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## **Agenda setting and framing in the UK energy prices debate**

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MSc in Media and Communications Governance

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# **Agenda setting and framing in the UK energy prices debate**

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**Nicholas Davies**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper uses the Labour party's pledge to introduce an 'energy price freeze' as a case study to examine some of the competing claims regarding the balance of power between politicians and the media in political communication. Using content analysis to measure media agenda setting I first show how the policy proposal dramatically increased issue salience. By treating frames as dependent variables I also argue that this success may have been due to the strong *conflict* frame it built. Drawing upon mediatisation and political marketing theory I finally examine whether the policy's salience can be explained by its fit with media logic. By measuring and analysing the policy measures most frequently reported in the energy prices debate I draw some tentative conclusions about the structure of incentives facing politicians and their press officers. In doing so I explore a number of normative questions raised by agenda setting, framing and political marketing in the UK energy prices debate. I support my analysis with in-depth interviews with politicians and journalists.

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## INTRODUCTION

When Ed Miliband took the stage at the Labour party conference on Sep 24 2013, only a handful of advisors knew that he was about to make a radical ‘retail offer’. The Labour leader’s pledge to ‘freeze’ energy prices had not been trailed in the media and most Labour MPs were in the dark about the details (Watson, 26/09/2013; Labour MP, interview, 28/07/2014).

It was a crucial moment for his leadership. Critics on his own side had complained that Labour had had a ‘silent summer’ (Channel Four News, 11/08/2013) and his poll ratings were waning (Stevenson, 11/09/2013). As a former Conservative Shadow Cabinet member and ex-Minister explained to me in an interview for this research, the conference speech is ‘terrifically important because they are one of the few occasions in the year when the opposition leader is pretty well guaranteed to have a whole 24 hour news cycle devoted to their speech’ (Tim Yeo MP, interview, 24/07/2014).

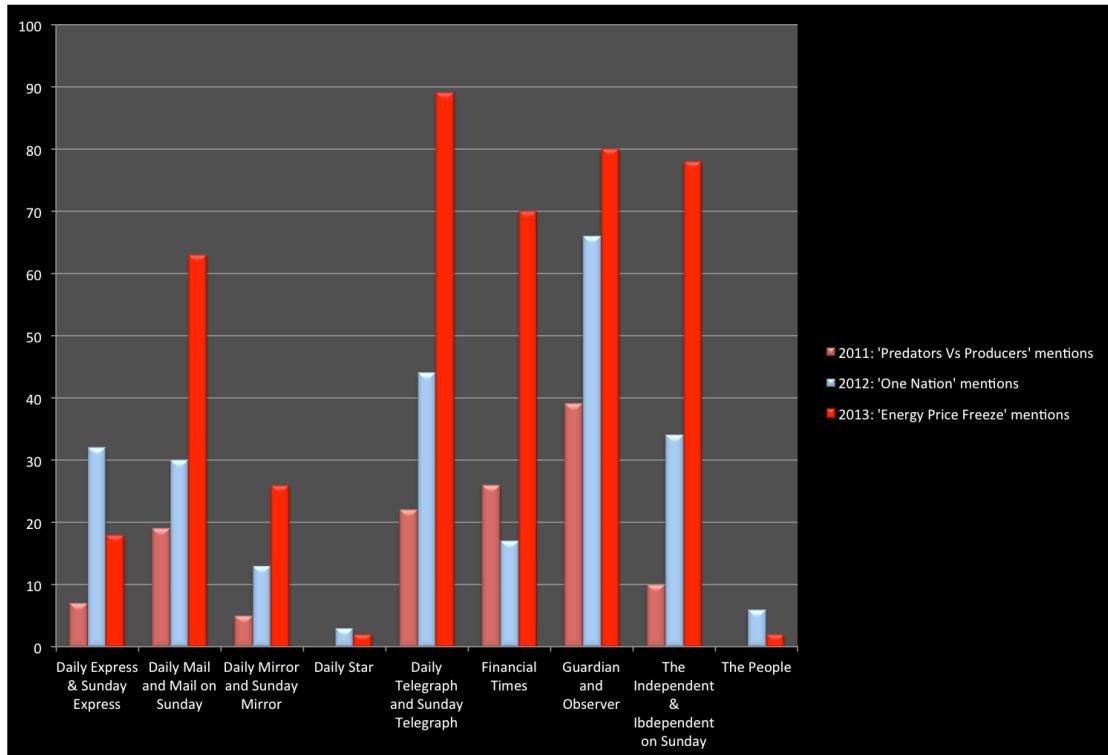
Pledging to ‘freeze energy prices’ until 2017, while gas and electricity markets were ‘reset’, was a big political risk. But it seemed to pay off. His 2013 speech appears to have been the most successful of his conference speeches to date, in terms of generating numbers of newspaper mentions (see *graph 1.* overleaf). As my results show, it also propelled the energy prices issue from the business and money sections of newspapers to the front pages; increased the issue’s salience; and arguably helped to divert the political debate from the Conservative’s preferred economic recovery narrative on to Labour’s chosen battleground, the cost of living.

While many papers and politicians criticised Miliband’s economics, both allies and opponents praised his political communication. As Andrew Rawnsley observed after a month of news stories discussing the price freeze:

‘...the pledge’s impact has been larger and longer lasting than anyone anticipated, either on the Labour side or in Government. It has cut through because the proposals is ‘simples’ for the media to grasp and turn into a headline.’ ( 27/10/2013)

The conservative commentator Matthew D’Ancona seems to have summed up the prevailing consensus among media commentators when he said ‘the Labour leader is framing the debate and defining its terms’ (27/10/13).

*Graph 1. Media impact of Miliband's three conference speeches between 2011-2013.<sup>1</sup>*



On the face of it, these assertions appeared to be an accurate assessment. The media had focused on energy prices for more than a month after his speech, piling pressure on the Coalition, which hastily cut 'green taxes' in response. However, as a close observer of the energy policy debate I wondered whether the Labour leader really was the one 'framing the debate and defining its terms' as the commentators had claimed. I suspected that a systematic analysis of the case study and energy debate more widely would provide an interesting insight into the balance of power between politicians and the media and how this influences political communication in contemporary Britain.

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<sup>1</sup> To produce this graph I used the Lexis Nexis database to search 15 national newspaper titles for mentions of 'Miliband', plus the 'key phrase/theme', for the remainder of the year following each speech.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The role mass communications play in influencing public and political discourse has been one of the central questions in media and political communications research. In the early twentieth century, as mass media became part of daily life in developed industrial economies, thinkers like Walter Lippmann advanced early media effects hypotheses that assumed the media had strong direct propaganda effects. In a world where individuals got much of their political information via the media, the persuasive communications techniques deployed by public relations professionals would increasingly mould public opinion (Lippmann, 1922).

Early empirical research by communications scholars at Columbia University challenged these notions, however, suggesting that the media only had limited effects on opinions. Voting behaviour was more likely to be determined by a citizen's social networks than his or her news consumption (Lazarsfeld, et al, 1944). Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues found that the potential for propaganda effects of political communications were largely cancelled out in US Presidential elections by party competition and the tendency of partisan audiences to insulate themselves from 'contrary points of view' (Lazarsfeld, et al, 1944:161). The media could reinforce attitudes, it was argued, but it rarely changed opinions (1944).

In a time still haunted by totalitarianism, however, the 'limited effects' model seemed counter intuitive to many media and communications researchers. This theoretical puzzle led some researchers to shift their focus from media's effect on attitudes and opinions, to the salience it could accord to particular issues and the cognitive effects this might have on audiences (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Soroka, 2002; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Among the first to conceptualize media power in agenda setting terms was Bernard Cohen who claimed that while the press 'may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think...it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about' (cited in Dearing & Rogers, 1996: 12).

### Agenda Setting

An agenda can be thought of as 'a ranking of the relative importance' of an issue – which itself can be defined as 'whatever is in contention' among a particular public (Lang & Lang, 1981: cited in Soroka, 2002: 5). Agenda setting can therefore be defined as an ability of one or more actors to influence the degree of importance accorded to an issue either in the minds of citizens, in a programme of policies, or in the priority given to particular issue or news by media outlets (Dearing, 1989; Soroka, 2002).

### *The public agenda*

The key focus of early research in this area was on how media affect the public agenda. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw were among the first to establish that the theory had empirical validity. Their influential paper on agenda setting in the 1968 US election campaign found a strong correlation between the hierarchy of issues emphasised by print, radio and television, and the salience undecided US voters in Chapel Hill attached to these issues when surveyed. This evidence was consistent with the effects one would expect to find, if the media had an agenda setting function, they argued (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Around the same time Ray Funkhouser was conducting similar research that would produce generalizable results for the entire US population. He used a longitudinal method to look for correlations between the news agenda and the opinions expressed by US citizens in Gallup Polls every year during the 1960s (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). The results of his study published in 1973 confirmed McCombs and Shaw's basic hypothesis. Newspapers and television may not be able to 'tell you what to think', but they can tell you 'what to think about' (McCombs & Shaw, cited in Lilleker, 2006: 27).

