Scything the grass: agenda-setting consequences of appointing public inquiries in the UK. A longitudinal analysis

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English

The media salience trends of 40 events in the UK between 1984 and 2003 were examined to determine the validity of allegations regarding the agenda-setting effect of appointing public inquiries. Results show that, contrary to the 'long grass' argument, the attenuation in media salience following the appointment of a public inquiry is not different from that of non-inquired events. The findings are analysed and an alternative explanation is suggested for the prevalence of the 'long grass' argument.

Français

Les tendances médiatiques dominantes ayant trait à 40 événements au Royaume Uni entre 1984 et 2003 sont examinées pour déterminer la validité des allégations concernant l'effet de mise à l'ordre du jour entraîné par la décision de mener une enquête publique. Les résultats montrent que, contrairement à l'argument « long-grass », l'atténuation de l'importance des médias suivant la décision de mener une enquête publique ne diffère pas de celle des événements non enquêtés. Les conclusions sont analysées et une explication différente est proposée pour la prédominance de l'argument « long-grass ».

Español

Se examinaron las tendencias de saliente media de 40 eventos en el Reino Unido entre 1984 y 2003 para determinar la validez de alegaciones en cuanto al efecto del marco de agenda del nombramiento de preguntas públicas. Los resultados muestran que, en contra del argumento de que la pregunta pública ayudará a reducir el interés general en el tema la atenuación de saliente media siguiendo el nombramiento de una pregunta pública no es diferente de los eventos que no se han preguntado. Los resultados se analizan y se sugiere una explicación alternativa para que prevalezca el argumento que la pregunta pública ayudará a reducir el interés general en el tema.

Introduction

Following a disaster, scandal or policy failure that raises public concern, will the appointment of a public inquiry (PI) reduce media attention to the event? This empirical question is central in current studies on crisis management and the practice of employing official investigations (Boin et al, 2005). This study suggests an answer to this question by relying on a longitudinal study of the media salience levels of 40 events – 18 cases that involved the appointment of a PI, and 22 events that did not.

In the UK, the decision as to whether to appoint a public inquiry, in the wake of negative events such as disasters, accidents, policy failures or scandals, lies in the hands of individual ministers, or the government collectively. The literature on the politics of PIs suggests a number of roles that PIs play, or should play in public life. Some arguments refer to the normative role of inquiries, as institutions for restoring confidence and ensuring that the necessary lessons are drawn. Other claims pertain to the political implications of employing PIs for agenda setting and public opinion. These latter claims serve in this literature to suggest that PIs play an active role in avoiding blame in the aftermath of crisis. One of these claims – that the appointment of a PI acts to reduce the level of media attention to the inquired event – is tested in this study.

The term 'public inquiry' (PI) is a loose one (PASC, 2005: 7), and is commonly used to denote different types of institutions and functions. Important distinctions can be made, for example, between planning, advising and investigating PIs. The criteria used by Sulitzeanu-Kenan (2006) were adopted to define PIs in the context of this study:

(1) an ad hoc institution – established for a particular task, and once its primary task is concluded, the tribunal is dissolved;
(2) formally external to the executive;
(3) established by the government or a minister;
(4) as a result of the appointer's discretion, or in other words, not the result of a requirement prescribed by any statute or other rule;
(5) for the main task of investigation;
(6) of past event(s);
(7) in a public way.

The first criterion restricts the set to ad hoc bodies, thereby excluding permanent institutions, and those that have purposes wider than investigation. The second criterion excludes investigative bodies that are part of the executive, eg, a special police investigation team, or inquiries conducted by regular civil servants. The third and fourth criteria exclude parliamentary inquiries or investigations set up by local authorities, and inquiries that are formally appointed by ministers but cannot be regarded as representing a specific political choice.[1] The fifth and sixth criteria are used to distinguish between investigative and advisory functions (Wheare, 1955: 43–4).[2] Although advisory bodies may engage in factual investigation, their purpose is to formulate prospective policy, while the purpose of investigative bodies is the factual investigation itself (Howe, 1999: 294), or rather the establishment of a factual

account of past events. The seventh criterion stresses the importance that the inquiry will not only be directed inward (to the appointing body) but also outward, in a way that exposes the facts to public scrutiny (Wade and Forsyth 1994: 1007; Clarke, 2000: 8).

Most of the investigations referred to as PIs in official documents and academic literature indeed satisfy the seven criteria. However, two criteria are often less strictly observed when the term 'public inquiry' is used to denote inquiries, namely that the inquiry is external to the executive (criterion 2), and that the inquiry is public (criterion 7). Such inquiries are referred to as PIs especially when the issue or event inquired into is a major one in public life, eg the Brixton Prison escape inquiry in 1991, which was a public, yet internal inquiry, and the Foot and Mouth inquiry in 2001, which was not public. For the purpose of clarity, it is worthwhile sketching the various types of inquiries that may be instigated by the executive. The various types of governmental investigative response are given in Table 1. These types all satisfy five out of the seven criteria – ad hoc inquiries, established by a minister or the government at their discretion, for the purpose of investigation of past events. Yet the requirement that an inquiry is external to the executive, termed here as 'independent', and the requirement to conduct the inquiry in public are relaxed, allowing for two dichotomous conditions. Within independent inquiries a particular aspect has also been included – the choice of a judge to serve as inquiry chairperson – judicial inquiry – or a non-judicial chairperson. The three dichotomous conditions comprise a three by two matrix, with six cells.

