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## **Media reporting on public procurement: an analysis of UK press coverage, 1985-2018.**

**Purpose:** The media is an important actor in public procurement, but research on its role is limited. This paper investigates how the media has engaged with public procurement, using UK newspapers as a case example.

**Method:** The method consisted of (1) searching Nexis database for news articles on public procurement (2) automatic extraction of article attributes like length, section, authorship and (3) manually coding each article for its theme and industry context. This produced quantitative indicators about the extent and focus of press coverage on public procurement.

**Findings:** Press coverage of public procurement increased between 1985 and 2018. The focus of coverage has been on governance failure and socio-economic policy. Governance failure, which includes corruption, cronyism and supplier malpractice, is associated with construction, outsourcing and professional services sectors. Socio-economic policy, which includes supporting small suppliers and favouring domestic industry, is associated with manufacturing, defence and agriculture.

**Originality:** This is the first study on media coverage of public procurement. It highlights that while there are similarities between media and academic treatment of public procurement, particularly in relation to its socio-economic side, the media emphasises governance failings and negative developments to a greater extent.

**Practical implications:** Government officials should be more proactive in countering the ‘negativity bias’ in news coverage of public procurement by showcasing projects where value-for-money has been achieved, services have been successfully delivered and social value has been realised.

**Limitations:** The analysis included UK media only. While the trends observed on the extent and focus of public procurement news coverage likely reflect the situation in other countries, international comparative research is still required.

*Keywords: public procurement, news reporting, secondary data.*

Research Paper.

### **Introduction**

This paper examines media reporting on public procurement through an analysis of the UK press between 1985 and 2018. Despite its role in setting the news agenda (McCombs, 1997; McCombs and Shaw, 1972), little is known about how the media engages with and reports on public procurement. While recent case studies have mined news reports as part of investigating the outsourcing of public services (Greasley, 2019) and high-profile contract loss (Flynn, 2020), there has been no attempt to investigate news reporting on public procurement as the object of study. What we do know is based on our own reading of newspapers e.g., shortcomings in the procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (Financial Times, 2021). It is this lack of empirical evidence on the role of the media as a chronicler of public procurement events, a shaper of public procurement

discourse and a (partisan) institutional actor in the public procurement field that motivates our study.

There are several reasons for examining media coverage of public procurement. The first is to assess the level of coverage given to public procurement in the news cycle and determine if there has been changes over time. This is important because mass communication theorists established decades ago that public awareness of any issue is a function of media coverage of that issue (Benton and Frazier, 1976; McCombs and Shaw, 1972). As such, the level of media exposure that public procurement has received will indicate how much readers are aware of it and whether awareness is likely to have increased or decreased over time. The second reason is to identify the thematic focus of media coverage on public procurement, be it project failures, corruption scandals, cost overruns or supplier success stories. The focus of media coverage influences how citizens perceive any given issue (Benford, 1997). Applied to our study, what stories and events the media has chosen to cover influences how citizens understand the form and purpose of public procurement.

The media's status as an institutional actor in the public procurement field is another reason why it deserves scholarly attention. As well as reporting the news, media organisations campaign on behalf of their readers and stakeholders. In the context of public procurement, this involves championing groups that are believed to be at a disadvantage e.g., small firms, advocating for the introduction of certain laws or policies, e.g., eco-friendly purchasing, and promoting the national interest e.g., 'Buy British' or 'Buy American'. In this way media organisations use their power to bring about outcomes that are consistent with their own ideological convictions or that are favourable to their supporters. The dynamic is one in which the media interacts with public and political discourse in the 'creation of meaning' about issues like public procurement (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). This 'creation of meaning' is no small matter given that public procurement averages 16% of gross domestic product (GDP) and 30% of government expenditure internationally (OECD, 2018).

By examining media representation of public procurement, it also becomes possible to make comparisons with academic research. The media and academia are two arenas in which the role of public procurement is debated. Academic understanding of public procurement has evolved over the last twenty years. From its earlier status as an administrative function, there is now recognition of the strategic role that public procurement can play in achieving value for money (VfM), delivering improved services for end-users, and supporting government sustainability objectives (Allen, 2021; Glas *et al.*, 2017). It remains to be seen whether the media has represented public procurement in these same ways or if it has taken a different approach. We know that the media has a 'negativity bias' (Trussler and Soroka, 2014), which *a priori* suggests that there will be a greater focus on failings in public procurement. Our study will clarify the extent to which this 'negativity bias' plays out in public procurement media reporting, and what other similarities and differences exist between it and academic inquiry.

To bound our study, we concentrate on the UK press. Even with the advent of social media, newspapers continue to be one of the most trusted and widely accessed sources of public information. As of March 2021, half of surveyed adults in the UK had read a print national newspaper and 60% had visited the website of a national newspaper (Mintel Insights, 2021). For researchers, the digital archives of newspapers contain a comprehensive record of events stretching back decades, which makes them suitable for carrying out longitudinal analysis of public procurement. The method our paper employs combines computerized and manual techniques to search for, extract, code and analyse news articles on public procurement

published in ‘popular’, ‘mid-market’ and ‘quality’ newspapers. The output includes quantitative data points on the extent (i.e., article frequency, major news stories, article length) and form (i.e., article theme, industry context) of news reporting on public procurement in the UK from 1985 to 2018.

Our study contributes public procurement scholarship in several ways. It provides empirical insights into how the media represents public procurement and, by extension, how citizens are likely to perceive it. Excepting Keulemans and Van de Walle (2017), there has been no previous attempt to investigate either of these actors’ attitudes towards public procurement. Furthermore, the insights the study generates on the media’s characterisation of public procurement can be added to and compared with what is already known about the academic characterisation of public procurement. Another contribution is that the study offers a macro view of public procurement that is anchored in theory on the ‘agenda-setting’ role of the media (McCombs, 1997; McCombs and Shaw, 1972). This is a departure from the traditional focus on public buyers and suppliers. It follows Murray’s (2009) recommendation for scholars to include political, media and other institutional actors in their studies as part of arriving at a multi-level understanding of public procurement. Finally, the findings are of interest to elected officials, policy makers and public buyers given that media messaging can shape voter preferences and citizens’ expectations over public services.

The paper proceeds as follows. It begins by explaining the agenda-setting role of the media. It then moves to providing an overview of how the public procurement field has evolved in recent decades and what this might imply for media coverage. Thereafter, it sets out the method employed for retrieving, processing and coding news articles. The results of the analysis are then presented, followed by a discussion of the results and their implications for research and practice.

