

'If you move in the same circles as the royals, then you'll get stories about them': Royal Correspondents, cultural intermediaries and class

Abstract

This article analyses the cultural politics of the Royal Correspondent: journalists who specialise in reporting news on the British royal family. It draws on in-depth interviews with Royal Correspondents and a broader understanding of royal news production, to position Royal Correspondents as cultural intermediaries. Pierre Bourdieu described cultural intermediaries as 'taste-makers' with influence over the construction of, and responses to, forms of culture (1984). This cultural intermediary role is significantly classed, where it is Royal Correspondents who demonstrate the appropriate 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1984) who get access to the most exclusive stories. The research finds that, because of the general secrecy around royal news, Royal Correspondents rely heavily upon elite networks and contacts, which produces 'homophilic' (Fincham, 2019) tendencies in reporting as well as a hierarchical and nepotistic structure based around those with the most exclusive access. This creates intersectional classed inequalities between those Royal Correspondents who have elite contacts and work for elite institutions, and those who do not. Such exceptionalism in access to royal news means that Royal Correspondents are not necessarily disturbing the ideological bases of monarchical power, despite some Royal Correspondents' claims that they are not deferential. Rather, Royal Correspondents function in service of reproducing the classed power of the monarchical institution.

Introduction

Royal Correspondents are journalists who specialise in reporting on monarchy. In the UK, many mainstream media outlets have a designated Royal Correspondent to report on the British monarchy, including broadcasters such as the BBC, ITV, Channel 5, ITN and Sky News; news agencies such as Press Association; newspapers such as the *Mail*, *the Mirror*, *the Sun*, *the Times*, *the Telegraph*, *the Express*, and *the Evening Standard*; and magazines such as *Hello!*, *OK!*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vanity Fair*. Some international outlets, such as *Yahoo*, *Newsweek* and CNN (at CNN they are a 'Royal Commentator', although the job is essentially the same) also have a Royal Correspondent. Many of these Royal Correspondents are also called upon to offer commentary on the British royal family in international contexts, in

television, radio and news appearances. Some have become well-known in their own right, for example Jennie Bond was BBC News Royal Correspondent for fourteen years (1989–2003), before undertaking a number of media appearances as a celebrity, such as being a contestant on the reality television show *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here* in 2004.

Despite the ubiquity of the Royal Correspondent in the UK media landscape, in academic terms, the role remains remarkably invisible to critical analysis. There have been no academic studies of the Royal Correspondent: who they are, what they do, and what this means in terms of media, culture, and ideology. This reflects a dearth of critical analysis of the British royal family more broadly, which my previous research has sought to address (XXXX). This article seeks to draw attention to the Royal Correspondent, and consider the cultural politics of the role in the context of journalistic practices. More specifically, this article positions Royal Correspondents as cultural intermediaries: those whom Pierre Bourdieu (1984) described as 'taste-makers' with influence over the construction of, and responses to, forms of culture. This cultural intermediary role is, as I will show, significantly classed, where it is Royal Correspondents who demonstrate the appropriate 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1984) who get access to the most exclusive stories about the elite institution of monarchy.

This article argues that Royal Correspondents construct multiple forms of legitimacy and value around the institution of monarchy, anchored to their role as a classed cultural intermediary. On a simplistic level, just the very presence of Royal Correspondents in major news organisations gives the British monarchy value. Royal Correspondents stand alongside other key specialist correspondents: the Foreign Correspondent, or the Political Correspondent. Their presence gives royal news comparable legitimacy to these other facets of inter/national news, and institutionalises royalty as part of our regular news cycle. As Ana Alacovska and Dave O'Brien argue, 'genres are categories that help communicate value and legitimacy to audiences and markets' (2021: 644). The genre of royal news is given legitimacy by the presence of the Royal Correspondent, who as a cultural intermediary gatekeeps the boundaries of the genre, and constructs what we see, hear, and understand about royal news.

Historically, Royal Correspondents were appointed by the monarchy itself. In her memoir, Jennie Bond recounts the story of former BBC 'Court Correspondent' (the former name for Royal Correspondents) Godfrey Talbot, who 'was summoned to Buckingham Palace and ushered in for an audience with King George VI and Queen Elizabeth before the final seal was put on his job' (2001: 17). Meanwhile, Joan Reeder is considered the first Royal Correspondent to work for a national newspaper, *the Daily Mirror*, after World War II, and covered George VI's death and Elizabeth II's coronation (Cardiff University Archives, 2022). As I will argue, while Royal Correspondents are no longer officially approved by the monarchy, they continue to gatekeep royal news through the formal and informal arrangements of royal news reporting, which are often based around inter-relationships, networking and contacts between elite sources, particularly revolving around social class.

Drawing on three in-depth interviews with Royal Correspondents, as well as visual and discourse analysis of texts written by and about Royal Correspondents, and a broader understanding of royal news production (XXXX), this article seeks to understand what the production of royal news looks like. The article begins with a literature review about the relationships between the media and the monarchy, and cultural intermediaries and journalism, before summarising the research methods used in data collection. I then consider the role of capital and privilege in accessing royal news. Following this, I explore elite sources and social networks, before tying this to concepts of 'homophily' (Fincham, 2019). I conclude by addressing what an analysis of the Royal Correspondent can reveal to us about royal news production.

