

## **'If you do hold them to account, are you going to find yourself hitting more brick walls later?': Royal Correspondents and royal news production**

### **Abstract**

This article outlines the structures, systems, rules and experiences of reporting on the British monarchy in the UK news today. The functions underpinning royal news are usually abstracted in the public imaginary. Using in-depth interviews with Royal Correspondents, and a broader understanding of royal news production, it explores the formal and informal agreements which shape reporting on royalty. The article addresses how the systems of royal news production significantly obstruct the ability to scrutinize the monarchy. The data illustrates the various frustrations of Royal Correspondents in terms of access, getting responses from the monarchy's Communications teams, and the potential professional risk of 'getting it wrong'. This has significant implications for questions of media, culture and ideology in the UK media, and the power afforded to the British monarchy in regulating its own media coverage.

### **Keywords**

*Royal Correspondents, accountability, UK news, news production, news values, British monarchy, power*

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In January 2020, when Prince Harry and Meghan Markle announced they were 'stepping back' as senior members of the royal family, their website detailed a new media strategy for the couple, signalling a broader disagreement with the foundations of the media-monarchy relationship (2020). This involved 'adopting a revised media approach to ensure diverse and open access to their work', including engaging with grassroots or new journalists; inviting specialist media to engagements; sharing information via social media channels; and 'no longer participat[ing] in the Royal Rota system': a traditional rota system which grants exclusive access rights to royal events for a select group of media outlets, who must apply for a pass. The announcement also explicitly criticised Royal Correspondents:

Britain's Royal Correspondents are regarded internationally as credible sources of both the work of members of The Royal Family as well as of their private lives. This misconception propels coverage that is often carried by other outlets around the world, amplifying frequent misreporting

Royal Correspondents are journalists who report almost exclusively on royal news, and many mainstream media outlets employ one, including broadcasters such as the BBC, ITV, Channel 5, 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!*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vanity Fair*. Of those Royal Correspondents employed by the publications listed above, nine are white men, four are white women, one is a woman of colour and one is a man of colour (surmised from publicly available data).

Prince Harry and Meghan Markle do not call out *individual* Royal Correspondents. Rather, they homogenise the specialist journalists from distinct publications and imply that there is no such thing as a 'credible' Royal Correspondent. The couple have gone on to criticise Royal Correspondents in their Netflix documentary series 'Harry and Meghan' (2022), and in Harry's memoir, *Spare* (2023). For our purposes, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's statements lays bare some of the structures of royal news production that have otherwise remained either abstracted, taken-for-granted, or entirely masked in the public imaginary. News about the British monarchy is ubiquitous, and royal events, charity initiatives, and stories of 'family life' are regularly covered across the international news media landscape. Yet, critical academic analysis of royal news production remains remarkably sparse. There is some work on the media and the monarchy more broadly (Nairn, 1994; Blain and O'Donnell, 2003; Otnes and Maclaran, 2015; Clancy, 2021), particularly historically (Owens, 2019; Plunkett, 2003, Sharpe, 2009). Yet, there have been no academic studies on the *technicalities* of royal news production: its systems, structures and rules, its key actors, and the consequences of royal reporting. Given the centrality of the monarchy to British social, political and culture life, such study is pivotal.

This article draws on in-depth interviews with Royal Correspondents, and uses the data from these interviews to frame, contextualise, and elaborate on wider news articles and reports about royal news production in the UK. It addresses two questions: what are the structures, systems, rules and experiences of royal news reporting in the UK today? And to what extent do these systems facilitate holding the monarchy to account? While the extent to which UK journalism fulfils its 'fourth estate' function to hold the powerful to account is disputable (Ramsay, 2019), with the monarchy, it seems there is seldom even capacity. As this article demonstrates, many of the Royal Correspondents I spoke to suggested that this accountability role is hindered because of the systems and structures around royal news which inherently curtail criticism. I argue this has significant implications for questions of media, culture and ideology in the UK media, and for the power of the British monarchy given its seeming ability to manage its own media coverage.

