. Data collection:

- News sampling: Articles were retrieved from the *Daily Mail*'s online archives (https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/sitemaparchive/month_202406.html) for the period 4 June to 3 July 2024 (inclusive). Only online platform articles were analysed to maintain consistency, with no reliance on print editions.
- Content analysis: the following attributes were coded for each article:
 - Date: the publication date of the article;
 - Article type: categorisation into formats such as commentary, feature, interview, news, newswire, and opinion. This distinction is crucial, as different article types may present differing levels of objectivity. For example, opinion pieces might reflect the editorial stance of the newspaper, while news reports are expected to maintain a more neutral tone and newswires usually have no editorial control and edits;
 - Categorising these will enable a deeper understanding of where potential bias might arise;
 - Headline: mentioning "Rishi Sunak," "Sunak," "Rishi," "Keir Starmer," "Keir," "Starmer" and/or mentioning both politicians in the headlines, while omitting terms like "Labour," "Conservative," or "Tory/Tories";
 - Manual sentiment analysis: evaluated for positive, neutral, or negative sentiment toward the political figures;
 - Sentiment analysis exclusion: the sentiment analysis was excluded for headlines that mentioned both politicians, as such cases could lead to dual interpretations. For example, a headline might reference both Rishi Sunak

and Keir Starmer but exhibit positive sentiment toward Sunak while being negative toward Starmer, making it challenging to assign a singular sentiment score;

- Case study: overview of the political figures.

Rishi Sunak, Conservative Party Leader, Prime Minister (2022-2024)

Rishi Sunak, leader of the Conservative Party and (a now former) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (2022-2024), has focused his rhetoric on economic recovery and fiscal conservatism. Sunak's policies typically advocated low taxes, economic growth, and free market principles.

His leadership has been marked by efforts to stabilise the economy in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Casalicchio, 2021) and post-Brexit challenges, while he still was the Chancellor of the UK.

As the leader of the governing party up until 4 July 2024, Sunak was expected to receive extensive media coverage during the General Election campaign, particularly from pro-Conservative publications, including the *Daily Mail*.

It is worth noting that the General Election, while widely anticipated, was still called somewhat unexpectedly. In the UK, the timing of a general election is at the discretion of the Prime Minister, who can request the dissolution of Parliament to trigger an election. In this case, while speculation about an election had been building considering the state of the Conservative Party and the Prime Ministers that have been appointed by the party (after Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, and Rishi Sunak followed) rather than elected by the public, the formal announcement came sooner than many observers expected.

The Conservative Party has been in power for the last 14 years (since 2010), during which time it has faced numerous scandals involving its leaders and key politicians, including Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, and Rishi Sunak. Notably, both Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak did not win a general election but were selected internally by the party to succeed their predecessors following leadership contests. While this is legal and legitimate within parliamentary democracies, it adds to the perception of the Conservative Party as struggling.

Keir Starmer, Labour Party Leader, Leader of the opposition

Keir Starmer, leader of the Labour Party since 2020 (Mason, R., 2020), served as the primary political opposition to Rishi Sunak during the 2024 General Election and was widely regarded as a strong contender for the position of Prime Minister.

Starmer's leadership has aimed to reposition the Labour Party as a credible governing alternative, focusing on public services, workers' rights, and social justice. He has sought to distance Labour from the far-left policies of his predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn (Batrouni, 2021), and re-centre the party's platform.

Starmer's policy proposals for the 2024 election were expected to focus on rebuilding public services, addressing economic inequality, and restoring trust in public institutions. However, most commentators have also highlighted that Starmer did not reveal much about his plans and was speculating based on how unpopular the Conservative Party was at a time (Shrimpsley, 2024).

10. Methodology challenges and limitations

This study is not without its challenges and limitations, which were identified as follows:

1. **Headline only analysis:** This study analysed headlines only, not full articles, and it might be argued that some context might have been missed
2. **Time constraints:** The study covers a one-month period leading up to the election, which may not capture longer-term trends in the *Daily Mail's* portrayal of the chosen political leaders. While this timeframe is relevant for capturing key election-related coverage and it can be argued that the coverage intensifies nearer the elections, it may miss subtler, longer-term shifts in media bias.
3. **Media ownership and framing:** While the *Daily Mail* is known to be more conservative-leading, this study does not investigate other media outlets, which could provide a broader understanding of media portrayal of Sunak and Starmer across the UK press.
4. **Manual sentiment analysis:** Despite efforts to maintain objectivity, manual analysis can be influenced by the researcher's biases or preconceived notions, which may affect the consistency of sentiment classification.
5. **Then Prime Minister's prominence:** It might be argued that the study is also limited by the potential that Rishi Sunak, who was the acting Prime Minister at the time, was featured more than other candidates due to his political status. This could have affected the balance of media attention and skewed the portrayal of the political landscape.
6. **Public sentiment toward the Conservative Party:** Public fatigue with the Conservative Party, after being 14 years in power, which was followed by numerous scandals (including 'Partygate' and Boris Johnson; BBC 2022; Liz Truss being in power for 49 days, Warerson, 2022), may have influenced both media coverage and audience reception during the election. This general desire for political change, regardless of specific policies or candidates, could have affected how the media framed stories and the prominence given to opposition leaders like Keir Starmer.

11. Research ethics

This research adheres to ethical guidelines by ensuring objectivity and transparency in the analysis. The analysis will utilise publicly available articles from the Daily Mail, guaranteeing the absence of any private or sensitive information.

Additionally, the data collection process will respect the intellectual property rights of the *Daily Mail* by using its archive for research purposes without reproducing full articles and providing links to access each article.