The media and the monarchy

The relationship between the monarchy and the media has existed for as long as monarchy itself. Historical monarchies were mediated through portraiture and coins (Sharpe, 2009), Queen Victoria was the first to feature in newsreels (Plunkett, 2003), twentieth century monarchs used mass produced portraits as souvenirs (Owens, 2019), and the contemporary monarchy uses social media to communicate with its subjects (XXXX). As I have argued elsewhere (XXXX), in an age where the sovereign no longer rules by divine right, media culture is the key site for the reproduction of public consent for monarchy's power. This can be seen in media representations of the monarchy as a royal *family*: for example, Prince

William and Kate Middleton's family as an idealised, nuclear family unit. The important role of the media in reproducing the contemporary monarchy has been explored in popular biography (Pimlott, 2021) and critical analysis (Nairn, 1994; Blain and O'Donnell, 2003; Otnes and MacLaran, 2015)

Royal Correspondents are a small, although important, fraction of those who report on monarchy. All journalists, from Royal Correspondents to opinion columnists to news editors, are writing pieces about royals, and the monarchy is big business for media outlets, with public interest still high. According to BBC News, in the first week of March 2021 during the period when Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's interview with Oprah Winfrey aired, 25,894 articles were published online about Markle (Taylor, 2021). In addition, there is a history of royal figures being exploited by media institutions to capitalise on their popularity. Princess Diana's life and death was hyper-mediated, to the point that the paparazzi were blamed for her death in a car crash in Paris in 1997 (Merrin, 1999; Hindman, 2003). More recently, as part of a set of claimants citing illegal phone hacking, Prince Harry is pursuing court cases against tabloids *the Sun*, *News of the World*, and *the Daily Mirror* for hacking his phone and illegally obtaining private messages (Siddique and Waterson, 2021). Meanwhile, Meghan Markle won a case in 2021 against Associated Newspapers Limited for publishing a 'personal and private' letter she wrote to her father, Thomas Markle, in the *Mail on Sunday* (Davies, 2021). Markle called out 'deception, intimidation, and calculated attacks' in the tabloid treatment of her (ibid.), and in her interview with Oprah Winfrey in 2021, specifically identified the racist and sexist coverage in the British tabloid media as a reason for her resignation from the monarchy.

There is an important distinction to make between some of these stories and Royal Correspondents. A Royal Correspondent did not, for example, write the original stories about Meghan Markle's letter to her father. This is not to suggest that Royal Correspondents have never sought to exploit royals for stories, but rather to specify that not *all* royal stories are written by Royal Correspondents. In an interview, *the Sun* journalist Dan Wootton (*Harry, Meghan and the Media*, 2022) claimed Royal Correspondents are limited in what they can report because they can't 'cover the story as honestly as an outsider' as they 'might be shunned' by royal Communications Officers and not get access to royal events

again. Meanwhile, in their interview with Oprah Winfrey (2021), Prince Harry and Meghan Markle identified what they called an ‘invisible contract’ between the media and the monarchy, whereby choreographed public exposure to royals is offered in return for privacy at other moments. One example of this might be the so-called ‘pressure cooker agreement,’ where royal officials negotiated a deal to have the paparazzi leave Princes William and Harry alone during their education, in return for intermittent occasions when they would stage photograph opportunities (such as William’s eighteenth birthday at Eton College) (XXXX). I explore these claims about ‘agreements’ between Royal Correspondents and royals in a separate article (XXXX). For the purposes of this piece, what matters is the specific role of the Royal Correspondent within the context of royal news production, and within journalistic practice more broadly. I am interested in what the Royal Correspondent symbolises; what this might tell us about their role in royal reporting; and how describing them as a cultural intermediary is useful in order to understand the implications of their position within an elite social class.

Journalists as classed cultural intermediaries

In *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu describes cultural intermediaries as encompassing ‘all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth)’ (1984: 359). Cultural intermediaries are ‘taste makers’ or ‘cultural authorit[ies]’ (Nixon and Du Gay, 2002: 497) who influence norms and tastes by selling products and setting cultural boundaries. Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews describe the cultural intermediary’s role as ‘framing’: ‘they construct value, by framing how others... engage with goods, affecting and effecting others’ orientations towards those goods as legitimate’ (2012: 552). Cultural intermediaries therefore have an ‘expert orientation’ in their field, and their degree of expertise is necessarily dependent on ‘market context’, where they will have greater legitimation in specific fields (Smith Maguire, 2014: 2). Their ‘expertise’ means their ‘framing’ of goods appears authentic and aspirational, influencing how audiences engage with the representations.

‘The journalist’ is one such example, particularly a journalist who works in a specific, specialised field because of the connotations of expertise (Tunstall, 1976; Mellor, 2008; Archetti, 2012), such as the Royal Correspondent. Maureen Mahon suggests that journalists

‘conceptualize, construct, and transmit meaningful cultural forms’ and in so doing ‘construct, articulate, and disseminate ideologies about identity, community, difference, nation, and politics, and with their impact on social relations, social formation, and social meanings’ (2000: 468–69). Journalists gather, piece together, edit and disseminate news stories in particular ways, often according to ideological positions. This is built into the very name: a Royal Correspondent will produce, and is assumed to have authentic knowledge of, royal news.

