

# From TV, to headline news, to Parliament:

How an ITV drama brought the Post Office scandal back into the spotlight



**In early December 2023, ITV sent out its [press pack](#) for 'Mr Bates vs the Post Office' – a New Year broadcast that would recount 'one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in British legal history'.**

Despite the lack of definite resolution for the postmasters involved, the UK press had gone relatively quiet on the story since the [initial 2009 coverage](#) by [Computer Weekly](#).

The legal scandal was brought back to the front pages with the ITV drama, tainting the cosy [Postman Pat](#)-esque reputation carefully built up by the Post Office brand over generations. Reaction to the programme has also gifted Fujitsu the dubious honour of household name status among those who had never heard of the company before.



'The unfolding of this crisis can be attributed to a confluence of societal, economic, and technological factors,' says director of communications for the [UK Black Business Entrepreneurs Conference](#) and founder of [FP Comms](#) Nicola Millington.

'Each widened the gap between the stakeholders involved – namely, the postmasters, technological 'advancements', and the public. In evaluating their responses and considering the path forward, several crucial questions demand attention.'

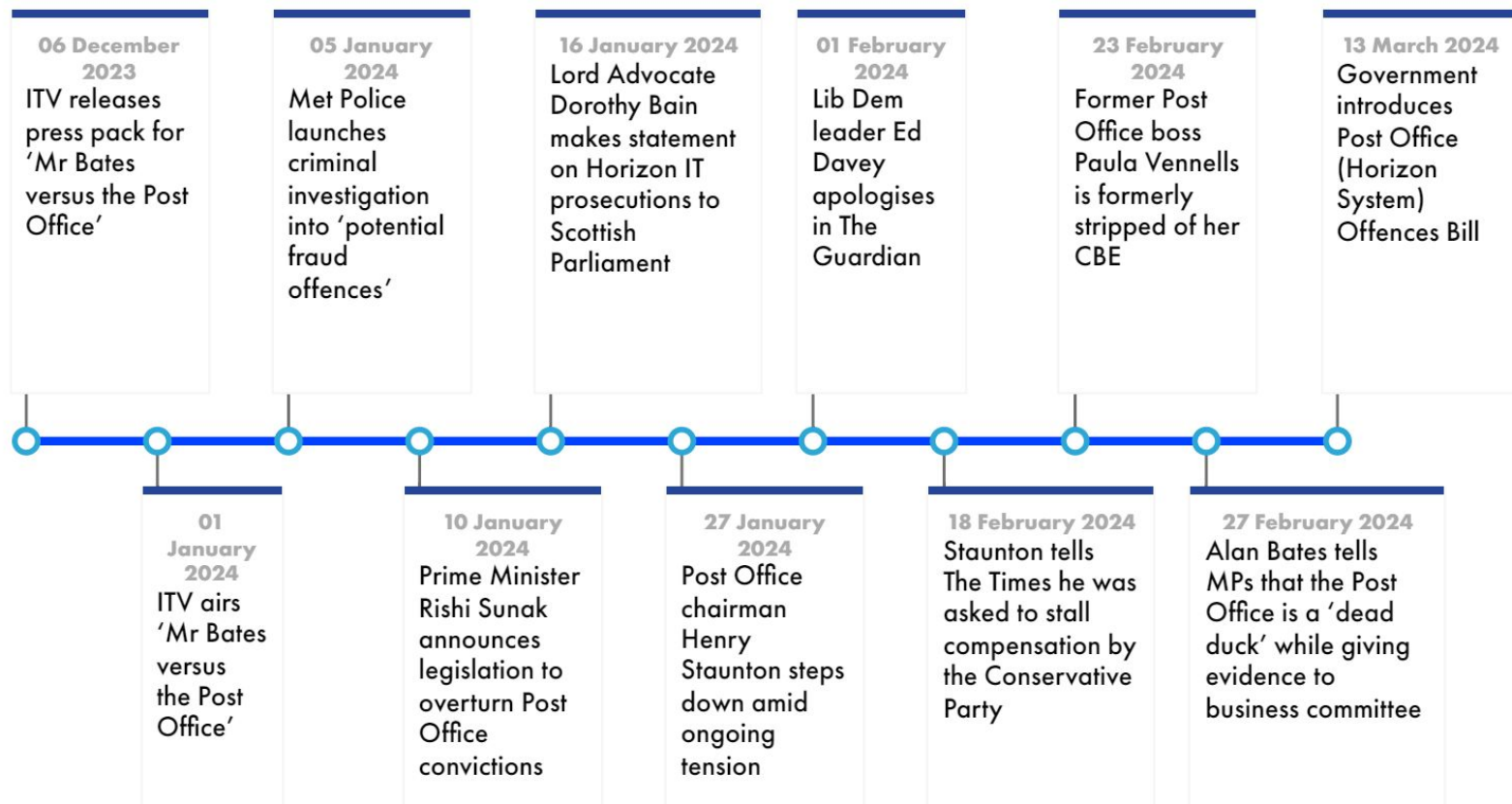
So how did the story explode so quickly across media, social media, and political halls over the last few months, and what can the formerly beloved brand do to fix the damage done?

