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Eva Nieto McAvoy & Stuart Allan

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Mediations of cultural policymaking during COVID-19: British newspaper reporting of the Culture Recovery Fund

Eva Nieto McAvoy  and Stuart Allan 

School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

ABSTRACT

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, cultural policymaking frequently came to the fore in media debates about the impact of the crisis and measures to alleviate it. In this article, we present evidence of how newspaper coverage of the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) identified and framed competing perceptions of the relative utility of policymaking in this context, while also problematising familiar assumptions about the CCIs among policymakers, journalists and (arguably) the public. Specifically, we analysed British news and editorial items (n.4,162) published from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020. It offers a novel investigation into the ways in which media and policy rhetoric overlap, interact and influence each other. In doing so, this article contributes a unique perspective to the study and practice of cultural policy, bringing to light the typically underexplored role of the news media in shaping the narratives driving cultural policy deliberation and action.

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KEYWORDS

Cultural policy; media; COVID-19; Culture Recovery Fund (CRF); cultural and creative industries (CCIs)

Introduction

It is fair to say that cultural policy does not usually make headlines (Comunian and Conor 2017; Tröndle and Rhomberg 2011). News coverage of the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) during the COVID-19 pandemic has been an exceptional moment of crisis, opening up a unique space to investigate the dynamics of related reporting, while also problematising familiar assumptions about the creative economy among policymakers, journalists and (arguably) the public. Our principal aim in this article is to contribute to scholarly analyses of cultural policy discourses around the crisis of, and the subsequent support to, the CCIs (e.g. Banks and O'Connor 2020; Yue 2022). Rather than focusing on policy documents, we offer an in-depth study of newspaper coverage of these discourses in order to bring to light the typically underexplored role of the news media in shaping the narratives driving cultural policy deliberation and action.

This article presents the empirical findings of a research study into the framing of key issues for the CCI sector in British national newspaper coverage, with particular reference to 3–10 July 2020, a formative period of reporting on the UK government's strategic support (see also Nieto McAvoy and A. Ostrowska 2022). Specifically, it was on 5 July that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) announced a £1.57 billion rescue package – the Culture Recovery Fund (CRF) – designed to sustain the country's culture and heritage sectors facing acute challenges by the pandemic's economic repercussions. Banks and O'Connor (2020) note that the media coverage of the celebrity-led campaign for the government to financially support the cultural sector might have had some influence on the launch of the rescue package. In identifying and evaluating the terms of

CONTACT Eva Nieto McAvoy  nietomcavoye@cardiff.ac.uk  School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, 2 Central Square, Cardiff CF10 1FS, UK

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reference emergent in the newspaper coverage, examining how they shaped the parameters for the news reporting and commentaries on the implications of the crisis for the cultural sector, the article focuses on the role of the press in helping to set the agenda for policy deliberation and debate regarding the perceived challenges and needs of the CCIs during the pandemic.

By analysing the ways in which the CRF and corresponding policy changes were reported by national newspapers, we offer an entry point for enquiries into the role the media play in brokering relations between different CCI stakeholders during this period. Our analysis garners insights into the press framing of pertinent debates over governmental support, showing how narrow newsworthy parameters of discussion were recurrently affirmed due, in part, to an over-accessing of selected official statements restricted to a limited range of voices deemed newsworthy. Also in this coverage, we examine differing viewpoints regarding the perceived value of the CCIs. We explore whether an emphasis is placed on their economic impact or on their value to society and individuals (as a public good). We argue that in the choice of frames and examples, the coverage of the CRF reinforces the same inequalities it identifies in the CCIs, accentuating the article's contribution to scholarship on media studies and cultural policy.

This article is organised as follows. Beginning in the next section, we introduce the theoretical underpinnings of our analysis by drawing upon relevant research in the fields of cultural policy as well as media and journalism studies. Specifically, we examine the scholarly literature on the relationship between policymaking and the media; pertinent issues arising from academic and industry-led research into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the CCIs and its perceived implications for cultural policymaking; and studies on the rhetoric of cultural policy with a focus on the concept of value. On this basis, we elucidate the research rationale for our study, before detailing its methodological priorities and commitments. We then present our study's empirical findings, placing particular emphasis on discussing how certain voices in the coverage framed the characteristics and guiding tenets of the Cultural Recovery Fund during this specific period. Our discussion of the findings elaborates on the understanding of the values that underpin the issues raised in the coverage. We also highlight the potential of this research for advancing future enquiries into the mediation of cultural policymaking discourses.

Mediations of cultural policy

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) and the measures to contain it have had a profound impact on the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) across the globe (Betzler et al. 2020). It has been characterised as a 'critical juncture' – a period of significant disruption that has put current cultural policies under intense scrutiny (Lee, Ling-Fung Chau, and Terui 2022). The question of whether it has been an open 'policy window' whereby policy changes are possible is still moot (Kingdon 1993). Given that cultural policy deliberations tend to be largely invisible to the public (England 2021), the news media – particularly newspapers – bear primary responsibility for alerting citizens to their significance. The media-policy nexus is assumed to work in overlapping, reinforcing ways. That is, the media tend to act as an intermediary forum between policymakers and the general public, as the 'average citizen often does not experience government policy directly, but learns about it from the mass media' (Soroka and Wlezien 2018). This has become apparent in the current crisis, where the government has heavily relied on the media to relay important information about COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns, vaccinations and social distancing measures (Mach et al. 2021). In doing so, the media exercise an agenda setting function, namely by directing attention to certain issues deemed newsworthy over and above alternative ones, thereby potentially influencing not necessarily what the public thinks, but what it might think about, as the saying goes (McCombs 2004).

Conversely, other media studies have shed light into the ways in which policymakers respond to increased media attention on an issue by developing reactive policy solutions (Yanovitzky 2002). Anecdotally, an observation made by Conservative MP Jeremy Hunt, now

Chancellor of the Exchequer and health secretary during the pandemic, is telling in this regard:

One of the great mysteries of British politics is why the newspapers continue to exert such a hold over Westminster, because we all know that readership is going down. We all know that fewer people, younger people in particular, are reading them. Yet they do still have a hold . . . The Mail has an extraordinary ability to set the agenda. (cited in Martinson 2021)

While the extent to which the media influences public opinion is debatable, by analysing newspaper coverage of the impact of COVID-19 on the CCI we can gain some insight into what elites – institutional actors and political forces – are thinking and doing (DiMaggio, Nag, and Blei 2013, 574). It allows us to unpack the underlying assumptions and narratives used to frame the topic at hand (DiMaggio, Nag, and Blei 2013, 573), in this case, the discourse surrounding the CCIS and the Culture Recovery Fund. With the benefit of hindsight, we can also reflect on how the media texts under scrutiny intersect with the findings from the academic and grey literature on the challenges facing the CCIs during the pandemic and its aftermath, some of which we now turn to.