### **The Agenda-Setting Role of the Media**

Early empirical studies in the field of mass communications by McCombs and Shaw (1972) and Benton and Frazier (1976) demonstrated that issues reported on in print and broadcast media during election cycles were mirrored in what voters deemed to be areas of concern. This led the same researchers to attribute an ‘agenda-setting’ function to the media. Agenda-setting means that the mass media draws attention to issues that individuals should think about and form opinions on (Shaw and Martin, 1992). As a theory, it explains why certain issues enter the public conscious more than others. To quote McCombs (1997, p. 433), ‘over time, the priorities reflected in the patterns of news coverage become to a considerable extent the priorities of the public agenda’. This applies not only to issue identification, but also to the cause of the issue, the proposed solutions to the issue and even the advantages and disadvantages of the solutions (Benton and Frazier, 1976).

Media organisations in open societies do not, for the most part, consciously aim to set the news agenda (McCombs, 1997). Instead, agenda-setting is an ‘inadvertent by-product’ of the necessity to select a few news topics to report on each day from the total available (ibid). This is backed up by research from McCombs and Shaw (1972), which shows that there is a consensus across media organisations on what constitutes the major news stories on any given day. There are occasions when agenda-setting by the media has a purposeful element to it, as when investigative reporting and campaigning is used to push issues into the public spotlight (McCombs, 1997). Whether deliberate or inadvertent, the effect of agenda-setting is to generate agreement in society over what issues should be discussed and acted on (Shaw and Martin, 1992).

As well as putting issues on the news agenda, the media provides thematic perspectives on issues for the benefit of its audience (Price *et al.*, 1997; Tuchman, 1978). These thematic perspectives, referred to as media frames in mass communications literature, represent ‘a central organising idea for making sense of relevant events’ (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989, p. 143). The same authors identified ‘progress’, ‘energy independence’, ‘public accountability’ and ‘not cost-effective’ as among the frames used in media discourse on nuclear power. Media frames are rarely static. This is evident in Fiss and Hirsch’s (2005) study of media discourse on globalisation. In the mid-1980s the dominant frame for globalisation was financial. Yet, this later came to be challenged by social critiques of globalisation and its effects on labour standards and community wellbeing. Such shifts led Gamson and Modigliani (1989) to contend that frames are part of a storyline or unfolding narrative about an issue.

Media frames matter because they ‘activate in the minds of readers a distinctive mix of thoughts and feelings’ (Price *et al.*, 1997, p. 501). The representation of nuclear power in terms of ‘progress’ and ‘energy independence’, for example, elicited positive feelings among members of the public, but these positive feelings gave way to concern over spiralling costs and a lack of accountability (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). Frames also have the effect of keeping certain elements in focus while excluding other elements (Benford, 1997). Thus, what the public gets to read or see or listen to is a selective presentation of an issue or event. Notable here is a media bias towards bad news stories that involve things going wrong or people misbehaving (Trussler and Soroka, 2014). Stories that involve things going right and people behaving appropriately makes for less compelling news stories (*ibid*).

### **The Evolution of Public Procurement**

While procurement has a long history in public administration, its emergence as an academic discipline and its consideration in government policy and management thinking is more recent (Thai, 2001). Scholarly and policy focus on public procurement is the result of several interlinked factors. First, there is appreciation of the strategic role that procurement plays in public administration and public service delivery: strategic in the sense that procurement can help public sector organisations achieve their corporate objectives related to cost containment, service delivery and socio-economic objectives (Allen, 2021; Glas *et al.*, 2017). Second, procurement spend is recognised as important in giving effect to what Arrowsmith (2010) called ‘horizontal policies’. ‘Horizontal policies’ variously include supporting small firms (Flynn *et al.*, 2015; Loader, 2015), buying ‘green’ (Grandia and Kruyen, 2020; Smith and Terman, 2016), and creating social value for communities and citizens (Bolton, 2006; Meehan and Bryde, 2014).

A trend towards outsourcing services that were formerly provided in-house by public sector organisations has also made procurement consequential (Brien and Hine, 2015). For instance, in the UK half of public procurement spend in 2018 was with external service providers (NAO, 2016). Quality of service provision in areas like transport and social care now depends upon sourcing decisions made by procurement officers in central, regional and local government. Expanded regulatory regimes at national and regional levels e.g., European Commission’s (EC) Procurement Directives also explains why public procurement has greater visibility in public administration. Procurement regulation of this kind is designed to uphold transparency and prevent malpractice by public officials (Martin *et al.*, 1999). It is also part of trade liberalisation and international politics, whether in a European context through EC Procurement Directives, or globally through the United Nations Commission on Trade Law (UNICITRAL).

The greater prominence accorded to public procurement outlined above will almost certainly have worked its way into media reporting. Enactment of new procurement laws, policy initiatives for assisting small firms, stakeholder consultations over outsourcing, etc are all developments liable to attract media interest. This could set up a mutually reinforcing cycle: government action on public procurement leads to news reporting; news reporting raises citizens' awareness of public procurement; citizens' awareness motivates governments into action, and so on. Moreover, the expanded role of public procurement and its links to 'horizontal policies' is likely to influence how media outlets interpret it and subsequently present it to their audiences. Public procurement becomes less about sourcing supplies and services in a cost-efficient, timely manner and more about protecting livelihoods, favouring domestic firms, and supporting local economies.

## **Method**

The method for investigating news reporting on public procurement consisted of three stages: (1) searching for relevant news articles (2) automated extraction of article attributes using a script written in Python language and (3) manually coding each article. The dual use of computerized techniques and manual coding was needed to deal with the manifest (requiring no interpretation) and latent (requiring interpretation) content of newspaper reports (Dooley, 2016). Computerized analysis is a time-efficient, replicable way of extracting attributes from large bodies of text (ibid). This made it suitable for generating quantitative indicators about the extent of news coverage on public procurement. Its weakness lies in comprehending the latent, context-specific nature of words and phrases. For this reason, we put a 'human in the loop' (Dooley, 2016, p. 244) and manually coded each article for its theme and industry context. It was possible, however, to triangulate the manual coding output with a computer-generated 'negativity score' for public procurement news reporting. We discuss this triangulation in the findings section.

### *Article search*

A search of over 100 UK national and local newspapers hosted on Nexis UK, which is a digital database of news content, was performed using the keyword combinations 'public procurement' or 'public contracts' or 'government contracts' or 'public purchasing'. We established that these terms were sufficiently broad to capture sub-themes like 'defence procurement', 'competitive tendering' and 'PFI'. The search parameter selected was *Headline and Lead Paragraphs*. This meant that only articles containing at least one of the keyword combinations in its headline or lead paragraphs were returned. Given the inverted pyramid style of news coverage, this strategy increased the probability that the article was substantively about public procurement. Other options involved searching the headline of the article or searching anywhere in the article text. Trial runs indicated that the former was too restrictive and the latter too expansive. Newswires, websites and articles with less than 500 words were excluded from the search. At the end of the process, the total number of news articles retrieved, minus grouped duplicates and non-relevant articles, was 1167 [Note 1].