'A basic tenet of effective crisis communications is to avoid "death by a thousand cuts";' says Peter Davenport, former journalist for outlets including The Times and the Daily Mail, and strategic consultant specialising in crisis comms at [Definition](#).

'Corporate reputation, possibly built up over decades, can wither on the drip feed of a scandal evolving and worsening by the day'.

**To better understand how the scandal evolved, we analysed media coverage, Parliamentary events, and online mentions of 'Post Office scandal' between 3 December 2023 to mid-March 2024. Results show development of the story from under reported legal issue, to prime time TV fodder, social virality, to Parliamentary debate.**

# Timeline of key events: December 2023 to April 2024

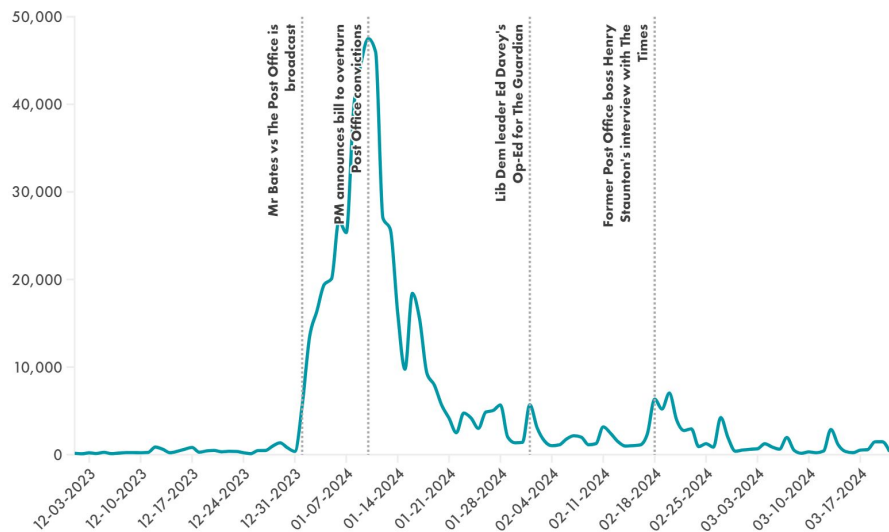


# 'Mr Bates vs The Post Office' blows up across social media and online

While details of the ongoing legal dispute between the Post Office and its submasters continued to be covered by investigative journalists at outlets including Computer Weekly, our research highlights how the ITV retelling boosted the story back in front of the wider public.

We looked at 'Post Office Scandal' mentions across X, YouTube, Tumblr, Facebook, Reddit, online news, blogs, forums, web searches, TV, radio, and podcasts using Pulsar, from the beginning of December 2023 to March 2024.

## Online interest in 'Post Office scandal' peaks in January 2024



Mentions of the Post Office scandal on X, YouTube, Tumblr, Facebook, Reddit, online news, blogs, forums, web search, TV, radio, and podcasts, Dec 2023 - Mar 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

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Mentions reach their highest spike on 10 January, a week following the broadcast of 'Mr Bates vs the Post Office'.

This was also the day Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced that the Government would bring forward legislation to overturn the convictions of all those judged on the basis of Post Office evidence during the Horizon scandal.

**'Two things tipped this – the drama, and the fact there's an election.'**

10 January saw quotes made by Private Eye editor Ian Hislop on 'Peston' reshared across X, with the video racking up over 222.6k views over time.





**Peston**  
@itvpeston

“Two things tipped this, this drama and the fact there’s an election”

Ian Hislop quotes a former sub-postmistress who says that the Government only started to take the Post Office scandal victims seriously because they were worried about losing their seats.