In assessing governmental efforts to contain the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the CCIs, studies typically focused on both lockdown and socially-distancing measures affecting the production and consumption of cultural products. One of the most common findings has been that the crisis has highlighted reinforced pre-existing and entrenched dynamics within the sector, which – in combination with the years of austerity and – have exacerbated the devastating effects of lockdown on certain subsectors and on particular roles and modes of employment (Banks 2020; Greer 2021; Yue 2022). Among other consequences, the pandemic has thrown into sharp relief the precarity of cultural and creative work (Comunian and England 2020; Comunian et al. 2021; OECD 2020), particularly for freelancers (Easton and Beckett 2021; Henry et al. 2021; Ostrowska 2021; Walmsley 2022; Warran et al. 2022).¹

A further problem identified is the long-standing social-economic inequalities that permeate the CCIs in terms of representation and of the composition of the workforce in relation to social class, gender, ability and ethnicity (Carey, O'Brien, and Gable 2021; Eikhof 2020), highlighting not only the 'lack of progressive change in the sector' (Hadley, Heidelberg, and Belfiore 2022) but also the reverse of some of the progressive gains made in the sector as a consequence of the pandemic. The wide range of challenges affecting different subsectors, roles, and regions has conditioned the uneven, varied ways in which the pandemic has affected stakeholders across the CCIs (Chamberlain and Morris 2021; England 2021; O'Brien et al. 2021) as well as certain entrenched pre-pandemic vulnerabilities internationally (Betzler et al. 2020; Sargent 2021). Moreover, there has been a call to re-invest in opportunities beginning to arise from the crisis in order to reshape the future of the sector (Banks 2020; Banks and O'Connor 2020; Joffe 2020; Meyrick and Barnett 2021; Serafini and Novosel 2021; de Peuter, Oakley, and Trusolino 2022; Warran et al. 2022).

Elena Belfiore (2021) recently explored the predominance of economic impact policy frames (Smith 2013, 73) and policy keywords (Gupta and Gupta 2019) that have shaped cultural policy processes and outcomes for the last 35 years. Banks and O'Connor (2020) analysed the implications of the rhetoric of economic value and the creative industries in the framing of the Culture Recovery Fund, noting that it carried with it a 'set of claims [...] about both the current status of arts and culture and its imagined contribution to the post-pandemic future' (2020, 4). We take these cues and analyse in this article the contribution of the media to the policy discourses surrounding the CCIs during the pandemic.

The rise and demise of the creative industries orthodoxy – by which policymakers construct the creative industries 'as a policy object that can be managed to secure primarily economic and sometimes social outcomes so as to increase competitiveness' (Schlesinger 2016) – has been explored elsewhere (e.g. Banks and O'Connor 2017, 2020; Belfiore 2021; Campbell 2014, 2018; Casey and O'Brien 2020; Comunian, Faggian, and Jewell 2015; Hesmondhalgh 2018; Jones et al. 2015; Luckman 2017; O'Brien 2013; Oakley and O'Connor 2018; Selwood 2021). The overlap of the

terms used to refer to activities pertaining to the cultural sector and of creative industries – and more importantly, the data collected to measure their impact – is arguably to the detriment of both cultural policy and creative industries policy (Anzel, Beer, and Currie 2022; Campbell, O'Brien, and Taylor 2019; Cunningham and Bakhshi 2016).

So why is this frame so persistent in both policy and public discourse? Some have argued that it might be related to the attractiveness of what the CCIs promise (Casey and O'Brien 2020). As an industry, the creative industries (and culture within it) become a priority of the current Industrial Strategy, having its own sector deal, even if most funding is arguably going to technology-driven and digital ventures (Banks and O'Connor 2020). Furthermore, others argue that it has been the merging of the CCIs with the digital economy that has made cultural policy relevant again (Wright and Gray 2022), noting that 'the potential success of CCIs continues to be, at least in part, the story of the success of IT consultancy, aligned with a narrative around the need to promote the arts' (Campbell, O'Brien, and Taylor 2019).

During COVID-19, the lobbying efforts for the CCIs were 'a bit confusing on terminology and overlap of what is in crisis exactly' (Waitzman 2021); the cultural sector being 'deeply confused about its value' (Banks and O'Connor 2020). While it is arguable whether this confusion helps the cultural and creative sectors involved, it might be an advantage for policymakers. It has been argued that cultural policy is endemically plagued by the presence of an ambiguity (as a structural characteristic and a deliberate choice) rooted, among other reasons, in the contested nature of the term 'culture' and its value (Gray 2015). There are some benefits in this ambiguity – in lobbying to support the cultural sector, for example, it is frequent to find mentions of the economic contribution to the broader economy, often giving figures that correspond to the success of the creative industries, specifically the tech and digital sector (whether they are correct or not is another issue). The effects of the ambiguity might also have a negative impact on the sector as certain discussions remain at the level of myth rather than action (Campbell 2018; Hadley, Heidelberg, and Belfiore 2022).

One of these ambiguous policy keywords is 'value', whereby its different meanings and uses – cultural, social, public and economic – intersect and overlap despite having distinctive histories and uses (Belfiore and Gibson 2019; O'Brien and Lockley 2015). The concept of 'value' has become a keystone of the advocacy efforts advanced by numerous publicly funded arts and cultural organizations. Struggling to always make the case for economic value, cultural actors tend to also frame their priorities in relation to their contribution to broader societal challenges, including where the cultural dimension is overshadowed by other, ostensibly more pressing, funding demands, like health and wellbeing. Crucial to debates about the value of culture are questions of inequality and diversity in participation, production and representation. The lack of evidence for such claims often comes under scrutiny (e.g. Anzel, Beer, and Currie 2022; Clift, Phillips, and Pritchard 2021). Another criticism is that the complex nature of the value of culture has become subordinate to economic value (Alexander 2018), as relevant policymaking discussions mostly take place within the creative industries policy paradigm (Banks and O'Connor 2017).