By considering the journalist as a cultural intermediary, we can understand how their construction of news is dependent upon ‘how such activities will vary according to the conditions and networks in which [journalists] work’ (Matthews, 2014: 146). That is, the stories they get and the news they produce is contingent upon their access to sources and their ability to build these sources into digestible stories. Mark Banks’ (2017: 43) work on the cultural industries has described how cultural workers ‘invest their work with varied purposes, intentions and meanings’. Stuart Hall (1985: 101) argues that journalists are ‘inscribed by an ideology to which they do not consciously commit themselves, and which, instead, “writes them”’: from, for example, the influence of their place of work. Hall uses Gramscian concepts of ‘hegemony’ and ‘producing consent’ to consider how news values ‘naturalise’ the views of powerful elites, who largely control news cycles (1973). Therefore, the ‘legitimiz[ing] hierarchies of taste’ of cultural intermediaries ‘ultimately serve different forms of institutional power’ (Cronin and Edwards, 2021: 4). There is some debate over the classed dimension of cultural intermediaries. Research has explored the role of intermediaries in enabling, facilitating and legitimating ‘elite’ lifestyles through organisational practices, for example by operating as agents or fund managers (Yee Koh and Wissink, 2017; Davies, 2017). Peter Conlin has critiqued work which positions cultural intermediaries as a privileged class, and instead suggests they are a ‘precarious educated working class’ (2015: 270) seeking upward social mobility. In this article, what I want to show is how the Royal Correspondent is shaped as a cultural intermediary in part by their perceived proximity to the bastion of the upper-classes, the monarchy, where one key reason they are in their jobs is because they themselves fit the class profile of this upper-class group. To use Bourdieusian terms, they have the habitus with which to pass. At the same time, despite their class privilege, they will never be as privileged as the objects of

their study. They are working in service of reproducing a classed institution, while always trying to 'fit' into that lifestyle themselves in order to get access to sources

In *Media Rituals*, Nick Couldry proposes 'the myth of the mediated centre': 'the belief, or assumption, that there is a centre to the social world, and that, in some sense, the media speaks 'for' that centre' (2002: 2). There is *an assumption* that the media acts as a 'social frame' of what is happening in society, and media gives us access to the 'centre'. Elsewhere, I have argued (XXXX) that the monarchy can be considered as part of this 'centre', as spectacular royal events and the ubiquity of representations of the royal family mean the monarchy is 'centered' in understandings of British society. This is not an accidental process, rather monarchy's 'centering' is actively reproduced in and by media culture. I want to argue here that it is Royal Correspondents' job to broker access to that 'centre'. Through their journalistic practices and the challenges associated with this, which I will outline below, they are the intermediation of royal news for the public: from the 'centre' out.

Research methods

This article follows a mixed-methods approach of in-depth interviews with Royal Correspondents, as well as visual and discourse analysis of texts written by and about Royal Correspondents and a broader understanding of royal news production. Data about Royal Correspondents is available from public sources: online (in blog posts, news articles), on social media (many Royal Correspondents have a Twitter account), and in published texts. For example, Jennie Bond published the memoir *Reporting Royalty* (2001) and Dickie Arbiter published *On Duty with the Queen* (2014), both of which are autobiographical accounts of life as a Royal Correspondent. Likewise, there are various accounts of royal news production more broadly, such as the BBC documentary series' *Reinventing the Royals* (2015) and *The Princes and the Press* (2021), and the latter's sister podcast *Harry, Meghan and the Media* (2022). These are useful for what they reveal about day-to-day Royal Correspondent work. Some Royal Correspondents have published books which discuss the monarchy more generally, for example Robert Jobson, the Royal Editor at the *Evening Standard*, has published a number of popular books providing profiles of various royals (2021). These have been discounted from my analysis, as I am interested in accounts of the work of royal reporting rather than biographies of royals. Due to the secrecy around royal reporting, as I

explore below, the published accounts of doing this work are limited. This is, itself, interesting given the extreme visibility of their reporting work versus the invisibility of *how* this work is undertaken. It should be noted that this secrecy around the work of royal reporting is mirrored within the institution too: tight non-disclosure agreements mean staff working for the monarchy cannot readily share their experiences (XXXX). Of the texts I sourced, I undertook thematic analysis, looking firstly for moments where the practicalities of *making* royal news was described (rather than, for example, anecdotes about meeting individual royals), and then breaking these down into subsections to find similarities and differences.

Due to the secrecy around royal reporting, in order to try to understand their work I undertook semi-structured phone interviews with three Royal Correspondents in mid-2020. Access to Royal Correspondents was always going to be a challenge. Researching journalists constitutes what Hanne Bruun refers to as 'elite interviewing' (2016: 131), where the power imbalances between the researcher and the participant are flipped from the usual position where the researcher has 'superiority'. Participants in elite interviewing can be understood as 'powerful gatekeepers of information or holders of information on the processes within and the workings of organizational structures' (Bruun, 2016: 132; see also Conti and Neil, 2007). As gatekeepers – or, indeed, cultural intermediaries – Royal Correspondents are in a position of power (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2014).

Of the thirty past and present Royal Correspondents I identified to contact, I secured 10 per cent of these interviews. Small sample sizes can be useful for qualitative research, as it allows for a close reading of the interview material. As Mira Crouch and Heather McKenzie argue, for 'depth' of understanding, contextualising, and theorising interview data, 'it is much more important for the research to be intensive' over a small sample size (2006: 494). Combining my interviews with mixed-method analysis of the texts about Royal Correspondents means I can contextualise the accounts I received within broader discourses about and by Royal Correspondents, whilst undertaking a close, in-depth analysis of the stories they told in the interviews. Of course, there may well be differences between my interviews and the published texts given that the latter are written for public consumption,

whereas my interviews (and particularly the Royal Correspondents who have remained anonymous) were off the record. I have tried to remain mindful of this where relevant.