Moreover, the research will remain objective and transparent in its methodology, clearly outlining potential biases and limitations. The selection of articles and the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods will help ensure that the research maintains a fair and balanced approach. Additionally, all data analysis will be conducted with integrity, avoiding any manipulation of results to fit preconceived hypotheses.

Finally, the research will maintain academic integrity by citing all sources appropriately and ensuring that the results are presented honestly.

By addressing these ethical considerations, the research aims to provide a balanced and thorough analysis of how media ownership may influence political coverage, particularly during the important period of a general election.

The case of the *Daily Mail* underscores the importance of scrutinising concentrated media ownership's impact on democratic discourse, as selective agenda-setting can reinforce political biases and limit public access to diverse perspectives. Agenda-setting theory, therefore, highlights a critical intersection between media, public opinion, and democracy, illustrating the implications of media ownership on political discourse.

12. Research findings

12.1. Overview of the data and findings

This section will provide an overview of the main trends and patterns identified before delving into the detailed analysis of the data collected and interpreted. This will establish the foundation for a deeper examination of how media ownership can influence the framing of politics.

Patterns that show possible media bias impacted by ownership and party affiliation are revealed via an examination of 757 headlines published by the *Daily Mail* between June 4 and July 3, 2024, the pre-election period. Given the *Daily Mail*'s longstanding support for the Conservative party and its current ownership by DMG Media, this affiliation offers a valuable and insightful context for examining how ownership influences the framing of political events such as the General Election, as well as the portrayal of political candidates and their issues.

A closer examination of the collected data reveals minor but noticeable differences in the treatment and sentiment surrounding the political candidates. The article headlines count for Keir Starmer, the leader of the Labour Party, was 282 times, while Rishi Sunak, the then-sitting Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party, received 330 mentions. This discrepancy, even though subtle, may be a reflection of Sunak's prominence as the then-leader, but it also begs the question of whether editorial choices intentionally bias coverage in favour of one candidate over another.

Following the quantitative examination of both party leaders' frequency mentions in the online version of the *Daily Mail*, more thorough qualitative assessments were conducted, including the manual sentiment of headlines framing both leaders.

A sentiment analysis of the headlines revealed that while negative coverage is present for both leaders, Sunak receives slightly fewer negative mentions (82) compared to Starmer (95). This marginal difference, paired with Sunak's 11 positive mentions (in contrast to Starmer's absence of any explicitly positive mentions in the headlines), suggests a possible editorial bias that aligns with the paper's ownership and political affiliation.

In addition to sentiment, the type of articles and language employed offered critical insights. For instance, Sunak appears more frequently in newswire articles (169, compared to Starmer's 98), which are often minimally (or never) edited reproductions of press releases often shared by the party's public relations and communications team, who, naturally, would desire to receive positive coverage. This may point to an indirect amplification of Conservative Party messaging, facilitated by the publication's editorial processes. On the other hand, Starmer is featured more in opinion pieces, though these were authored predominantly by Conservative-affiliated figures and had a negative connotation, such as the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the Conservative candidate Rishi Sunak himself.

Further research also examined the sources of the information provided, such as identifying whether content originated from newswire agencies (e.g., PA Media, Reuters) or whether articles were authored by journalists (including their titles, such as Political Editor, Home Affairs Correspondent, and others). However, the broader analysis and interpretation omitted these findings (though they can be found in raw data files) due to scope limitations and a focus on headline-level framing.

This research will further discuss these patterns, which extend beyond quantitative discrepancies to qualitative aspects like headline language and article topics. Sensationalist and aggressive phrases, like "grilling" and "locked horns," dominated the coverage, framing political discourse in dramatic terms, which are often associated with the language used across the *Daily Mail*.

12.2. Media ownership and bias

A total of 757 headlines (Table 1) in the *Daily Mail* (from the online archives) were examined over the period between 4 June and 3 July 2024.

The *Daily Mail*, owned by DMG Media under Jonathan Harmsworth, the 4th Viscount Rothermere, has a long-standing reputation for supporting the Conservative Party. This ownership alignment suggests a strong potential for editorial bias in its reporting, particularly during election periods when public opinion is more malleable.

The data reveals that Rishi Sunak, the Conservative Party Leader, was mentioned more frequently (330 times) than the opposition leader Keir Starmer (282 times) during the sample period (Table 1). While this disparity in mentions may suggest preferential coverage, it is also important to consider that Sunak, as the sitting Prime Minister, would naturally attract greater media attention due to his central role in the government.

Mention	Counts of mentions
Sunak and Starmer (in the same headline)	145
Rishi Sunak or Rishi or Sunak	330
Keir Starmer or Keir or Starmer	282
TOTAL	757

Table 1: the total counts of mentions in the Daily Mail, 4 June-3 July

Additionally, the difference in mentions is not overwhelmingly significant, which may indicate that the *Daily Mail* aimed to maintain some balance, at least in terms of the volume of coverage of individual candidates in its pre-election coverage.

12.3. Agenda-setting level 1 and frequency of mentions

The data presented below (Table 2) outlines the frequency of mentions of political figures “Keir Starmer/Keir/Starmer” and “Rishi Sunak/Rishi/Sunak” as well as their combined mentions (“Sunak and Starmer”) in the *Daily Mail* headlines one month before the general election in June and early July 2024.