The advantages of this typology are that it encompasses the variance of governmental response, while being selective and explicit about the definition of cases used in the analysis. Since the appointment of a PI serves in this study as an independent variable, only response types 5 and 6 – those cases that clearly satisfy all seven criteria provided above – were considered as PI cases. Typically minor inquiries – types 2 through 4 – were not included in the analysis,[3] in order to

Table 1: Governmental investigative response types

	Internal	Independent	
		Non-judicial	Judicial
Private	(1) An inquiry which does not satisfy the independence condition, and the publicity condition Eg: inquiry into the Parkhurst prison escape (1995)	(3) An inquiry which does not satisfy the publicity condition Eg: inquiry into Ashworth mental hospital: paedophilia, pornography and financial irregularity (1997)	(4) A judicial inquiry which does not satisfy the publicity condition Eg: inquiry into the collapse of BCCI (1991)
Public	(2) An inquiry which does not satisfy the independence condition Eg: inquiry into the rail crash on the Kent-Sussex border (1994)	(5) An inquiry which satisfies all the criteria Eg: inquiry into the Southall Rail Crash (1997)	(6) A judicial inquiry which satisfies all the criteria Eg: inquiry into the Cleveland sex and abuse row (1987)

allow a clear comparison between major inquiries and non-inquiry events (NIEs), without the possible bias resulting from including minor inquiries either in the PI set or in the NIE set.

   PIs that satisfy the above criteria come into existence in a variety of circumstances, and they range from fairly routine investigations of specific types of misfortunes to unique and extreme disasters and fiascoes. Much like the recent Public Administration Select Committee's (PASC, 2005: 7) report, this study focuses on those PIs set up to investigate specific controversial events that have given rise to public concern. However, more selectively, this study concentrates on the particular cases in which the office-holder, with the power to decide whether to set up a PI or not, is included in the group of those potentially responsible for the negative event to be investigated, or at the least that it had happened 'on their watch'. Such a condition excludes from the analysis PIs into events that occurred under a previous government – that is, a government formed by a different party. For example, events that took place under the Major government are 'historical' when addressed by the Blair government, yet events that took place under Thatcher are not 'historical' when addressed by the Major government.[4] Such events or inquiries are termed 'historical' and are considered here to be distinct from 'current' inquiries, since the considerations in appointing them are expected to differ substantially, as they are not dealing with an existing crisis that may influence current political evaluations, but rather with 'setting the record straight'. Adopting Weaver's (1986) terms, it is assumed that 'historical inquiries' serve the purpose of 'credit claiming' rather than 'blame avoidance'. Such cases are, for example, the second inquiry into 'Bloody Sunday' (set up in 1998 by the Blair government into the events of Sunday, 30 January 1972 during the Conservative Heath government),[5] or the inquiry into the Marchioness disaster (set up in 2000 by the Blair government to examine the events of August 1989 during the Conservative Thatcher government).

The 'long grass' argument

The basic argument underlying these inquiries is that crises, disasters and scandals often result in public disquiet and in loss of confidence in the body politic. Confidence can be effectively restored only by thoroughly investigating and establishing the truth by a credible body, and exposing the facts to public scrutiny (Salmon Commission, 1966; Clarke, 2000: 8). Another related argument focuses on the function of learning as an important aspect of PI activity. Learning is a common reason given for the appointment of PIs, that is, learning for the purpose of drawing lessons that would help prevent or reduce the chance of a similar event happening (Howe, 1999; Clarke, 2000: 7; Elliot and McGuinness, 2002). The relative advantage of PIs in learning and establishing thorough accounts of complex affairs have been noted by various observers (The Times, 1988; Polidano, 2001).

   It could be argued that the functions of credible investigation for restoring confidence as well as for learning in order to reduce the likelihood of reoccurrence can be seen as normative functions of PIs, that is, as the appropriate outcomes of a successful PI. However, given the fact that PIs are creations of politicians, it is not surprising that a number of writers suggest a descriptive function of PIs – and one

that is at odds with, and indeed an impediment to, attaining the two normative functions – the employment of PIs for the purpose of blame avoidance.

A starting point for a discussion on the role of PI in blame avoidance is that the decision to establish a PI in the first place rests in the hands of individual ministers or in the government collectively (Flinders, 2001: 163). Indeed, the literature addressing the politics of public inquiries in the UK, as well as in other countries, suggests that a PI may hold some blame-avoidance advantages for the appointing government or office-holder.

Several explanations have been suggested in the literature to account for the employment of PIs under such circumstances. These explanations rely on a number of empirical assumptions pertaining to the social, political and legal consequences of PI appointment, process and reporting. It has been suggested that the appointment of a PI gives the impression that ministers share public concern: that is, that they could not have been personally involved (Woodhouse, 1995: 25). This claim was not supported by the results of a recent experimental study (Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006). Another argument suggests that the appointment of PIs can 'block' alternative investigative procedures (for example, of parliamentary committees or criminal investigations) – as a result of rules and conventions governing conflicts of institutional investigative authority and freedom of speech and particularly of the press (for example, subjudice) (Kremnitzer, 1989; Elliot and McGuinness, 2002: 21; Flinders, 2001: 164; Polidano, 2001).

Yet perhaps the most common claim in the literature on the politics of PIs is that an appointment of a PI acts to reduce the level of public interest in the affair. In other words, appointing a public inquiry is often portrayed as 'kicking the ball into the long grass' (PASC, 2005: 9).[6] Woodhouse has suggested that 'the investigation of an inquiry removes the issue from the political arena, thereby depoliticizing it and deflecting controversy' (1995: 25; see also Thompson, 1997: 183; Flinders, 2001: 164). This impression is also shared outside the UK. Bovens et al (1999: 128) have observed that:

> Policymakers will sometimes try to exercise damage control by immediately *initiating an investigation* of their own account.… In this way, they can not only silence their critics ('we are looking into these matters') but also try to *keep, or regain, control over the political agenda*. For these reasons, it is a very useful tactic to depoliticize the crisis. (emphasis added; see also Lijphart, 1975; Lipsky and Olson, 1977: 443–4; Brändström and Kuipers, 2003: 289).