My three interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes, and I asked the Royal Correspondents about their working practices, their day-to-day activities, and their feelings on royal news production more broadly. The participants were given the option of remaining anonymous in the data. One chose to remain identifiable, and they will be referred to by name: Stephen Bates, former Royal Correspondent at *the Guardian*. Two chose to remain anonymous, and due to the limited pool of Royal Correspondents in the UK, I will not categorise these participants by any demographic information as this risks identifying them; rather they will be referred to here as RC1 and RC2. Gareth Rice argues that researchers must develop an 'elasticity of positionality' (2010: 72) to deal with the complexities of 'studying up' and any specific concerns raised by participants. I gave my participants the opportunity to read the transcripts of the interviews, and they had two weeks to request the removal of any data they did not want included in the study. While this meant that I lost some relevant data, it gave elite interviewees some control over their representation to mitigate concerns about reputational damage.

'Capital' and privilege in accessing royal news

It is first worth noting that multiple Royal Correspondents said they did not 'set out' at the beginning of their journalist career to become a Royal Correspondent, and indeed many started off as general reporters before moving across to royal reporting, often by chance. Jennie Bond (2001: 3) writes that 'it wasn't a post I'd ever sought or even considered' before the BBC offered her the opportunity, RC1 said 'I was a reporter and then an opportunity came up to move into royals and I took it', and RC2 said 'I have more experience as a journalist, as opposed to being a Royal Correspondent'. This suggests that there is no 'training' for the Royal Correspondent role as such, rather it is an extension and a specialism of journalism more broadly, particularly current affairs. As RC2 said, 'once you specialize and once you're used to having a patch' (in this case they started in local news, as opposed to, as they say, 'just sort of covering anything') 'you can transfer that skill to anything'. It is just a case of 'learn[ing] the facts of things' and 'work[ing] out the logistics' of a new 'patch'. In this way, the role of Royal Correspondent is positioned as a specialism within broader

logistics of journalism, drawing on the skillsets of other journalist roles. Valentine Low, Royal Correspondent for *the Times*, interpreted this as a political necessity (2021): ‘no one ever sets out to be a Royal Correspondent’ and if they did ‘they are quite clearly far too interested in the royals and therefore in danger of becoming a full-blooded sycophant’. This proposes a level of critique and objectivity in royal reporting, where Low considers Royal Correspondents to be tasked with maintaining a critical distance from the royal family. As he goes on to say, ‘the day the royals think that they can rely on you to say the right thing is the day you have ceased to be a proper journalist’.

I am not here to dispute the ideological positionality of individual Royal Correspondents. However, it *is* in the interests of this article to address the structural inequalities and ideologies which constitute the Royal Correspondent role. Despite a distinct lack of choreographed career trajectory amongst some Royal Correspondents, it would appear that while a variety of journalists can *become* a Royal Correspondent, it is a very specific one who is more likely to succeed, as RC1 outlines:

it is quite different to journalism in general and there are certain skills that are valuable. It’s weird though, the people who really excel... in all honesty, there’s a class dimension to it, which is that if you move in the same circles as the royals, then you’ll get stories about them. But very few people actually fit into that category
(RC1)

RC1 identifies a ‘class’ issue in Royal Correspondent work. Social class is an important factor in hierarchies of employment within the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). But Royal Correspondents are a specific case considering the royals are upper-class and aristocratic, and the social circles surrounding royalty are extremely exclusive, therefore logically it could follow that the ‘same circles as the royals’ that RC1 mentions are also upper class. RC1’s reference to Royal Correspondents having ‘certain skills’ could be interpreted as referring to forms of Bourdieusian ‘capital’ – social, cultural, economic and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1984) – that structure social stratification. Those Royal Correspondents who possess the appropriate ‘capital’ get access to the inner royal circle.

The intersectionality of this classed dimension is also important, and I would add that this is also a racialised issue. In 2021, it was revealed that the Royal Household (those working for the monarchy across the royal palaces) have only 8.5 percent of employees who are from ethnically diverse backgrounds (Meierhans, 2021), and the monarchy has been at the centre of racism accusations throughout 2021 after Prince Harry and Meghan Markle identified structural racism within the institution (2021). The British monarchy is a colonialist organisation which is built on white supremacy (XXXX). Therefore, part of the 'capital' required for access to the institution is, presumably, whiteness. This is especially notable given the racialised inequalities within the cultural industries more broadly, as identified by scholars such as Anamik Saha (2017).

These intersectional inequalities amongst Royal Correspondents of who is most likely to 'excel', as RC1 put it, are indicative of the type of 'tastes' they reproduce as cultural intermediaries. Dave O'Brien et al. (2017: 275) state that 'inequalities in cultural production produce damaging "epistemological effects" (Saha, 2012), leading to the production of a limited and problematic repertoire of representations of ethnicity, class, gender and regional identity'. That is, social inequalities in the production of cultural texts will be reflected in the representations they display and the consumption of those texts amongst audiences. If the most successful Royal Correspondents are white and upper-class, it follows that they are likely reproducing white, upper-class tastes, and hence reproducing the norms on which the monarchical institution relies. They are, therefore, not necessarily disturbing the ideological bases of monarchical power; rather these elite Royal Correspondents are functioning in service of reproducing the monarchical institution.