### **Holding the powerful to account?**

Researchers in media studies and journalism studies have long studied the role of journalism in accountability and scrutiny, a responsibility some have called the 'watchdog role' of journalists (Mwesige, 2004; Waisbord, 2000) or their 'fourth estate' function (Felle, 2015). This is contextualised in classical liberal theories about the relations between news organisations and the state (Siebert et al., 1963).

The extent to which this occurs in practice is more complex. Research has found that publics believe that news journalism fails to appropriately scrutinize powerful institutions and individuals (Newman et al., 2019), and indeed many believe that the media is actively complicit in upholding systems of inequality (Palmer et al., 2020). 'Scandals' in the UK media, such as the 'phone hacking scandal' where newspapers were found to have hacked into the voicemails of key public figures, have eroded public trust in tabloid media (Coleman, 2012). The reporting of key political moments such as Brexit were ideologically driven by cultural populism, drawing on anti-establishment narratives even whilst Brexit disproportionately benefitted - and was supported by - elites, thus showing favourability for the powerful (Moran and Littler, 2020). Organisations like the Media Reform Coalition have demonstrated the concentrated ownership of UK media which 'creates conditions in which wealthy individuals and organisations can amass vast political and economic power and

distort the media landscape to suit their interests' (2021: 3). Aeron Davis (2018) uses the framing of 'the Establishment' to describe how, in a society like the UK with concentrated ownership amongst the political, economic and media elite, key institutions invest in one another's power and seek to uphold the systems that benefit everyone.

Scholars have argued that news media's fourth estate function has been further complicated by systems like corporate public relations, which they suggest manipulate coverage to be more favourable towards the powerful (Tumber 1993; Ewen, 1996). It is, after all, the most wealthy who can afford to pay for elite PR advice. Others, like Aeron Davis, have critiqued this take because it relies on reductionist understandings of audiences as 'cultural dupes' (2000), understandings which British Cultural Studies has long rejected. However, for our purposes, it is interesting to consider how systems like public relations influence the values of news *production*. Royal news written by Royal Correspondents is shaped by a series of formal and informal codes. These then influence the experiences of Royal Correspondents in collecting news, the stories they write, and most importantly, the extent to which they are able to hold the powerful royals to account. While the idealised 'fourth estate' function is increasingly at risk anyway, this article demonstrates that the systems of royal news production inherently hinders it before it even begins.

### **Methodology**

This paper takes a mixed-methodology approach, drawing on interview data, and discourse analysis of news stories about royal news production. The interviews were conducted as part of a related project about Royal Correspondents as cultural intermediaries (Clancy, 2022), and I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with three Royal Correspondents in mid-2020. Sourcing participants and getting consent from Royal Correspondents was a challenge, made more difficult by the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Royal Correspondents are not a huge demographic group. I identified thirty to contact, meaning my success rate in undertaking three interviews was ten per cent.

These access difficulties were compounded by the status of my interviewees. As Hanne Bruun argues, 'elite interviewing' (2016: 131) means that the power imbalances between the researcher and the participant flip from the usual position where the researcher is

‘superior’, to the participant having power over the researcher. Royal Correspondents 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 such, they are difficult to engage, and adaptations must be made to research to ensure their trust is maintained. 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 my elite interviewees some control over their representation to mitigate concerns about reputational damage, as well as ensuring, as much as possible, that anonymity was fulfilled where required. I gave my interviewees the option of being anonymous or identified in the data. One chose to be identified: Stephen Bates, former Royal Correspondent at *the Guardian*. The other two chose to remain anonymous, and I will refer to them here as RC1 and RC2. Given their public profiles, no further demographic information will be used as it risks identifying them.

The interviews were in-depth, giving Royal Correspondents opportunity to reflect on their working practices, day-to-day activities, and feelings on royal news production more broadly. As Mira Crouch and Heather McKenzie argue, ‘it is much more important for the research to be intensive’ over a small sample size to ensure a ‘depth’ of understanding, contextualising, and theorising interview data (2006: 494). I have combined the interviews with discourse analysis of royal news production, including news stories and documentaries about Royal Correspondents and royal journalism generally. This includes blog posts and news articles, social media reports, published memoirs from Royal Correspondents (Bond, 2001; Arbiter, 2014), 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).