### *Attribute extraction*

The newspaper articles were downloaded in text format for processing. Python computer script was used to split raw text into one-unit chunks to represent each article. Then a search for specific words within a unit e.g., 'by-line', 'section' was performed to split the text further and extract individual attributes. The initial attempt at extracting attributes proved difficult because of inconsistencies in the publication formats of newspapers. The Python script had to be refined to manage these inconsistencies and enable the automated extraction of article attributes. The final attributes extracted for this study included 'author', 'abstract', 'title', 'newspaper', 'year',

‘length’, ‘page number’ and ‘graphic’. Combined with data on the annual number of news articles and the incidence of major news stories, these attributes were used to determine the extent of news coverage on public procurement.

### *Manual coding*

The manual coding of articles followed standard practice in the treatment of qualitative data (see Figure I). A large body of text was reduced step-by-step into a small number of categories (Silverman, 2006). The content of each article was scanned to identify its theme. In some cases, this was inferred straight from the headline e.g., ‘Merry-go-round public contracts harming SMEs’. In other cases, a full reading of the text was necessary. Articles were coded for one theme only. By the end of the coding process, 249 Level One themes had been identified. The 249 Level One themes were reduced to 28 Level Two themes after a second-round of analysis. For instance, SME-related articles were combined into one group, corruption-related articles were combined into another group, etc. A third round of analysis reduced the 28 Level Two themes into six overarching themes, which we set out in the findings. An illustration of the coding process in respect of one of the six themes is included as Appendix A.

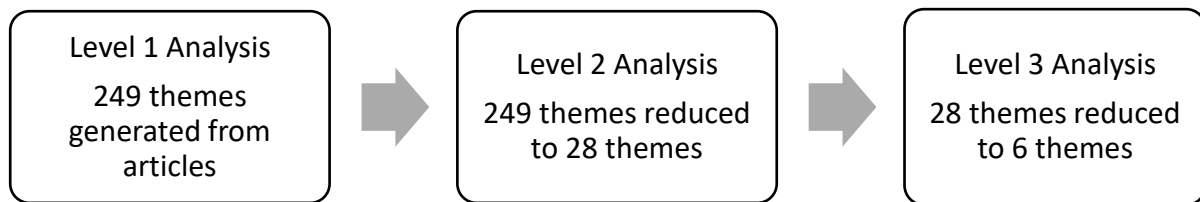


Figure I Manual coding process

Two researchers worked together coding the articles. A categorisation scheme was developed to aid the coding process. The scheme was created out of a preliminary review of the news articles and the researchers’ knowledge of procurement. The first researcher was responsible for coding all articles. The second researcher independently coded a sample of 100 articles. The results were compared, and the level of inter-rater agreement was over 90, thus indicating reliability of the coding process. The two researchers then worked together to collapse the Level One themes into Level Two themes and the Level 2 Themes into Level Three themes. In addition to coding each article for its theme, we coded each article for its focal industry [Note 2]. The reason for doing this was to identify connections between article theme and industry context. These connections are discussed in the findings section.

### *Periodization*

We take a periodization approach to analysing news reporting on public procurement. The periodization is based on three watershed events in recent UK history. The first is electoral triumph for the Labour Party in 1997. New Labour under Tony Blair represented a departure from traditional socialism and accelerated the contracting out of public services. The second event is the 2008 international financial crisis. It triggered a period of fiscal austerity and made ‘doing more with less’ a political mantra. The third event is the 2016 Brexit referendum in which the UK electorate voted to leave the EU. These three events allow us to delineate the

study as follows: period I (pre-97), period II (1997-2007), period III (2008-2015) and period IV (2016-2018).

### Findings

The findings are divided into two parts: extent of news reporting on public procurement and focus of news reporting on public procurement.

#### *Extent of news reporting on public procurement*

1985 is the base year in our study, as this is when digital records for the major UK broadsheets start. In our sample of the 1167 articles, approximately 40% were published in the local press and 60% in the national press. Media reporting on public procurement was minimal in the early years. Then there was an uptick in 1993, and apart from troughs in 1996 and 2007 the volume of reporting has been on an upward trajectory ever since (see Figure II). Further investigation revealed that the upward trajectory in public procurement reporting is associated with a generalised increase in news reporting (see Figure III). Hence, while the absolute number of public procurement articles has increased over time, the relative number has remained stable.