Considering the multiplicity of meanings of these policy keywords, one wonders, then, how the concepts of 'value' or the 'CCIs' manage not only to survive but also to thrive. Could the ambiguity and reductionist simplicity be the cause of their popularity as well as of their demise? As has been argued elsewhere for other policy keywords such as 'soft power', policy keywords and frames are not fixed, but 'malleable signifier[s] of political action' (Hayden 2012, 5). The fluidity of the concepts of 'CCIs' and 'value' may work in their favour if they are understood as performative (Gillespie and McAvoy 2016), particularly in their inscription in advocacy efforts and policymaking. To be sure, what these concepts come to mean and what they do through discourse and practice functioning within specific policies that constitute a rhetoric of culture and cultural policy in particular contexts (see also Belfiore 2021). The performativity of the policy frames can take on a second meaning (Hadley, Heidelberg, and Belfiore 2022) by which the rhetoric of cultural policy remains solely at the level of discourse, therefore disconnecting it from action. Change cannot happen without significant shifts in power, and without long-dominant

voices losing their privileged positions (Hadley, Heidelberg, and Belfiore 2022). As such, our analysis is not so much concerned with what these concepts *are*, but with what these concepts *do*; how they are operationalized by different stakeholders. We therefore pay particular attention to who is defining and mobilising value in the coverage and to what effect.

Our study therefore sits at the intersection of academic work on media and cultural policy, bridging the gap between studies focusing on the relationship between journalism and policy processes more broadly, and studies into the rhetorical dimensions of the CCIs as a policy construct. Policy processes are complex, and policy actors cannot always control and predict the outcome of their advocacy efforts (Kingdon 1993). From agenda setting – whereby an issue at stake gets recognised as a policy problem – to enacting change, conventional political forces are as important as the range of policy ideas and proposals. The pandemic can be considered as an unpredictable (and unwelcomed) ‘policy window’, where some of the underlying assumptions about both policy problems and the solutions come to the fore. This article offers a unique analysis – usually absent from both media and cultural policy research – of the role of the press coverage of the Cultural Recovery Fund in shaping the narratives driving cultural policy deliberation and action.

Methods

Our study focuses on a moment of crisis for the cultural and creative industries in the UK, when policymaking debates about possible measures to mitigate the challenges faced by the CCIs peaked around the announcement of the Culture Recovery Fund (5 July 2020). As Banks and O’Connor (2020) have noted, the CRF was a call to save the arts and cultural sector, not the creative industries as a whole. Our sampling of the national newspaper coverage of the impact of COVID-19 on the CCIs (n. 4216 from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020) shows how the press played an advocacy role in highlighting inequalities and suggesting possible solutions. However, as we will demonstrate below, the arguments used by supporters, lobbyist and critics alike remained within the narrow horizon of possibilities set out by the rhetoric used by government to define the scope and mechanisms of British cultural policy.

In methodological terms, we conducted our study as follows. First, we selected 10 British newspapers with high circulation, representing quality, middle-market tabloid and tabloid press and including their Sunday issues, and online and printed versions.² The items to be analysed were identified and collected using Lexis Nexis, a news database. Our research retrieved data using searches based on keywords employed by DCMS to describe the subsectors of the creative industries and the cultural sectors.³ In doing so, there was an overlap with other sectors, such as Digital. Once duplicates were eliminated and the sample manually cleaned to select only the items relevant to the parameters set in the study, we were left with a dataset of 4,162 items. These were quantitatively and qualitatively coded for themes, subsectors represented, newspaper title and section as well as peaks of reporting. Our guiding research questions were as follows: (1) how are issues central to the CCIs framed in the coverage? (2) How is the government response to the crisis in the cultural and creative industries characterised and responsibility attributed? and (3) what actors (sectors, institutions or locations) are present in the coverage, which ones are the key sources, and how are their views represented?

Based on this first round of content analysis, we identified the week of 3–10 of July as one of the highest peak in reporting (n.215), coinciding with the launch of the Culture Recovery Fund (CRF). It is not surprising that most of the peaks identified in the news coverage coincide with government announcements, as the news media played a crucial role in relaying official public health messaging during the crisis (see Figure 1). This week concentrated a high number of articles containing a manifest content of interest to this study, including announcements on policy changes affecting the reopening of venues in England, the financial support for the CCI and the highest peak for reporting on freelancers.⁴ For the case study (n. 215), we explored the questions laid out above in relation to the reporting on the CRF, as well as adding a further question to this subset of data: (4)

Timeline

First date of publication of each item (n.4,162)

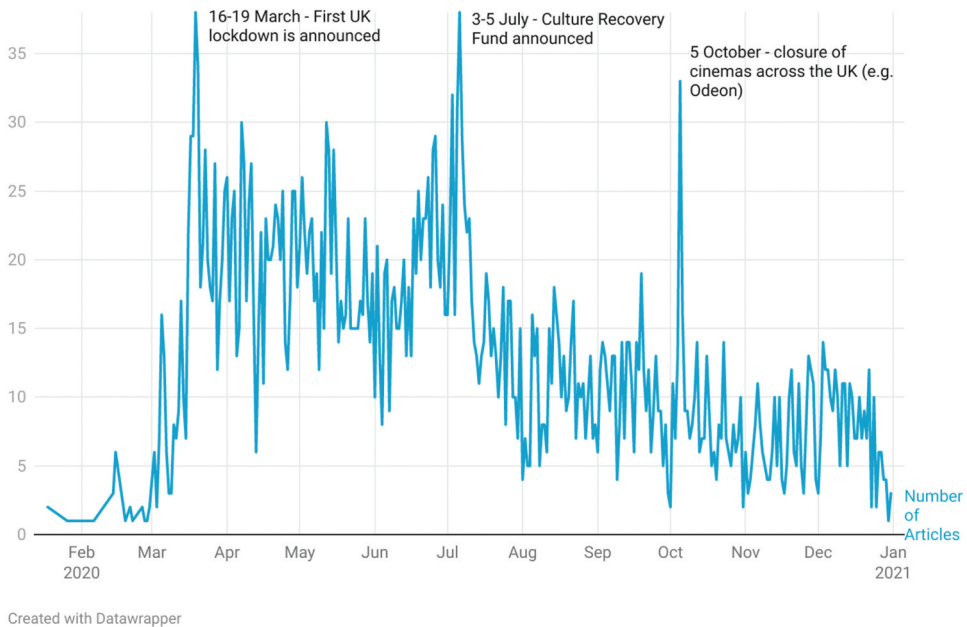


Figure 1. Number of articles per date from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020. Data: <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/1PcFb/6/>.

what are the different understandings of the value of the CCIs that underpin the issues raised by these questions in the coverage?