As with most issues regarding monarchy (Clancy, 2021), there are layers of obfuscation and a lack of transparency around royal news production, and this feeds into the amount of material available. This article therefore pieces together disparate accounts alongside a more general understanding of the media-monarchy relationship, which I have built over

the past eight years researching the British monarchy. In so doing, it seeks to expose on-the-ground experiences of dealing with royal news.

### **Reporting on monarchy**

Royal news has existed, in various forms, for hundreds of years. Monarchy was historically mediated using portraiture and coins (Sharpe, 2009), Queen Victoria was the first to feature in newsreels (Plunkett, 2003), in the twentieth century mass produced portraits were sold as souvenirs (Owens, 2019), Princesses Margaret and Diana experienced the glare of the paparazzi (Merrin, 1999), and the monarchy today makes use of social media (Clancy, 2021). The central role of the media in reproducing monarchy has been explored in popular biography (Pimlott, 2021) and critical analysis (Nairn, 1994; Blain and O'Donnell, 2003; Otnes and MacLaran, 2015). Some journalism studies work has explored the monarchy, from Teri Finneman and Ryan J Thomas's work on news media 'photo scandals' of Kate Middleton and Prince Harry (2013), to those studying Princess Diana's relationship with the tabloid media (Hindman, 2003; Sharkey, 1999). These accounts address the *effects* of royal news, rather than the structure and organisation of royal news production.

Within the Royal Household – the team of staff working for the monarchy in its palaces – there is a Communications Office, which deals with all royal media. The individuals heading these offices often changes rapidly, including with a change of monarch. At the time of writing, the Communications Secretary to The King and Queen is Tobynd Andreae, former co-deputy editor of the Daily Mail (Hall, 2022), and the Communications Secretary to the Prince and Princess of Wales is Lee Thompson, former vice-president of global communications at NBC Universal (Moore, 2022). Past Communications Secretaries have had connections to Sony, Channel 5 and B Sky B (Clancy, 2021). As I describe elsewhere, this demonstrates how the monarchy's 'communications team have skills in packaging royal events for the news cycle' (ibid.: 38). They are experienced journalists and broadcasters, with contacts, former alliances, and practiced skills. The Royal Correspondents I interviewed said they would go to 'the palace' (RC1), the 'press officers' (RC1) and 'their offices' (RC2) if they had a royal story that needed confirming, which all referred to this Communications team.

As specialised journalists, Royal Correspondents are central to the royal news landscape. I asked my interviewees to describe their 'average day or week', and the Royal Correspondents described a mix of 'diary events' and 'work[ing] at getting your own stories' (RC1). 'Diary events' – royal engagements such as public visits or speeches – consist of journalists accompanying royals to events, and 'walk[ing] around behind them as they talk to different people' (RC1). Then:

when they're [the royals] done speaking to that person, you can then go on and ask the person what was said. If you interview a couple of people, you might overhear something and get a story out of something somebody says. Often these are kind of benign - that are effectively PR for the royals and whatever contacts they work with (RC1)

As RC1 suggests here, these 'chats' to members of the public do not happen by chance. Who speaks to a royal is tightly choreographed, as is the choice of location, what the royal does, how long they spend there, photography opportunities, and so on (Clancy, 2021). Locations of royal visits are organised systematically to ensure fairness to different local, national and international geographies, and are typically matched with individual royals' "interests" in order to maximise audiences (Bates, 2015). A small team from the palace will undertake a reconnaissance tour of the area prior to the visit (Arbiter, 2014), to plan the royal activities and ensure the space is suitable. In 2015, it cost £12,000 in flights alone to fund one reconnaissance trip to South Africa (Herald Scotland, 2016a; Arbiter, 2014). Royal Correspondents are specifically invited on international tours, and their travel, accommodation and itinerary are organised by Buckingham Palace so they can follow the royals. Elsewhere, I have written about this as a form of 'embedded journalism', which is usually used to dispatch journalists to armed conflict areas alongside military units (Clancy, 2021; see also Brandenburg, 2007). As I argue, such organisation 'raises ethical issues around impartiality and objectivity' in royal reporting (Clancy, 2021: 156), given that the journalists are reliant on the hosts for mobility, safety, and access.