In the decades since, over a hundred subsequent studies using both hierarchical and longitudinal approaches have attempted to test public agenda setting hypothesis (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Researchers have tested a variety of contingent conditions like personal experience of an issue (Zucker, 1978), interpersonal discussions on an issue (Wanta & Wu, 1992), and the perceived credibility of the media source (Wanta & Hu, 1994). The balance of evidence generated by these studies supports the generalization that exposure to an issue via the media - and the relative prominence it is accorded - can make an issue more or less accessible to citizens; say, when evaluating a candidate in an election (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2004).

### *Political and media agendas*

Unlike research on public agenda setting, empirical research by political scientists and communications scholars on whether media agendas determine political agendas, or vice versa, is inconclusive. Some political scientists maintain that the media's ability to set the political agenda is limited (Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993); others claim to have found strong effects (Wood & Peake, 1998; Edwards & Wood, 1999). While some time-series content analyses conducted by researchers on political and media agendas appear to show that 'media attention more often precedes political attention' (Walgrave 2008: 446), the

conflicting empirical evidence would suggest that ‘no single direction of influence’ can be assumed (Soroka, 2002: 7-9). As a result there is no generalizable theory of the media’s ability to set the political agenda (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006).

In fact, there is little academic agreement on how to define the ‘political agenda’. Distinguishing between ‘symbolic and substantial political agendas’ may help us to make sense of the conflicting political/media agenda setting results (Pritchard and Berkowitz, 1993; Walgrave & Van Aelst 2006:94). Researchers have attempted to measure issue salience in political forums in a number of ways (Soroka, 2002; Van Aelst et al, 2013). Many of the studies that recorded strong correlations between media and political agendas looked mainly at the symbolic political agenda found in the public pronouncements of politicians; in other words, what they said, rather than what they did. ‘Whenever substantial political agendas like legislation and resource allocation were considered in the research at hand, researchers were much less impressed by the media’s impact’ (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006: 56).

Some political communications scholars have warned against too narrow a focus on merely measuring issue salience, however. In work on campaign agendas, Holli Semetko et al point out that both political and media agenda setting must be ‘conceived as a dynamic’ and ‘deeply political’ process (1991). Not a ‘semi-mechanical practice, connoting a sedate ordering of items for sequential consideration before the real business of debate and decision taking over them begins’ (Semetko et al, 1991: 90). The interplay between political and news agendas must be understood in the context of the fierce ‘competitive struggle to control the mass media agenda’ that takes place in the run up to election campaigns in the US and UK. ‘A struggle that pits, not only candidates and parties in contention for agenda domination, but also campaign managements against news organisation teams’ (Semetko et al, 1991: 90).

#### *The role of news production processes in agenda setting*

Other theorists have pointed out that news production processes automatically place powerful political and business elites in a position to influence the news and public agenda. The logic of the newsroom ensures there is ‘a systematically structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged positions’, according to Stuart Hall, for instance (Hall et al, 1978: 58). Governing politicians and the heads of large companies are more likely to see their definitions of events reproduced via the media, Hall argues, because their institutional positions grant them greater legitimacy than other actors. Their powerful positions not only make these figures more newsworthy by nature, they also places them higher up in a social ‘hierarchy of credibility’ (Becker, 1967). In a similar vein, Lance

Bennett's indexing theory has suggested that the media closely mirror or 'index' elite debates - specifically in a foreign policy context - only offering critical commentary on certain issues if there is elite disagreement (Entman, 2004). It follows that if there is little or no disagreement between elites then there is much less for journalists to report.

Despite the privileged opportunities political elites may have to set agendas, however, journalists and editors still control the 'the gates of access' through which much political communication – even in the era of mass-self communication – has to pass to reach voters (Semetko, 1991; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Castells, 2009). While media workers may not have much *substantive* power, they can be said to wield *symbolic* power. Indeed, Robert Entman has argued that a handful of editors, senior correspondents and commentators exercise more influence over the transmission of ideas than 'all but the most powerful public officials' (Entman, 2004:11). As Semetko explains this is because they not only have the power to select what is allowed through the gate, they can also provide 'contextualising commentary, packaging, and event definition (Semetko et al, 1991:90). The media's influence over politics arises 'from their ability to frame the news' (Entman, 2004:4).

## **Framing**

The concept of framing helps us understand how both media and political actors package and present information in an attempt to cater for their target audiences and/or define social reality and influence public opinion.

"To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text...to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation.'

(Entman 1993:52)

As a phenomenon 'framing' is arguably as old as story telling itself, of course, but it was not until the 1970s that sociologists and ethnographers drew on emerging ideas in cognitive psychology to elaborate the concept theoretically. Frames help individuals process new information, it has been suggested, because they trigger existing interpretative mental schemas – or 'clusters of ideas' (Entman, 1993; De Vreese & Lecheler, 2012). In other words, frames help us to make sense of our social or physical environment by siting new information in relation to the existing maps we have in our mind of how the world works.

### *Cultural frames*

Frames are not confined to individual minds. They are also cultural constructs by which meaning is shared within communities and societies. Media thus perform a dual role in framing models; not only contributing to the ‘social construction of meaning’ alongside other processes of socialisation (Schuefele, 1999); but also providing a battlefield where competing individuals, institutions and ideologies fight to define ‘social reality’ (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Indeed, many contested issues can be seen as a ‘symbolic contest’ pitting competing interpretative cultural frames against each other (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). This is, of course, why framing as a concept has come to be most commonly linked to the presentation of issues in news report or political communication. For journalists it allows complex stories or events to be communicated concisely, while for political actors framing is a way of defining an issue that furthers their political or policy goals (Nisbet, 2010).

### *Media frames*

In the same way that we can differentiate between public or media agenda setting then, we can also think of framing in terms of individual or audience frames versus media frames. Framing research often focuses on the effects that media frames can have on individual or audience frames and therefore public opinion (de Vreese & Lecheler, 2012). Framing experiments have found statistically significant correlations between the way an issue message is framed and audience opinions, discourse or decisions relating to that issue (Druckman & Nelson 2003; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004; Chong & Druckman, 2007). Fewer studies have looked at how frames find their way into news reports and public discourse (de Vreese & Lecheler, 2012). In the literature this process has been termed ‘frame building’ and can be thought of in analogous terms to agenda setting (Scheufele, 1999). Research in this area studies the relationship between elites and the media, the processes by which frames emerge, and the factors determining their frequency and success - such as the extent of elite sponsorship, degree of cultural resonance, and fit with news values (Gans, 1979; de Vreese & Lecheler, 2012; Häggli, 2012).

### *Frame building and agenda setting*

There is considerable inconsistency in the way framing is defined and operationalized in the literature (De Vreese, 2005). The forefather of agenda setting research, Maxwell McCombs, suggests framing can fundamentally be seen as ‘second-level agenda-setting’ (2004). McCombs points out that each issue has its own ‘agenda of attributes’ and that framing can

make certain aspects or attributes of an issue more salient for audiences – as Entman’s definition suggests (2004:547). For McCombs then, a frame is the ‘dominant attribute in a message’ and ‘the second level of agenda setting is the transmission of attribute salience’ (2005: 546). In simpler terms, agenda setting affects *whether* we think about an issue, while framing may affect *how* we think about it. Other scholars suggest that although both concepts are premised on psychological models of information processing, they locate effects in different cognitive processes and so warrant a separate conceptual classification (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Agenda setting works by increasing the accessibility of the issue in our memory, but framing relies on an applicability effect; it only works if it is applicable to an existing interpretative schema in the mind of the message receiver (Price & Tewksbury, 1997).

### *Definition*

In this paper, I will adopt the definition provided by Gamson and Modigliani in their seminal article on the cultural characterisations of nuclear energy. According to them, a frame is:

‘A central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggest what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue’ (1989: 143).

Although I will treat framing or frame building as an agenda-setting process, I do not accept McCombs characterisation of it as ‘second-level’. In doing so, McCombs seems to imply that framing can only have an effect after some form of initial agenda-setting has taken place – i.e, the issue / object has to be the subject of debate. Yet, if frames can represent dominant and deep-rooted (perhaps even neurally structured) cultural or ideological beliefs, as social constructionists suggest (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), it is conceivable that they also have strong ‘first-level’ effects – for instance, structuring whether we even consider something an issue in the first place. Indeed, it could be argued that the dominant cultural or ideological frames reproduced by society and the media may hold a potentially ‘insidious power’ to define the battleground of issues by shaping the values and desires of citizens (Lukes, 1974).