DATE	Starmer	Sunak	Sunak + Starmer	Grand Total
4.06.2024	3	1	12	16
5.06.2024	7	8	11	26
6.06.2024	9	6	2	17
7.06.2024	4	27	6	37
8.06.2024	0	21	0	21
9.06.2024	4	8	0	12
10.06.2024	7	20	0	27
11.06.2024	5	21	8	34
12.06.2024	6	21	14	41
13.06.2024	14	10	9	33
14.06.2024	12	16	0	28
15.06.2024	8	6	1	15
16.06.2024	8	6	2	16
17.06.2024	8	14	3	25
18.06.2024	14	11	4	29
19.06.2024	17	11	4	32
20.06.2024	6	19	3	28
21.06.2024	15	10	3	28
22.06.2024	12	3	8	23
23.06.2024	8	2	4	14
24.06.2024	7	13	3	23
25.06.2024	18	12	4	34
26.06.2024	7	6	17	30
27.06.2024	15	6	6	27
28.06.2024	11	15	3	29
29.06.2024	11	3	3	17
30.06.2024	5	7	2	14
1.07.2024	10	9	3	22
2.07.2024	16	10	3	29
3.07.2024	15	8	7	30
Grand Total	282	330	145	757

Table 2: counts of daily mentions in the Daily Mail, 4 June-3 July

After analysis of the data, we may observe the following key observations:

12.4. Overarching coverage trends

Both Sunak and Starmer received consistent attention, though Sunak's mentions are slightly higher overall. The differences in daily mentions are noticeable but not overwhelmingly large, suggesting that both leaders were prominent in the media discourse during this critical period.

For instance, Sunak peaks on June 7 with 27 mentions, while Starmer's highest count, 17 mentions, occurs on June 19 (Table 2). While the overall trend shows Sunak leading in mentions, the gap between the two varies across the dataset.

Combined mentions

Headlines mentioning both leaders, represented in the "Sunak and Starmer" column, show a steadier trend with occasional increases, such as on June 26 (17 mentions). These combined mentions suggest moments when the media may have directly compared or analysed both figures, reflecting the competitive dynamic of the election campaign.

Implications for agenda-setting's primary level:

The data analysed demonstrates how the *Daily Mail* highlighted the election campaign, with both Sunak and Starmer receiving consistent media attention. While Sunak's mentions are generally higher, the difference is not exceptionally large, indicating that both leaders were featured prominently in the media narrative. The combined mentions suggest moments of comparison or engagement between the two leaders, which may have shaped public perceptions of the election as a competitive process.

"Framing" of the headlines: manual sentiment analysis

Out of the 757 headlines, 145 mentioned both Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer (Table 1). These were excluded from the sentiment analysis due to the potential for dual interpretations. For instance, a headline might simultaneously cast a positive light on Sunak while framing Starmer negatively, or vice versa. Such dual meanings make it difficult to assign a singular sentiment score without risking oversimplification or misinterpretation. By excluding these cases, the

analysis ensures greater accuracy and clarity in assessing the sentiment directed toward each political figure individually.

The sentiment analysis reveals stark contrasts in the tone of coverage for the two leaders. Of the 610 articles where sentiment could be assessed, Sunak received fewer negative mentions (82) compared to Starmer (95); see below in Table 3. However, it is important to note that while negative mentions were present, they were not particularly significant in number, suggesting that, on the whole, the coverage leaned more towards neutral reporting rather than being overtly critical of either political figure.

Both leaders saw overwhelmingly neutral coverage (Sunak: 236, Starmer: 186). Notably, Sunak garnered 11 positive mentions, whereas Starmer received none.

Mention	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Grand total
Rishi Sunak / Rishi / Sunak	82	11	186	330
Keir Starmer / Keir / Starmer	95	0	236	282
TOTAL	177	11	422	610

Table 3: manual sentiment analysis

Article types

The data obtained and analysed below provides a breakdown of mentions for “Keir Starmer/Keir/Starmer” and “Rishi Sunak/Rishi/Sunak,” as well as their combined mentions (“Sunak and Starmer”) across various types of articles in the *Daily Mail* (see Table 4).

These were categorised into formats such as:

- Commentary
- Feature
- Interview

- News
- Newswire
- Opinion

This type of categorisation allows for a more nuanced understanding of how these political figures were framed and featured in the media during the election campaign period.

Mention	Commentary	Feature	Interview	News	Newswire	Opinion
Keir Starmer/Keir/ Starmer	5	2	2	139	98	36
Rishi Sunak/Rishi/ Sunak	3	0	0	141	169	17
Sunak and Starmer	1	1	0	97	37	9
Grand total	9	3	2	377	304	62

Table 4: article types

After analysing the data, here are the key observations:

12.5. Overall mentions

Sunak received the highest total mentions (330), followed by Starmer (282) and combined mentions (145). The distribution suggests that both leaders were prominently featured, but Sunak's slightly higher count may reflect a marginally greater focus on his role or actions during

this period. The overall totals are comparable, indicating that the *Daily Mail* ensured coverage for both candidates.

Distribution across article types:

- **News:** The majority of mentions appear in news articles (Sunak: 141, Starmer: 139, Combined: 97), highlighting the *Daily Mail*'s focus on reporting factual campaign developments, policies and events. This consistency across candidates suggests a balanced focus on straightforward news reporting.
- **News wires:** Mentions are also significant in newswire content (Sunak: 169, Starmer: 98). This difference could reflect a greater volume of Sunak-related press releases or syndicated content reaching the *Daily Mail*. The newswires included PA Media, Reuters, and Associated Press. It is worth noting that newswires typically consist of press releases or syndicated content provided by political parties, organisations, or public relations agencies. These articles are often reproduced with minimal or no editorial changes, meaning they can reflect the messaging priorities of the originating parties rather than independent journalistic analysis.
- **Opinion and commentary:** Starmer appears more frequently in opinion pieces (36 mentions compared to Sunak's 17), with the likes of politicians such as the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, former Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, as well as Rishi Sunak himself, having space to share opinion pieces in the *Daily Mail*. It is worth noting that all of the opinions were provided by the members of the Conservative Party, which can result in a more biased tone and content. This data also suggests that Starmer sees a slightly higher presence in commentaries (Sunak: 3, Starmer: 5). This variation might indicate different editorial strategies for analysing and critiquing each candidate's campaign.
- **Features and interviews:** Mentions in features and/or interviews are minimal, with both leaders receiving similar attention (2-3 mentions each). This low frequency suggests that in-depth personal or thematic explorations of the candidates were not a significant focus during this period.