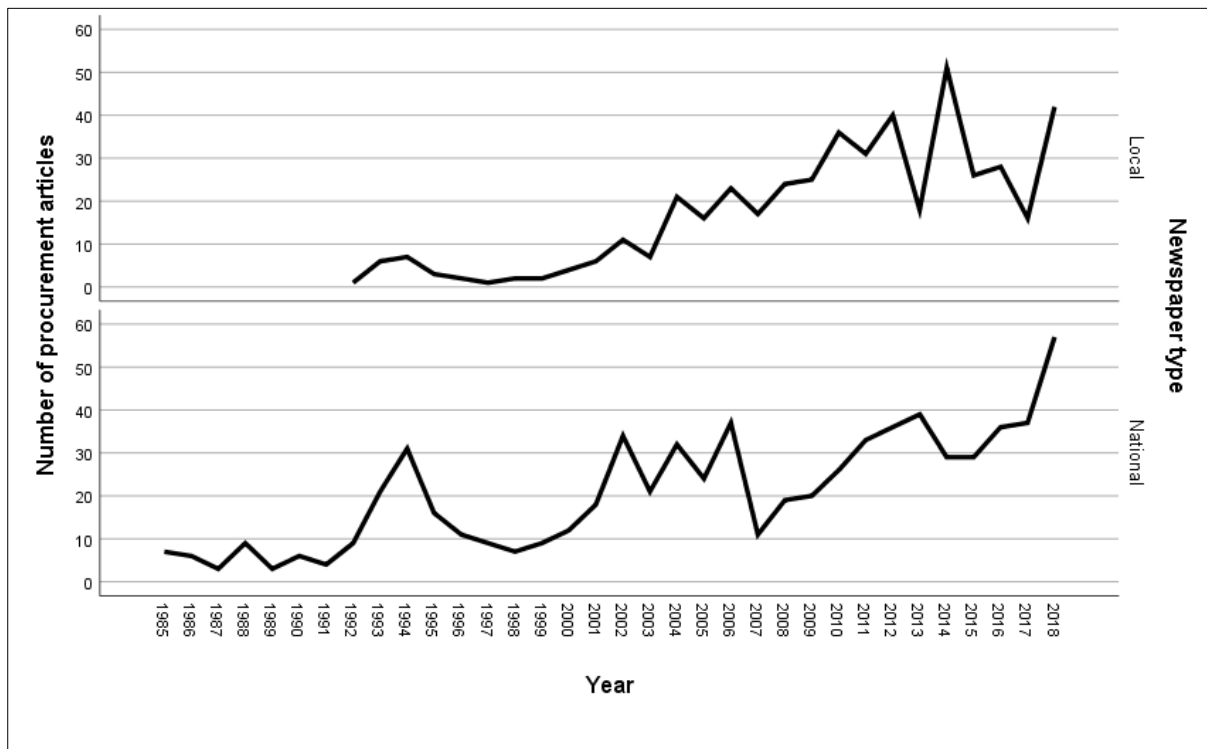


Figure II Volume of reporting on public procurement



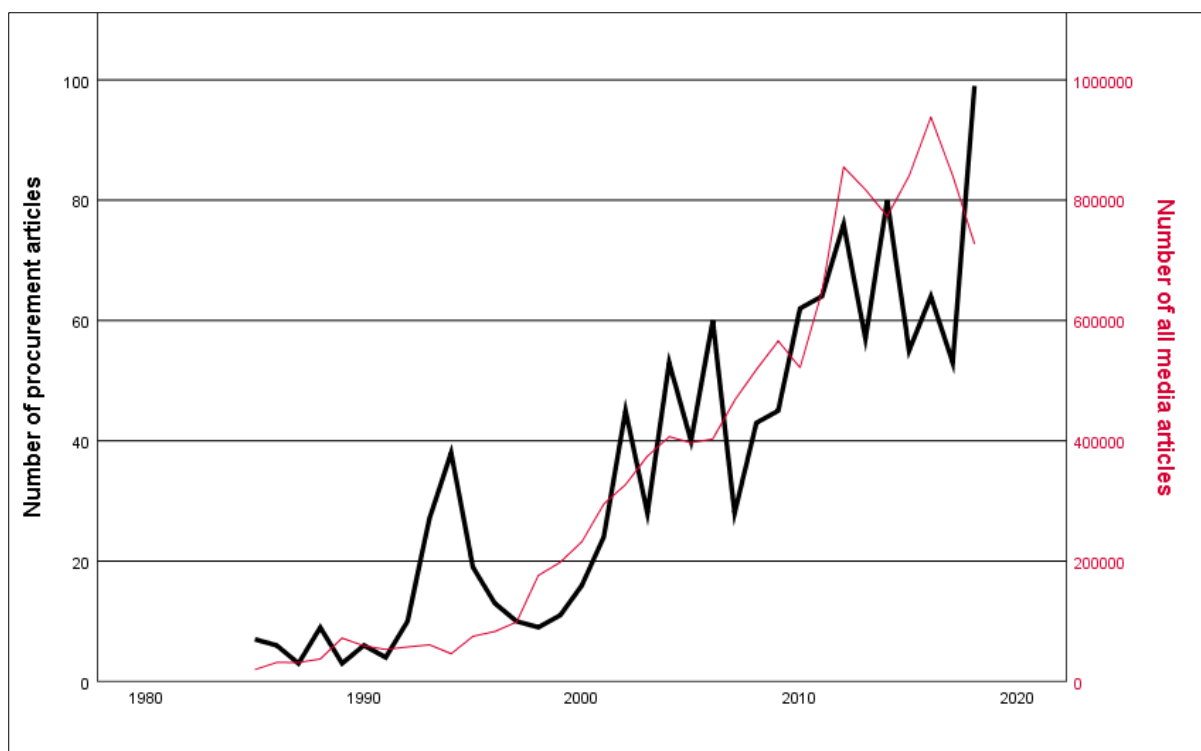


Figure III Volume of reporting on public procurement versus all media articles

#### *Predictors of news reporting on public procurement*

To explain the upward trend in coverage of public procurement, we specified a predictive model and tested it by running a negative binomial regression. The three determinant variables in the model were (i) total number of news articles published in the UK press each year (ii) percentage of UK government expenditure accounted for by public procurement each year and (iii) time [Note 3]. As determinants (i) and (ii) were strongly correlated with time (.95 and 0.84, respectively), we used their residual measure in the binomial regression to avoid multicollinearity [Note 4]. The results show that time is statistically significant, but the residual measures of total news articles and procurement spend are not (see Table I). This means that time is the underlying explanatory variable for the observed increase in public procurement news articles.

The same three-variable predictive model was used to test a second indicator of the extent of reporting on public procurement: major news stories. We defined major news stories as events that attracted at least five separate articles within a seven-day period. We counted 24 major news stories in total. Examples included the award of government contracts to Labour Party donors in 1997; the selection of Siemens over British-based Bombardier for a £6 billion train manufacturing contract in 2011; allegations of fraud against back-to-work provider, A4E, in 2012; and the collapse of construction firm, Carillion, in 2018. As with the volume of reporting on public procurement, the results show that it is time rather than total number of news articles or percentage procurement spend that explains the growth in major news stories about public procurement.

Table I Negative binomial regressions predicting the number of news articles and number of major news stories on public procurement

Variable	News articles on public procurement	Major news stories on public procurement
Number of all news articles	-1.563 (2.375)	- 4.661 (3.640)
Percentage public procurement spend	2.234 (6.324)	3.266 (9.901)
Time	.088*** (.0219)	.083** (.037)
Constant	-172.869*** (43.855)	-166.299** (76.027)
Log Likelihood	15.604	6.801
Wald	15.538***	4.785**
Df	3	3

Note: \*\*\* p <.001 and \*\* p <.05. Standard errors are in parentheses. Missing data for years 1985, 1986 and 1998.

*Additional indicators for extent of news reporting on public procurement*

It is believed that readers learn how much weight to attach to an issue from the amount of information contained in a news story and its position in the paper (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Therefore, we used the article length and article page number as supplementary indicators of the extent of news reporting on public procurement (see Table II). There is no evidence that articles have become longer. Articles consistently averaged around 800 words and there was no statistically significant difference over time (p =.415). Articles have not moved closer to the front of the paper either. In fact, there has been a statistically significant move away from the front page (p <.05).

We also extracted information on the use of pictures to accompany articles, the section in which the article was published and the author of the article. The analysis shows that using pictures to accompany articles on public procurement has become more common, with the incidence going from 9.7% in period I to 25.5% in period IV (p <.01). Inserting pictures is noteworthy for two reasons. First, pictures draw readers' attention to stories about public procurement. Second, as space is at a premium in newspapers, any editorial decision to attach a picture to a story signifies the relative importance of public procurement in the news agenda of that day. In terms of authorship, newspapers have started to carry more articles written by practitioners, academics and politicians. The proportion of articles written by these external contributors rose from 2.4% in period I to almost 20% in period IV (p <.01). This is borne out by an increase in articles listed under Editorial & Opinion and Other sections over time.