At large scale royal events, such as weddings, there are 'fixed points where they set up lots of photographers and a couple of reporters' (RC1) and that is the only place journalists are

allowed to stand. As Bates told me, ‘you got fairly extensive briefings’ about royal events beforehand to know what to expect, including timings, clothing, expected speeches. etc. The Royal Correspondents are therefore being handed a huge amount of information by their subjects, which they *could* then directly report within the remit of what the Communications Offices had planned.

Access to most of these tours and events is determined by the Royal Rota System. The Royal Rota is a system that news organisations must apply to if they want access to royal events. Applications go to Buckingham Palace, who then approve or reject them. Information on how and why applications are approved or rejected is not publicly available, demonstrating a lack of accountability. 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.). This means that other news organisations are reliant on Royal Rota journalists, who *must* share their materials. 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*. Note that this never includes independent or ‘up-and-coming’ organisations and journalists: only established ones are listed, which brings with it its own set of norms and ideologies in terms of who is permitted access to royalty (Clancy, 2022). In his memoir *Spare*, Prince Harry writes that the Royal Rota System ‘stank to high heaven. It discouraged fair competition, engendered cronyism, encouraged a small mob of hacks to feel entitled’ (2023: 330). As I explore below, the Royal Correspondents also reflected critically on this system.

There are also informal, ad-hoc agreements between the monarchy and the media, that are much harder to define and calculate. In the famous interview with Oprah Winfrey, where Prince Harry and Meghan Markle described their experiences in the royal family, Prince Harry referred to these agreements as an ‘invisible contract’ between reporters and royals (2021). Markle even claimed that tabloid reporters have ‘holiday parties’ at the Palace, although many journalists have denied this (Vincent, 2021). An example of these agreements in action are the so-called ‘pressure cooker agreements’ (Hewlett, 2015), which

emerged after the death of Princess Diana due to the paparazzi being blamed for her car crash, and attempts afterwards to protect her young sons. Palace officials negotiated a deal where the paparazzi would leave Princes William and Harry alone during their education, in return for intermittent occasions when they would be invited to staged photograph opportunities (for William's eighteenth birthday at Eton College, for example). These would appear to the public as though they were intimate glimpses at royal life.

The 'pressure cooker agreement' provoked criticism from some journalists. In November 1998, for example, *the Mirror* published the headline 'Harry's had an accident: but we're not allowed to tell you' (Voice of the Mirror, 1998), with the story claiming that the monarchy 'banned all newspapers from revealing what happened to Harry' at school. The Palace asked the newspaper to apologise, to which they responded with the headline 'we're unable to apologise for a story we didn't publish' (Kerr, 1998). Here, *the Mirror* lampoons the curtailing of press freedoms on royal news.

It is within all of these systems and structures, in their various levels of 'official' and 'unofficial', that Royal Correspondents are operating.

### **'The palace is very good at frustrating the journalistic process'**

The Royal Correspondent interviewees all spoke at length about the challenges of getting access to royal news. RC1 detailed this:

The palace is very good at frustrating the journalistic process so [...] a lot of the time they will simply say 'no comment', or sometimes they even say things are untrue and in the fullness of time you learn it wasn't right, and you find that they were true [...] And news desks tend to get very frustrated, they sometimes want to read a lot into 'no comment' responses from the palace, because one week the palace will say the story is not true, and then the next week they might say no comment, and the news desk will come down and say "well last week they said it's not true and next week they're not denying it, so does that mean it is true?"

RC1's claim suggests that the monarchy puts barriers in place to prevent Royal Correspondents from reporting on royal news, or at least to make their job more difficult. Richard Sambrook (2010) suggests one key function for all Correspondent journalists is to 'witness' events and be there to translate them to audiences: a role which seems to be hindered for Royal Correspondents. Receiving 'no comment' replies from sources is not unusual for journalists, but it appears that the issue here is changing responses over time, which leads news organisations to make assumptions and write a story. This is perhaps partly due to the long-running nature of royal news, which continues indefinitely, rather than a breaking-news story over within a few weeks. If news organisations are repeatedly told 'no comment', yet need to produce royal news to attract audiences, it is perhaps not surprising that they are noting patterns in Palace responses and writing stories from the limited information they have.