#Peston

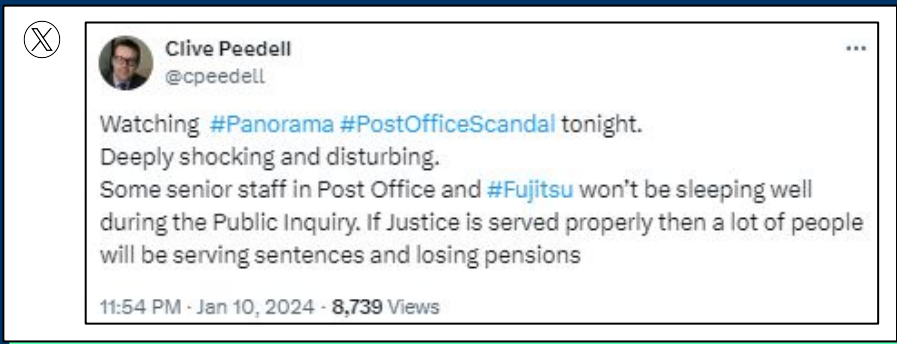


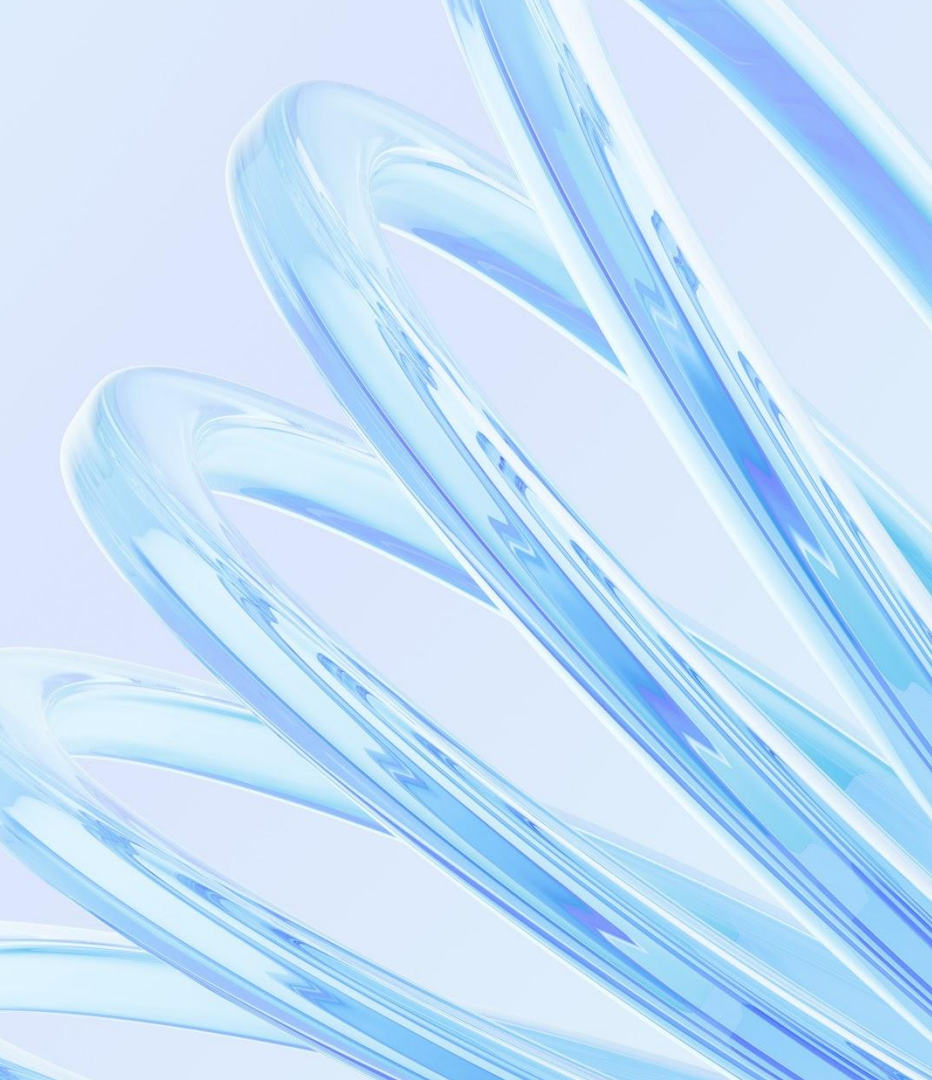
**Ian Hislop on concern for Post Office Scandal victims**  
Ian Hislop MP on #Peston 10/01/24

10:58 PM · Jan 10, 2024 · 222.6K Views

The influence of 'Mr Bates vs the Post Office' on politics and public debate was also acknowledged by the Have I Got News For You X account, which shared the hope that main actor Toby Jones would also delve into the cost-of-living and refugee crises.