### *Agenda setting and framing on energy prices*

In the energy prices debate, we may think of agenda setting as determining how much salience the issue is given by media, audiences or politicians. The framing of the issue and emphasis placed on certain aspects or attributes of the issue may in turn affect whom or what

we blame and the potential solutions we consider. More fundamentally, it may affect (although this is highly contingent on other factors) whether we see rising energy price as a ‘cost of living crisis’ affecting those on low incomes or in macro economic terms as a ‘burden on business’ and drag on growth. The framing of the energy prices debate might also affect whether we even consider the environmental consequences of energy policy at all.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### *Political Marketing theory*

In this paper, I have found it useful to think about agenda setting and framing in the UK energy prices debate within the conceptual framework provided by political marketing theory. This analytical framework, Harrop points out, does not merely concern the study of promotional techniques, but rather the whole strategic positioning of a party in the political market (1990). Politicians and parties in this perspective must be understood as strategic ‘goal directed actors’, competing with opponents over the control of agendas, policy implementation, vote share and election victory (Lilleker & Lees-Marshment, 2005; Scammell, 2014:xvii). The most successful parties, according to this model, will be market-oriented – using market research to shape both their policies and messages to appeal to target voters (Harrop, 1990; Lilleker & Lees-Marshment, 2005; Gould, 2011). This essentially economic perspective suggests political communication must therefore be seen as being shaped by the particular structures of competition in a given democratic market – such as the nature of the voting system, electoral constituencies, number of parties, particular legislative arrangements and media environment (Scammell, 2014).

### *Mediatisation*

In thinking about how the media influence political agendas and communication then – or indeed vice versa – one must also consider the structures, grammar and logic of the media.

The concept of mediatisation, first outlined by David Altheide and Robert Snow in 1979, alerts us to the potential consequences for political communication in an age when politicians central means of communicating with voters is via media (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999).

Because politicians and parties depend on public support to win or retain office, it is argued, they must constantly seek media exposure (Meyer & Hinchman, 2002). In doing so, they often have to adopt the formats, time frames, style and vocabulary of the mediums they wish to communicate via (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). Thus, ‘the format and logic of’ what constitutes ‘newsworthy information’ eventually comes to shape ‘the nature’ of political

discourse itself (Altheide, 2004:295). This inexorably leads to the ‘colonization of politics’, in Thomas Meyer and Lew Hinchman’s view, as media logic comes to not only determine political communications, but the actions, decisions and policies of politicians too (2002). Seen from this perspective then, the media’s influence on the politic agenda might be more insidious than mere measurements of issue salience suggest.

## **Research Aims**

The media’s apparent power to affect an issue’s salience on the public agenda, and the influence that political or media framing may have on how issues are perceived and dealt with, prompts a number of important empirical and normative questions. Who sets the media agenda? How do news production processes affect political communication? Does media framing influence the salience of issues on the political and policy agenda? Is media logic shaping policy development? And does any of this matter for the health of our democracy? These are big questions, still being grappled with by media researchers and political scientists, and clearly I cannot hope to answer them with a limited study covering only one issue, over a short period of time in only one country. Nevertheless, by examining agenda setting and framing in the UK public debate on energy prices, I hope to explore the role of mediatisation, media framing and political marketing in shaping political discourse.

By systematically analysing how an agenda setting piece of political communication increases issue salience and is filtered and framed by different media I intend to do three things. Firstly, test whether issue salience was indeed increased by the case study, as suspected. Secondly, examine the battle to define social reality through frame building by assessing whether Miliband’s speech had a frame building effect in the energy debate – as many commentators claimed. Thirdly, attempt to explore empirically how media logic might in turn be influencing agenda setting actors through the structure of incentives it creates. While we cannot easily measure mediatisation, we can measure which elements of political communication are most successful in passing the ‘gates of access’ to be transmitted and reproduced by the media. In doing so we may be able to tentatively infer the kind of lessons that political actors will learn during repeated attempts to gain traction with different political communications. From this I hope to be able to make some tentative inferences about the interplay between elite influence and media power and the role of news culture in shaping which policy ideas are passed on and how they are communicated.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To assess the media agenda setting and framing in the energy prices debate, I used a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches - with content analysis as my main method. I analysed the content of 387 UK newspaper articles on energy prices. To support my analysis I interviewed two senior politicians who have participated in the debate, two broadsheet journalists, one broadcast journalist, and two bloggers who fact check and monitor energy coverage. In this chapter, I set out the justification and rationale for my choice of methodologies, sampling strategy, coding design, reliability testing and ethical considerations.

### **Research Questions**

To operationalize my research question I broke it down into a series of sub questions examining issue salience, frame salience, policy mentions, and the perceptions of politicians and journalists.

#### *Research Question 1: Agenda setting*

How has the salience of energy prices on the media agenda been affected by political communication on the issue?

- a. How does the number and volume of stories on energy prices in our case study period of Autumn 2013 compare to a similar more typical period?
- b. What were the factors involved in driving heightened salience?
- c. Did Miliband's pledge to introduce a price freeze increase the salience of energy prices as an issue on the news agenda?

#### *Research Question 2: Frame building*

Treating the media frame as the dependent variable and political communication as the independent variable, was the price freeze pledge associated with any change in the salience of the following frames within the coverage:

- a. Cost of Living?
- b. Conflict?
- c. Game Frame?

*Research Question 3: Policy salience*

Which political messages or policies on energy prices were most frequently reproduced during in the sample? Was this associated with either:

- a. Word length?
- b. Type of newspaper?

*Research Question 4: News production and political communication*

How do journalistic and news production processes affect political communication in the energy prices debate?

- a. How do politicians perceive the power of the media to set the political agenda and frame the energy prices debate?
- b. How do journalists perceive the power of politicians to set the media agenda and frame the energy prices debate?

## **Content Analysis**

Content analysis is an appropriate method for measuring media agenda setting effects because it provides a systematic and replicable way to measure the salience and prominence media outlets accord particular issues by counting the frequency, length and location of output devoted to them (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Hansen, 1998). Identifying the frames used to emphasise a particular interpretation of an issue or its politics, clearly has a larger qualitative component, but once more content analysis can help us analyse which frames are more frequently emphasised in particular texts.

There is more of a case for the use of specifically qualitative methods such as interviews and discourse analysis in the realm of framing research – and I conducted six in depth interviews with journalists and participants to record their perceptions of the processes under investigation. If we wish to measure issue salience or establish whether there are statistically significant associations between variables, however, we need to quantify these variables.

*Definition*

Until the latter half of the twentieth century the quantification of media content was often presented as an objective way of researching mass communications (Krippendorf, 2004). Bernard Berelson defined content analysis as ‘the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication’ (Berelson, 1952: 18). Later researchers criticised the positivist pretensions of this early generation of content analysts and their tendency to conflate quantification with objectivity. It is impossible to be entirely value free in selecting the codes or content to analyse and during the last quarter of the twentieth century the method and its theoretical underpinnings were refined in response to these criticisms as the essentially qualitative nature of any textual analysis was acknowledged (Hansen, 1998; Krippendorf, 2004). Unachievable aspirations of objectivity were replaced with a more measurable emphasis on designing replicable research. Furthermore, the criterion that meaning must be manifest was abandoned (Krippendorf, 2004). For analysing framing then, where meaning can sometimes be latent, Klaus Krippendorf’s definition is more appropriate:

‘Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences by systematically identifying specified characteristics of the message’ (Krippendorf, 2004: 24).

*Reflexivity*

Given these criticisms of content analysis, it is pertinent to offer a reflexive explanation of where I am coming from in devising this research. As a media officer working for the cross-party Energy and Climate Change Select Committee in Parliament, I have spent four years reviewing how a range of media outlets report the very same source material. During this time I have been struck by the divergent ways different UK newspapers report energy issues – sometimes appearing to cherry-pick information to fit editorial narratives. In devising this study then, I was motivated to apply a more systematic analysis to the way different newspapers were covering energy prices. Of course, this meant I had to be aware of my own biases influencing the design and ensure the study was replicable.

### *Replicability*

The potential replicability of content analysis is one of its key advantages. If coding guidelines are expressed clearly and categories are mutually exclusive the results of a well-designed content analysis should be replicable with a high degree of agreement by researchers with similar skills and experience coding the same material (Krippendorf, 2004). Replicability can be gauged using a reliability test, such as Scott's Pi, Cohen's Kappa or Krippendorf's Alpha, to assess the extent of agreement between coders (Lombard et al, 2002). Despite the obvious importance of such tests in demonstrating the validity integrity of research, however, reliability testing has historically been under-reported by media and communications researchers (Lombard et al, 2002).

## **Research Design**

I knew from personal experience that energy prices had been at the top of the news agenda for much of Autumn 2013 and that this appeared to have been triggered by Miliband's pledge to freeze prices. To establish this empirically, however, I would have to measure the salience systematically and compare the results with another more typical period. This would also allow me to assess whether his intervention had had a wider frame building effect on energy coverage.