It appears from this literature that the appointment of a PI can be expected to decrease the salience of the affair in the public agenda. Salience is also expected to play an important role in determining the actual effect of blame attitude on blame expression, and blame-avoidance activity can be directed at the salience of the blame-generating issue, or in other words its rank in the public agenda (Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood, 2005). Such activities may include non-argumentative strategies (Hood, 2004) such as non-engagement, diversions, covert attempts to fix public agenda, directive strategies, that is 'concede-and-move-on', or, as addressed in this study, the appointment of official investigations.

An alternative claim may draw on the typical characteristics of the demand rather

than the supply of PIs. PIs are often sought by political rivals, journalists and others critical of the government's record or policy, and it is very likely that these actors, while demanding a PI, seek to increase attention to the issue. Yet, it is not at all clear whether the demand for a PI by these actors is aimed at increasing issue salience. It is equally likely that the demand for a PI is aimed at obtaining an authoritative critical PI report in the long term (see Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006: 647–8), even at the 'cost' of a short-term salience reduction. The results of this study are relevant to this counter claim as well.

Thus, the 'long grass' claim can be restated as the 'agenda-setting effect of PI appointment': that the appointment of a PI – the independent variable – is expected to reduce the salience of the affair to be inquired, in the public agenda – the dependent variable.

Agenda setting

'Agenda' is defined as 'a list of issues and events that are viewed at a point in time as ranked in a hierarchy of importance' (Rogers and Dearing, 1988: 565). The salience of an item on the agenda is not an absolute but to some extent a relative matter (Lang and Lang, 1981, as quoted by Rogers and Dearing, 1988: 567). The rich literature on agenda setting typically refers to three types of agendas:

(1) the public agenda – the salience ranking of issues by the general public, typically measured by opinion polls;
(2) the media agenda – the salience of issues in the media, typically measured by content analysis of the various media;
(3) the policy agenda – the salience of issues in policy making, which are measured in various ways, such as committee meetings, Bill introductions, presidential papers, and parliamentary questions addressing the issues in question (Rogers and Dearing, 1988, Soroka, 2002: 271–2).

The basic conception of agenda setting was a theoretical idea without much basis in empirical research until a study by McCombs and Shaw (1972) of the media's role in the 1968 presidential campaign. McCombs and Shaw found strong correlations between the mass media agenda and the public agenda (salience). These findings were the first empirical support to the agenda-setting function of mass media. Despite the (cross-sectional) method they used, agenda setting was conceptualised by McCombs and Shaw (1972) as a process by which agenda is influenced and develops. This conception has helped lead later scholars to include data gathering over time in their analyses of agenda setting (Rogers and Dearing, 1988: 564).

Since then, the vast majority of research in this field has showed that members of the public learn the relative importance of issues through the amount of coverage these issues receive in the news media (Wanta and Hu, 1993: 250–1). In a few studies, researchers were able to control the independent variable of the media agenda as it influenced the public agenda. A notable example is a field experiment conducted by Iyengar et al (1982), who found that manipulating the issues covered by the media influenced the issue salience reported by participants.

However, more recent work suggests that the direction of media–public, media–

policy and public–policy relationships vary across issues. In quick–onset major events, where there typically is little previous public concern, the causal direction is mostly from the media agenda to the public agenda. Such causality should occur for agenda items that Zucker (1978: 227) termed 'unobtrusive'. Zucker's (1978) 'obtrusiveness' hypothesis suggests that the more obtrusive an issue is – the more likely individuals experience it directly – the less potential there is for media effects on public opinion. Issues involving dramatic events or conflict should have an increased potential for media attention and effects on public agenda (Wanta and Hu, 1993). Zucker's 'obtrusiveness' hypothesis was confirmed by Soroka (2002). By using inflation as an 'obtrusive' issue, debt/deficit as an unobtrusive and abstract issue and environment as an unobtrusive concrete issue, Soroka's time-series analysis supports Zucker's 'obtrusiveness' hypothesis. The public salience of inflation was independent of media agenda. The public reacts to increases in actual inflation, and the media reacts both to the public and actual inflation; for the environment the media has a significant impact on both the public and policy agendas, but results indicate that all three agendas play mutually reinforcing roles; for debt/deficit the media has a positive effect on both the public and policy agendas. Thus it appears that media agenda plays a dominant role in determining the salience of 'unobtrusive' issues.

The 'long grass' hypothesis and media salience

To the knowledge of the author, the 'long grass' claim has not yet been empirically tested, and hence it is labelled here as the 'long grass' hypothesis. This hypothesis posits the existence of a PI as an independent variable, and salience as the dependent variable. This is one possible interpretation of the various formulations suggested by the literature for the 'long grass' claim, still, it is argued, a feasible one, both in terms of the common understanding of the claim, and in light of the theoretical importance of salience in crisis management and blame avoidance.

The measure of salience used in this study relies on media salience. The reasons for selecting this measure are both substantive and practical. The practical reasons are that data on public agenda (issue salience) are not available for assessing the salience of all cases and controls. Most opinion polls ask about more general issues (eg, health system, economic condition, sleaze), and not about specific affairs.[7] Two theoretically grounded reasons for selecting media salience are, first, that the events included in this study are typically quick-onset unobtrusive issues, for which the media plays a central role in determining both public and policy agenda; second, most models of agenda–setting dynamic assume that the policy agenda does not directly affect the public agenda, and that any effect it may have on public agenda is mediated by the media agenda (see Rogers and Dearing, 1988: 557; Soroka, 2002: 270).

Thus, the media salience (MS) for the event, inquired or not inquired into, serves as the dependent variable in testing the hypothesis that the appointment of a public inquiry has the effect of reducing MS for the inquired event – the 'long grass' hypothesis.