This invested relationship also feeds into the type of information these elite Royal Correspondents share, and the type they do not. RC1 notes that:

there are a couple of other people as well who just move in certain circles where they're much more likely to come across things and again they probably don't write everything they come across either, based on, you know, you've got to be discreet in order to move in those circles, I suppose (RC1)

This notion of discretion presupposes a level of loyalty, where ‘to move in those circles’ the elite Royal Correspondents must ‘play the game’, so to speak, and retain their silence where it is appropriate. Keith Negus (2002: 508) argues that a cultural intermediary’s power comes not only from the ‘production and circulation of information and symbolic materials’, but also from the ‘concealment of knowledge, deception and manipulation’. As ‘experts’ on monarchy, these elite Royal Correspondents have authority in defining the boundaries of royal stories, and structuring what, when, and how royal news is reported. The elite Royal Correspondents are also often called upon to give statements or interviews at key royal moments, for example, in television coverage of royal weddings. Considering the royals themselves very rarely speak publicly (see below), especially to confirm or rebuke rumours, the Royal Correspondent is thus given the role of managing royal public relations, and deciding what is made public, and perhaps more importantly, what is not. Hence, the Royal Correspondent is tasked with interpreting news from ‘the centre’ (Couldry, 2002) for public consumption. At the same time, their role as an elite Royal Correspondent also positions them as part of, or at the very least on the periphery of, the ‘centre’ themselves. The class inequalities inherent to monarchy are being compounded by the elite networks surrounding it, and speaking for it.

While there are elite Royal Correspondents, there are also those who get less access to royal exclusives. As RC1 said, this is also often classed. This access is especially problematic for those Royal Correspondents who are not part of an organisation which is on the Royal Rota system. The Royal Rota is a rota system that news organisations must apply to if they wish to cover royal events. According to News Media Association, where applications can be sought: ‘representatives from each relevant media sector are offered the opportunity to cover a [royal] event, on the understanding that they will share all material obtained, with other members of their sector who request it’ (News Media Association, n.d.). That is, those organisations on the Royal Rota who are invited to attend events *must* share their materials with other journalists, as part of the obligations of the Royal Rota pass. Members of the Royal Rota include *the Daily Mail*, *the Sun*, *the Times*, *the Telegraph*, Wire Picture Agency, Independent Photographers Association, BBC, Sky News, and ITV. Only established media outlets that are deemed ‘appropriate’ are allowed access to the Royal Rota, and this is not usually independent organisations, or ‘up-and-coming’ ones. Nor is it ever independent

journalists: they are all attached to an elite institution, which itself comes with news values and is usually high-profile enough to be part of the Establishment (the BBC, for example. See below for an account of the BBC-monarchy relationship).

RC2 says that 'it is really tricky' to get access to royal information, and to ensure it is confirmed before publication, because of the secrecy employed by the monarchy. They continue, this inevitably means that those not on the Royal Rota system 'don't have as good and as easy access to these Palace sources, whereas they [Royal Rota journalists] get told stuff that we don't get told, so we do rely on them'. Reliance on Royal Rota sources means a reliance on those elite journalists who have been 'approved' to operate within the elite royal circle. While the Royal Rota claims it has been designed to address 'space restrictions and security' (News Media Association, n.d.) and any information gathered is shared with other journalists, this is still structuring what information gets gathered. Multiple roadblocks are in place here to prevent producing objective, impartial royal news, and to produce royal news from alternative sources outside of the classed 'centre'.

Social networks and elite sources

While capital and privilege was key to success as a Royal Correspondent, other related skillsets also seemed important. Let us return to the aforementioned comment from RC1:

It's weird though, the people who really excel... in all honesty, there's a class dimension to it, which is that if you move in the same circles as the royals, then you'll get stories about them (RC1)

We can take from this quotation that networks and contacts are vital to Royal Correspondent work. When asked what sort of skillset was needed for Royal Correspondent work, my interviewees, echoed in the public Royal Correspondent accounts, said that developing contacts and sources was a central part of the role. While this is true of all journalist work (Aelst, Sehata and Van Dalen, 2010), this took on a different dimension for Royal Correspondents. RC1 said, there is 'lack of guidance from the [Buckingham] Palace' on the majority of stories, who typically just say 'no comment' to any rumours (this was echoed from multiple Royal Correspondents on the podcast series *Harry, Meghan and the Media*

(2022)). Rather, Royal Correspondents are left to 'piece stuff together based on very limited information' (RC1), usually by contacting sets of elite sources who might have some information from inside the Palaces. Jennie Bond writes that 'you depend on... a friendly relationship with private secretaries, or friends and relatives of royalty' (2001: 76).

I explore the claims that the British monarchy offers a 'lack of guidance' to journalists elsewhere (XXXX). For the purposes of this piece, RC1's comments speak to the earlier argument about the privileged demographics who have the 'capital' to access royal circles. Jennie Bond writes of trying to confirm a story about Prince Charles and Princess Diana in the mid-1990s: 'in pursuit of the truth, I called all the contacts I could muster. One, a household name who was a personal friend of the couple' (2001: 75). Likewise, Katie Nicholl, Royal Correspondent for *Vanity Fair*, said of collecting sources: 'it's a long process and one that takes years... Some of my best contacts have become close friends now' (in Bonner, 2018). These references to 'friendships' relies on the cultivation of personal relationships with elite sources, which depends upon Royal Correspondents having the appropriate capital to do so. David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker found that 'sociability is essential for professional success' across the cultural and creative industries (2011: 156).

But these comments also raise issues of social networks, and how those networks are interconnected. This is suggestive of 'the Establishment': a networked, interconnected and often interdependent group of elite actors made up of 'the national media, the City, large corporations, the Whitehall civil service, and the major political parties at Westminster' (Davis, 2018: 3). Theories on the Establishment suggest that these groups often move in tangent with one another to shore up elite privilege and ensure their interests are maintained. It is not that I am suggesting *all* Royal Correspondents are part of the Establishment. As we have seen, some cite frustration with lack of access, although one could argue that the Royal Correspondents role as cultural intermediary earns them a place in the Establishment regardless. Rather, I argue that the elite Royal Correspondents who have closest access to royalty can be considered 'the Establishment', because they move in the same upper-class social circles, and hence can be assumed to have comparable interests. These elite circles tend to 'shore up' (XXX) each other's privilege and power using their specific skills: in Royal Correspondents' case, producing media representations. If they

are loyal to royalty, as we have previously seen, then they too are involved in the process of shoring up royal power and reproducing elite privilege. This, again, raises questions of classed networks, impartiality and objectivity.