### *Sampling strategy*

To operationalize RQ1, therefore, I had to select at least two time frames within which to take my sample. One covering the key moments in the case study, and another control period, which would give me a meaningful benchmark to compare any changes in salience. One option would be to take one sample from, say Jun – Dec 2013, incorporating the suspected agenda setting moment – Miliband's speech on 24 Sep. Krippendorf warns researchers however, to be wary of recursions – circular or seasonal fluctuations in content values (2004). This seemed to be a very real possibility on energy, where there are seasonal fluctuations in demand and price rises are typically announced in Autumn. I therefore decided to compare Autumn 2013 with a corresponding period in Autumn 2012.

*Time frame*

In an attempt to avoid skewing the sample too heavily around the trajectory of events in the case study period I bounded the samples from 4 Sep – 6 Dec; using one benchmark date taken from Autumn 2012 – the 4th September Select Committee hearing with the ‘big six’ – and one common to both samples - the Chancellor’s Autumn Statement which took place both years on 5th December. These periods had the advantage of containing many similar news ‘events’, which I hoped would help in isolating the impact of Miliband’s intervention on issue and frame salience. For instance, both periods contained an Energy & Climate Change Select Committee hearing with the ‘big six’ energy companies; a round of above inflation energy price rises; announcements from Labour on energy regulation; Government announcements on energy policy; and interventions by the Prime Minister during PMQs. Lists of the news events in the sample periods are set out in *tables I.* and *II.* in the results chapter on p.23.

*Choice of media*

An exploratory search of nine national newspapers using the database Lexis Nexis for coverage mentioning ‘energy prices’ during Autumn 2013 produced over a thousand results. To make my research task manageable, I therefore focused on national newspapers as opposed to web based or broadcast media, and narrowed my search to four key papers. Although this decision was taken primarily on pragmatic grounds, the partisan and campaigning nature of the UK’s press (Leveson, 2012) also makes it particularly worthy of attention when looking at how political communication is framed in the news.

Although the majority of UK newspapers are right-leaning, I chose an evenly balanced sample with two Labour and two Conservative supporting newspapers. I selected the popular tabloid *Daily Mirror*, circulation approximately 1,026,000, and the largest selling left-leaning broadsheets the *Guardian*, circulation approx. 198,000, and sister paper the *Observer*, which I bundled together for convenience (ABC figures, September 2013). The right-leaning tabloid *the Sun* would have been my first choice as it is the *Mirror*’s direct competitor and the UK’s biggest selling newspaper, but it was unavailable behind a paywall. Instead, I selected the mid-market *Daily Mail*, circulation 1,778,000 and the largest selling Conservative broadsheet the *Daily Telegraph*, circulation 550,000, again bundling this with sister *Sunday Telegraph* despite its status as a separate editorial entity (ABC figures, September 2013).

After reading an exploratory sample of articles from these titles containing the term ‘energy prices’, I decided to exclude the following:

- articles with only a passing mention of energy prices;
- articles that discussed energy prices in other countries, unless in the context of prices or policy in the UK;
- letters to the editor;
- personal finance features offering consumer advice on energy deals, unless they discussed policies or reasons bills were rising;
- political sketches.

A simple search using database Lexis Nexis for the term ‘Energy Prices’ in the four papers between: 4 Sep-6 Dec 2012 and 2013 produced 286 and 663 results, respectively. After removing duplications and the excluded article types, I was left with a sample:  $n= 88$  articles from 2012 and  $n=299$  from 2013.

### *Units of Analysis*

To operationalize studies of media agenda setting researchers often use content analysis to assess salience of an issue by counting particular indicators of media attention and prominence over time – such as the number of stories devoted to an issue, column inches or seconds in broadcast clips and the location or ordering of news reports (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Kiousis, 2004). To answer RQ1 and measure issue salience in the four newspapers under investigation, I therefore recorded the location of each energy prices article within the newspaper, its word length and type – news, comment, feature or editorial.

I chose to limit my unit of analysis to the text of articles. If time and resources were not constrained then clearly a systematic analysis that included the images selected by newspaper picture desks would have been preferable. However, I judged that, while pictures of polluting power stations or wind farms in the countryside could clearly trigger frames, in the case of newspaper stories on energy, it was the frames deployed by journalists in the text and headlines that were the key elements worthy of analysis.

### *Identifying frames*

Frames can be identified in the use of language or juxtaposition to present an issue in a way that activates associations in the minds of audiences. Metaphors, historical references, visual imagery, stock phrases and key words have been identified as ‘framing devices’, as well as the as the use of contrast, selection of source quotes, reasoning and causal linkages to develop a narrative (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Van Gorp, 2010).

One criticism of framing studies is that researchers tend to ‘reinvent the wheel’ and produce a ‘unique set of frames for every study’, thus limiting comparability (Nisbet, 2010:78; Vreese & Lecheler, 2012:295). Mindful of this, I used both deductive and inductive approaches to design my coding schedule – incorporating four generic frames from the literature, as well as identifying issue specific frames as I immersed myself in the texts.

### *Generic frames*

Three generic frames can be commonly found in news reporting – *conflict*, *economic consequences*, and *human interest* or *emotivity* (De Vreese, 2012). Politics is also increasingly framed in strategic rather than issue based terms using a *game* frame, according to some researchers (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Furthermore, while it seemed obvious that stories on energy prices would be framed in terms of *economic consequences*; I included another generic frame with high relevance to energy issues – *environmental consequences*. My own experience as a press officer working on these issues led me to suspect that the framing of the debate often left the environmental impact of energy policy choices out of the picture altogether.

### *Specific energy prices frames*

I also identified three pairs of opposing frames used by newspapers to evaluate the energy prices issue:

- *Cost of living*
- *Cost to business / economy*
- *Greedy energy giants*
- *Power firms are NOT the bad guys*
- *Go green to beat price rises*
- *Green harm*

Plus four more specific partisan frames used to characterise the ‘price freeze’ proposal:

- *Red Ed returns to 1970s socialism*
- *Bad / mad economics*
- *Good for consumers*
- *Labour Vs fat cats*

When drafting my coding guidelines I attempted to follow the criteria recommended by Cappella and Jamieson, so that the definitions had ‘identifiable conceptual and linguistic characteristics’, were distinguishable ‘reliably from other frames’ and could be recognised by others (De Vreese & Lecheler, 2012:294). In coding for my frames I also made a distinction between those that could be found in quotes from sources – which I did not include – and the overall frames, which I defined as being deployed by the journalist or author of the piece.

#### *Frame building hypotheses*

Frame building researchers treat frames in news output as dependent variables and various aspect of political communication as independent variables (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Häggli, 2012; De Vreese & Lecheler 2012). I therefore coded for the presence of particular frames; the political proposals that were mentioned; the reasons given for price rises; and the solutions cited. I developed three hypotheses to test the frame building effect of Miliband’s speech. My first hypothesis, supposed that if Labour had been as successful, as media and political commentators claimed, we might expect to see an increase in the salience of its chosen frame – *cost of living* – in media coverage of energy prices. Secondly, framing literature would lead us to suspect that would be an increase in the use of *conflict* and *game* frames (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese & Lecheler, 2012).

#### *Mediatisation hypotheses*

It is difficult to operationalize and measure mediatisation (Van Aelst et al, 2013). However, based on my reading of the mediatisation literature I also expected to find that the most frequently mentioned pieces of political communication had been the simplest and most headline-friendly (Esser, 2008). I suspected however, that this would be contingent on whether the newspaper was popular or broadsheet and possibly on the word length of the article – given that we might suppose more space could provide scope for more in-depth consideration of policy. I therefore treated the policies mentioned as a dependent variable and word length and newspaper type as independent variables.

## **Interviews**

Claes De Vreese has argued that ‘to investigate framing we first need to know more about framing practices’ (2010: 192). To support my analysis and build a picture of how news production practices may be determining how energy issues are framed, I therefore conducted six in-depth interviews with journalists regularly covering energy issues in the UK’s serious print and broadcast media and politicians involved in the debate from the two main parties.

### *Ethical concerns*

The only ethical concerns raised by my research were in relation to the interviews I conducted with two politicians and three national newspapers and broadcast journalists. Information or opinions disclosed by the MPs or journalists could potentially reflect badly on their reputation or that of their party or employer. If the interviewees were not reassured that these reputational risks were mitigated, it could furthermore prevent their full and frank participation. In return for consent I therefore offered anonymity.