Of course, news is always a constructed product (Archetti, 2010; Schlesinger, 1978), and the processes by which all journalists produce knowledge and corroborate information is difficult to ascertain (Godler and Reich, 2017; Ekström, 2002). But both RC1 and RC2 noted that receiving 'no comment' replies in their Royal Correspondent role felt different to other journalist roles:

I think one [thing] that is quite unique to royal reporting is the lack of guidance from the palace (RC1)

It's a case of working out how much you can push a palace on giving a response, and when to give up and accept they're not going to comment [...] that's possibly more unique to royals, than say for example, [the] health [sector] - you wouldn't necessarily give up for health, as quickly as you might give up with the royals because you know they are not going to tell you. Whereas, if the health sector doesn't tell you something you think, "no, no. You're going to tell me" (RC2)

RC2 suggests that you have to decide whether to keep pushing for a story, or to just give up and accept you are not going to find out, which seems to happen often. This demonstrates that RC1's suggestion of the palace 'frustrating the journalistic process' seems to be

succeeding. According to the UK and Ireland National Union of Journalists Code of Conduct (1936), journalists should 'strive... to ensure that information disseminated is honestly conveyed, accurate and fair'. If Royal Correspondents are repeatedly trying to confirm their stories, only to be shut down by the palace, this makes fair and transparent reporting on the monarchy very difficult.

RC1 notes that part of the issue here is the limited number of sources available to ask about royal news. The Communications Offices are not strictly sources, rather they are more akin to public relations managers and spin doctors, yet they are amongst the only people Royal Correspondents can ask. The monarchy actively protects itself by ensuring sources do not talk:

Let's say you're a Westminster correspondent, there are a lot of people in Westminster and you have access to a lot of people you can talk to, to try and stand your story up. So you're obviously not going to ring the Prime Minister on his mobile and ask him, but there'll be other senior ministers that a lobby correspondent might get close to, senior staff members from both within governments and from the opposition benches, you've got backbench MPs, MPs on select committees, all these people who are in positions to know information [...] but the royal family have been successful at building a wall around all the people within the royal household (RC1)

'Building a wall' suggests that those within the palace, who would be considered 'expert sources' in news journalism terms (Albæk, 2011), are sworn to secrecy or are not easily accessible. Indeed, royal commentator Brian Hoey (2003) claims all staff in the palaces must sign a confidentiality agreement upon employment, which imposes tight restrictions on what they can discuss. The consequences of breaking these agreements were revealed in 2003, when *Daily Mirror* journalist Ryan Parry posed as a footman to work at Buckingham Palace for two months, before documenting his experiences in the newspaper. Buckingham Palace sued Parry for breach of contract, and his stories were redacted (Byrne, 2003).

While on the one hand there is limited access to royal news sources, Royal Correspondents also spoke of another level of exclusivity in terms of which journalists *do* get stories on the rare occasions they are released. RC2 notes:

I find the Royal Rota quite frustrating [...] it does constantly seem like I've asked exactly the right questions to the palace and I've been told I'm not going to get [a] comment or I'm sent to another department to ask the same questions, and then found myself sitting at home on a Saturday morning and the answer to my question is being broken as a headline from a reporter on the Royal Rota (RC2)

This suggests that it is a select group of journalists, namely those on the Royal Rota, who are being given news stories. This means that royal news is reported in a select few publications first: those who have been approved by the monarchy for a place on the Royal Rota. Therefore, it might seem that royal news is being tactically broken *on specific platforms*, at the expense of those journalists from other outlets who must rely on other journalists' materials. Such 'copy and paste' forms of journalism have been referred to as 'churnalism' (Atkins, 2011), which in many ways the Royal Rota seems to actively embolden. This then creates a hierarchy of both royal news reporters and royal news itself, where the same news organisations get reputations for breaking exclusive royal news and 'having access'. This also influences the tenor of royal news. If the same news organisations always report royal news, they are likely to report it from the same ideological position each time, therefore royal news typically takes one 'shape' which audiences become accustomed to.