The newspaper items were analysed using a media framing analysis (Anderson et al. 2005; Iyengar 1994; Johnson-Cartee 2005; Kim, Carvalho, and Davis 2010). In doing so, we follow a media studies approach that we think is particularly pertinent in its relationship to policy frames in general (Smith 2013), and cultural policy frames in particular (Belfiore 2021). Frames (both policy and media) emphasise certain interpretations of events over alternative possibilities in order to promote a preferred interpretation as the most reasonable one available. It is usually the case that media framing might not necessarily be the result of a conscious choice by the journalists but rather the result of situated everyday practices conditioned not just by dominant discourses and exposure to 'official' channels but also by the imperatives of their role, including the corporate dynamics and editorial line of the newspaper outlets where they work as well as journalistic interests and values. Among these factors influencing the framing of a particular topic in its coverage by the press, an important feature is the availability of various sources of information and their specific perceived attributes (such as legitimacy, credibility, power status, etc.).

For that reason, we explore both the chosen frames to report on the coverage of the impact of COVID-19 (explicit and latent) on the CCIs and the governmental measures as well as the hierarchy of voices and sources of newspaper items. In order to identify the 'primary definers' – i.e. the voices that determine the 'initial definition or primary interpretation of the topic in question' (Hall et al. 1978, 58) – quoted or paraphrased in the news items here analysed, we pay particular attention to the interplay of government and other (institutional or not) sources quoted in the coverage. In doing so, we acknowledge the complex interaction behind what we term 'official' discourses (Miller 1993; Schlesinger 1990). That is, the wide range of stakeholders that is usually behind the complex negotiations of the meaning of particular articulations of social issues prior to engagement with the media (Miller 1993), including the ambiguity of policy frames (Dekker 2016).

Given this press-centred evidential basis, however, we take care in our case study to avoid extrapolating from our findings to characterise wider patterns or trends in the media ecology. That said, it is still the case that newspapers influence the priorities and judgements of broadcast (radio and television) and online news platforms (Cushion et al. 2018), as well as topics trending on social media, and maintain a gatekeeping role (Vos 2019). Further, this article is based on findings arising from a frame analysis of news and editorial items, not the relative prominence or placement of these items on the page, or accompanying visual cues (e.g. graphs, charts, illustrations or photographs). It is hoped further research may conduct interviews with key actors in the reporting (e.g. press journalists and their policymaker sources) to explicate the social relations of information networks and the dynamics of knowledge exchange, which has not received the attention it warrants among scholars to date.

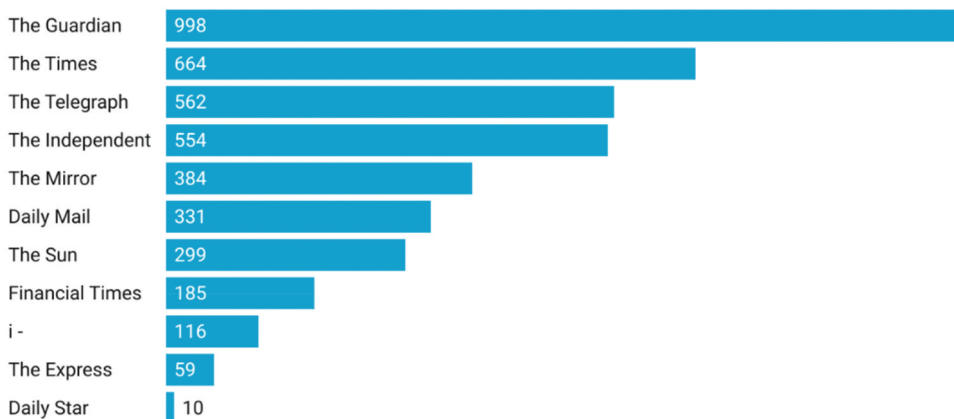
In the next sections, we present specific findings from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the news and comment items published during 2020 (n.4162), discussing the main newspapers and sections, subsector and news and comment frames. We then turn to the qualitative thematic analysis of the frames actors and sources arising from the reporting of the cultural policy measures during 3–10 July 2020, focusing on the Culture Recovery Fund.

Reporting on the impact of COVID-19 on the CCIs

The content analysis of the whole sample (n.4162) offered top-level findings that frame the more in-depth discussion of cultural policymaking in the next section. Perhaps not surprisingly, we found more news items published by the ‘quality’ (formerly known as broadsheet) newspapers than by the ‘tabloid’ or popular titles.⁵ The predominance of relevant coverage being associated with the more elite newspapers (titles with smaller circulations but attracting readers from higher socio-economic demographics) corresponds with journalistic and editorial presumptions made about their respective readers’ interest in, and engagement with, arts and culture. We also found a concentration of coverage on the CCIs in newspapers on the centre-left of the political spectrum. In the coverage of the Cultural Recovery Fund, for example, *The Guardian* published almost as many as the other three

Publication distribution

Number of items in each publication (n.4,162) from 1 Jan to 31 Dec 2020



Created with Datawrapper

Figure 2. Distribution of articles referring to the impact of COVID-19 and the cultural and creative industries by newspaper (n.4,162). Data: <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/Lt5fT/7/>.

quality newspapers put together.⁶ This title is perceived to cater to professional readers, including those working in the CClIs (Ofcom 2021).⁷ Figure 2 shows the distribution by newspaper.

We allocated each item to the most prominent subsector covered by it. More specifically, we chose a categorisation of subsectors that mirrored that offered by the DCMS, breaking it down to reflect, where possible, the categories used by the media items under analysis, thereby highlighting some of the tensions noted in studies on the definitional challenges of the CClIs (Bakhshi 2020; Campbell, O'Brien, and Taylor 2019; Cunningham and Flew 2019; Maioli et al. 2021). The cultural and creative industries subsectors featuring most prominently in the newspaper coverage were the performing arts (18%), followed by the screen and film industries (17%).

We studied the sample for themes and frames, following an inductive process by which these emerged as the analysis took place and were subject to constant revision. An initial pilot thematic analysis of n.117 articles indicated initial themes to organise the articles around some broad categories. We later broke down these categories to capture the nuances when reporting on these issues into 25 frames. Figure 3 shows the results of this analysis.