Table II Indicators on extent of news reporting on public procurement

Indicators	Period I Pre-1997	Period II 1997-2007	Period III 2008-2015	Period IV 2016-2018	All periods	Sig.	Number of Obs.
Number of articles per year (mean)	12.08	29.45	60.25	72	34.32	.001	1167
Major news stories per year (mean)	0.33	0.54	1.25	1.33	0.70	.026	24
Article wordcount (mean)	837.50	790.11	789.97	808.31	799.31	.415	1167
Article page number (mean)	14.20	14.69	17.50	18.11	16.36	.047	799
Article with graphic	9.7%	16.7%	32.4%	25.5%	23.9%	.001	1167
Newspaper section						.001	898
Business	34.4%	34.3%	34.1%	23.1%	32.0%		
News & politics	45.6%	47.4%	40.4%	52.7%	45.2%		
Editorial & opinion	2.2%	3.5%	7.6%	9.9%	6.5%		
Features & society	13.3%	9.1%	13.1%	4.9%	10.5%		
Other	4.4%	5.7%	4.8%	9.3%	5.9%		
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%		
Author type						.001	1020
Reporters & freelancers	97.6%	95.3%	84.5%	80.4%	88.1%		
Politicians	1.6%	1.4%	2.5%	1.4%	1.9%		
Industry professionals	0.0%	1.4%	7.4%	8.4%	5.1%		
Academics, commentators & thinktank staff	0.0%	1.4%	3.0%	3.7%	2.4%		
NGO staff	0.8%	0.0%	1.2%	2.3%	1.1%		
Readers' letters	0.0%	0.4%	1.5%	3.7%	1.5%		
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%		

Table III Thematic focus of news reporting on public procurement

Theme	Sub-theme	Period I Pre-1997	Period II 1997-2007	Period III 2008-2015	Period IV 2016-2018	All periods*
		%	%	%	%	%
Socio-economic policy lever						
	Employment standards	6.2	2.2	5.0	6.9	4.7
	Corporate standards	0.7	0.9	2.1	2.3	1.6
	Social good	1.4	2.2	3.7	1.9	2.7
	SMEs	0.7	8.0	10.6	3.7	7.4
	Domestic industry	1.4	2.2	6.2	7.4	4.7
	Jobs	0.7	2.8	5.8	3.7	3.9
	Regional development	<u>0.0</u>	<u>4.3</u>	<u>3.5</u>	<u>3.2</u>	<u>3.3</u>
		11.1	22.6	36.9	29.2	28.3
Governance failure						
	Conflicts of interest	6.2	7.7	2.9	2.8	4.6
	Cronyism	2.1	17.0	2.7	3.7	6.8
	Corruption	13.8	5.9	3.7	4.2	5.7
	Fraud and criminality	5.5	2.2	10.2	1.9	5.8
	Unethical supplier behaviour	0.0	0.0	1.7	6.0	1.8
	Compliance	6.2	2.8	3.5	3.7	3.7
	Transparency and accountability	<u>2.8</u>	<u>0.9</u>	<u>3.3</u>	<u>11.6</u>	<u>4.1</u>
		36.6	36.5	28.0	33.8	32.4
Cost centre						
	Cost of procurement	3.4	4.3	3.7	6.0	4.3
	Cost savings in procurement	0.7	1.2	1.2	0.5	1.0
	Cost of Private Finance Initiatives (PFI)	<u>0.7</u>	<u>2.5</u>	<u>0.4</u>	<u>1.9</u>	<u>1.3</u>
		4.8	8.0	5.3	8.3	6.6
Public service provision						
	Disruption to public services	0.7	5.9	2.3	5.6	3.7
	Failings by service providers	0.7	3.4	4.6	3.7	3.6

	Contracting out public services	<u>5.5</u>	<u>2.8</u>	<u>5.8</u>	<u>4.6</u>	<u>4.7</u>
		6.9	12.1	12.7	13.9	12.1
International relations						
	EU integration	9.0	3.7	0.6	0.0	2.4
	Trade disputes	21.4	0.6	1.2	0.9	3.5
	Future of UK	0.0	0.0	1.2	6.5	1.7
	World trade	<u>2.1</u>	<u>1.2</u>	<u>0.0</u>	<u>0.0</u>	<u>0.6</u>
		32.5	5.5	3.0	7.4	8.2
Commercial marketplace						
	Supplier share price	1.4	3.7	3.9	1.4	3.1
	Supplier profit and loss	0.7	4.6	3.5	5.1	3.8
	Supply opportunities	5.5	4.0	3.9	0.9	3.6
	Success stories	<u>0.7</u>	<u>3.1</u>	<u>2.5</u>	<u>0.0</u>	<u>2.0</u>
		8.3	15.4	13.8	7.4	12.4
Total*		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Count (N)		145	324	482	216	1167

\*There is a statistically significant difference in the focus of news coverage across the four time periods ( $\chi = 175.93$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Table IV Thematic focus of reporting on public procurement by industry

<b>Industry</b>	<b>Socio-economic policy lever</b>	<b>Governance failure</b>	<b>Cost centre</b>	<b>Public service provision</b>	<b>International relations</b>	<b>Commercial marketplace</b>	<b>Total</b>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
No industry	43	15.6	10.4	5.7	51	8.3	23.8
Construction	13	20.8	40.3	5	3.1	9	15.1
Business support services	1.8	21.1	5.2	30	0	24.8	14.4
Manufacturing	18.2	3.7	0	0	4.2	3.4	7.1
Defence	7.3	7.1	6.5	0	17.7	14.5	8.1
Professional services	2.1	12.4	2.6	2.9	0	2.1	5.4
Health & social care services	0.2	2.1	9.1	39.3	0	4.1	6.6
IT and communications	2.7	2.9	18.2	5.7	17.7	18.6	7.4
Transport services	0	2.9	1.3	5.7	0	2.1	2
Food & agriculture	4.8	0.3	1.3	0	1	0.7	1.7
Pharmaceuticals	0.3	6.1	0	0.7	0	2.1	2.4
Waste management	0.6	0.8	2.6	0.7	0	1.4	0.9
Training & education	0.6	0.5	0	0	0	4.1	0.9
Energy	1.2	1.1	1.3	1.4	4.2	2.8	1.6
Social welfare	3	0	0	0	0	0	0.9
Miscellaneous	0.9	2.6	1.3	2.9	1	2.1	1.9
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Count (N)	330	379	77	140	96	145	1167

\*There is a statistically significant difference in industry specificity across the six thematic areas ( $\chi = 941.588$   $p < .01$ ).

Table V Thematic focus of reporting on public procurement by newspaper type

<b>Newspaper type</b>	<b>Socio-economic policy lever</b>	<b>Governance failure</b>	<b>Cost centre</b>	<b>Public service provision</b>	<b>International relations</b>	<b>Commercial marketplace</b>	<b>Total</b>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Local newspapers	60.3	27.4	40.3	37.9	26	37.2	39.9
National newspapers	39.7	72.6	59.7	62.1	74	62.8	60.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Count (N)	330	379	77	140	96	145	1167

\*There is a statistically significant difference in newspaper type across the six thematic areas ( $\chi = 90.161$  p <.01).