RC2 talks about these issues in terms of their personal 'frustration'; that is, how it affects them doing their job. While this is important, as it speaks to the day-to-day practices of Royal Correspondent work, for our purposes here it is important to ask what this means on a broader level in terms of the culture and ideology of royal news production.

### **'They're quite like the Pope in the Vatican'**

In all of my interviews, and in the other published accounts from Royal Correspondents, they spoke in terms which suggested a hierarchy between the royals and journalists.

Contact between royals and journalists is minimal:

unlike fields such as politics, sport and the arts, the people you are writing about don't actually talk to you. Not if they can help it (Low, 2021)

In most briefs in journalism there is a far more direct route to the heart of a story. You simply call up the person in question and discuss the rumours, reports or allegations with them. [...] [e.g. Bond tells a story about having breakfast meetings with Prime Ministers]. But it is rare, indeed, to have an opportunity like that with any of the Royal Family (Bond, 2002: 76)

It remains exceptional for any of the royals to give in-depth interviews to journalists, and the Queen never did so. As I have argued elsewhere (Clancy, 2021), maintaining a balance between being visible and being invisible is key to reproducing monarchical power. Monarchy must be visible enough that it remains present in the public imagination – usually in either hyper-visible forms such as royal ceremony, or through discourses of ‘familialism’ with royal babies and weddings – yet invisible enough that its power or wealth are not brought into widespread debate. Interviews might threaten precisely this balance, given that they offer intimate encounters with public figures (Usher, 2015). Former Royal Correspondent Stephen Bates discussed these issues of in/visibility in terms of institutional power:

The royal family are an extraordinary institution [laugh] in journalists' terms because you never get to speak to them directly or very, very seldom [...] And the royal family isn't sort of a self-fuelled institution. You get to see them, you get to hear them, but you don't get to speak to them, not very often. Anyway, [in that] they're quite like the Pope in the Vatican [laugh] (Bates)

Bates notes the contradictions here in terms of visibility and invisibility. Monarchy is not ‘self-fuelled’, it *needs* public consent to continue in its current form (Clancy, 2021). It is therefore notable that ‘you don't get to speak to them’, because this places a distance between the royals and the public who live under, and therefore consent to, constitutional

monarchy. The public are not able to interrogate their unelected monarchy, and most media coverage has been mediated and precisely choreographed.

Bates compares the monarchy to 'the Pope in the Vatican'. The Pope is politically unique: sovereign of the Vatican City State, separate from Rome through claims to the Lateran Treaty 1929. Due to this, the Catholic Church has claims to statehood, and the Vatican and the Pope have immunity from civil or criminal trial. Instead, the Vatican deals internally with priests and other religious figures through canon law which requires 'pontifical secrecy'. Many have claimed that this lack of external accountability, and the rarity of any convictions arising from canon 'trials', has led to crimes being undetected or unpunished (Eagleton, 2010). In comparing the royals to the Pope, Bates notes practices of secrecy which essentially mean externally holding the royals to account in media culture is arduous. Although monarchy's secrecy is not formalised in a treaty, the informal organisation of royal news reporting (for example, the reluctance to push for further comment, the exclusivity of royal circles, systems like the Royal Rota) means that monarchy is afforded degrees of secrecy and the ability to somewhat control the narrative around itself. Albeit this is within limitations that, of course, there is always the possibility other news organisations will break informal agreements. In *Spare* (2023), Prince Harry writes of his frustration when an Australian magazine broke embargoed news of his deployment to Afghanistan, meaning he had to withdraw.