'Reviews' was the most frequent frame in our sample (13%), explained by the number of items present in the 'arts and culture section' of the newspapers under analysis. The three most frequent frames (present in 9% of items each) included the reopening of cultural institutions, the cultural digital offer and reflections on the value of culture. The range of issues is too broad to cover within the limits of this article, as the reporting often moved between themes, frames and tone. In order to capture nuances in the discussions, we focus our attention on the week of 3–10 July, namely on the framing of the Culture Recovery Fund.

Reporting on the impact of the Culture Recovery Fund

On 5 July 2020, the government announced the Culture Recovery Fund (CRF), a package of £1.57 billion to help 'Britain's globally renowned arts, culture and heritage industries [...] weather the impact of coronavirus' (HMG 2020). We focus in this section on the findings from the thematic analysis of newspaper reporting on the CRF, but also on other COVID-19 milestones for the cultural sector during the week of 3–10 July as can be seen in Figure 4.

A range of measures were, arguably, put in place quite late into the pandemic. Possible reasons have been pinpointed (e.g. Banks and O'Connor 2020), including DCMS's relative subordinate position within the governmental structure, and a fundamental lack of understanding about how DCMS sectors and their workforces are structured (Tobin 2020). We unpack these in our study as we look into the main frames of the reporting. The most frequent theme, present in 40% of news items, was what one writer called a 'financial intensive care' (*The Times*, 23 May 2020) – that is, the advocacy efforts and the initiatives in place to support the CClIs during lockdown. The complete breakdown of main themes and frames is shown in Figure 5.

Here, we begin to delve into the main findings arising from our analysis of the reporting on the financial challenges facing the CClIs and cultural workers, as well as on the support offered by different bodies, including the Cultural Recovery Fund. Specifically, we unpack in the following sections two interrelated issues: (1) the limited range of voices and frames used in the reporting which mirrors and feeds into the official discourses and (2) the rhetoric on the value of the CClIs for the economy, individuals and society.

Who gets to talk about culture?

In this section, we argue that the narrow newsworthy parameters of the debates over governmental support were recurrently affirmed due to an over-accessing of selected official statements restricted to a limited range of voices. A close reading of the coverage shows how the government's press release on 5 July succeeded in setting down the initial framing of the Cultural Recovery Fund (CRF).⁸ The information given in the official press release provided the necessary elements for news stories

Themes and frames

Frequency and percentage of items that address each theme and frame (n.4162)

Themes	Frames	frequency	percentage (%)
'show can't go on'		215	5
	closures, cancellations and postponements	215	5
'armchair art'		590	14
	arts and culture online offers	384	9
	streaming and broadcasting	167	4
	non-digital culture at home	39	1
'financial intensive care'		806	19
	financial challenges facing the cultural sector	242	6
	support measures for the cultural sector	172	4
	challenges facing cultural workers and freelancers	168	4
	lobbying for different cultural subsectors	136	3
	fundraising initiatives to support culture	88	2
'it's not all doom'		825	20
	the value of arts and culture	354	9
	art and culture produced as a result of (or about) COVID-19	203	5
	creatively adapting to COVID-19 limitations and guidelines	177	4
	subsectors benefitting from lockdown	48	1
	cultural institutions contributing to support society and communities beyond their remits	43	1
'bums on seats'		618	15
	institutions reopening and activities resuming (or not)	395	9
	reflection of a post-pandemic future for cultural activities and institutions	142	3
	guidelines to reopen or resume cultural activities	81	2
other		1,108	27
	reviews of art and culture	524	13
	public service broadcasting	164	4
	diversity (or lack of) in the cultural sector	144	3
	artists' and creative practitioners' experiences of lockdown	89	2
	other	68	2
	technology	60	1
	audiences' experiences of arts and culture	44	1
	Brexit	15	0
Total		4,162	100

Created with Datawrapper

Figure 3. Distribution of news items by theme and frame (1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020) n.4,162. Data: <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/3rUyt/1/>.

Timeline of policies (3-10 July 2020)

Main policies affecting the cultural sector announced during the week of 3-10 July 2020 in the UK nations.

July 3, 2020	Performing Arts Venues Relief Fund from Creative Scotland launches (£12.5m)
July 3, 2020	Reopening of museums, galleries and heritage sites in Northern Ireland with social distancing measures
July 4, 2020	Reopening of some indoor venues in England such as cinemas, museums and galleries, with social distancing measures
July 5, 2020	Launch of the Culture Recovery Fund (CRF) is announced by DCMS
July 8, 2020	Mini budget announced with a Job Retention Bonus scheme
July 9, 2020	Announcement of reopening of outdoor theatre, opera, dance and music events in England following covid-safe protocols and social distancing measures
July 10, 2020	Round 1 of CRF opens

Created with Datawrapper

Figure 4. Important policy moments for the CCIs during 3–10 July 2020.

to be generated with a minimum of effort on the part of different titles in our sample. In order to further unpack how the ‘primary definitions’ laid out by the official press release announcing the CRF were rendered in the newspaper items, we also coded for the range of sources (quoted or paraphrased) utilised. [Figure 6](#) shows the distribution by source category.⁹

We found that the most frequent sources were those offered in the government press release, mainly political voices, which accounted for almost half of the sources. The then Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Oliver Dowden, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak were the most frequently and prominently quoted or paraphrased voices (Johnson’s words were cited in five of the headlines). Even then, not all political voices are alike. The hierarchy of political voices reveals the relative subordinate position of DCMS in relation to the Treasury. Quotes from Labour politicians were, not surprisingly, more critical, and Jo Stevens, at the time Shadow Culture Secretary – was the most frequently mentioned source not included in the government’s press release.

The leading voices in the cultural sector most quoted were also part of the official press release announcing the CRF, including Andrew Lloyd-Webber or playwright James Graham.¹⁰ While initially well-received, several objections to the CRF gained traction in the coverage, including from those quoted in the governmental press release.¹¹ We also heard from ‘alternative’ voices to those in the press release, attempting to create a forum for discussion. Concerns included the support package being ‘spread very thin’, as Dame Judi Dench put it, or ‘swallowed up by the “high arts”’ (*The Independent*, 8 July, 2020). Although a minority, some voices were concerned with the (lack of) diversity in the sector, wondering if it was possible to ‘rescue and reform at the same time?’ (Suba Das in *The Guardian*, 5 July, 2020).