Implications for agenda-setting's secondary level:

The data highlights the *Daily Mail*'s reliance on news and newswire content to shape the public's perception of the election campaign. While both candidates received extensive coverage, Sunak's slightly higher overall mentions, especially in newswire articles, might suggest a marginal advantage in visibility.

From the second level of agenda-setting perspective, this distribution suggests that the media prioritised straightforward reporting of events and developments over deeper analysis or narrative framing. However, the slight differences in article type focus for each candidate hint at variations in how their campaigns were covered and framed. It is also important to note that the language, narrative, and topics used within the headlines might have influenced the perception of each politician.

12.6. Language used

Within a number of headlines covering either Rishi Sunak or Keir Starmer, the *Daily Mail* employed dramatic and sensationalist language, a hallmark of its usual editorial style. This use of language aligns with the newspaper's tendency to captivate readers with emotionally charged and provocative phrasing. By leveraging idiomatic expressions, colloquial terms, and figurative speech, the *Daily Mail* reinforces its sensationalist appeal while shaping the narrative around key political figures.

Headlines included phrases like "throw of the dice," which conveys risk-taking or uncertainty, and "go head to head," emphasising confrontation and drama. Similarly, "trade blows" and "locked horns" evoke imagery of conflict, portraying debates as combative rather than intellectual exchanges. Terms such as "testy debate" and "grilling" highlight tension, painting political figures as being under immense pressure. These expressions, while vivid and engaging, also contribute to framing political events in a dramatic light, often amplifying conflict over substance.

Further examples like "bad blood," "long line of gaffes," and "schmoozing" infuse the coverage with a sense of incompetence or superficial behaviour, shaping how readers interpret the character and actions of the politicians.

Phrases such as “disguised in flowery language” and “expert dissects” suggest hidden motives or complex realities needing explanation, while “running out of time” and “crippling caution suffocating optimism” dramatise urgency and failure.

This figurative and idiomatic language used across headlines, while effective at grabbing attention, may oversimplify complex political issues, steering readers toward emotionally charged interpretations. It reflects the *Daily Mail*’s approach to engaging its audience but also highlights its editorial strategy of framing political coverage through a lens of tension and drama, consistent with its broader agenda-setting influence and populist tone.

12.7. Identified topics and patterns

Between 4 June and 3 July 2024, it was evident that certain topics emerged as focal points in the media coverage, receiving disproportionate attention compared to others.

The major topics and patterns were identified:

- Televised political debates:

At the beginning of June, headlines predominantly focused on Sunak and Starmer’s televised debate on ITV, a widely anticipated and popular format for engaging the public and showcasing political leadership during election campaigns.

The headlines such as “*Starmer v Sunak - THE VERDICT: MailOnline panel say Rishi had the 'trust factor' but Sir Keir was 'more relatable'... while others say bad-tempered ITV debate clash told voters NOTHING*” (Kandohla et al., 2024) and “*Rishi Sunak showed 'calm, firm confidence' in ITV debate while 'anxious' Keir Starmer blinked more and used verbal fillers, body language expert reveals - as key moments from ITV debate are revealed*” (Parashar, Lodge, 2024) emphasises the rivalry between Sunak and Starmer, framing the debate as a heated clash with little value for voters. By attributing specific traits - Sunak having the “trust factor” and Starmer being “more relatable” - the headline shapes public perceptions of their strengths while adding drama to the event.

- The National Health Service (NHS)

As the election campaign progressed, the coverage expanded into broader topics such as immigration, taxation, and the NHS, reflecting key issues that resonate with the electorate.

The NHS, in particular, became a focal point with headlines like *“Keir Starmer insists he would never use private healthcare - even if a relative was stuck on waiting list - because the NHS is 'in his DNA'”* (Jaffer, 2024). This headline not only highlights Starmer’s personal commitment to the NHS but also frames him as taking a principled stance on a highly emotive issue. By emphasising phrases like “in his DNA”, the coverage attempts to establish a personal connection between Starmer and one of the UK’s most cherished institutions, while also implicitly contrasting his stance with broader critiques of NHS management or private healthcare use by other political figures. As the campaign unfolded, Keir Starmer’s stance on the NHS appeared nuanced. While he initially emphasised his unwavering commitment to the NHS with statements like “it’s in his DNA,” he later acknowledged the complexities of healthcare choices, stating that he “understands” why people use private healthcare (PA Media, 2024).

- Taxes

It is no wonder that both politicians are also heavily focused on taxes, a key issue for voters. The Conservative Party Leader Rishi Sunak claimed that a Labour government would impose a *“£2,000 tax hike for families”* (Tapsfield, 2024), framing the opposition as a financial threat to households. In response, the Labour Party labelled Sunak a “liar” (PA media, 2024), directly challenging his credibility and the validity of his claims. This exchange underscores the heated nature of political statements, with both sides employing charged rhetoric to appeal to voter fears and priorities.

- 80th anniversary of the D-Day commemoration in France

A significant portion of the headlines during this period focused on the controversy surrounding then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s attendance (or lack thereof) at the 80th anniversary of the D-Day commemoration in France, where he left early to record a pre-election interview in the UK.