Still, since agenda setting is a dynamic process, in which time plays an important role (Iyengar et al, 1982: 849), a preliminary expectation would be that the passing of time since the advent of an event has an effect on MS:

$$MS = \beta 0 + \beta 1 time$$

And under this condition, the long grass hypothesis suggests that the appointment of a PI is expected to moderate the effect of time on MS, or more specifically to increase the rate of MS attenuation over time:

$$MS = \beta 0 + \beta 1 time + \beta 2 PI + \beta 3 PI \star time$$

where MS represents the media salience of the event, 'time' represents the time factor, and PI is a dummy variable indicating whether a PI was appointed. Therefore, the elaborated long grass hypothesis (H1) predicts that the level of MS will be a function of the interaction of time and the decision to appoint/not appoint a PI.

Research design

The independent variable – PI appointment

As noted above, the PIs included in this study are response types 5 and 6, as set out in Table 1. Events, which may lead to the appointment of a PI, typically emerge as salient issues. The question addressed in this study is whether the appointment of a PI indeed influences the level of salience. In order to ascertain this, such events should be compared to their counterfactuals – which are comparable events that did not lead to the appointment of a PI. For this purpose, the analysis includes two sets of events. The first is a set of PI cases that represent one value of the independent variable; and the second is a set of NIE controls that represent its other value.[8]

Data gathering on PIs

Creating the complete list of PI cases drew from the following sources:

(1) the list provided in Annex 1 of the Public Administration Select Committee report Government by inquiry (PASC, 2005: 86–95);
(2) Butler and Butler (2000: 323–5);[9]
(3) additional secondary sources such as Drewry (1975, 1996), McLean and Johnes (2000) and Elliot and McGuinness (2002);
(4) a systematic newspaper survey of the national British press (Lexis-Nexis database). This survey was conducted for the purpose of gathering data on controls (NIEs), and the data on PI cases was a by-product. More details on this stage of the data gathering are provided below.

The cases selected for the analysis were all category 5 and 6 inquiries, for the years 1984-2003, omitting 'historical inquiries'[10] and two PIs that were not appointed following a significant level of salience (the sinking of the Marques 1985, and sinking of the Derbyshire in 1980, appointed in 1986). This selection process resulted in 18 PI cases.

Data gathering on NIEs

Compiling the set of NIE controls was done by systematic yearly-based searches in the UK national press for instances in which the appointment of a public inquiry was called for. The Lexis-Nexis media database was used, and for each year, a sample of two national broadsheets was selected (based on the availability of sources in different years).[11] This method provided a number of advantages. First, it excluded the researcher's judgement regarding the events to be included in the set, and any other retrospective judgement of past events with the questionable 'benefit' of hindsight, and other problems of memory. This method also accommodates the notion that social problems are social constructs, to a great extent defined by prevailing ideologies, and thus susceptible to change over time (Edelman, 1988: 12–13). The second advantage of this method is that it provides a gate-keeping mechanism for excluding events that were not deemed important or serious enough to be included in a national newspaper, based on multiple editorial decisions at the time of the event.[12]

Many NIEs (and a few PI cases) have led to repeated calls for the appointment of a PI (or for a second PI, eg Bloody Sunday, for which one was appointed; and the Hillsborough disaster, which did not receive a second inquiry). In a great proportion of the cases, repeated calls were made when new information emerged about the issue, or when similar events occurred. Other examples are anniversary dates (eg, the Marchioness and Lockerbie disasters). This study included repeated calls for a PI as additional NIEs if more than a month had passed since the previous call.

The dependent variable: media salience

The measurement of MS was based on the number of newspaper articles per time unit. Measurement relied on a sample of two broadsheets for each case, which were averaged to provide the mean number of articles per newspaper per time unit (For more details on the development of the MS measurement index, see Appendix 1.) Since the measurement of MS relied on broadsheets, a test for the correlation between MS in broadsheets and tabloids was conducted. The results suggest that although the rate of political coverage is higher in broadsheets, salience co-varies in the two types of publications – indicating the validity of using broadsheets as a general measure of press salience.[13]

As noted earlier, agenda and salience are relative concepts. Press coverage provides a relative measure of MS because it is a result of editorial decisions that weigh up the relative importance of many issues to be included in a finite capacity of press coverage (in this case, the total number of articles in a given newspaper). Since the format of major broadsheets does not change often, the number of articles can be regarded as a relative measure of salience.

It should be reported that the protocol for counting the number of articles on a particular event included (1) specifying the time unit; (2) the newspapers searched; and (3) the keyword/s for search. This information was recorded for each case included in the analysis. Furthermore, the final number of articles considered was not merely the database search result. All articles were checked for relevance, and the proportion of relevant articles from the automated search was recorded.[14] The

basic criterion for making the choice was whether the article talks (even partly) about the event, or does it just refer to the event as context (time reference etc). For example, many sports articles that mainly reported on football matches, included references to the Hillsborough disaster.[15]

A longitudinal study design

Designing the measurement structure had to account for a number of considerations:

(1) The effect of time on MS: It is expected that the passing of time is related to the level of media (and public) interest, and therefore, to MS. 'If problems appear and disappear – if they follow Down's (1972) 'issue-attention cycle' – then to look for agenda setting effects cross-sectionally invites confusion. If they are to be detected, agenda setting effects must be investigated over time' (Iyengar et al, 1982: 849). Thus, any measurement of MS should account for the time factor, in order to avoid biased inferences.

(2) The higher mean level of initial MS in PI cases: The appointment of PIs is expected to be associated with relatively salient issues. In other words, the propensity of office-holders to appoint a PI may be higher for more salient events. Thus, comparing post-PI appointment MS to post-NIE MS is expected to be biased. This demonstrates one of the shortcomings of an observational study (as opposed to an experimental one) – the problem known as 'Berkson bias' in medical case-control design (Lilienfeld and Stolley 1994: 231), or 'self-selection' in social sciences.[16] One way of addressing this potential bias is to compare pre-PI and post-PI MS, in order to control for the absolute size of MS, and rely on the change in MS, which can more reliably be attributed to PI appointment.