Despite the concerns expressed by the sources and in the coverage for the inequalities in the CCIs, we found that the lack of diversity in the sources mirrored the lack of diversity identified in the sector. We heard mostly from celebrity-artists and directors of large cultural institutions, most of them

Themes and frames frequency

Frequency and percentage of items for each theme and frame from 3 to 10 July (n.215)

Themes	Frames	frequency	percentage (%)
'financial intensive care'		86	40
	support measures for the cultural sector	57	27
	lobbying for different cultural subsectors	12	6
	financial challenges facing the cultural sector	10	5
	challenges facing cultural workers and freelancers	7	3
'bums on seats'		31	14
	institutions reopening and activities resuming (or not)	31	14
'armchair art'		30	14
	arts and culture online offers	23	11
	streaming and broadcasting	4	2
	non-digital culture at home	3	1
'it's not all doom'		26	12
	the value of arts and culture	15	7
	creatively adapting to COVID-19 limitations and guidelines	7	3
	art and culture produced as a result of (or about) COVID-19	4	2
other		42	20
	diversity (or lack of) in the cultural sector	15	7
	public service broadcasting	14	7
	other	13	6
Total		215	100

Created with Datawrapper

Figure 5. Themes and frame frequency (n. 215). Data: <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/DXPyz/4/>.

belonging to the traditional – and arguably more ‘highbrow’ – artistic realms such as theatre.¹² Arguably, their advocacy efforts were key in securing funding to the sector (even when their jobs were not the ones at risk). The over-access granted to certain well-known voices is dependent on established information networks and pre-established dynamics of knowledge exchange between journalists and the actors involved in any news reporting cycle. While the rationale for choosing well-known sources to draw attention to the challenges facing the cultural sector is clear, there is an irony in doing so in order to bring to the fore the lack of diversity or the entrenched inequalities in the sector. The media, by ‘signalling but not enacting change’ in their choice of frames and voices, also engage in what Hadley, Heidelberg, and Belfiore (2022) have identified for the cultural sector more broadly as ‘an approach as close to hegemonic culture as possible, but with enough activist rhetoric to be seen to be “doing something”’.

For example, there were hardly any voices representing freelancers (2% of the sources), despite being identified in the reporting as a particularly vulnerable section of the cultural sector. The government’s lack of support to cultural workers, particularly freelancers, in favour of institutions, was a recurrent theme in 20% of the items in our sample.¹³ The responsibility for the difficulties facing freelancers was attributed to the government’s inadequacy, but also to broader structural

Type of Source

First source in each item (n.166) of a total of n.215

Source	frequency	percentage (%)
political: UK national	38	23
director of cultural institution/performance venues/impresario	34	21
political: regions and nations/local	29	18
actor/artist/writer	13	8
non-governmental public body (ACE, BFI...)	8	5
playwright, screen or stage director, producer	8	5
other	8	5
industry association/network	6	4
political: shadow government	5	3
union	4	2
journalist	5	3
academic/scientist	5	3
freelancer	3	2
Total	166	100

Created with Datawrapper

Figure 6. Frequency of sources (n. 215). Data: <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/IX7og/3/>.

issues within the cultural sector that predate the pandemic. Regardless of the relative importance of this theme in our sample, freelancers were hardly ever quoted or referenced as sources in the reporting. We find only two pieces (out of a total of 215) that were written by freelancers, the opera singer Allan Clayton (*The Telegraph*, 8 July, 2020) and Anna Fleischle, a production designer (*The Independent*, 10 July, 2020). In virtually all other cases where freelancers were mentioned, they were represented in the plural as generic, faceless and nameless. Only once did a news item name a cultural worker, even if only mentioned as ‘a human cannonball called Eddie’ in an item about circus performers (*Daily Mail*, 7 July 2020).

As far as we could tell, the sources that were identified were three times more likely to be male than female. As far as we can determine, there was also a lack of diversity in the sources in terms of race, ability, class and geographical disparities mirroring the same lack of diversity in the sector where these various factors intersect and interact to compound disadvantage (Carey, O’Brien, and Gable 2021).¹⁴ Perhaps not surprisingly, lobbying efforts were sector specific; that is, most of the criticism to the lack of government support for venue-based cultural industries came from voices within this subsector, not the wider CCI. While understandable, it is a finding that suggests that the CCIs operate in interconnected but fairly distinct ecosystems.

News framing often depends on the availability of various sources of information and their specific attributes (such as perceived credibility, legitimacy, and power status). The process of selection of media sources responds to similar limitations that perpetuate inequalities in the CCIs, such as the role of social networks, and the cultural elements in commissioning decisions (O’Brien 2020). Our analysis supports this by showing that the coverage by the British national daily press of the impact of COVID-19 on the CCIs tended to replicate, rather than challenge, the existing inequalities in the sector.¹⁵ Even when its intentions might be different, for the most part, the choice of

frames and sources in the reporting reinforced the relative status of the CClIs which was very much focused on the 'traditional' arts and culture.

The newspaper coverage highlighted the disparities of resources and opportunities in the sector; however, in doing so, the media contributed to the hierarchy of subsectors, institutions and geographical distribution that characterizes the CClIs in the UK. To the extent it is possible to generalise from our findings, when discussing the challenges and the support given by government to the CClIs, the newspaper press seems to have focused mainly on the arts and cultural sector, which highlights how narrowly the CClIs are often understood. The breakdown of subsectors can be found in Figure 7.

Subsector frequency

Subsector frequency (n.253 allowing for multiple subsectors coded in each newspaper item) from 3 to 10 July 2020 (n.215)

Subsector	frequency	percentage (%)
theatres	51	20
the arts	35	14
music	27	11
screens (film, cinemas and TV)	21	8
museums, galleries and heritage	20	8
publishing	18	7
broadcasters	12	5
tech and digital	8	3
comedy	8	3
visual arts	6	2
cultural sector	5	2
opera	5	2
streaming	5	2
gaming	4	2
VR	4	2
fashion and design	4	2
radio	4	2
festivals	4	2
libraries	3	1
photography	2	1
dance	2	1
performing arts (festivals, gigs)	2	1
architecture	1	0
circus	1	0
creative industries	1	0
Total	253	100

Created with Datawrapper

Figure 7. Subsector frequency (n. 215). <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/uLhdX/6/>.