This decision sparked widespread negative coverage across the country, including from the *Daily Mail*, which was critical of Sunak's actions and has remained a topic of discussion up until the end of his political campaign. The coverage featured bylined headlines such as:

- *“Keir Starmer sticks in the knife over Rishi Sunak's D-Day disappearing act and says 'for me there was nowhere else I was going to be' - as even the PM's own veterans minister admits it was a 'significant mistake' for 'sorry' premier to skip event.” (Heffer, 2024)*
- *“Angela Rayner and Penny Mordaunt lock horns over taxes and Trident in heated election debate while a dancing Nigel Farage savages 'unpatriotic' Rishi Sunak for D-Day debacle.” (Wilcock et al., 2024)*
- *“ANDREW NEIL: Rishi Sunak has let down our veterans. He has let down the King. He has let down the country. This is terminal - and will haunt him through his last days in politics.” (Neil, 2024)*
- *“‘I do care’: Squirming Rishi Sunak apologises AGAIN for leaving D-Day events early amid huge Tory backlash - before his hardest day of the election campaign gets worse as he is heckled over NHS GP problems.” (Heffer, 2024)*
- *“Disbelief from military figures after Rishi Sunak returned from Normandy before all of the D-Day events had finished to do General Election interview recording with ITV News.” (Stone, 2024)*
- *“D-Day blunder has Rishi Sunak under siege as war veterans and military chiefs condemn apologetic PM for skipping anniversary ceremony.” (Nicol, Line, 2024)*
- *“EXCLUSIVE: Rishi Sunak's D-Day 'error' was because his grandparents did not serve in the war', claims Conservative defector and Reform candidate Lee Anderson.” (Owen, Hodges, 2024)*
- *“EXCLUSIVE: LORD ASHCROFT: Rishi Sunak's ratings were so bad, his D-Day debacle barely changed a thing.” (Ashcroft, 2024)*

This incident and the resulting media frenzy highlight how perceived missteps by political leaders can dominate election coverage, particularly when linked to sensitive topics such as patriotism and respect for veterans. It is also worth noting that the negative connotation was attributed to various different actors, including those from the Conservative party or Conservative supporters (e.g., Lord Ashcroft's opinion piece in the *Daily Mail*).

Sunak's decision was framed as a grave error, with the *Daily Mail* emphasising his "D-Day disappearing act," "blunder," and the "significant mistake." The newspaper also amplified criticism from other political figures such as Nigel Farage (Reform Party), Angela Rayner (Labour Party), and even former Conservative (and now Reform) Party member Lee Anderson, compounding the narrative of Sunak's perceived failure.

The negative headlines, combined with sensationalist language - "squirming," "under siege," and "let down the country," not only portrayed Sunak as unpatriotic but also cast doubts on his leadership, effectiveness and decision-making capabilities.

This intense focus illustrates how the media can amplify a single event to shape public discourse and potentially impact a politician's campaign trajectory. The fallout from this event marked a pivotal point in the election narrative, as Sunak struggled to recover from the damage to his image amidst ongoing scrutiny.

- Betting investigation

This was not the last time the Conservative Party faced scrutiny during the pre-General Election campaign. On 12th June 2024, news emerged about a Conservative MP being investigated for allegedly placing a £100 bet on the General Election being held in July, a few days before the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak officially announced the election will be taking place on 4th July (Wilcock, 2024).

As the scandal progressed, the Conservative Party vowed to expel any member found guilty of betting on the election date, signalling an effort to maintain accountability and protect the party's integrity amidst the ongoing scrutiny. This statement served as a public attempt to demonstrate a commitment to ethical standards, particularly in the face of accusations that could damage the party's reputation.

- Labour's manifesto

The media's focus soon shifted to the Labour Party following the announcement of their election manifesto. *The Daily Mail*, staying consistent with its critical stance on Labour, dominated the coverage with a series of headlines that scrutinised the party's policies and leadership:

- *“Labour election manifesto in full: Keir Starmer's document has dearth of policies, but a blizzard of reviews... and room for 33 pictures of the leader”* (Ellicott, 2024) - This headline ridicules the manifesto for lacking substantive policies, instead focusing on its promotional presentation of Starmer as the centerpiece.
- *“ALEX BRUMMER: Keir Starmer's claim that Labour are the real wealth creators is pure hooey. Their policies risk killing the lifeblood of our economy”* (Brummer, 2024) - Here, Labour’s economic policies are attacked, with accusations that they threaten the foundations of the economy.
- *“Brace for years of tax rises if Starmer wins election, says think-tank”* (Tapsfield, 2024) - This headline reinforces fears of financial burdens under a Labour government, playing into voter concerns about economic stability.
- *“Opinion polls predicting 'Starmergeddon' should make voters think twice of handing Labour huge majority by voting Reform, Transport Secretary Mark Harper warns”* (Beckford, 2024) - This dramatic framing, coining the term “Starmergeddon”, uses hyperbolic language to suggest disastrous outcomes if Labour wins, while also advocating for alternative voting strategies.

The tone of these headlines underscores the *Daily Mail*’s agenda-setting approach, framing Labour’s manifesto as weak, economically dangerous, and politically risky. The paper’s emphasis on Starmer’s leadership image, alleged policy flaws, and potential consequences of a Labour government reflects its alignment with conservative statements.

- “Poor Rishi”: lack of Sky TV license

Rishi Sunak faced fresh criticism across social media after comments attempting to demonstrate his connection with ordinary people were widely ridiculed.

The headline in the *Daily Mail* *“‘Rishi Sunak's Sky TV JustGiving page is now open!': Social media erupts with memes mocking PM's attempt to explain how he's in touch with ordinary people”* (Haigh, 2024) highlights the backlash, as users created memes mocking the Prime Minister’s perceived detachment from everyday struggle, considering that Sunak and his wife Akansha Murty are on the list of The Sunday Time’s Rich List 2024 (274 position of 350 with a net worth of £651m).