I am not disputing the importance of ethical and moral boundaries in tabloid journalists' attempts to gather stories. Much has been written in journalism studies about rights to privacy versus exposing public interest stories (Finneman and Thomas, 2013; Gauthier, 1999; Hodges, 1994). But the monarchy is a public institution, and relies on public funding. Therefore, as RC1 says, it is not a straightforwardly private institution:

it creates a very weird situation where ordinarily you would think weddings are private and a birth was private and things like that. But, in reality, a birth of a royal is the creation of the heir to the throne, potentially, and a wedding is somebody entering public service in Britain (RC1)

RC1 says that often, journalist queries are dismissed by the palace as being about a 'private' matter, and therefore they are not going to comment. But in fact, it is more complicated than this because the royal public/private boundary is blurred. I have explored elsewhere how women's reproductive capacities, usually considered private family matters (although highly politicised, as feminist scholars have shown, see Briggs, 2017), are central to monarchical power, because reproduction in a royal context has two meanings: biological reproduction of a baby, and institutional reproduction of monarchy through royal dynasty (Clancy, 2021). As RC1 says, this means that moments like weddings and babies are *not* solely private, as royal private lives structure our public institutions. It follows then that these moments require accountability, but the systems of royal news production do not necessarily support this given that they seem to rely on a basic understanding of private/public.

Two Royal Correspondents also talked about more explicit consequences of holding royals to account, or of doing so and getting it wrong:

I think the things that always end up worrying you is if you do hold them to account, are you going to find yourself hitting more brick walls later, and it's a big risk because if it turns out you were going hit more brick walls, you might not find that out until you've taken the risk of holding someone to account... Well, this is probably my personal concern rather than anything that's been communicated to me or any personal experience [...] I find it quite difficult to get stuff off the palace anyway, so I want to be able to report fairly but also keep the right people on side to make sure I can continue to report and don't end up in a situation where they won't tell me anything because that would make my job even harder (RC2)

in some ways this is actually the real art of being a Royal Correspondent, it's in this particular area where you've got to try to work out what can be published safely. And if you get something wrong you will get a big comeback from people, if the royal family starts complaining about stuff, people really listen to them and nobody generally believes the press. If you get something wrong, you're not going to have any friends in the rest of the society (RC1)

Both Royal Correspondents speak here of exclusion: of being excluded (even further) from access to royal stories, and of being excluded from 'the rest of society' if they are seen to annoy the royal family. RC2 notes that this is more 'personal concern' rather than any formal warnings, but the fact that these concerns are felt remains alarming for the transparency of royal news, as it is clearly limiting what the Royal Correspondents feel able to write. The culture surrounding monarchy – which as we have seen, is structured around systems of exclusion – means that Royal Correspondents are judged by what they say and do. Making sure you can 'continue to report' is the main focus because their entire job is reporting royal news, and so risking this is not an option. Rather, part of the job is 'keep[ing] people on side', which essentially means not disturbing the status quo. There is an element of self-policing here which speaks to notions of the surveillance society (Foucault, 1995; Andrejevic, 2006), whereby there is the constant threat of Royal Correspondent's sources, or the monarchy itself, watching and monitoring royal reporting.

This threat had interesting implications in 2012, when British media were faced with the choice of whether to publish two controversial royal images: Prince Harry partying naked in a Las Vegas hotel room, and Kate Middleton sunbathing topless in France (Finneman and Thomas, 2013). British newspapers chose not to publish the French paparazzi photos of Kate Middleton, but *the Sun* did publish the naked photo of Harry on its front page. Teri Finneman and Ryan J. Thomas discuss this in terms of the ethics of the paparazzi and tabloid journalism, arguing that the suppression of these photographs evidences 'a cautious and qualified step forward for British press performance' (2014: 419). I do not disagree that the ethics of the tabloid media require significant attention, but perhaps a more pertinent question is why media outlets hesitated when publishing royal nudes, when those of other celebrities are published globally (Lawson, 2015). The question is less about right or wrong, but rather the exceptionality applied to the royals over other public figures, and what this reveals to us about the politics of royal news reporting. Another case demonstrating consequences for journalists who annoy the royal family is the BBC's complaint that, after Princess Diana's interview with *BBC Panorama* in 1995 where she discussed Prince Charles's affair and the impact of royal life on her mental health, BBC lost exclusive rights to the Queen's Christmas message, and had to share it with ITV (Hastings, 2006).