Theatre was the subsector most referenced, where other categories like architecture or design were hardly mentioned when reporting on the challenges facing the creative industries. This prominence of the performing arts in the coverage is partly justified as the result of real challenges faced by venue-based culture during lockdown and considering the lack of a reopening roadmap. But there are also reasons related to the dynamics of cultural journalism in the (London-based) 'quality' press. It over-relies on a small number of lobbying voices from the performing arts (e.g. Andrew Lloyd-Weber), and there is an over-representation of the subsector in the sections in our sample – after 'News', *The Guardian* 'Stage' section is the most frequent one in our sample. The perceived inequalities in relation to who would receive financial support and where was also mirrored in the choice of institutions included in the reporting – half of the top 10 names in terms of frequency were performance-art venues.¹⁶

The voices in reporting alerting to the possibility of an uneven distribution of government support to the CCI's across the country were justified in their concerns, as the CRF has been unequally spread across regions and nations (Gilmore et al. 2021), as well as across sub-sectors and types of roles and employment (Redmond 2021). Our analysis shows that the reporting on these issues preempted the unevenness of the distribution of resources but also reinforced the inequalities in their choice of examples. The press coverage was skewed towards large national institutions, either National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) or DCMS-sponsored museums and galleries,¹⁷ based in England, mostly in London and other large cities, such as Manchester and Birmingham. The government's 'levelling up' agenda was hardly ever referenced but, when it was, it was identified as a key driver shaping the criteria for the distribution of this funding – not always positively. Institutions in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland received little attention.

While focusing on the subsectors most affected by lockdown (consumer oriented, in-person performance part of the CCI's), we also identified an undertone in the reporting about the exceptionalism of the 'traditional' arts and culture in relation to their value to individuals and society. Arguably, the coverage seems to support the concern that 'public authorities consistently continue to support cultural institutions that may be obsolete' (Mangset 2020). At the same time, the reporting on the reopening of other sectors of the economy was invoked in several pieces, whereby one could 'fill a plane with people, but not a concert hall' (*The Guardian*, 6 July, 2020). This seems to point to a tension in the perceived value of cultural activities. We find here one of the main challenges facing the cultural sector in recent decades – to articulate the value the CCI's bring to individuals and society, including, but not only, in economic terms, in ways that speak to the priorities of policymakers.

What is the value of culture?

While we found explicit reflections on the 'value' of the CCI's in 7% of items in our sample (e.g. reflections on the arts as a source of solace), we also found that the reporting on the CCI's during this period carried underlying assumptions about their importance for individuals and wider society. In this section, we unpack certain rhetorical features in the reporting of cultural policy.¹⁸ We also argue that the press coverage under analysis tends to replicate the frames that we find in advocacy efforts and policy interventions, rather than questioning them or presenting alternative narratives. The economic policy frame is predominant in the coverage and raises questions about public perceptions of the role and value of publicly subsidized arts and culture.

The contribution of the CCI's to the UK's economy was a frequent frame to justify the need to support the arts and culture. It was specifically addressed in around a fourth of the items, but it is implicit in many more, through the references, e.g. to the number of workers employed by the sector. Political sources were often quoted as supporting this view, often in combination with a characterisation of cultural institutions as 'the beating heart of this country' (Boris Johnson), 'the soul of our nation' (Oliver Dowden) and 'the lifeblood of British culture' (Rishi Sunak), again making use of the ambiguity offered by the CCI's rhetoric. Political voices were not alone, as many voices

from the sector also highlighted the role that arts and culture play as drivers of the creative industries and therefore of the British economy. This was seen as an argument for the government to subsidize the sector to get back on its feet, with some pointing out that this would mean being able to rely once again on the income they generate independently.

An issue that the COVID-19 crisis seems to have questioned is whether the ‘mixed economy’ model of funding for the CCIs in the UK – a combination of ‘state grants, earned income and private sponsorship’ – ‘provides a secure foundation for sustainable growth’ or not (Greer 2021). We found in the coverage two different – and opposing – views regarding the need and wisdom of the arts and culture being generally supported by public funds. Within this framing, there are some voices who believed that the arts and culture sector should indeed use this emergency fund as an opportunity to stop depending on public subsidies (e.g. *The Telegraph*, 6 July 2020). Others reasoned that ‘organisations that have become less and less dependent on public money are now the most vulnerable’ (*The Telegraph*, 8 July, 2020). Research has in fact proved that organisations that had increased trading revenue and decreased their grant dependency suffered the most (Thelwall and Thelwall 2020), while others more dependent on government funding were better ‘cushioned from the most immediate impacts of the pandemic’ (Greer 2021).

Much less frequent, but significant, were the references to the social value of the cultural and creative industries. One of the ways in which this is reported on is through the incorporation of art leaders’ accounts of how their institutions have supported their local communities during lockdown – from holding workshops online to reaching out to elderly people to working with social services to distribute food or creative packages (e.g. Tamara Harvey in *The Guardian*, 5 July, 2020). But many worried that the value of culture to individuals and society beyond the economy might not be enough to advocate for support to the CCIs.

Of course, it is perfectly possible to make a case for a rescue. Music, literature and art don’t need an economic justification. They are either of value in themselves or not. Even so, our great cultural institutions are a major industry. (*The Telegraph*, 7 July, 2020)

Even for those who did not doubt the ‘intrinsic’ value of the arts, the economic contribution was presented as undeniable and a reason to support the sector that might more directly appeal to policymakers.

Challenging newsworthy claims of cultural policy

This article has presented findings examining British newspaper coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on the cultural and creative industries (CCI) sector during 2020, focusing on a pivotal week (3 to 10 July 2020). We study the press coverage of the CCIs and the Culture Recovery Fund (CRF) from a media frame’s perspective, bridging the gap between cultural policy and media studies. Our study shows that early reporting on the CRF highlighted similar issues to those identified in related academic research into the efficacy and challenges of governmental support. However, we also find that the items analysed effectively normalised underlying inequalities, particularly in recurrent choices of news frames and sources cited or paraphrased in the coverage. While freelancers were often mentioned as crucial to the creative economy, their concerns were seldom expressed. Time and again, the voices selected to speak about the CCIs (mostly the cultural sector) tended to belong to elite opinion leaders, particularly those associated with theatres and other performing arts venues. These institutions were typically based in England, mostly in London and other large cities. Institutions in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland received scant attention, effectively missing what could have been an important opportunity to compare and contrast policymaking approaches.

We also discussed findings from the empirical study in relation to the various (and interconnected) media and policy discourses on the value of culture, assessing their potential to inform not only public opinion but also practice. To the extent to which it is possible to discern in the press coverage, we explored the ways in which the cultural and creative sectors tends to be framed in terms of its relative positions between a ‘public good’, the ‘heart’ and ‘soul’ of the nation, and an industry (Banks and O’Connor 2020).