As I have previously demonstrated, historically, Royal Correspondents were appointed by the monarchy itself. This no longer happens, but it seems that the best chances of getting stories comes from being within the royal circle. Tom Bradby, former Royal Correspondent for ITN and now the host of ITV's flagship news show *News at Ten*, has reportedly had a decades long friendship with Prince William and Prince Harry, including an invitation to Prince William and Kate Middleton's wedding in 2011 as a guest, and both royals' personal phone numbers (Bickerstaff, 2021). Bradby was educated at Sherborne School, an independent all-boys boarding school which is a member of the Eton Group, an association of twelve exclusive English public schools. Both Prince William and Prince Harry attended Eton College, another member of Eton Group. It is also worth noting that Jennie Bond attended St Francis' College, an independent all-girls school ([BBC, 2003](#)), Roya Nikkhah, Royal Editor at *the Sunday Times*, attended independent St. Mary's boarding school ([St Mary's Colne](#), n.d.), Camilla Tominey at *the Telegraph* went to the independent [St Albans High School for Girls](#) ([The Clem and Em Podcast, 2019](#)), Katie Nicholl from *Vanity Fair* went to independent Channing School ([Miller, 2005](#)), and Nicholas Witchell at the BBC was educated at independent Epsom College ([Luckhurst, 2005](#)).

As Aaron Reeves et al. suggest, 'when elites are drawn from narrow educational backgrounds, they are more likely to develop "a unity and cohesion of consciousness and action" which, in turn, may have profound implications for the exercise of power' (2017: 1141). Elite educational systems can be considered part of the Establishment in that they are central to shoring up networks of privilege. The symbiosis between Royal Correspondents and their subject suggests similar values, and hence a reproduction of elite narratives through the cultural intermediary role. There are also questions about the extent to which elite networks tend to protect one another's interests, considering these interests are mutually beneficial in reproducing elite privilege.

Elsewhere, these mutual interests are more obvious. Dickie Arbiter moved from Court Correspondent at IRN to Press Secretary at Buckingham Palace in 1988, hence making the move from *reporting* on royalty to literally producing royal news from within. In his memoir, Arbiter tells the story of being approached directly by the then-Press Secretary Robin Janvrin and the Private Secretary William Heseltine while on the royal yacht Britannia. This suggests that the materials he was producing as Court Correspondent were suited to becoming the monarchy's spin doctor. Like Jennie Bond, Arbiter has earned social and cultural capital, and indeed celebrity credence, through his Royal Correspondent work, and is now a regular royal commentator across the news and entertainment industries. The cultural intermediary therefore takes on 'legitimacy' as a media personality in their own right – indeed, Bond discusses at length in her memoir how she has been recognised all over the world (2001). This chimes with Helen Powell and Sylvie Prasad's theories on the 'celebrity expert' as a cultural intermediary, where the individuals have connotations of 'familiarity and trust' (2010: 114) which imbue them with legitimacy. If the 'expert' is a well-known individual, audiences will feel more able to relate to them, hence increasing the 'experts' ability to influence public opinion.

Dickie Arbiter's daughter, Victoria Arbiter, is now a Royal Commentator for CNN. The Arbiters lived in Kensington Palace when Dickie Arbiter was Press Secretary, and Victoria Arbiter is very open about having been 'on both sides of the royal press machine—she essentially grew up *in* the press office' (Bonner, 2018). This is a form of nepotism which mirrors the reproduction of monarchy itself as hereditary, which presupposes that the Arbiters' values on monarchy are being reproduced across generations.

Such networked relations extend beyond individual journalists and to news organisations. RC2 reflected on the kinds of institutions which, when limited royal news *did* come from Buckingham Palace, tended to receive it:

I get frustrated, but also have a little bit of respect in some ways for the fact that they frequently go to BBC. It's annoying, you can think "well what about the rest of us?" But on the other hand, you think "okay fair enough". Like if they went to some tiny... And yeah, it's annoying to see them telling the BBC all these exclusives. Well,

they don't need all these exclusive anyway, they're the BBC! Like, everyone's going to watch and listen to them anyway. They don't need any help! But they are the royal family, so they go to the other institutions (RC2)

The reference to 'the other institutions' is particularly revealing of the kinds of values that RC2 sees being reproduced in royal news. The BBC and the monarchy are both considered key organisations at the centre of the British Establishment (Mills, 2016), and both have comparable values in terms of British national identity and public service (XXXX). RC2 notes that they are not surprised that the monarchy would go to the BBC over, as they say, 'some tiny' media outlet. Rather, this is considered the obvious choice, and it is 'fair enough' that the two institutions would uphold one another given that they are both elite. Returning to Couldry's concept of 'the myth of the mediated centre' (2002), if both the BBC and the monarchy are key actors in the British Establishment then the BBC can equally be considered as part of the 'centre', reporting 'outwards' for audiences. This gives the BBC a sense of legitimacy for audiences (Mills, 2016). In this way, the BBC is perhaps constructed as the ultimate mediator of royal news. It is possibly not a coincidence that Jennie Bond, former BBC Royal Correspondent, is the most well-known British Royal Correspondent. The position inherently has a supposition of superiority because the BBC are considered part of the same 'centre' as the monarchy, and therefore it follows that the BBC Royal Correspondent will have access to the 'best' royal news.