This reaction underscores the challenges Sunak faced in addressing criticisms of elitism and disconnect, with social media amplifying public sentiment and humour at his expense.

- Starmer's ties to Jeremy Corbyn

As the election date approached, the political rhetoric and media coverage became increasingly intense.

The Conservative Party launched an attack on Labour Leader Keir Starmer, accusing him of suggesting that Jeremy Corbyn - embroiled in controversy over allegations of antisemitism and suspended by the Labour Party in 2020 - would have made a better Prime Minister in 2019 than the then-elected Boris Johnson (PA Media, 2024). This line of attack sought to associate Starmer with Corbyn's contentious leadership, framing him as sympathetic to hard-left policies and unfit for office.

This narrative was further amplified by the *Daily Mail*, which featured an opinion piece by former Prime Minister Boris Johnson himself, titled: "*EXCLUSIVE: BORIS JOHNSON: Unless Keir Starmer revokes his endorsement of a Corbyn premiership, he is simply not fit to be Prime Minister*" (Johnson, 2024). In the headline, Johnson directly questioned Starmer's judgement and suitability for leadership, portraying him as complicit in supporting Corbyn's controversial positions.

Adding to this, the *Daily Mail* published another piece under the headline: "*What would have been so 'great' about Jeremy Corbyn as PM, Keir? Tories heap pressure on Starmer over support for hard-Left predecessor - who wanted to ditch nuclear weapons, 'disband' NATO, and 'sided with Putin' over Salisbury poisonings*" (Heffer, 2024). This article highlighted Corbyn's past stances on key national security issues (e.g., nuclear disarmament, NATO withdrawal) and alleged sympathies toward Russia, using them as a proxy to criticise Starmer's leadership by association.

This coverage reflects a strategic effort by the Conservative Party to link Starmer to Corbyn's unpopular legacy, leveraging topics like antisemitism, national security, and foreign policy to undermine Starmer's credibility.

It also underscores the heightened role of media narratives in influencing voter perceptions during the final stretch of the election campaign. However, it is important to note that on the 25th of June, Keir Starmer, despite his initial hesitation, acknowledged that his remarks about Corbyn being a better Prime Minister than Boris Johnson during the 2019 elections were incorrect *“squirms before he admits Labour 'got it wrong' when it tried to install Jeremy Corbyn in No. 10”* (Groves, Ellicott, 2024).

- Nearing the final days of the election

On 23rd June, as the election drew closer, the *Daily Mail's* editorial team intensified its narrative against Keir Starmer, aligning closely with the Conservative Party's messaging. The *Daily Mail* published articles that reiterated Rishi Sunak's warnings, emphasising that voters had just 10 days to avert a Keir Starmer supermajority as election day approached (Groves, 2024). This messaging framed the potential Labour victory as a looming crisis, employing dramatic language to appeal to voter fears and cast doubt on Starmer's ability to lead effectively.

By using phrases like “disaster” and highlighting the urgency of the approaching election, the articles sought to mobilise Conservative supporters and undecided voters by portraying Labour's potential dominance as a threat to the nation's stability.

- Transgender matters

In June, Keir Starmer faced public scrutiny over the contentious issue of transgender rights. This time, the debate was intensified by comments from former Prime Minister and Labour leader Tony Blair, who stated, *“A woman has a vagina and a man has a penis”* (Heffer, 2024), while criticising politicians for being in a “muddle” over “common sense” transgender issues. Blair's remarks, seen as a swipe at Starmer, underscored the challenges political leaders face in navigating complex debates.

This episode not only reopened debates on gender identity but also underscored divisions within the Labour Party on how to approach the subject. For Starmer, the remarks risked alienating some progressive supporters while simultaneously fuelling criticism from opponents who questioned his leadership and policy positions on sensitive cultural matters.

- Knife crime and celebrity endorsement

In the meantime, Keir Starmer gained support from British actor Idris Elba, who joined him on the campaign trail to discuss the pressing issue of knife crime. This collaboration highlighted Labour's focus on tackling violent crime, with Starmer pledging to block online sales of "zombie" blades "straight away" (Wilcock, 2024) if elected.

Elba, known for his advocacy on social issues and IFAD Goodwill Ambassador, brought additional visibility and public support to Starmer's campaign, emphasising the importance of addressing youth violence and community safety.

By focusing on a high-profile social concern, Starmer sought to strengthen his connection with voters and demonstrate a proactive approach to policy-making, leveraging Elba's celebrity status and influence to amplify the message. The move underscored the importance of public figures in shaping political campaigns and resonating with broader audiences on critical issues.

- Media spotlight: framing the final days of the election campaign

In the final days leading up to the election, the *Daily Mail* amplified its critical coverage of Keir Starmer and the Labour Party, focusing on the potential implications of a Labour victory.

Headlines like "*EXCLUSIVE: It's not too late to stop a Keir Starmer supermajority, poll shows - as millions are still undecided with just a week left until election*" (Churchill, 2024), framing Labour's potential dominance as a threat and emphasising voter indecision as a crucial factor in the outcome.

Opinion pieces, such as columnist's Richard Littlejohn's (2024) "*After this week's TV debate, the prospect of five years of tetchy, intolerant Starmer scares the life out of me in a way Blair and Brown never did,*" added a personal and emotive critique of Starmer's leadership style, contrasting him unfavourably with previous Labour leaders.

Additionally, allegations of Labour plotting to "rig" elections (Groves, 2024) sought to undermine Labour's credibility and intentions.

The headline *“Pensioners warned Starmer is ‘coming for your winter fuel payments’ - after Labour left the door open to means-testing older people’s benefits”* (Groves, 2024) emphasises concerns among pensioners about the potential impact of Labour’s proposed policies on winter fuel payments. It suggests that Labour leader Keir Starmer and his party have not ruled out the possibility of means-testing these benefits, which could result in some pensioners losing access to financial support for energy costs. This framing targets older voters, raising fears about their financial security under a Labour government.