### *Problems encountered*

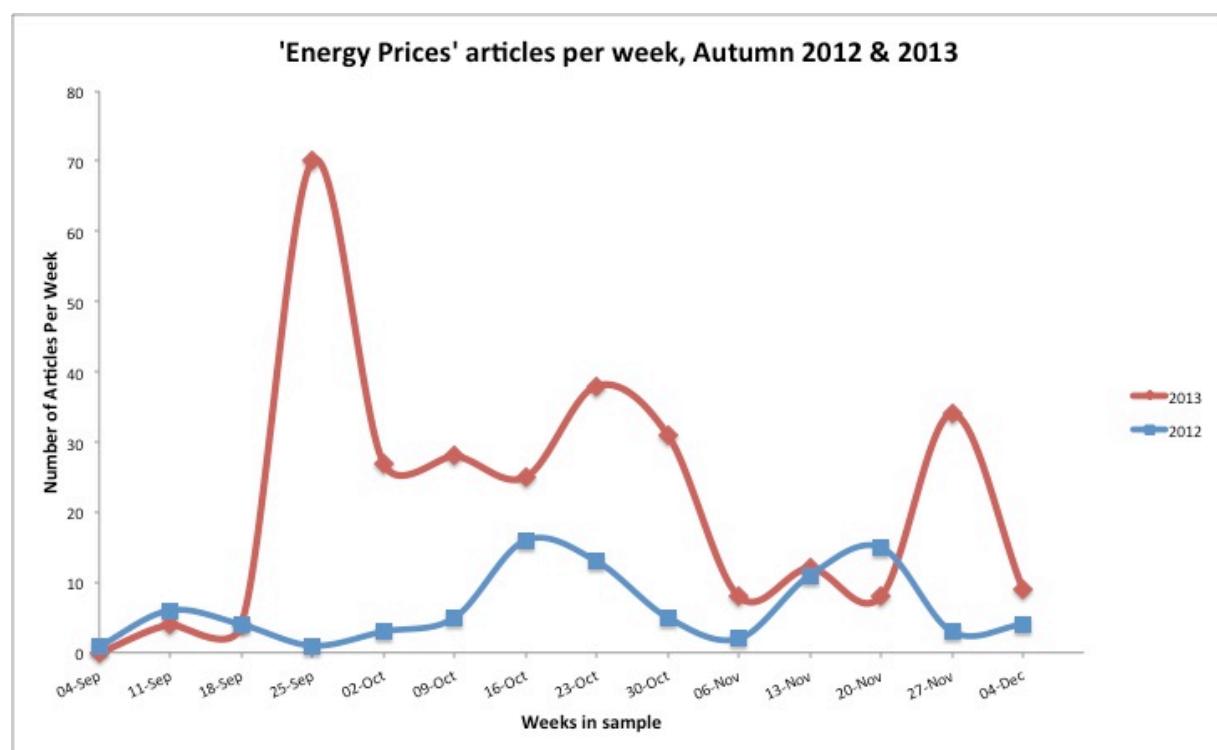
My first test of intercoder reliability produced unacceptably poor results with less than 80% reliability in one third of the variables even using the most liberal intercoder test – simple percentage agreement (Lombard et al, 2002). I went through each variable with my other coder and discussed where we had diverged. This helped me discover and rectify two problems. The first problem concerned our relative levels of media and issue literacy. Definitions, which I had considered relatively self-evident, had not been clear enough for someone that rarely reads newspapers and is unfamiliar with energy policy. Secondly, variables with scales requiring coder judgment had shown higher levels of disagreement. To deal with these issues I provided tighter, more detailed definitions and instructions and sacrificed some detail to simplify the coding where disagreement had been particularly high. One methodological limitation of this study is that I have only used percentage agreement to demonstrate the validity of my results. Lombard et al point out that that this test is not ideal because it does not account for chance agreement (2002), however the intercoder agreement figure obtained on a random sample of 30 articles from the corpus was above 80% for non-descriptive variables and given the limitations of time and resources in this study it was the most appropriate test available to me.

## FINDINGS

### Research Question 1: Agenda Setting in the Energy Prices Debate

Content analysis of energy prices coverage in four newspapers appears to show that the news agenda has followed the political agenda on this issue during the two periods under consideration. As the graph below shows, the salience of energy prices on the news agenda has been affected by political communication from both parties.

*Graph 2. Overlaid time line of ‘energy prices’ news waves in Autumn 2012 & 2013<sup>2</sup>*



The Prime Minister’s announcement during PMQ’s on 17 Oct 2012 that the Government will legislate to ensure ‘energy companies have to give the lowest tariff to their customers’ prompted a small increase in salience. The leader of the opposition’s pledge on 24 Sep 2013 to introduce a ‘price freeze’ while reforming the energy market had a much bigger effect – more than quadrupling the average number of stories per week as it drove a ‘news wave’ that dominated the agenda for over a month.

<sup>2</sup> Graph was produced by calculating the average number of energy prices news stories for each week of my two samples from 2012 and 2013.

*Table I. Key news events in the energy prices debate, Autumn 2012*

<b>Date</b>	<b>News events in energy prices debate, Autumn 2012</b>
<b>4 Sep</b>	Energy & Climate Change Select Committee hearing with the 'big six' companies
<b>1 Oct</b>	Labour Shadow Energy Secretary, Caroline Flint, pledges to replace energy regulator Ofgem
<b>12 Oct</b>	British Gas and Npower announce gas and electricity prices to rise by 6% - 9.1%, respectively*
<b>15 Oct</b>	SSE's 9% increase in energy prices comes into effect*
<b>15 Oct</b>	Scottish Power announces average price increase of 7%, effective from 3 Dec*
<b>17 Oct</b>	David Cameron announces during Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) that Government will legislate 'so that energy companies have to give the lowest tariff to their customers'
<b>26 Oct</b>	EDF announce 10.8% rise in energy prices, effective from 7 Dec*
<b>5 Dec</b>	Autumn Statement: Chancellor publishes 'gas strategy'.

*Table II. Key news events in the energy prices debate, Autumn 2013*

<b>Date</b>	<b>News events in energy prices debate, Autumn 2013</b>
<b>24 Sep</b>	Labour leader Ed Miliband pledges to freeze prices and 'reset the energy market'
<b>9 Oct</b>	Prime Minister and Ed Miliband clash at PMQs over Energy Price Freeze
<b>10 Oct</b>	SSE announce average price increase of 8.2%, effective from Nov 15*
<b>16 Oct</b>	PM and Miliband again debate energy prices at PMQs
<b>17 Oct</b>	British Gas announce energy price increase of 9.2%, from Nov 23*
<b>21 Oct</b>	Npower announces energy price increase of 10.4%, from 1 Dec*
<b>21 Oct</b>	Energy & Climate Change Select Committee calls the 'big six' energy companies to Parliament to explain latest above inflation price rises
<b>22 Oct</b>	Former PM John Major calls for a windfall tax on energy companies
<b>23 Oct</b>	PM announces at PMQs that he would 'roll back green levies' in response to further questions from Miliband regarding energy prices
<b>25 Oct</b>	Scottish Power announces average price increase of 8.6%, from 6 Dec*
<b>29 Oct</b>	Energy & Climate Change Select Committee hearing with the 'big six' companies & smaller suppliers Ovo and Co-op energy
<b>6 Nov</b>	Opposition Day debate in Commons on Energy Price Freeze
<b>5 Dec</b>	Chancellor formally announces in Autumn Statement that the ECO energy efficiency scheme will be cut in order to reduce energy bills

\*Percentage values for energy price rises are presented as average 'dual fuel' increases combining gas and electricity prices, as announced by companies and reported in the media.

On average there were 5 articles on energy prices per week in the Autumn 2012 sample and in the first three weeks of the 2013 sample this trend appears broadly similar. However, after Miliband's pledge on the 24 Sep 2013 there is a sudden spike and a prolonged period of heightened salience - fuelled by further price rises, political interventions, and a select committee hearing – that only starts to recede after the Prime Minister's promise to 'roll back' the green levies on consumer bills on 23 Oct. In the ten weeks that followed Miliband's speech there was an average of 28 articles per week across the four newspapers with 75% of all articles mentioning the Labour policy to freeze prices. The prominence of the issue in coverage also increased with at least 22 front-page energy stories during the 2013 sample compared to 9 in the 2012 sample.<sup>3</sup> In terms of pure volume the 89 articles - with more than a passing reference to 'energy prices' in my 2012 sample - amounted to 59,164 words, whereas the 299 articles during the same period in 2013 amassed a total of 198,792 words.

## **Research Question 2: Frame Building in the Energy Prices Debate**

*RQ2a: Null hypothesis confirmed.*

The first hypothesis was that Labour's price freeze pledge may have had a frame building effect, increasing the salience of the *cost of living* frame within the coverage. Contrary to expectations, the results did not suggest a statistically significant association between the speech and the prevalence of the *cost of living* frame within the articles that followed, once the impact of an increase in comment pieces was controlled for.<sup>4</sup> The null hypothesis was therefore confirmed with 95% confidence at a *p* value of .052. It is worth noting however, that given that the overall volume of news stories on energy prices increased by a factor of more than three, the overall salience of the frame may have increased within news coverage overall. More research would be needed to establish this.

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<sup>3</sup> The Lexis Nexis search engine did not provide page numbers for Daily Mail articles, so the number of front pages recorded here are from the three other papers in my samples.