### *Thematic focus of news reporting*

Content analysis of the 1167 articles produced six thematic areas in UK press coverage of public procurement (see Figure IV and Table III). Governance failure and using procurement as a socio-economic policy lever are the two dominant themes, accounting for over 60% of news articles and 62.5% of major news stories. Governance failure refers to corruption, conflicts of interest, cronyism, supplier fraud, transparency-accountability issues, etc. Socio-economic policy lever refers to public procurement supporting employment standards, corporate responsibility, SME growth, jobs, domestic industry, regional development, etc. The other four themes in press coverage of public procurement are international relations, cost implications, public service provision and commercial opportunities. Each received comparatively low levels of media coverage, although they did make news headlines intermittently.

News coverage of public procurement has a strong negative tone to it. Governance failure is explicitly negative. The socio-economic policy lever theme has negative connotations e.g., barriers experienced by SMEs when tendering. The same can be said of the service provision theme where disruption to public services and failings by service providers loom large. The cost centre theme also emphasises costs incurred over cost savings. To triangulate our observations, we use a ‘negativity score’ for public procurement news articles. The ‘negativity score’ is generated by an algorithm on Nexis UK – the database we used to retrieve news articles. The algorithm categorises news as either ‘negative personal’ or ‘negative business’. The ‘negativity score’ for public procurement news articles published between 1985 and 2018 was 50.4%. This is almost double the 25.9% rate of negativity across all published news articles over the same period [Note 5]. The relatively high ‘negativity score’ is consistent with our thematic findings that news reporting on public procurement emphasises failures and misbehaviour.

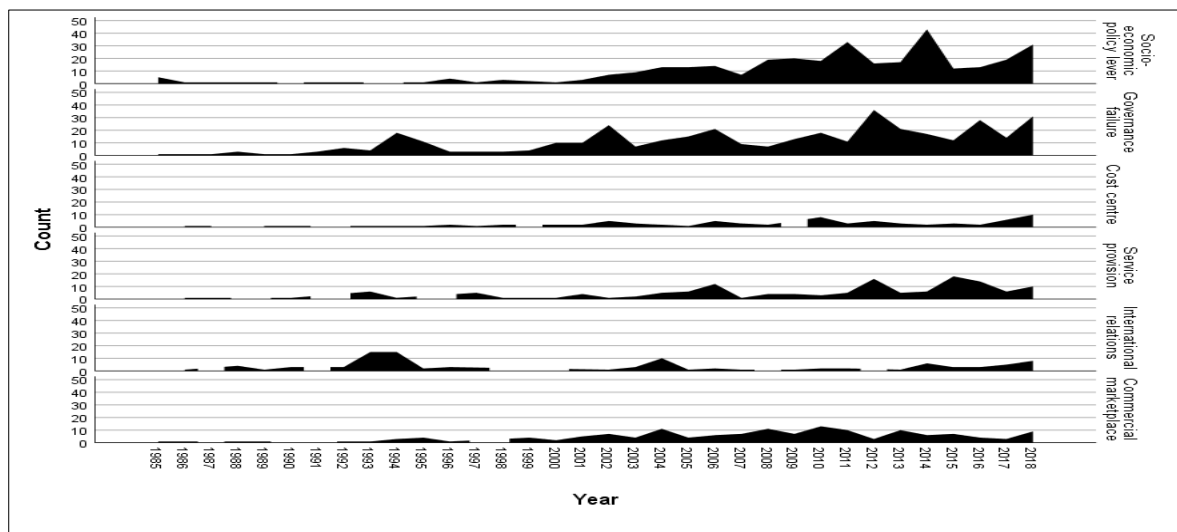


Figure IV Focus of UK news reporting on public procurement

### *Thematic focus of news reporting and industry context*

Further analysis shows that there is industry specificity to themes in news coverage of public procurement (see Table IV). Over 54% of articles with a governance failure theme are attributable to three industries: construction, business support services and professional services. These appear to be the problem industries in public procurement, whether it is to do with delayed payments to sub-contractors, overcharging by outsourcing providers or conflicts



of interests between government officials and consultants. Socio-economic policy themed articles are associated with manufacturing, defence and agriculture industries. In the context of public contract awards, these industries are viewed as having the potential to safeguard jobs and sustain local economies. Over two-thirds of public service provision themed articles are linked to either the health/social care or business support services. Articles about the cost of procurement are most likely to mention construction followed by IT-communications.

#### *Thematic focus of news reporting and local versus national newspapers*

As well as industry specificity, the thematic focus of public procurement varies between national and local newspapers (see Table V). Socio-economic policy articles have appeared more in local press than national press (60% versus 40%). The reverse is the case with governance failure articles, which have appeared more in the national press than the local press (73% versus 27%). This indicates that the impression individuals form about public procurement depends on the newspaper they read. Readers of the local press will largely see public procurement in terms of its relationship to socio-economic issues like job creation, industrial growth and regional development. Readers of the national press are likely to have greater awareness of governance failure in public procurement, alongside aspects like international relations and public service provision.

#### *Narrative account of news reporting on public procurement*

The paper now turns to providing a brief narrative account of the main stories and events that defined public procurement news coverage in the UK between 1985 and 2018.

##### *Period I Pre-1997*

What limited coverage of public procurement there was in period I largely focused on governance failures and international trade disputes. Governance failure did not have one defining event. Instead, there was a drip-feed of stories about corrupt political actors at home and abroad, as well as revelations about former UK government ministers assuming advisory roles with public contractors. Trade dispute stories arose from two major events in the 1990s. The first was a stand-off between the EU and the US over access to each other's public procurement markets, especially telecommunications. The second was the so-called 'Pergau case', which saw British firms banned from bidding for contracts with the Malaysian government over allegations of corruption in defence procurement.

##### *Period II 1997-2007*

Period II witnessed an expansion in news coverage of public procurement, which was driven by several events. The first was to do with governance failure and concerned accusations of cronyism under Tony Blair's New Labour. One of the biggest controversies involved the award of a £32 million contract for the supply of a smallpox vaccine to a firm owned by Paul Drayson, a Labour Party donor. Awareness of how public procurement could act as a policy lever for socio-economic objectives, notably supporting the SME sector, was also spurring media interest. SMEs barely received a mention pre-1997 but were starting to make the news now. Reports carried in the press at this time highlighted the under-representation of SMEs in public sector supply chains and the barriers experienced by them when tendering.