- Positive momentum for Sunak

In the final days leading up to the election, Rishi Sunak garnered some positive media coverage, shifting the narrative slightly in his favor. Headlines such as *“Sunak praises ‘incredible strength’ of his wife and daughters during campaign”* (PA Media, 2024) highlighted a more personal and relatable side of the Prime Minister, humanising him and appealing to family-orientated voters. However, it is important to note that the newswire - which usually has no editorial edit or stance - was used to boost this narrative, suggesting a deliberate effort by the campaign to shape public perception through widely disseminated and positive messaging.

Additionally, the headline *“British economy grew by 0.7 per cent between January and March - higher than the predicted 0.6 per cent in new boost for Rishi Sunak”* (Duel, Wilcock, 2024) showcased an economic success story, directly tying the positive growth figures to Sunak’s leadership, considering that economic growth remains one of the hottest and most controversial topics. While it could be argued that the difference between 0.6 and 0.7 per cent is negligible, this statement appears to frame a relatively modest achievement in a disproportionately positive light.

This type of coverage positioned him as both a capable leader overseeing economic recovery and a grounded individual with strong family values, providing a counterbalance to earlier controversies in the campaign.

In a surprising turn during the final days of the campaign, former Prime Minister Boris Johnson made an unexpected appearance to support Rishi Sunak, signalling a united front within the Conservative Party (Groves, Prosser, 2024). This was notable given that Sunak had played a

pivotal role in Johnson's resignation as Prime Minister, with his own resignation from the Cabinet being viewed by some as a 'betrayal' to Johnson.

Headlines such as “*Rishi's secret weapon! Boris Johnson makes surprise appearance to reunite with Rishi Sunak to stop Starmergeddon in massive Conservative boost*” (Groves, Prosser, 2024) framed the event as a strategic move to galvanise Conservative voters and counteract Labour's momentum.

The dramatic language, including terms like “stop Starmergeddon” portrayed the potential Labour majority as a crisis, while Johnson's return was positioned as a pivotal moment of solidarity. The reunion of the two leaders aimed to leverage Johnson's enduring popularity, potentially energising the Conservative base at a critical juncture in the campaign.

- Starmer's decision not to work 24/7

Just a couple of days before the General Election, the Conservatives seized on Keir Starmer's comments about his work-life balance, labelling him a “*part-time Prime Minister*” (Line, Strudwick, 2024) following his 24/7 diary confession that he has no desire to stay in the office on Friday nights and would rather spend these with his family. This criticism aimed to paint Starmer as less committed to the demands of leadership, contrasting it with the expectations of a tireless Prime Minister fully dedicated to the role.

Although the *Daily Mail* might have utilised its agenda-setting ‘power’, its influence cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader political and social context. In this instance, the Conservative Party has been in power since 2010, with the last couple of years marked by turbulent times. This includes the resignation of Boris Johnson following the ‘Partygate’ scandal during Covid (BBC, 2022) and Liz Truss, who served as Prime Minister for only 49 days, becoming the subject of online mockery comparing her tenure to the lifespan of a cabbage (Waterson, 2022).

Rishi Sunak, seen by some as disloyal to Boris Johnson, succeeded Truss; however, neither Truss nor Sunak secured victory in an actual election, having been appointed internally by the party following leadership challenges and changes. The Conservatives also faced setbacks in the

form of losing the support of major donors, such as billionaire John Caudwell, a long-time Conservative supporter who chose to vote for Labour in the general election.

However, despite the acknowledgement of the *Daily Mail's* potential influence, Keir Starmer won the General Election and secured a significant majority (securing 411 seats in the House of Commons, which provided a majority of 174 seats; Parker, 2024), suggesting that voters can and do access alternative information and make independent decisions beyond the narratives shaped by dominant media outlets. This outcome highlights the resilience of democratic choice in the face of concentrated media power.

13. Study limitations

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without its limitations. The analysis focused solely on the *Daily Mail* online newspaper version, which, while illustrative of the dynamics of concentrated ownership, represents just one segment of the UK media landscape. Future research could expand this analysis to include other media outlets with varying ownership structures to provide a more comprehensive understanding of media influence. Likewise, increasing attention should be paid to social media, digital media outlets and podcasts, and platforms such as YouTube, which are increasingly winning market share, especially with younger generations.

The societal implications, as discussed above, including potential Conservative ‘fatigue’ and the ongoing discussion surrounding pressing issues such as the NHS and immigration or politician’s mishaps, may have swayed electoral behaviour one way or another. After years of Conservative rule and a perception that Britain’s issues remain unsolved and even worse than they used to be, nothing the Daily Mail could have done would have mattered enough. In that sense, a similar analysis under more even conditions between candidates could yield interesting results.

Additionally, this study analysed headline-level data only, which, while effective in capturing agenda-setting dynamics, may not fully reflect the depth and nuance of complete articles; it is also worth noting that headlines may be misleading in order to capture the attention of a reader (clickbait). To explore how the public consumes and interprets media narratives, further research could incorporate full-text analysis and audience reception studies.

Conclusions

In this thesis, the intersection of media ownership and political coverage was examined through a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of the *Daily Mail* headlines with qualitative techniques, including manual sentiment analysis and interpretative qualitative analysis, focusing on the treatment of Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer in the lead-up to the General Election in summer 2024.

This thesis examined 757 online *Daily Mail* headlines between 4 June 2024 and 3 July 2024, featuring both politicians, hoping to uncover patterns of issue salience and framing, preferential editorial treatment and bias, as well as the overall influence of concentrated media ownership on public discourse.