These classed interrelationships between Royal Correspondents, the monarchy's Communications Offices, and the royals themselves raise questions about bias and objectivity. In the following section, I'll explore this as a form of 'homophily'.

'Homophily' and social media journalism

Various scholars have discussed issues of 'groupthink' or 'pack journalism' in relation to journalism (Hanusch and Nölleke, 2018; Bentivegna & Marchetti, 2018), critiquing how the self-reverential tendencies of journalism mean journalists think along similar lines, leading to homogenous reporting. This often means that journalists rely on *other journalists* as sources, thus repeating similar information. Studies have also found that there are 'bubbles within bubbles' (Fincham, 2019: 215), whereby journalists with similar specialisms are most

likely to interact with their equivalent: for example, for our purposes, Royal Correspondents with Royal Correspondents.

'Homophily' is a concept describing 'the tendency of individuals to form groups with those most similar to themselves' (Fincham, 2019: 215), which could be demarcated along identity lines (i.e. class, gender, race, age; see Wreyford, 2015; Nwonka, 2021, in relation to the film industries) or acquired characteristics (i.e. occupation, education), such as journalism. The concept has been applied in journalistic studies and social network analysis to consider how news media is structured around homophilic ties between journalists and/or other elite cultural intermediaries, who tend to communicate primarily between themselves. In an article focusing on Taiwan correspondents in mainland China, Daisy Xiaoxuan Cheng and Francis L.F. Lee (2014) found that such ties were especially relevant in cases where 'news information does not always flow freely', so the trading of information amongst journalists is often the only way to produce news content. While remaining conscious of the many differences between China's media systems and the UK's, Cheng and Lee's approach does speak in many ways to Royal Correspondent work, where, as we have seen, a very limited amount of information comes willingly from Buckingham Palace. Royal Correspondents may therefore be particularly susceptible to 'homophily', because they are almost entirely reliant on their own (elite) networks for news.

This susceptibility is only enhanced considering the Royal Correspondent community in the UK is quite exclusive, and those working on the 'royal beat' are likely to know/come into contact with each other, not least considering they run in the same elite social circles as part of their journalistic networks. They are also especially susceptible given how royal news is produced. The Royal Rota system guarantees that only a select group of Royal Correspondents will get exclusive access to royal news, which they are then *obliged* to share with fellow Royal Correspondents. In this way, the Royal Rota System almost *actively produces* homophilic news reporting along classed lines, as Royal Correspondents rely upon a privileged few to share their findings with the rest of the group.

Kelly Fincham (2019) has found that 'homophily' amongst political journalists is particularly prevalent on Twitter, where they are more likely to connect with fellow journalists. This is,

as Fincham argues, symptomatic of the ‘filter bubble’ factor on social media more broadly, where individuals are most likely to interact with users similar to themselves, with similar viewpoints. Royal Correspondents regularly comment on, ‘retweet’ or ‘like’ each other’s posts. For instance, on February 21st 2021 *Daily Mail* Royal Correspondent Emily Andrews quote retweeted royal commentator Peter Hunt and his article in *the Spectator* entitled ‘the monarchy failed Harry and Meghan’, with Andrews adding ‘this is a well-argued piece & I agree with much Peter says’, before offering her own commentary on ‘it’s so sad that a middle way cd [sic] not be found’ for Harry and Meghan to stay in the monarchy (@byEmilyAndrews, 2021). Although Royal Correspondents do not always agree with one another online, what this informally demonstrates is a space where they regularly communicate, and they can discover and engage with royal news from their competitors and/or colleagues.

Social media also impacts upon the roles of cultural intermediaries. As Cronin and Edwards argue, ‘algorithms, platforms, online crowd-sourcing and do-it-yourself (DIY) culture-making have all been recognized as important intermediaries’ and ‘non-human actors’ are involved in ‘the information curation, circulation and filtering processes that influence the political-economic context for cultural intermediation’ (2021: 5). Of course, this is especially notable considering (some of) the general public have access to social media and can post news themselves. While there are processes in place which (theoretically) produce some news sources as more ‘legitimate’, which on Twitter consists of adding a ‘blue tick’ to profiles which are verified (Miragliotta, 2012), ultimately any user could produce royal news at any time. This form of ‘citizen journalism’ has been much theorised across journalist studies, as a democratising process which enfranchises otherwise disenfranchised citizens from news production (Goode, 2009); as decentralizing, de-westernising, and globalising forms of news production (Allan and Thorson, 2009); and as endemic to issues of ‘fake news’ circulating online to perpetuate false ideologies (Tandoc Jr., Lim and Ling, 2017).

For my purposes, online news and social media is interesting to consider in terms of how it stabilises or destabilises Royal Correspondents as cultural intermediaries, and as privileged interpreters of ‘the centre’. Many of the Royal Correspondents have the ‘blue tick’ verification on Twitter, giving their accounts a sense of authenticity. RC1 reflected on the

introduction of Twitter: 'it's massively changed royal reporting because people do feel like they need to have a big social media following'. While RC1 acknowledges this is true for all journalists who use social media to promote their work, they note how this has led to the promotion of Royal Correspondent work, where a 'big social media following' is a sign of legitimacy and success in their role. This connects back to my earlier comments about how many Royal Correspondents have become elite celebrities in their own right. Studies have shown that individuals/companies with large social media followings are more likely to be seen as trustworthy by other users and by the public (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). This mirrors ideas of the 'celebrity expert' as a cultural intermediary, albeit on a micro scale. By cultivating followers, Royal Correspondents can cultivate their position as cultural intermediaries.