As with cronyism, cost overruns on infrastructure projects like the Scottish Parliament Building put public procurement in the news for the wrong reasons. This long running saga was held up as symptomatic of the failure of the public sector to deliver projects on time and within budget. Around the same time, debate on the merits of using private finance initiatives (PFI) to provide

schools and other types of public infrastructure was taking place. A report commissioned from consultants Mott MacDonald by the Treasury Department in 2001 concluded that PFI schemes cost less over the long-term. The media was not entirely convinced. As one newspaper headline put it, 'the public still foots the bill' when things go wrong, whether it is PFI or traditional public procurement.

### Period III 2008-2015

The 2008 international financial crisis, and the half decade of austerity that followed it, pushed public procurement further onto the news agenda. The emphasis throughout this period was on how public procurement could aid a struggling economy. Leveraging public procurement for the benefit of the SME sector was to the fore in this discussion, with industry bodies like the Federation of Small Business (FSB) calling for the government to improve SME access to public contract opportunities. Leveraging public procurement in support of domestic industry and jobs was also getting attention. The 2011 decision to award a £6 billion train contract to the Germany manufacturer, Siemens, over UK-based Bombardier was portrayed in the media as a missed opportunity, with the government accused of not having the 'balls or brains' to support British manufacturing.

As well as socio-economic concerns, there was a strong governance failure aspect to news reporting in period III. Much of it was to do with supplier fraud and criminality. The biggest fraud case involved A4E, a welfare-to-work provider that held UK government contracts valued at £180 million. Four of its staff were arrested over falsely claiming that welfare recipients had been placed in employment. Similar fraud cases involving security contractors G4S and Serco were to make headline news the following year. Politicians were vocal in their criticism of these outsourcing giants. Fraud was not the only problem with public service contractors. Sub-standard performance was also under media scrutiny, no more so than when G4S failed to provide 10000 personnel as part of its security contract for London Olympics 2012.

### Period IV 2016-2018

Governance failure re-asserted itself as the focus of public procurement news coverage in period IV, with a lack of transparency and accountability now the main talking points. This was due to the collapse of construction giant, Carillion, in 2018. Media reporting turned on the question of how a firm known to be in financial difficulty was still awarded £1.5 billion in government contracts in the six months before it entered administration. The Carillion case was held up as typical of the 'great secrecy' surrounding public procurement decision making and the lack of accountability by government officials, contractors, and auditors when things go wrong. Linking public procurement to employment standards surfaced during this period, following proposals made by Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, that contract awards should be contingent on firms implementing CEO salary caps.

## **Discussion**

### *Implications*

Agenda-setting theory predicts that the more the media reports on an issue, the more citizens will become aware of it and believe it important (Benton and Frazier, 1976; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 1997). Our findings show that news coverage of public procurement in the UK increased from the 1980s onwards, as judged by number of articles, incidence of major news stories, contributions of subject experts, picture accompaniments and more diverse

section placement. The inference we draw is that awareness of public procurement as a news item will have increased in tandem. This awareness will mainly be in the form of governance failures and socio-economic aspects, allowing for variation in emphases between local and national newspapers. These, in effect, are the ways in which the UK press has framed public procurement for its audience rather than, say, focusing on its cost or service dimensions.

There is a strong negative tone to press coverage of public procurement – a finding supported by both manual and computerized analysis of the articles. There was corruption in construction projects, supplier fraud in business support services and conflicts of interest in professional services. The media covered these stories, especially when politicians were implicated. Perhaps the focus on governance failure is not surprising given that experiments show people gravitate towards negative news content (Trussler and Soroka, 2014). In this sense, newspapers are simply giving the public what they want. Academic research on public procurement covers governance problems like corruption (Basheka, 2011; Csaki and Gelleri, 2005), supplier collusion (Padhi and Mohapatra, 2011) and maverick buying (Gelderman *et al.*, 2006; Karjalainen and Van Raaij, 2011; Martin *et al.*, 1999). However, it does not do so to the same degree as the media. Governance failure is one of many themes in academic research on public procurement rather than the main theme.

Although not as negative as governance failure, media coverage of socio-economic policy issues highlighted missed opportunities in public procurement. Among them was SMEs' difficulties with tendering, overlooking domestic manufacturers for £ billion contracts, failure to utilise local food supply chains and lack of positive action on worker rights. Readers were given the impression that public procurement was not leveraging its spending power for the common good. Minus the protectionist overtones concerning domestic industry, this socio-economic perspective finds its academic equivalent in procurement research on areas like social value (Bolton, 2006; Meehan and Bryde, 2014), SME participation (Flynn *et al.*, 2015; Loader, 2015) and 'green' products and services (Grandia and Kruyen, 2020; Smith and Terman, 2016). Hence, we can say that the media resembles academia in recognising public procurement's role as a demand-side stimulant for economic, environment and social development.

The media did not only report on socio-economic policy issues. At time, media outlets tried to bring about change in line with their own ideological preferences. This is not unusual, as media reporting can have an activist element to it (McCombs, 1997). Prominent cases of media activism in the analysis included *The Sunday Times* campaign for a 'better deal' for small suppliers and *The Daily Mail's* petition to have the Brexit passport contract decision reversed in favour of British firm, De La Rue. The former had universal support and eventually succeeded. The latter was partisan and proved unsuccessful. These and other cases are a reminder of the media's status as an institutional actor in the public procurement field. As well as chronicling events and informing public opinion, the media attempts to steer procurement decision making in certain directions. This phenomenon has not been previously documented, probably because of the organisation-centric view that researchers have taken of public procurement (Murray, 2009), but it deserves further investigation.

When the media selects an area to focus on, other areas are excluded (Benford, 1997). In the case of public procurement, pre-occupation with governance failures and socio-economic objectives pushed other areas to the sidelines. Over the period of analysis, the media paid relatively little attention to the cost and service provision aspects of public procurement, even though these are primary considerations for buyers when selecting suppliers. By contrast,

scrutiny of procurement costs, VfM, bid prices and the quality of supplies and services are central to academic research (Dimitri, 2013; Stake, 2017; Uenk *et al.*, 2019). Media treatment of public procurement differs from academic research in two other respects. The international trade and political dimension of public procurement has been reported on in the media, but scholars in our field have not examined it to any appreciable degree. The outcome from winning public contracts is another area that the media reports on but that academia has overlooked. There are, for example, no empirical studies testing the relationship between contract wins and business performance indicators like share price or profit margin. These are two possible areas that public procurement scholars could investigate in future.

#### *Practitioner relevance*

The findings offer a lesson for senior civil servants and policy makers. Public procurement receives a negative portrayal in the media. Positive developments and reform initiatives get crowded out in favour of failings and mishaps, with knock-on effects for readers' perceptions about the role and purpose of public procurement. If the situation is to change, government officials will have to become proactive in influencing the messaging around public procurement. We are not advocating political spin, but successes in public procurement deserve to be communicated to the public. In practice, this means public relations officers reaching out to media organisations and informing them where VfM has been achieved, services have been successfully delivered, SMEs have been contracted, etc. It also means the relevant government departments and ministries countering the 'negativity bias' with press conferences and publicised reports that showcase improvements in compliance, efficiency and effectiveness across government spend.