(3) The limited number of cases for pre-PI MS measurement: The third problem stems from the nature of the phenomenon. In eight PI cases (44% of all PIs), the appointment was made immediately (not more than a single day) following the event and four more cases had a delay of two to three days. This pattern precludes the possibility of having meaningful measurements of pre-PI MS, and in some cases pre-PI MS is nil since the first press report on the event came after the announcement of a PI appointment (for example, the 1996 Dunblane case).

The combination of these issues presented a challenge to the research design. The first issue requires accounting for the time factor in the analysis. The second requires the measurement of pre-PI MS, yet the third inhibits such a measurement in a large proportion of the cases. The solution adopted was a longitudinal study design of the different 'growth curves' (in this particular study – 'decay curves') of PIs and NIEs. This included measuring the effect of PI appointment by comparing the difference in the rate of reduction in MS over a period of eight weeks following the event, between cases and controls. Following the suggestion of Curran and Muthén (1999: 592, see also Willett et al, 1998) this period was divided into four time units, each ranging two weeks. MS for each case/control was measured at each time unit providing four repeated measurements of MS (referred to as MS1 – MS4), and yielding a total of 160 measurements. These repeated measures provide

data on the time-factor effect on MS. Week-based time units were selected due to the weekly cycle of press coverage. Relying on non-weekly time units may distort the measurements because such periods can include varying numbers of weekends, in which the typical coverage profile is different from a mid-week profile. Thus, a seven-day basis for sampling is important in relatively short-duration time units. Furthermore, based on the 18 PI cases analysed, the mean delay between event and PI appointment (abbreviated t1 delay) is 3.83 days, and the maximum is 15 (see Appendix 2). This means that nearly all PI appointments are included in the first time unit, and the rest occur at the very beginning of the second unit. This method both accounts for the time factor in the analysis and provides a measure of MS trend, as a substitute for the pre-/post-PI comparison.

In order to avoid the potential bias resulting from the higher mean level of MS in PI cases, selection of controls was not random, but relied on 'matching for initial MS' (MS1) – selecting controls with first time-unit MS (MS1) measure that approximate the mean MS1 for PI cases. Due to the considerable difference in mean MS1, this in practice meant selecting controls with the highest MS1 from each year.[17]

Addressing potential intervening factors

A number of potential factors may also influence the level and attenuation rate of issue salience. In some specific cases, other events, not included in the analysis, may have influenced the level of salience of the issue in question. The measurement protocol for MS described above was helpful in reducing the influence of such events on the salience measurement. For example, shortly after the Dunblane shooting a suspected 'copycat' murder of 34 people had occurred in Tasmania on 28 April 1996. This event may have influenced late press coverage (MS4) of the Dunblane case. In order to reduce the effect of the Australian event newspaper articles that mainly dealt with the case in Tasmania, with only minor reference to Dunblane were not included.

The context of the decision to appoint a PI may also have an influence on the issue salience and possibly on its salience-attenuation rate. More specifically, the question as to whether the government is seeking to initiate a PI, or whether it is bowing to external pressures, may have consequences for the media response to PI appointment. Direct information on this question is difficult to attain, as it is not always clear, even for the persons involved, what were the reasons for appointment. However, one way to assess this is by checking for calls for the appointment of a PI, prior to the appointment. The existence of such calls may indicate the existence of external pressure for PI appointment before the announcement of an appointment.[18] This data are used in the analysis to assess the possible influence of this factor on issue salience.

It is also possible that the salience of public issue may differ in various periods along the political cycle. In order to control for this, all events included in the analysis were coded according to whether they took place in the first year after national elections, in an election year, or in the middle period (none of the first two categories).

Finally, it is possible that variations in the administration of inquiries may also influence the level of issue salience. This was addressed by selecting only public inquiries (types 5 and 6), thereby limiting some of the procedural variance. Other

factors, such as inquiry press briefings and televised hearings were not included in the analysis as they are at least in part the consequences of the key causal variable – PI appointment (see King, 1991: 1050).
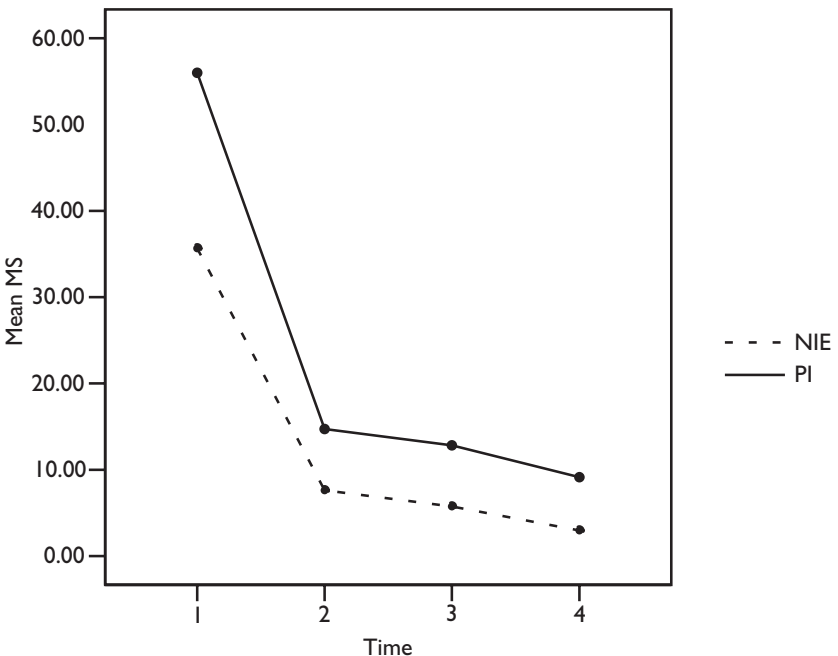
Results

H1 predicts that an event that was followed by the appointment of a PI would result in a sharper decrease in media salience over time. This hypothesis was tested on a sample of 40 cases, 18 PIs and 22 NIEs (see Appendices 2 and 3).