While ambiguity has been seen as an intrinsic (and at times pragmatic) characteristic of culture policy, the findings in this paper also raise questions about the efficacy of the ambiguity of the creative and cultural industries rhetoric for advocacy efforts. We found that the contribution of the cultural and creative industries to the UK's economy is a frequent frame to justify the need to support arts and culture, demonstrating the prevalence of the 'rhetorical dominance of economic value and impact in cultural policy discourse' (Belfiore 2021), but also in the public realm. The findings in this study support the concern that the rhetoric around change in the CCLs remains at the level of discourse – inequalities and diversity 'are not going to be changed by cultural policies only' (Meyrick and Barnett 2021), and arguably, not by media narratives either.

This analysis of the newspaper coverage has shown how the press may contribute to perpetuating governmental framings of the CCLs, helping to pinpoint the recurrent convergence of certain preferred policymakers and stakeholders as news sources. Our evidence indicates that this coverage tended to adopt a highbrow, institutional, and elitist perspective on the CCLs, thereby de-centring, even marginalizing certain sectors and actors. In many ways, these findings reinforce broader arguments within journalism studies regarding the hierarchal, over-accessing of 'credible', 'accredited' sources reaffirming the definitions of the powerful. Made apparent is the narrowness of newsworthy parameters, which severely constrain the possibilities for public deliberation and debate. This may go some way in explaining why the cultural policy logics and associated framings about the CCLs presented in this study, which are well known within the sector, remain largely invisible to the public.

Notes

1. Including all cultural 'independent workers' that fall in this category such as self-employed, sole directors of Limited Companies, or those employed short term or temporarily. Freelancers is also the term we find in the newspaper items under scrutiny.
2. *The Guardian/Observer, Daily Express, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, The Times, The Telegraph, The Independent, The i-, Daily Star, and The Sun.* We included *The Independent*, as a legacy printed newspaper, despite its current online only presence. Each paper includes daily and Sunday editions
3. These keywords were refined through experimentation by testing different parameters to maximise the size of the sub-sample. For more on methodology, keywords used and parameters, see E. Nieto McAvoy and A. Ostrowska (2022).
4. Reopening schedules were different across the UK, as were other policies regarding the measures arising from the pandemic. Arguably, COVID-19 was one of the first major instances where the public could experience the difference devolution may make to cultural and other policy domains (e.g. E. Nieto McAvoy and A. Ostrowska [forthcoming]).
5. In choosing the national newspapers, we are also aware of the skew in their coverage towards England, in general, and London, in particular.
6. *The Guardian* published 71 items, *The Times* 28, *The Independent* 26, *The Telegraph* 21 during 3–10 July.
7. *The Guardian* and *Observer* led newspaper rivals in audience share among professional (ABC1) workers, with 25% of the audience share, among 16- to 24-year-olds, with 31%, and among readers from ethnic minority groups, with 29% (Ofcom 2021). Taking into account both print and online readership, *The Guardian* and *Observer* are second only to the *Daily Mail* (Ofcom 2021).
8. As would be expected, feature articles and opinion items are more open in their framing of issues, typically providing more nuanced – and, at times, contentious – interpretations than those included in fact-based news reportage.
9. While some of these categories might overlap, we allocated them to each source depending on the role in which they were quoted. For example, an actor might be a freelancer, but might not be referenced as such in the coverage. We coded the contributors of opinion pieces as sources.
10. The only voice not part of the official narrative who made the top five most used sources was Sam Mendes.
11. Andrew Lloyd-Webber is also used as a source in articles criticising the lack of roadmap for indoor performances to reopen.
12. For a cross-national study on the portrayal of popular and high culture in newspapers, see Janssen, Verboord, and Kuipers (2011).
13. There are mentions to 'freelancers' (inclusive of related terms, such as 'self-employed') in 34 items of the subsample from 3–10 July 2020 (n.215). Across the whole sample (n.4,162), 'freelancers' as a theme is only covered in 7% of the articles (n. 284).

14. Tamara Harvey, artistic director of Theatr Clwyd, was the only source from the Welsh cultural sector. Scottish cultural institutions and leaders were also less frequently used as sources in national (London-based) news. There are some items in the sample from the Scottish editions of the papers that report on the cultural sector in Scotland. No sources from NI are present in our analysis.
15. In selecting national newspapers for this analysis, there is a danger we further entrench one of the key problems this article identifies, namely that London-based journalism and news titles effectively overshadow other national voices and experiences. Indeed, differences in how cultural recovery funds were developed and implemented deserved closer press interrogation, especially as the devolved governments were relatively free to decide how to spend consequential funding. It is similarly worth noting London-based newspapers hold a major share of circulation in the regions and nations – e.g. the *Daily Mail* is the most read (print and online combined) newspaper in Wales. Future research should further interrogate the different narratives offered in local and regional titles.
16. We coded for the first institution to be mentioned in each item, as well as the geographical region, either mentioned in the reporting or, in most cases, by noting the location of the institutions.
17. The B.B.C. and Reach were also mentioned frequently in the items under scrutiny in relation to financial challenges and funding.
18. Alongside frames we explored the range of descriptive terms that refer to the CRF. Most items use some combination of ‘rescue’, ‘emergency’ and ‘support’ followed by ‘package’ and ‘funds’ to describe the CRF. The term ‘investment’ is also frequently used, following the terminology offered in the government’s press release. The relative frequent use of the term ‘bailout’ in certain papers is worth noting, particularly as it implies that the arts and cultural organisation were responsible of their own failing (Banks and O’Connor 2020).

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Notes on contributors

Eva Nieto McAvoy is a visiting fellow in the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University. For the last 3 years she has been a research associate on the ‘Arts, Culture and Public Service Broadcasting’ workstrand for the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (Nesta, London). Her interest in the intersection of culture, power and technology is behind her recent publications on the ‘pivot to digital’ in museums and galleries during COVID-19 in *Cultural Trends*, on digital cultural diplomacy in the *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, and on algorithmic memory practices in *Convergence*. She has contributed publications on the work and history of the BBC World Service, on soft power and on the impact of COVID-19 on the Welsh screen sector.

Stuart Allan is Professor of Journalism and Communication in the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University. He recently completed a 5-year term as Head of School and has been the project lead of the ‘Arts, Culture and Public Service Broadcasting’ workstrand for the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (Nesta, London). Currently, his research topics include the evolving nature of public service broadcasting, with a particular interest in debates about public value and impartiality. He has led and contributed to a range of research projects over the years, including grants awarded by the UK and international research councils.

ORCID

Eva Nieto McAvoy  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4442-4887>
Stuart Allan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7767-0470>

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