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Citation: Brooke, H. (2014). Research Focus: MPs' Expenses Scandal. Reputation, Michae(11), pp. 9-10.

This is the published version of the paper.

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Heather Brooke, journalist and activist, was an initial driving force behind the campaign for disclosure of MPs' expenses. Here she offers a practitioner perspective of the scandal.

Journalists must labour to meet an ever-present metric of public impact. Do our stories get read? If so, do they become talking points or sink into oblivion?

It is not surprising that one conclusion from the Graffin et al. paper is that "newspapers played a significant role in shaping social reactions to the [MPs' expenses] scandal". Information by itself doesn't have the same impact as information framed. It needs context, relevance and humanity if it is to engage the public. Crucial to the survival of every journalist is a keen understanding of what the public finds interesting.

The framing mechanisms used by journalists hunting for stories in the MPs' expenses dataset are the news values: information about famous, and powerful people; quirky details (including claims for a duck house, a trouser press and moat cleaning).

But for the authors, Douglas Hogg ticks another box beyond his moat-cleaning claim: his "elite" status. They contend that the media's focus on Hogg and other establishment grandees was indicative of external targeting which skewed the outcomes of sanctions against those MPs with honours and status over those without.

This seems too narrow a definition. The journalistic identification of Hogg, for example, speaks to a wider narrative of class, privilege and, ultimately, power. It was the combination of the quirky moat combined with Hogg's aristocratic status and unrepentant behaviour that helped to heap opprobrium on his head.

There is a more obvious contention that can be drawn from the MPs' expenses scandal and one that makes sense of the authors' statement: "We found no relationship between MPs' status and inappropriate expense behaviour: the fact that so many MPs engaged in inappropriate expense behaviour suggests that abuse of the expense system was systemic to the parliamentary bureaucratic culture."

The reason for this is due to the secrecy of the system. A secret system involving public money creates incentives to divert public money away from the public good and towards private gain. That is why we saw MPs across all political parties and at all levels of power and fame taking advantage of public money.

I come from a background of transparency activism, and what the scandal illustrated to me

"WHAT THE SCANDAL ILLUSTRATED TO ME WAS THE TANGIBLE COST OF SECRECY."

was the tangible cost of secrecy. It enabled a culture of lax rules and minimal enforcement to build up, where there was little to lose and much to gain from claiming the maximum allowances for dubious items.

Compare the MPs' expenses with an almost identical investigation I did in 1992 as a young reporter covering the Washington State Legislature. I asked the legislative authority for my local politicians' expenses. I received them without delay in the form of boxes of paper receipts. I examined them carefully, but it soon dawned on me that there were no improper claims – a great disappointment for an eager reporter. It seemed that politicians' awareness that the documents were publicly available created strong incentives for them to spend public money wisely.

In the UK, such claims were not part of the public record. I discovered very little official information was in general made public. As a result, British journalism is forced to rely on patronage networks and, as the phone hacking scandal revealed, some more dubious methods.

I had no patronage network in the UK and instead made use of the UK's nascent Freedom of Information Act to chivvy expense claims from parliamentarians, beginning in 2005. But Parliament did not give up the documents as willingly as their Washington state counterparts. Instead, for four years they refused to release the information and only began to do so after they lost their appeal against my case in the High Court. Even then, they delayed and delayed. It was during this delay that a copy of the digitised receipts was sold to the *Daily Telegraph*.

The Graffin et al. paper states: "Elite opportunism is the tendency of high status people to over exploit their advantage... elite targeting [is] when elites are scrutinised more than non-elites for the same behaviors and held to higher standards of conduct."

What is interesting about MPs, however, is that until the court case and subsequent leak of the database, MPs of any status were scrutinised far less than the average person. The system operated predominantly on trust. No receipts were necessary for claims under £250, or under £400 for food, for example.

MPs were therefore held to a lower standard of conduct than ordinary people despite being in a position of authority, where they legislated upon the morality of others. It is perhaps for this reason the public were so outraged when the claims finally came out. It must have been particularly galling for someone struggling to make ends meet during a time of national austerity to read about wealthy MPs using public funds to buy a new Aga oven. ■

Heather Brooke is Professor of Journalism at City University. Her book The Silent State *is published by Heinemann.*