<sup>4</sup> There appeared to have been a negative association, but once the impact on the sample of an increase in comment pieces had been controlled for, this did not appear to be significant.

*RQ2b: Null hypothesis rejected.*

A statistically significant increase in the salience of the *conflict* frame in news stories following the speech was found at a 99% confidence level  $p=.001$  with news articles nearly six times as likely to apply that frame.

*Table III. Conflict frame results*<sup>5</sup>

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	Variables in the Equation	
							95% C.I.for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	Speech	.644	.278	5.375	1	.020	1.904	1.105 3.281
	News	1.775	.546	10.567	1	.001	5.901	2.024 17.211
	Comment	1.264	.577	4.792	1	.029	3.540	1.141 10.977
	Editorial	.728	.730	.994	1	.319	2.071	.495 8.665
	Constant	-2.626	.562	21.869	1	.000	.072	

*RQ2c. Null hypothesis rejected.*

A statistically significant increase in the salience of the *game* frame was found in comment and editorial articles following the speech at a 99% confidence level.

*Table IV. Game frame results*

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	Variables in the Equation	
							95% C.I.for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	Speech	1.027	.432	5.658	1	.017	2.794	1.198 6.514
	News	.741	.760	.950	1	.330	2.098	.473 9.309
	Comment	2.143	.763	7.880	1	.005	8.524	1.909 38.055
	Editorial	2.268	.843	7.233	1	.007	9.662	1.850 50.462
	Constant	-3.657	.800	20.895	1	.000	.026	

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<sup>5</sup> The tables on this page were produced using the statistical analysis software SPSS, which I used to analyse the relationships within my data.

**Research Question 3: Policies Mentioned in the Energy Prices Debate**

Policy proposals on energy prices with direct consumer benefits were reported more frequently than regulatory solutions without obvious direct benefits. The ‘price freeze’ was mentioned more frequently than any other policy proposal, proportionally. This was mentioned in 75% of articles in the sample after its announcement on 24 Sep 2013. In response, the Prime Minister pledged to ‘roll back some of the green regulations and charges that are putting up bills’ on 23 Oct (Cameron, 2013). This policy initiative was mentioned in 56% of the remaining articles. Policies that did not have obvious direct effects on consumers were mentioned far less frequently. Labour’s promise to replace the regulator Ofgem was mentioned in just 5% of 2012 articles after the announcement and its pledge to ‘reset’ the market in 2013 was mentioned in 12%.

*Table V. Policy mentions in 2012 sample*

Policy	Proposer	Announced	Percentage of mentions (within remainder of 2012 sample)
Simplify Tariffs	Coalition	17 Oct	44%
Replace Regulator	Labour	1 Oct	5%

*Table VI. Policy mentions in 2013 sample*

Policy	Proposer	Announced	Percentage of mentions (within remainder of 2013 sample)
‘Price Freeze’	Labour	24 Sep	75%
‘Roll-Back’ Green Levies	Coalition	23 Oct	56%
‘Reset’ Market	Labour	24 Sep	12%
2030 Decarbonisation	Labour/Lib Dem	24 Sep	4%

I tested whether this was related to the word length in case it was a reflection simply of the difference between shorter, briefer news pieces and longer more considered comment and analysis pieces. Yet no association was found. Testing for newspaper however made more of a difference – as out of the 35 articles mentioning more than just the price freeze, 21 were from the Guardian/ Observer.

*RQ3a: Null hypothesis confirmed*

There appeared to be no statistically significant association between the word length of articles and whether they mentioned the proposals to abolish Ofgem or tackle vertical integration by ‘resetting’ the market.<sup>6</sup> The null hypothesis was confirmed at the 95% confidence level.

*RQ3b: Null hypothesis confirmed.*

No association was found between the *type* of newspaper – be that broadsheet or mid-market/popular – and the proposals which were mentioned. However, there was an association with one of the *titles*. The *Guardian* being 4.5 times more likely to have mentioned proposals to ‘reset’ the market than other papers at a 99% confidence level  $p=<.001$ .

## **DISCUSSION**

The question of what made this particular piece of political communication so successful in setting the media agenda is worth considering because I believe it provides an opportunity to examine whether processes of mediatisation and political marketing may be shaping political communication in Britain today. My results seem to suggest the ‘price freeze’ set the agenda for three reasons. Firstly, because of the real world attributes of the energy prices issue itself. Second, because the pledge provoked multiple layers of newsworthy political conflict. And, lastly, because of the tabloid-friendly simplicity of Miliband’s ‘retail offer’ itself. Let us look at these reasons in more detail.

### *Energy prices issue*

Research suggests that the attributes of an issue play an important part in how newsworthy it is likely to become. Although ‘a real world indicator’ such as rising prices ‘is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause for an issue to climb the agenda’ on its own (Dearing and Rogers, 1996:29), too few agenda setting studies consider the ‘possibility that their results are fundamentally dependent on issue attributes’ (Soroka, 2002). If an issue is obtrusive and/or prominent – in other words, if citizens have direct experience of it or it has direct

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<sup>6</sup> The ‘big six’ energy companies are said to be ‘vertically integrated’ because they have both generation and retail arms, making it difficult to work out exactly how much profit the supply arms are actually making.

consequences for them – then it is more likely to be picked up and gain traction on the media or political agenda (Soroka, 2002).

Interviews with journalists and politicians provided anecdotal support for conclusions in the literature about the importance of obtrusiveness in determining the agenda setting potential of an issue. Respondents raised the real world impact of energy prices repeatedly. The broadcast journalist I interviewed saw consumer stories as inherently newsworthy because of their every day value to people. While most news items are:

‘...not going to particularly impact upon [viewers] lives. With an energy story, if something’s changing or if a company announced that it is going to freeze prices, as one of the big six did, or if somebody announces an under £1,000 deal; that’s news you can use, so those stories have traction’. (Broadcaster, interview, 04/08/2014)

It often takes both an advocate and/or a ‘trigger event’ to push an issue up the media agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). But for an issue to stay high on the news agenda, it will depend on how much competition it faces from other ‘news’ (Geiss, 2011) and whether a flow of new information maintains its newsworthiness (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). The broadcaster echoed this, describing how the energy prices story provided:

‘...multiple moments to hit the story again and again and again and again. You know, there are six big companies, right, so they’ve all got a pricing announcement to make. Then there’s, what’s the government doing? What’s the regulator doing? What are independent bodies doing? What is the NAO doing? What is the energy select committee doing?’ (Broadcaster, interview, 04/08/2014)

This made the news production process easier, in his view, because it:

‘...gave editors what you might call a cheap lead. You’ve got legitimacy for going back into that story because you know the audience cares about it, you know it affects millions of people so people will be engaged in it. And it’s relatively easy to jack up some of the usual suspects to get a piece on air.’ (Interview, 04/08/2014)

#### *Political conflict and the game frame*

The potential newsworthiness of an issue is often increased by conflict and it is one of several generic frames identified as being common to news coverage (Dearing and Rogers, 1996; Van

Gorp, 2010; De Vreese & Lecheler, 2012). My results show that news stories after Miliband's speech were nearly six times as likely to contain the *conflict* frame as energy price articles before. This may provide another clue as to why the price freeze pledge had such news appeal. While 'the speech had a lot of power in itself', it was its timing and the challenge it posed politically which was crucial in sustaining the high level of coverage. That was the way one broadsheet journalist saw it.

'It had been bubbling along for quite a while. Every time you had these big events like British Gas' profit announcements or a price rise, there would be a big hoo-ha about it ...but I think the speech was cleverly timed knowing that there was a round of price rises on the way, which forced the government's hand to respond to it in a way.'

(Broadsheet journalist, interview, 04/08/2014)

I would even suggest that we could see the political framing of the 'price freeze' pledge as representing the kind of 'symbolic contest' that Gamson & Modigliani discuss (1989). In choosing to campaign on a highly obtrusive issue like energy prices, Labour was not only activating a *cost of living* frame already present in much news coverage – as we can see in *table VII* below - it was also tapping into popular antipathy against energy companies. The generic *emotive* frame was repeatedly activated in news stories or features in the sample that talked of 'struggling families', 'pensioners' or other *victims* forced to choose between 'heating or eating' (eg, Daily Mail, 09/10/12; Daily Mail, 15/11/12; Daily Mirror 17/10/12). In this context the popular press appears to have cast the 'energy giants' as almost fairy tale villains.