Preliminary tests were conducted to assess the difference in the mean level of initial MS between PI cases and NIE controls. The mean level MS1 for PI cases was 56.0 (articles per newspaper per week), and 35.7 for the NIEs. This mean difference of 20.3 is statistically insignificant (p = .122) in a two-tailed t-test. Given the possibility that the initial level of MS, may be positively related to the slope of the salience trend, this marginally significant difference in MS1 has led to the requirement of a $p < .05$ significance level for the PI*time interaction term, in order to support H1. I will return to this issue in the interpretation of the results.

The measure of media salience was subjected to a 4 (time factor) by 2 (appointment value) mixed model ANOVA. This analysis yielded a main effect of the time factor, F = 45.230, p < .001, indicating that the level of media salience devoted to the issues in both PIs and NIEs analysed, clearly decreased over time, as can be seen in Figure 1.

However, no significant interaction effect was found for the time factor and PI appointment on media salience, F = 1.503, p = .229.[19] Tests of within-subject

Figure 1: Levels of media salience over time for PIs and NIEs

contrasts resulted in non–significant interaction effects for all three pairs of the four time units (p = .192, p = .992, and p = .614).

Five PIs were preceded by calls for PI appointment.[20] In comparing their mean rate of salience attenuation to that of the other 13 PIs no significant difference was found. Furthermore, no significant two-way interaction effect of the political cycle stage and time was found, nor a three-way interaction effect of the political cycle, PI and time.

A Pearson correlation test for the relationship between initial media salience (MS1) and the initial attenuation (MS1–MS2) in MS across all cases (PIs and NIEs) resulted in a strong and significant association (r = .923, p < .001).

Discussion

The findings clearly show that time plays an important role in the dynamics of agenda setting. As time progresses, media salience decreases. The rate of decrease is high in the first two to three weeks, then moderates, yet continues in the same direction. These results confirm the research design's capacity to account for the time factor, and therefore to detect differences between the media salience trends of each group (formally, an interaction of time and PI appointment), if such a difference indeed exists.

The findings, however, do not support the hypothesis. No significant interaction was found to support the hypothesis that the appointment of a PI results in a higher rate of media salience decrease, compared to events that are not investigated. This finding does not support the 'long grass' argument, or in other words, the claim that the appointment of a PI has an agenda-setting effect (as far as this effect is expressed in media salience). The existence of preceding calls for PI appointment was not found to have an effect on the rate of salience attenuation of inquired issues, and the political cycle was not found to have an effect on the rate of salience attenuation, nor on the effect of PI appointment on the rate of salience attenuation.

As noted earlier, the analysis presented a complication for assessing H1, but one that may inform our understanding of the findings. As expected, the initial mean media salience (MS1) of PI cases was found to be substantially greater than that of NIE controls. In early analyses, before matching NIE controls by MS1 level, this led to a finding of an interaction effect, seemingly supporting H1. However, a more close examination of this finding (by running tests of within-subject contrasts) revealed that this interaction effect was significant only in the early period following the event – in the comparison of time units 1 and 2. This presented two possible interpretations: (1) support of H1 – that the increased rate of MS attenuation is due to the independent variable PI; (2) a product of selection bias – that the increased rate of MS attenuation is due to the higher level of initial MS, since such events may typically lose more attention over time, especially early in the process. The second interpretation appeared to be more reasonable in light of the existence of an interaction effect only in the first comparison of time units 1 and 2.[21] Indeed, after making the changes in the NIE control sample in order to control for the initial media salience (verified by avoiding a significant difference in this measure between the two groups) no significant interaction was found, therefore suggesting

that the initially found interaction was a product of selection bias rather than a confirmation of H1.

The results also show an interesting relationship between the initial level of media salience and the rate of salience decrease over time. Events with high initial salience are strongly associated with a sharp initial decrease (within the first two to three weeks) in media salience, thereby, matching for initial media salience was important for an unbiased assessment of the long grass hypothesis. Such a finding, although exceeding the intended scope of this research, can be explained by a roughly fixed attention span of two to three weeks. After this period, the level of MS of various issues reaches similar levels, even when their initial salience was much more divergent. This dynamic requires the more salient issues to lose more salience in this period than less initially salient issues.

Why, then, is the 'long grass' claim so prevalent in the writings of various observers of political life, such as academics, journalists and politicians? One possible explanation is that this claim is based on an error in attribution. It is possible that the same reason that biased the early analyses of this study lies behind the impression that the appointment of a PI indeed reduces the salience of the inquired event. This possible explanation relies on two elements. First, it appears that events that resulted in the appointment of a PI have (on average) higher levels of salience at their early stages. Second, the strong and significant correlation between the rate of MS decrease and the level of initial media salience. It is possible that PI cases typically have high initial salience, and thus exhibit a sharp decrease in their salience in the first two weeks since the event became public. Yet this decrease is not due to the appointment of a PI, but rather represents the typical attenuation of highly salient events over such a period of time. In light of the fact that the probability of PI cases being highly salient is substantially greater than that of NIEs, it is conceivable that observers attribute the sharp decrease in salience to the appointment, rather than to the initial salience.

To conclude, it appears that the appointment of a PI does not affect the level of public salience of the event inquired into, as far as this effect is expressed in media salience over the first eight weeks following an event. Beyond the scope of this research, it remains to be seen whether the appointment has effects that exceed the eight-week period, or whether a PI appointment has a qualitative rather than a quantitative effect on press coverage.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1: Development of the media salience measurement

The initially planned measure for MS was based on an index that relied on the following items:

(1) Number of articles (per time unit)	(2) Page type/exposition front page – 10 page 2-3 – 5 editorial – 4 other – 1	(3) Article size (number of words)

These codes were adopted from Durant et al (1998).