This thesis has also examined theoretical frameworks of media ownership, highlighting the differences between public, private, and concentrated ownership models. It has also explored distinctions between allocation and operational controls and the direct and indirect influence of owners on editorial stances and choices.

However, it is worth noting that this thesis also aimed to look at wider contextual factors that might have influenced the electoral outcome in 2024 (the Labour Party and its leader Keir Starmer won), including the overall public sentiment towards the Conservative Party, the economy, and societal issues in the UK as well as political dynamics. By situating the analysis within this broader framework, it explored how concentrated media power interacts with public opinion and the shifting landscape of British politics.

Focusing specifically on the British newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, this study provided a brief historical overview of the British media landscape and its role in shaping public opinion.

The transition from traditional “newspapers” to “viewpapers” was analysed, emphasising the growing prominence of opinion pieces over ‘traditional’ factual reporting and their role in directing public narratives. Furthermore, this study has assessed the broader role of media in society, examining its impact on political processes, including agenda-setting, framing, and public trust in media as well as governments.

This thesis set out the following objectives, and these were the supported findings:

- 1. To analyse theoretical frameworks on media ownership (e.g., ownership models, direct and indirect influences) and the impact these may have on editorial choices and practices.**

Generally, the findings align with the notion that ownership can directly or indirectly influence editorial practices. The *Daily Mail*'s ownership by DMG Media, a known supporter of the Conservative Party, appears to contribute to editorial choices favouring Rishi Sunak over Keir Starmer. The reliance on unedited newswire articles for Sunak-related content, coupled with opinion pieces critical of Keir Starmer authored by Conservative affiliates, illustrates both direct (editorial bias) and indirect (amplification of party messaging) influences.

However, this thesis also found out that even though it might be argued that Sunak received somewhat preferential treatment, the editorial team also highlighted Sunak's mishaps. These also show the limitations of ownership bias, suggesting that, while the *Daily Mail* may have its affiliation with the Conservative Party, it does not censor itself from being critical towards it.

- 2. To examine the historical relationship between media ownership and political ties in the UK.**

The *Daily Mail*'s historical alignment with the Conservative Party continues to shape its political reporting. This study reaffirms patterns of ownership-driven editorial decisions, with past and current biases evident in election coverage. While balanced coverage in terms of volume was observed, the framing and sentiment analysis underscore the persistent intertwining of media ownership and political agendas, reflecting long-standing media-political relationships in the UK.

3. To evaluate the *Daily Mail*'s pre-election coverage of Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer, identifying patterns of bias or favoritism.

Quantitative analysis showed slightly more mentions for Sunak (330) than Starmer (282), with Sunak receiving more positive coverage (11 positive headlines vs. none for Starmer). Qualitative analysis revealed framing choices that mostly positioned Sunak as competent and trustworthy while portraying Starmer less favorably. Additionally, sensationalist language amplified negative portrayals of both candidates, but with a clear tilt favouring the Conservative leader.

Furthermore, the study highlighted how media ownership influences both levels of agenda-setting. The first level, focusing on the sheer volume and frequency, showed how the *Daily Mail* prioritised narratives aligned with Conservative Party interests, such as economic success stories under Sunak's leadership. The second level, framing, exposed the use of language and sentiment (neutral/positive/negative) to depict Sunak as competent and trustworthy, while derogatorily referring to Starmer's potential administration as 'Starmageddon'. These results support the larger concerns that media outlets with major ownership power may slant political coverage in ways that benefit the owners, which could sway how voters think and, in turn, impact the results of elections.

4. To assess the broader implications of media ownership on political diversity and public trust in the media, taking into consideration wider political implications

The data collected and findings suggest that concentrated media ownership, exemplified by the *Daily Mail*, influences political narratives by favouring one political party over another, potentially narrowing political diversity. While the *Daily Mail*'s bias aligns with ownership interests, its limited impact on the 2024 General Election outcome - where Keir Starmer secured a decisive majority - indicates that public trust in media narratives may be waning, with voters seeking alternative information sources, as well as with many Conservative voters likely having switched to Labour in 2024.

Upon finishing this study, several recommendations can be made. For academics, future research should expand its scope to include a wider range of media outlets with diverse ownership structures, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between ownership

and editorial practices. Incorporating audience reception studies and full-text analysis of articles, in addition to headline-level framing, would provide deeper insights into how media narratives are consumed and interpreted by the public. Moreover, considering the changing landscape of media in the recent years, it is important to take into account ‘new media’, the result of fragmentation and atomisation in the media, including, but not limited to, podcasts, newsletters, social media platforms, audio and video content among others.

Media professionals, on the other hand, should prioritise transparency in editorial practices to rebuild and sustain public trust. This includes making a clear distinction between opinion pieces and factual reporting and ensuring balanced coverage, particularly during politically sensitive periods like elections. Reducing reliance on unedited syndicated content, which often reflects political messaging, and diversifying perspectives within newsrooms are also critical steps toward achieving fairer reporting.

This research’s findings have implications for grasping the media’s role in the electoral process. Concentrated media ownership restricts diversity in political reporting and risks exacerbating prejudices that may influence public discourse and distort democratic outcomes. This highlights the necessity for enhanced examination of media ownership frameworks and their influence on political narratives, especially during electoral campaigns.

To conclude, this thesis contributes to the ongoing discourse on media ownership, agenda-setting, and their implications for democratic discourse. By examining the *Daily Mail*’s portrayal of political leaders during a critical electoral period, it highlights the intricate relationship between media ownership models, political power, and public perception.

As media ownership continues to consolidate globally, understanding these dynamics becomes increasingly important for safeguarding the principles of fair and unbiased political reporting in democratic societies, as well as preserving journalism as a ‘fourth estate’.

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