*Table VII. Presence of cost of living frame within 2012 sample*

Newspaper		Cost of Living		Total
		Absent	Present	
Newspaper	Daily Mail / Mail On Sunday	Count	8	23
		% within Newspaper	34.8%	100.0%
		Count	1	16
	Daily Mirror / Sunday Mirror	% within Newspaper	6.3%	100.0%
		Count	12	27
	Daily Telegraph / Sunday Telegraph	% within Newspaper	44.4%	100.0%
		Count	15	23
	Guardian / Observer	% within Newspaper	65.2%	100.0%
		Count	36	89
	Total	% within Newspaper	40.4%	100.0%
		% within Cost of Living	100.0%	100.0%

My main purpose here is not discourse analysis, but, I would argue that some of these frames have unmistakable metaphorical echoes of one of the seven basic plots that have been said to underpin all storytelling (Booker, 2004). In picking a highly symbolic fight with the energy companies Labour was portraying itself as on the side of ‘struggling families’ against the ‘fat cats’. A story line that fits a template endlessly reproduced in literature and filmmaking from Beowulf to Jaws: *overcoming the monster* that threatens the community (Booker, 2004) In activating these pre-existing frames, Labour’s political communication was arguably exploiting deeply embedded narrative structures that are resonant within our culture (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). They were also putting the Conservatives in the uncomfortable political position of being on the side of the ‘bad guys’; if the party opposed the price freeze.

It is noteworthy that the Hollywood director, Paul Greengrass, helped Miliband prepare for his speech (Dominiczak, 25/09/13). The opening passage contains an anecdote about how the Labour leader helped a woman who had fallen off her bike. Miliband recounts how she then called him a ‘hero’, before quipping that she must have been concussed (Miliband, 24/09/2013). The use of metaphor in political speeches may be regarded as meaningful whether conscious or not and this introduced a motif that is surely significant given the obvious narrative structure of the party’s subsequent pitch on energy (Charteris-Black, 2014). Perhaps revealingly, the Labour MP I asked about the energy prices debate described the ‘price freeze’ explicitly in terms of a ‘narrative’. In his view it:

‘...fed into another narrative which was much more deeply partisan and party political. Which was: it is a rigged market and the people with power don’t care. They are on the side of the people who rig the markets and not on the side of the people who pay the bills. It is all about the rich versus the poor and we are on the side of the poor. It is a simple political framework. They attack us on the green taxes and we attack them on being rich bastards’ (Labour politician, interview, 28/07/14).

In light of these political theatrics programmed into the ‘price freeze’ gambit, it is unsurprising that the salience of *game* frames increased in the coverage. A *game* frame can be identified in news media when reporting or analysis focuses on the strategic game being played by political actors rather than the issues involved (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). The increase in the game frame identified in RQ2 was associated ( $< p.001$ ) with the increase in comment and analysis pieces following his speech detailing the political conflict over energy prices on energy that followed the speech – and partly skewed by the influence of party conference coverage discussing Miliband’s energy gambit.

Capella and Jamieson have suggested that the media's use of *game* frames to characterise politics has increased in the US, arguing powerfully that this is having a corrosive effect on democracy by encouraging a 'spiral of cynicism' (1997). They suggest 'it is impossible to know which came first – the conflict driven sound-bite oriented discourse of politicians or the conflict-saturated strategy-oriented structure of press coverage' (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997:9). In this case study of the UK energy prices debate, however, it seems obvious that Miliband's set-piece conference speech was deliberately designed to provoke 'symbolic conflict' rather than rational issue-focused debate. I would therefore mount a defence of the use of the *game* frame found in my sample. When an issue is marketed and politicised, in the way that energy prices were in this case study, citizens are surely entitled to seek analysis that explores the politics of the situation as well as the issues. The *game* frame becomes normatively problematic, however, when it becomes a substitute for a serious consideration of the issues at stake.

### *Mediatisation*

The results of RQ3 are interesting because they show that for all of the tens of thousands of extra words that were written about energy prices in Autumn 2013, the arguably more significant element of Miliband's proposal in public policy terms - to 'reset' the market by increasing competition and transparency in the wholesale market – was only mentioned in 12% of the articles after the speech, compared to 75% mentioning the price freeze. That the detail of energy market reforms was not particularly newsworthy seems to have been confirmed on the 29th Nov 2013 when Labour published its 'green paper' setting out its plans to 'reset' the market in more detail, including a proposal to force the big vertically integrated companies to sell energy into an open pool in order to improve transparency (Labour, 2013). Only the Guardian covered it (in the sample).

*Table VIII. Combined breakdown of policy mentions across both samples*

<b>Policy</b>	<b>Proposer</b>	<b>Announced</b>	<b>Percentage of mentions (in remainder of 2012 or 2013 samples)</b>
'Price Freeze'	Labour	24 Sep 13	75%
'Roll-Back' Green Levies	Coalition	23 Oct 13	56%
Simplify Tariffs	Coalition	17 Oct 12	44%
'Reset' Market	Labour	24 Sep 13	12%

Replace Regulator	Labour	1 Oct 12	5%
Decarbonisation Target	Labour/Lib	24 Sep 13	4%

Can these results tell us anything about mediatisation in the UK? It is difficult to measure mediatisation and the literature only offers limited empirical evidence to support its claims (Van Aelst et al, 2013). However my results would seem to chime with content analysis that has shown the average ‘soundbite’ length has shrunk<sup>7</sup> (Patterson, 2000; Esser, 2008). While policy mentions are obviously not the same thing, I would argue that these results do hint at the kind of incentive structure that politicians and their press officers are faced with when trying to access the media. It is worth noting, for example, that the three most frequently reproduced policies – ‘simplifying tariffs’, the ‘price freeze’ and ‘cutting green taxes to reduce bills’ – share common characteristics. Firstly, they were all simple to explain, in fact self-explanatory. Taking no more space than a tweet or headline to communicate. Secondly, all three had direct and potentially quantifiable economic consequences for consumers.

On the face of it then these results would seem to offer some support for the argument that, in mass mediated democracies, politics has to conform to the logic of news production (Altheide & Snow, 1979). ‘Politicians who wish to address the public must negotiate with the media’s preferred...formats, language, and even the content of their messages’ (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999: 33-34). Or as Tim Yeo MP put it to me: ‘policy, to make an impact, has to be saleable on TV, and has to be capable of producing a headline in a tabloid’ (interview, 24/07/2014).

One problem in the design of my research however is that it only provides a snapshot of one policy debate at two periods in time. It has been argued that ‘since we understand mediatisation as a development process, empirical research should ideally employ longitudinal designs’ (Esser & Matthes, 2013: Loc 3251). Claims that media influence is growing are seldom supported with such extended studies of variables over long periods (Van Aelst et al, 2013). To measure mediatisation more effectively therefore, the methodology of this research could be built upon using content analysis of media coverage of specific policy debates - or party policy announcements themselves - over a greater span of years. This would allow us to observe whether there are trends in political communication towards simpler, more headline (or tweet) friendly proposals, in line with what we might expect in a mediatised political environment (Esser, 2008).

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<sup>7</sup> Although it should be noted this trend is more pronounced in the US than Europe.

However, even if such trends were to be observed the mediatisation thesis should not be accepted uncritically. At their most apocalyptic, mediatisation theorists suggest that politics has sacrificed all autonomy in return for access to the media (Meyer & Hinchman, 2002). But it is by no means clear that this ‘colonization’ is as complete as Meyer & Hinchman claim, even in a media saturated society like the UK. There are good reasons to question whether the media – powerful though it can be – has robbed politics of all its autonomy. Firstly, it is possibly more accurate to argue that the relationship is characterised by a complex reciprocity characterised by mutual dependency – news production demands information and politicians need exposure (Hall, 1978). Indeed the Labour politician I interviewed seemed to see it in these terms. In his view the price freeze was an:

‘...example of where you need to work with the media to get your message out. Namely prices are too high and we will do something about it as the government are failing to do anything about it. That was the message Labour needed to get out. In order to do that effectively we colluded with an over simplification of the message. To say it is all about the price freeze, it is not actually but if that is what you want to say, as long as we get the message out, we will go with that.’ (Labour politician, interview, 28/07/2014)

Secondly, we could hypothesise that while mediatisation may be apparent in the kind of symbolic political communication that we have analysed in this case study, it may be rather less important in much of the day-to-day legislative or administrative politics that goes on in Westminster or Whitehall, often ignored by the media. As Walgrave and others point out, the media ‘seem to affect symbolic political agendas considerably more than substantial political agendas’ (Walgrave, 2008: 446). Lastly, we could even argue that once politicians understand media logic they can use it very effectively to their own ends – as Labour seems to have done rather effectively in this example. By tapping into existing narratives and providing a ready made conflict that will create news, you can have the media communicate your values to millions of people and put pressure on your opponents on your behalf.

### *Political Marketing*

Perhaps a more useful framework for analysing our case study and viewing the relationship between politics and the media can be found in the political marketing literature. According to political marketing theory, major parties will become increasingly focused on highly strategic, marketing led campaigning that targets ‘dealigned’ swing voters in the marginal constituencies that determine elections (Harrop, 1990; Lilleker & Lees-Marshment, 2005;

Lilleker, 2006; Scammell, 2014). Margaret Scammell claims that in placing structures of competition at the heart of the understanding of political communication, political marketing may be a more useful way of looking at understanding campaigning and political communication than often technologically deterministic conceptions of media power or mediatisation (2014). She characterises democratic systems that contain two dominant competitors, like the UK, as ‘oligopolies’, highly ‘sensitive to marketing innovation’. In such systems ‘there is a need for constant monitoring and instant responses to the marketing activities of rivals’ because ‘small adjustments to market share may produce hugely significant effects upon profits’ (Scammell, 2014:21).