Television coverage, including BBC's [last-minute](#) repeat of 2022 Panorama episode 'The Post Office Scandal', also fueled the online conversation, as well as consideration of how the Post Office and Fujitsu would handle the increased attention:





Did both brands respond quickly enough to the re-emerging scandal?

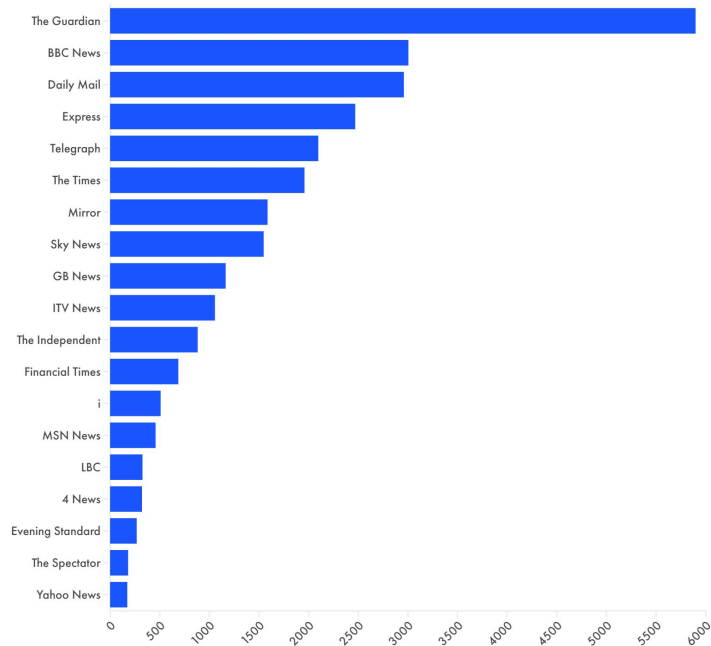
‘The Post Office could’ve been far more proactive in their response rather than seemingly waiting to see the reaction to the show,’ believes Megan Boyle, head of PR at [TAL Agency](#).

‘Fujitsu seemed to only respond once their finances took a hit, and have completely failed to regain any good faith thanks to their lack of transparency and further claims about how the company ran.’



# Media outlets leading coverage of the case

## Top online news outlets in the Post Office scandal conversation between December 2023 and March 2024



Between December 2023 and March 2024, The Guardian provided the majority of reporting of the events, followed by BBC News, The Express, The Telegraph, and The Times.

Highest engaged stories for this period included Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey's [editorial for The Guardian](#) apologising for not seeing through what he called 'the Post Office's lies' during his time as minister responsible for postal affairs; [bonuses for Fujitsu bosses](#); and former Post Office boss Henry Staunton's [interview for The Times](#), claiming pressure from the Tories to stall compensation.

Press coverage continued as journalists mined the high public interest in the case seen online.

'Media crises do not appear out of nowhere - they come from management ignoring a serious issue repeatedly over a long period of time,' says Tim Prizeman, Director of [RB Public Relations](#), who has over 30 years of experience advising well-known business brands on issues of sensitivity.

'The Post Office scandal has been reverberating around the media since 2009, and clearly many senior people within the Post Office and Fujitsu were well aware of the problem long before this, yet deliberately ignored and down-played it.'

'Good crisis communications doesn't blame or cover-up,' says Rich Went, award-winning senior PR and marketing strategist and senior account director at global communications consultancy [Gallium Ventures](#).

'Good comms anticipates public sentiment by taking ownership, expressing empathy, and reassuring. Neither the Post Office nor Fujitsu did this; instead, they attacked. While they relied on the complexity of the story for a long time, that crutch was taken away by the ITV drama - they simply weren't prepared, and didn't listen.'

# Westminster reaction

## How public outcry brought the scandal back to the attention of politicians

Over eight years following Paula Vennells' 2015 [assurances](#) to the Business Innovation and Skills Committee that there had been no miscarriage of justice, the scandal returned to the forefront of UK political circles.

Trouble was brewing for the Post Office brand months before the ITV retelling - ahead of the case's eventual reintroduction into the limelight at Prime Minister's Questions, the interim report of the Post Office Horizon IT scandal inquiry relating to compensation was [published](#) on 17 July 2023.