The Royal Correspondent's concerns about liability are also not entirely baseless, given that in recent years we have seen a number of cases where royals sue media outlets for stories they claim are damaging (Davies, 2021). Scholars of journalism and law have argued that the threat of liability, which largely comes from elite actors who can afford to sue at will, is highly restrictive for journalistic freedom and professional conduct (Freedman, 2008). The threat of liability, and indeed the more subtle threat of removing access, does much to hinder the role of journalists to hold public and private institutions to account (Ettema, 2007).

RC1 claimed above that 'if you get something wrong, you're not going to have any friends in the rest of the society'. This phrase, 'the rest of society', refers to other UK journalists, and to the communities surrounding the royals (for example, aristocratic and elite friends). The quote demonstrates multiple levels of (mis)trust, which limit the scope of critical royal reporting, considering Royal Correspondents rely on external sources for royal news so they cannot alienate them. Of course, journalists always risk losing contacts. But again with royal news, there seems to be another level of exclusivity *in addition to* the layers that already exist in getting access in the first place. The risk of alienating people suggests there is a reluctance to be associated with anyone deemed to have not behaved appropriately towards the royals, hinting at informal hierarchies and exclusions within royal news culture society, where it is the royals who are protected.

Indeed, RC1 claims it is the royals who will be believed if they were to lodge a complaint, whilst journalists will be vilified. This takes on particular resonance in the current populist media landscape, where 'post truth' and 'anti-expert' sentiments are influencing people's engagement with global news. Due to social media and other digital platforms restructuring how we engage with news (Fletcher, and Park, 2017), and populist world leaders who rely on a 'cult of personality' (Reyes, 2020), there is generally more public distrust in news organisations because they are seen as elitist. What is notable and somewhat contradictory here is that RC1 claims the public are investing their trust *in another institution*: the monarchy, which is perhaps the most elitist institution of all. This suggests a level of cognitive dissonance in how the public understands these institutions. In my previous work,

I have explored how the monarchy rejects elitism to represent itself as a 'family', to circumvent questions about power and privilege (Clancy, 2021). But there are important questions to ask here about public responses to monarchy and how it is understood as a trustworthy and legitimate institution, despite its extremely privileged position. This seems to present real risks to the transparency of news reporting.

## Conclusion

In the introduction, we explored Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's comments about the (lack of) credibility of Royal Correspondents. In light of the data presented here, and the various levels of management and control over Royal Correspondent access, it seems pertinent to ask whether the structures of royal news production are even set up to allow Royal Correspondents to report transparently. Indeed, the media-monarchy relationship is shaped around control – carefully choreographed news stories which keep the monarchy in the public imaginary while ensuring most critical attention is suppressed. In the interview with Oprah Winfrey, Prince Harry said 'I'm acutely aware of where my family stand and how scared they are of the tabloids turning on them' (2021). This seems to demonstrate their awareness of how media culture is one of the key vehicles for the reproduction of the British monarchy. While it needs celebratory media coverage, if the tabloids were to hold the royals to account, as it were, this would risk undermining monarchy's powerful position in society.

This article has demonstrated a power struggle between the monarchy and the journalists tasked with reporting on it. While the monarchy relies upon their reporting, the reporters live under the formal and informal rules by which royal news is governed. In an age of digital media, when the rules of journalistic practice are being dismantled and rewritten (Harcup and O'Neill, 2016), the fact that these agreements have survived seems extraordinary. It speaks, in many ways, to the hierarchies *within* 'the Establishment' of elite actors and institutions governing British society (Davis, 2018).

While we see royal news everywhere, everyday, the processes by which this news came to be are abstracted, taken-for-granted, or entirely masked. Being held accountable in this way should be central in any democratic society. While there is a question mark over whether

most of the UK media fulfil their 'fourth estate' function to hold the powerful to account, with the monarchy, news production is organised in a way that ensures there is never such an intent, nor capacity. To understand the monarchy's continued power and influence in British society, we must understand the structures that bring royalty into the public imaginary.

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