From this perspective Labour’s price freeze could be seen as a piece of marketing aimed at both traditional supporters and swing voters in marginal seats, but symbolically played out on the national stage. Once Labour had made this consumer ‘retail offer’ and it gained media traction, the Conservatives would be under pressure to follow – which they did on 23 Oct with the PM’s pledge to ‘roll back’ green levies, swiftly enacted in the Autumn Statement on 5 Dec. Political marketing theory then potentially offers an important additional insight in understanding the media agenda setting process and helps us understand why the price freeze was so newsworthy. Newspapers did not devote so much space and attention to energy prices after the ‘price freeze’ promise simply because it was headline-friendly and consumer-focused. The price freeze arguably commanded the news agenda because it was about competition and conflict; it demanded a response. In an oligopolistic political market, marketing logic suggests an offer like that has to be matched (Scammell, 2014). And in the absence of any other spectacular ‘hard’ news to divert attention (Geiss, 2011) that conflict dominated the agenda.

Mediatisation might help us understand the structure of incentives and format requirements politicians need to adopt to be successful in agenda setting, but political marketing locates this within the context of a competitive democratic system. The mass media is but one of the competitive structures that parties operate within (Scammell, 2014). Furthermore, research not only suggests that online social media is growing in importance as a means of ‘engaging’ voters, but that more traditional methods of direct face-to-face or phone contact are still crucially important in ‘getting out the vote’ (Gibson, 2013). Furthermore, far from losing their autonomy, politicians are able to use professional marketing to retain agency in their relationship with the media – as this case study seems to show. The irony here is that while some sections of the press saw the ‘price freeze’ as an opportunity to dust down their old book of ‘loony left’ cultural frames, last widely used when Ken Livingstone was planning to

introduce a congestion charge in London (Curran et al, 2005), ‘Red Ed’s’ policy had market logic running right through it.

### *Normative concerns*

Political marketing practitioners linked to New Labour, like Philip Gould and Deborah Mattinson, have argued that the use of market research to develop policy can bring democratic benefits by making politics more responsive to the everyday needs of the electorate (Mattinson, 2010; Gould, 2011). However, the practice of political marketing raises some normative concerns. In simply responding to the market, for instance, it arguably fosters a focus on individualistic concerns and instant gratification, rather than on collective political responses and long-term policy (Wring, 2005; Scammell, 2014). One of political marketing theory’s forebears, Joseph Schumpeter, insisted that party competition for the votes of a largely passive citizenry would deliver effective leadership (Held, 1996; Scammell, 2014). But if we think only in terms of price, and political leaders merely offer consumers what they say they want, could we be forfeiting the very leadership that a representative Liberal system of Government is supposed to deliver?

In this case study we can perhaps see a worrying glimpse of the consequences for public policy when it becomes the focus of political marketing. The consumer-focused ‘price freeze’ and ‘green tax’ cut offered by the parties in Autumn 2013 appear disconnected from either the professed economic intention of the Labour leadership to provide a ‘stable and predictable policy framework for business’ (Balls, 2014) or the ‘strategic objective for the Coalition Government’ to improve energy efficiency (DECC, 2012). Indeed, as an ex-Secretary of State for energy pointed out at the time, the cut to the ECO efficiency scheme announced by the Chancellor would ‘cut energy bills this year, but increase average bills every year for ever after’ (Huhne, 25/11/2013).

The potential problems of marketing oriented politics could, of course, be compounded if it is conducted in the context of a mediatized public sphere where citizens get an incomplete picture of the consequences of key policy choices. When it comes to energy this could have worrying results. Framing analysis by Scrace and Ockwell has found that energy policy framing tends to focus on ‘the “getting”, “selling” and “buying” (access and security) aspects of energy policy, whereas how energy is converted and used and how this fits into the natural environment’ is rarely emphasised (2009: 2229). In this way ‘linguistic framing may serve to sustain high-carbon energy policy (2009: 2225). In my samples I also found some evidence for this. While 87% of articles in my sample were – unsurprisingly - framed in terms of

*economic consequences*, only 11% of articles framed decisions on energy policy or prices in terms of their *environmental consequences*. Climate change was hardly mentioned at all and, when it was it was, often only in relation to the ‘green taxes’ that were cited as a reason for rising prices in 36% of the stories across both samples.<sup>8</sup>

In my interview with the bloggers at Carbon Brief they raised concerns about how the debate on energy prices and policy was ‘disconnected’ from discussions about climate change.

‘If you have no awareness of greenhouse gas emissions from coal, then doing anything other than building new coal plants is a pretty silly idea. Yes, there are health benefits from not having coal but broadly you want coal because it’s cheap, because it provides base load power. Why wouldn’t you want that? Well, an important reason that you wouldn’t want it is because it contributes to greenhouse gas emissions...but if that foundation or back story isn’t part of the conversation, then actually many people will think “what’s wrong with coal power? Why are we using more expensive alternatives?” That is a problem if what you’re interested in is a well informed discussion in the media, about how people can exercise their democratic choices over energy policy.’ (Carbon Brief bloggers, interview, 29/07/2014)

One of the broadsheet correspondents I spoke to was more sanguine:

‘Media reflect society. If you go and ask a voter, “What do you know about this party’s policy?” they may know of one or two things, probably brief sound bites, and the media and politicians are both responding to a public which has limited attention span for policy issues, and ultimately wants to know how this policy will affect them at the end of the day. So if it all gets reduced to money in your pocket, that’s because that’s what readers seem to care about most.’ (Broadsheet journalist, interview, 04/08/14)

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<sup>8</sup> Across the two samples newspaper stories linked energy price rises to green policy levies (36%) and company profits (28%) more frequently than to rising wholesale gas prices (26%) or network costs (10%) – despite official estimates from both Ofgem (2011) and the Committee on Climate Change (2012) pointing to rising wholesale gas prices as the dominant driver.

A case can certainly be made that political marketing and media outlets that simplify issues merely provide a useful heuristic short cut for non-specialist audiences who may not have the time or inclination to consider policy questions in depth (Scammell, 2014). As the Labour MP I spoke to put it:

‘When politicians say, “We are going to do something about it.” The last thing you want to go into is how we are going to change from the current structure of vertical integration [in the energy market] to a pooled structure [which forms the basis of Labour’s proposal to “reset” the market]. This is gobbledegook to newspapers and it is gobbledegook to the average punter who is just concerned that their bill is too high.’  
(Labour politician, interview, 28/07/2014)

Nevertheless, the point raised by the bloggers at Carbon Brief is a valid one. Agenda setting and framing research shows that the media *can* influence what you think about, and, *how* you think about it (McCombs, 2004). This makes the media’s normative democratic responsibility (which in the case of newspapers grants them a privileged ‘self-regulated’ status) to provide citizens with the information necessary to make informed political decisions (Leveson, 2012; Esser & Matthes, 2013) all the more important. If increasing commercial pressures mean newspapers neglect these responsibilities (Davies, 2008) and merely fame stories to pander to the perceived prejudices of readers without regard to the wider consequences then the fears of mediatisation scholars may well prove to be justified.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, my results show that the political agenda on energy prices led the news agenda of these newspapers during the two periods studied. In particular, they confirm that Labour’s pledge to ‘freeze prices’ had a dramatic agenda setting impact in terms of issue salience – increasing the number of stories, their prominence and volume. The key frame building impact was not on *cost of living* frame, as may have been expected, but on the *conflict* frame which appeared nearly six times as often after the speech – arguably accounting, in part, for the pledge’s agenda setting power.

Newspapers were quick to take sides in this fight – casting the policy as either an economically illiterate return to *1970s socialism* (Daily Telegraph, 25/09/2013; Daily Mail, 26/09/2013;) or as brave stand for consumers against *greedy energy giants* (Daily Mirror, 25/09/2013; Guardian, 28/09/2013). In the heat of the fight, however, much of the coverage

ignored the more complicated and substantial part of Labour's proposals and focused on the easy to understand consumer offer of a price freeze. While the sample and scope of the work is too limited to make valid generalizations, feedback like this arguably provides a powerful incentive for politicians to simplify and offer headline-grabbing consumer deals rather than considered policy. The narrow framing of the energy prices debate by newspapers also raises concerns about the quality of information citizens receive about policy choices in the mediated public sphere. In my view future research on political communication could do well in focusing on the elements of policy messages that make it through the media's 'gates of access' to assess the effect that mediatisation and political marketing may be having on public policy.

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