These values were combined to create a MS index using the following formula:

MSi = Article no. $\star$ (page type $\star$ 6 + article size/30)[22]

Reassessing the media salience index

This index posed a problem since it requires data on the page/section of each article, and the Lexis–Nexis database provides this data only for a limited number of newspapers, and just in recent years. An exception to this is *The Independent*, which is provided with page/section data, but this newspaper is included in the database only from 1989. The need to measure pre-1989 cases, and to rely on more than one newspaper for MS measurement, led me to reassess the MS index.

For the first 30 cases MS measurement was based on *The Independent*, and employed the MS index described above. Then this index was correlated with the simple measure of number of articles for each time unit. The results were: $r = .988$, $r = .988$, $r = .981$, $r = .946$, for time units 1 to 4, respectively ($N = 30$, $p < .001$ for all four results, two-tailed Pearson).[23] Thus the level of correlation found suggests that the simple measure of article number accounts also for 0.9 of the variance of the other variables (page/section rank and article size).[24] In other words, the use of the article number instead of the MS index will lead to a loss of 5% of the information. This result supports the use of article number as a single measure of MS. This measure is simpler, allows using additional newspapers, for which page numbers are not indicated, and includes pre-1989 cases.

Appendix Two: List of public inquiries included in the analysis

	PI name	Appointment date	t1-delay (days)[a]	Political cycle[b]
1	Salmonella outbreak at Stanley Royd Hospital	14.9.84	9	2
2	Bradford stadium fire	13.5.85	2	2
3	The Zeebrugge ferry disaster (Herald of Free Enterprise)	9.3.87	2	3
4	Cleveland sex abuse row	8.7.87	15	1
5	Fire at King's Cross	19.11.87	1	1
6	Piper Alpha disaster	7.7.88	1	2
7	Clapham Junction railway crash	13.12.88	1	2
8	The Hillsborough disaster	17.4.89	2	2
9	Strangeways prison riot	5.4.90	4	2
10	Orkney ritual abuse case	19.4.91	14	3
11	Arms to Iraq	10.11.92	1[c]	1
12	The shooting at Dunblane Primary School	21.3.96	1	2
13	North Wales Child abuse Inquiry	13.6.96	6[d]	3
14	Southall Rail Crash	19.9.97	1	1
15	Paddington / Ladbroke Grove rail accident	8.10.99	3	2
16	Climbié inquiry	12.1.01	0	3
17	Equitable Life	31.8.01	6	1
18	Death of Dr David Kelly	18.7.03	0	2

Notes: [a] Mean t1-delay = 3.83 days.
[b] Political cycle: 1 = year after elections, 2 = middle period, 3 = election year.
[c] One day since the collapse of the Matrix Churchill trial because of 'inconsistent' evidence about the government's role on 19 April 1991.
[d] Roughly the date when the leaks were published about the content of the unpublished Jillings report, which suggested sexual abuse of about 100 children in Clwyd over a period of 20 years, as well as new allegations of child abuse in Cheshire (calls for a PI into this affair first appeared on 5 September 1992).

Appendix 3: List of NIEs included in the analysis

	NIE name	t0	Date (of call)	t1 delay (days)[a]	Political cycle
1	Fatal air accident at Manchester Airport	22.8.85	14.9.85	23	2
2	Tottenham riots	6.10.85	8.10.85	2	2
3	Hungerford (Berkshire) killings – gun control	19.8.87	20.8.87	1	1
4	Shooting of three IRA terrorists by the SAS in Gibraltar	9.3.88	12.3.88	3	1
5	Lockerbie disaster	14.3.89[c]	15.3.89	1	2
6	Marchioness disaster	20.8.89	21.8.89	1	2
7	Poll tax riots	31.3.90	2.4.90	2	2
8	Rochdale ritual child abuse	10.9.90[d]	20.9.90	10	2
9	Brixton Prison escape	7.7.91	8.7.91	2	3
10	Arms to Iraq (this issue is also a PI case – a year and 4 months later)	28.7.91[e]	29.7.91	1	3
11	The Robert Maxwell affair	4.12.91	5.12.91	1	3
12	Serious Fraud Office's handling of the Asil Nadir case	29.6.93[f]	30.6.93	1	2
13	Joy Gardner's death after a tussle with deportation police	1.8.93	2.8.93	1	2
14	Barings collapse	26.2.95	2.3.95	4	2
15	Sea Empress – environmental disaster	15.2.96	20.2.96	5	2
16	Child abuse in care homes in Clwyd, North Wales (NIE 3 months before the PI case)	26.3.96	27.3.96	1	2
17	Cash for questions	1.10.96[g]	9.10.96	8	3
18	Murder of Stephen Lawrence	13.2.97[h]	14.2.97	1	3
19	Murder of Loyalist Billy Wright 'King Rat' at Maze Prison	27.12.97	31.12.97	4	1
20	Murder of solicitor Rosemary Nelson in Northern Ireland	15.3.99[i]	17.3.99	2	2
21	Wormwood Scrubs Prison (West London)	15.6.99	16.6.99	1	2
22	Potters Bar rail crash	10.5.02	11.5.02	1	1

Notes: [a] Mean t1 delay = 3.45 days.
[b] Political cycle: 1 = year after elections, 2 = middle period, 3 = election year.
[c] First becomes an NIE after allegations of early intelligence information existed prior to the event (t0 = 21 December 1988).
[d] The day when a court order restricting public discussion of the affair was relaxed (*The Independent*, 11 September 1990: 3).
[e] The date on which the publication of information by the Trade Select Committee was made.
[f] The day Secretary Mates gave his resignation speech, which included accusations of the SFO and DPP.
[g] The date Neil Hamilton and political lobbyist Ian Greer dropped their libel claim against *The Guardian* in the High Court (less than 24 hours before the action was due to start) (*The Independent*, 2 October 1996). It should be noted that the Nolan committee, which was later appointed, did not investigate the affair.
[h] After the prosecution failed, and the day a coroner's jury found that Lawrence's death was a result of unlawful killing.
[i] Scotland Yard announced that 25 prison officers from Wormwood Scrubs were to be charged with assault on inmates after the biggest criminal investigation at a British jail (*The Independent*, 16 June 1999).