#### *Limitations and future research*

The study has several limitations. It confines its analysis to UK news reporting. Whether UK trends mirror international trends is debatable. International comparative research is required before we can generalise the themes identified in UK news reporting to other jurisdictions. Another limitation is that only newspapers reporting is analysed. We recommend future studies to analyse the content of practitioner magazines like *Supply Management* and triangulate our results. Methodologists may criticise our decision to manually code the theme for each article. An alternative method is to utilise data mining software that picks out the most frequently used words in each article, quantifies their relative importance through algorithms and takes the final output as a proxy for what the article is about (Dooley, 2016). The caveat here is that the length of news articles, averaging around 800 words, might obscure the concepts of interest. Finally, the study does not test the effects of news coverage on readers. Building on survey insights offered by Keulemans and Van de Walle (2017) about citizens' preferences on government spending, we encourage researchers to start considering the 'public' in public procurement.

#### *Conclusion*

Our paper offers a fresh perspective on public procurement by concentrating on an institutional actor previously unresearched: the media. It contributes to understanding on the extent and form of media engagement with public procurement, and what this implies about citizens' awareness of it. Two key findings emerge from the analysis. The first is that public procurement has become more visible in news coverage and, by implication, more prominent in the minds of readers. The second is that the media renders public procurement in ways that are not always recognisable in academic discourse but are nonetheless important in influencing policy and practice. While there are some overlaps between media and academic treatment of public procurement, particularly on socio-economic policy objectives, we show that the media

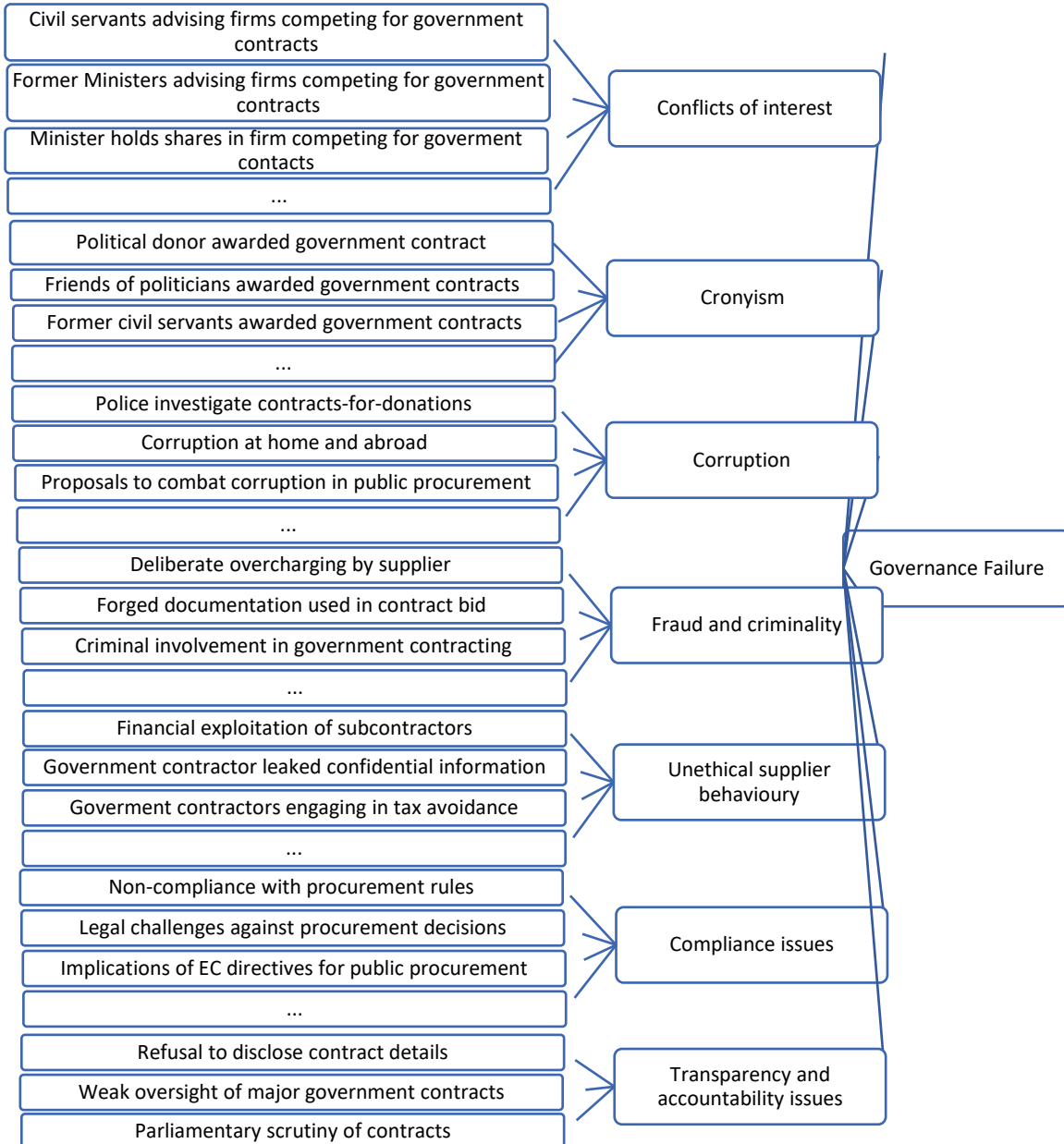
accentuates the negatives of public procurement and omits positive developments. The end-result is a selective and, at times, self-serving media narrative that is likely to engender cynicism towards public procurement. Senior government officials and buyers should be more proactive in countering this situation.

### Notes

1. Examples of non-relevant articles included ‘Amazon prevented public from purchasing’ and ‘Pietersen aired dirty laundry in public as his contract wrangles escalated to Twitter’.
2. Approximately 76% of articles referred to an industry. Most concentrated on a single industry. In cases where two or more industries featured in an article, we selected the first industry mentioned.
3. Annual figures for total number of news articles were obtained from Nexis UK database. Data on public procurement spend was obtained from Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis (PESA) reports, which are produced by the UK government.
4. The residual measures for predictors (i) and (ii) were generated by individually regressing them on the time variable and then subtracting their predicted values from their actual values. This leaves variables (i) and (ii) with their unique variation that is separate from time. Refer to Fiss and Hirsch (2005, pp. 36-37) for further explanation of this technique.
5. The total number of news stories retrieved from Nexis UK between 1985 and 2018 was 12051264. The total number of negative news stories over the same period was 3123136.  $3123136/12051264 = 0.259$

## Appendix A

Categorisation for governance failure theme (Level 3), its sub-categories (Level 2) and some of its initial coded categories (Level 1)



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