Social media also shifts Royal Correspondents engagements with the monarchy itself, considering the monarchy has its own social media accounts. On Twitter, @RoyalFamily, @ClarenceHouse and @KensingtonRoyal are run as official accounts from the royal Communications Offices, and they also have official Facebook and Instagram accounts. Royal news will often be released on these profiles, and they are then retweeted, quote retweeted, or linked to by Royal Correspondents on their own profiles. This is direct sourcing of royal news, which as described above, is rare for Royal Correspondents to get access to in a culture of royal secrecy. In quote retweeting the official royal posts, Royal Correspondents can develop the stories with their own interpretations and offer commentary or context for audiences, which in turn positions them as the cultural intermediaries who are interpreting the social centre for less-informed audiences. For example, Sky's Royal Correspondent Rhiannon Mills quote retweeted a tweet from the @KensingtonRoyal account, signed by Prince William, criticising the racist abuse of England football players after the Euros 2020 (@SkyRhiannon, 2021). Mills commented that the tweet was an 'impassioned intervention', and that it is 'worth remembering William tried to get them to act on cyberbullying before and is president of @FootballAssoc'. This cultural intermediation gives context to the tweet from a seemingly informed perspective, while also framing the tweet in a positive way – 'impassioned' – to shape how audiences might interpret it.

Sourcing royal news in this way, however, means that it is not *exclusive* royal news. Rather, Royal Correspondents are receiving the news at the same time as their competitors, other non-specialist journalists, and the general public. Scholars Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2010) use the phrase 'context collapse' to describe how social media collapses distinct contexts of time and space, and brings together audiences who are otherwise in distinct social groups, for example celebrity and fan, who all abound on the same platform. Pre-social media, they argue, having such intimate contact with celebrities would have been near impossible. This helps us to understand the Twitter dynamic between royals, Royal Correspondents, and royal audiences (with the caveat that it is a team of communications staff, rather than royals themselves, who usually run the royal social media accounts). Royals have, as I described above, typically kept themselves very distanced from Royal Correspondents and fans, choosing to let minimal information leave Buckingham Palace, and Royal Correspondents have relied on secondary sources to attempt to confirm stories. On Twitter, royals abound on the same platform as those reporting on them, *and* the audiences consuming that news. Audiences can engage with the Royal Correspondents' interpretation of the news, and/or they can engage directly with the royal post itself. While quote retweeting does give the Royal Correspondent some room to offer cultural intermediation, Twitter alters their role in being the only ones privy to royal news. This is 'context collapse', where some of the old classed hierarchies and boundaries of royal news have been eroded and rewritten. While Royal Correspondents inevitably hold sway over online royal news – the 'blue tick' of verification is one such example of how they are constructed as 'trusted, elite sources' – audiences can also access and interpret this royal news themselves. This perhaps goes some way towards destabilising the classed inequalities I have described in royal reporting.

Conclusion

This article has explored the Royal Correspondent as a cultural intermediary, considering in particular the dimensions of class inequality, 'capital', and elite networks central to their role. The term cultural intermediary is useful because it describes how Royal Correspondents 'frame' royal stories for audiences, and also how their position as 'experts' gives value to royal news. This is pertinent given the often privileged positions of successful Royal Correspondents, whereby only those with the appropriate 'capital' to exist in elite

social circles will succeed. Hence, the framing of news about the monarchy, an elite institution, is being 'framed' by a cultural intermediary equally invested in maintaining classed privilege. I also connected this to Couldry's concept of 'the myth of the mediated centre', building this using a framing of 'the centre' being inherently classed, to argue that Royal Correspondents both *are* the centre and *interpret* the centre for audiences, leading to a complex relationship between Royal Correspondents, the monarchy, and the general public. I have detailed the networks Royal Correspondents rely upon, the hierarchical and nepotistic structuring of access to royal news, and the 'homophilic' tendencies of these expert journalists, in order to understand the function and characteristics of the Royal Correspondent in the UK today. These classed dimensions of Royal Correspondent work construct multiple forms of legitimacy and value around royal news.

What does this tell us about the production of royal news? At the beginning of this article, I quoted Royal Correspondent Valentine Low, who said 'no one ever sets out to be a Royal Correspondent' and if they did 'they are quite clearly far too interested in the royals and therefore in danger of becoming a full-blooded sycophant'. While Royal Correspondents may, indeed, not *set out* to become Royal Correspondents, this does not account for the broader structures of royal news I have described in this paper, that force even the most critical Royal Correspondents to rely on established, loyal news sources. And as we have seen, these loyal news stories often come from within elite networks. It is important to flag, again, that the cultural industries generally are dominated by elite actors: this is not unique to Royal Correspondents. However, it seems especially pertinent here given that the systems of royal news reporting are designed in service of the monarchy, and how this influences the cultural intermediation of Royal Correspondents.

Although Royal Correspondents are often the subject of mirth from those who disapprove of their news reporting roles (Blackall, 2021), they, and more importantly the systems they belong to, are still not subject to systemic critical analysis in popular culture or scholarly research. The role of the Royal Correspondent in upholding systems of capital, elites and privilege is vital to understanding the broader landscape of both UK journalism and the UK's feelings towards its royal family. What does it mean when only a handful of elite actors get access to royal news, and can choose to spread or hide information as they wish? What

does it mean when the actors responsible for producing a large proportion of royal news, and certainly the royal news which has the most semblance of legitimacy, is produced by those within the same privileged class? These are the bigger questions about monarchy, media and power that need addressing further (XXXX) if we are to understand the influence of the British royal family in British culture.

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