Notes

[1] Although rules governing the use of inquiries in particular circumstances represent political choices, these are general, and are not part of this study.

[2] For example Lord Donaldson's inquiry into the Braer tanker disaster of January 1993 did not address the causes of the event, but was rather a 'forward-looking' inquiry into future prevention of similar environmental disasters (The Guardian, 9 February 1993; Clarke, 2000: 11).

[3] For example, the inquiry into the Nurse Beverley Allitt case, which was a type 3 inquiry.

[4] Unless some implications of the affair, eg participation in ongoing cover-up, raises concern regarding the responsibility of current office-holders. An example of such an exception is the inquiry into the Guildford Four miscarriage of justice, established in October 1989. The main failures in the system were the extraction of confessions and the pre-1976 trial investigations by police and crown prosecution. On the other hand, the miscarriage of justice continued into the 1980s, particularly in the appeal procedure. Indeed, the terms of reference of the inquiry were 'to inquire into the circumstances leading to and deriving from the trial of Patrick Armstrong, Gerard Conlon, Paul Hill and Carole Richardson on charges arising out of the explosions in public houses in Guildford on 5 October 1974' (House of Commons *Hansard*, 19 October 1989, Col. 279). Therefore, in this case the inquiry is regarded as 'current'.

[5] In this case, the inquiry was set up as part of the steps taken in the peace process in Northern Ireland.

[6] 'There are many reasons for setting up an inquiry. There is the "long grass" version, when ministers are faced with a political embarrassment and want to announce something that will give them short-term relief. Hutton falls into this category' (Johnston, 2004).

[7] Even when a specific event is asked about, the question rarely appears more than once.

[8] The terms 'cases' and 'controls' conform to the general observational research design – 'case control design' (Shadish et al, 2002: 128).

[9] This source was not consistent in the categorisation of PI types. For example the 1921 Act PI into the Dunblane School Massacre was included in the list of 'Departmental Committees', rather than 'Enquiries held under the Tribunals of Inquiry (Evidence) Act, 1921'.

[10] Eg, MV Derbyshire Inquiry (1995), Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (1997), BSE Inquiry (1997), Bloody Sunday Inquiry (1998), Bristol Royal Infirmary Inquiry (1998), MV Derbyshire Inquiry [2] (1998) and FV-Gaul Inquiry (1999).

[11] January–July 1984: *The Financial Times* (the only period for which only one newspaper was used); August 1984 – June 1985: *The Financial Times* and *The Guardian*; July 1985 – December 1988: *The Guardian* and *The Times*; 1989 – 2003: *The Times* and *The Independent*.

[12] A similar method was employed by Dowding and Kang (1998) and Dewan and Dowding (2005) for their studies of ministerial resignations, by way of relying on *The Times* as a single news source.

[13] Comparing the MS (number of articles) of 20 events (both PIs and NIEs) between *The Independent* and *The Times* (averaged) to *The Daily Mail* (including the Sunday editions of all three newspapers) yielded a strong and significant correlation: $r = .807$, $p < .001$.

[14] A typical pattern was that the closer the time-unit was to the event the higher the proportion of relevant articles (80-90%) was. This is not surprising as the search was based on a keyword search, and as time goes by, the probability of articles on other issues that only refer in passing to the event increases.

[15] Eg, 'If Liverpool can be grateful for anything, it is that they do not have to go there on the last day of the season needing to win to retain the championship, as might originally have been the case before the disaster at Hillsborough extended their season' (*The Times*, 13 May 1989).

[16] This problem can be demonstrated by a simple example. One wishes to study the effect of a pain–relief pill on headaches. However, let us assume that an experimental study is not feasible (much like the feasibility of an experiment for this research), and the method employed is observational: gathering one group of subjects that use the pill, and another group of subjects who do not. Assuming we know when people develop a headache, we measure the intensity of the headache in the cases (those who took the pill) and the controls (those who did not). The bias in this measurement comes from the fact that the treatment (pill) was not randomly administered, but rather cases self-selected themselves – decided to take the pill. This decision can be expected to be associated with higher-intensity headaches. Thus, relying on the post-treatment headache is misleading.

[17] As will be shown in the Results section, the mean MS_1 of PI cases was still higher than the mean MS_1 of controls.

[18] This leaves open the possibility of *anticipated pressure* as a reason for PI appointment, even in the absence of previous calls for such appointment, and (although less likely) the possibility of a government initiative to appoint regardless of such previous calls.

[19] Due to violation of the sphericity assumption, the (more conservative) Greenhouse-Geisser test was used. It should be noted, however, that employing the standard mixed–model ANOVA test also yielded an insignificant difference ($p = .218$).

[20] The 1984 inquiry into the Salmonella outbreak at Stanley Royd Hospital; the 1991 inquiry into the Orkney ritual abuse case; the 1992 inquiry into the sale of arms to Iraq; the 1996 North Wales child abuse inquiry; and the 2001 inquiry into equitable life.

[21] If such interaction effect had been found in later comparisons (between time-unit 2 and 3, or between 3 and 4) this would have presented support for the first interpretation, since such interactions are less likely to be explained by the difference in initial MS.

[22] The formula is based on known and estimated ranges for each of the variables: page type varies between 1 and 10; estimated mean article size = 520. Each item is given a coefficient in order to bring the figures to comparable sizes.

[23] On the reason for four time-units see below in the Method section. The correlation between A and A$\star$B, when A and B are random sets of numbers with no correlation is r = .71, since A accounts for half of the variation of A$\star$B.

[24] The average r is .976, so the article–number accounts for .95 of the variance of the intensity index.

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