It was followed up with an [urgent question](#) put to the Government the very next day. A summer of pondering later, and the Government [announced](#) on 18 September 2023 that postmasters whose convictions were on the basis of Horizon evidence would be offered a fixed sum of £600,000.

To enable such compensation, the Government revealed in an unusual step that they would pursue legislative action, with the [Post Office \(Horizon System\) Compensation Bill](#) passing the Commons without disagreement on 19 December 2023.

## **The New Year brings renewed political interest in the case**

On 10 January 2024, over a week after ITV's dramatisation of the whole scandal, Labour Leader Keir Starmer opened his appearance in PMQs by expressing his support for the Government's action on the Post Office scandal. In his prior answer, the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak had [committed](#) the Government to introducing 'new primary legislation to make sure that those convicted as a result of the Horizon scandal are swiftly exonerated and compensated'.

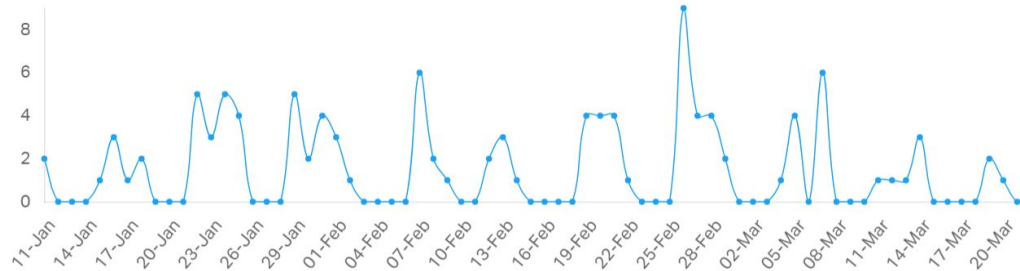
Nonetheless, not all political pressure was unanimously in favour of such action: doubts came from the legal sector, with the Bill potentially raising questions for judicial independence, as [suggested](#) by David McNeil from the Law Society.

Additionally, this suspicion was matched by backbench Labour MP for North Tyneside Mary Glendon, [asking](#) the Attorney General about the status of the rule of law in the Government.

Likewise, the Government's move did not fully quell the political currency of the story, as shown by tracking Parliamentary mentions of the scandal using Vuelio Political Monitoring. In the succeeding weeks following Sunak's remarks, 'Post Office Horizon Scandal' was mentioned 45 times and the 'Post Office' was mentioned 288 times by Parliamentary sources. This political currency was such that Liberal Democrat Leader Sir Ed Davey was even [targeted](#) by the press for his role in the scandal during the Coalition Government, for which he later [apologised](#).

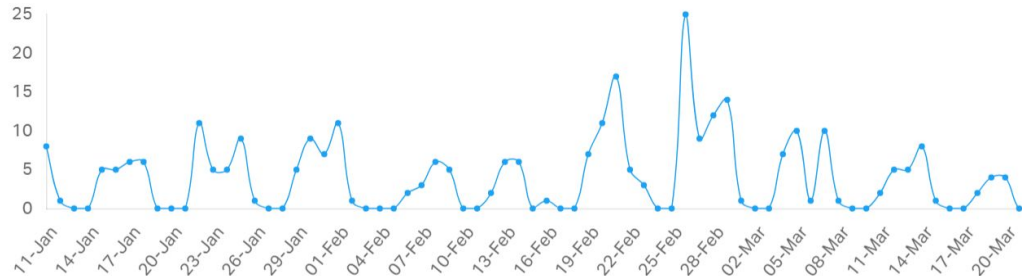
## Parliamentary mentions of 'Post Office Horizon Scandal' in 2024 so far

Coverage by Date



## Parliamentary mentions of 'Post Office' in 2024

Coverage by Date



The scandal has continued to hold the interest of Parliamentarians. Following Sunak's commitment to quash Horizon convictions and the compensation Bill achieving Royal Assent on 26 January, the Government unveiled the [Post Office \(Horizon System\) Offences Bill](#) to the Commons on 13 March 2024. In the [explanatory notes](#), the Government detailed that this Bill represents an 'unprecedented and wholly exceptional legal solution' while declaring that it does not 'set any constitutional precedent' in an attempt to quell concerns from the legal sector. Meanwhile, the opposition parties have demonstrated little resistance to the Government's moves.

Where are we in April 2024? In the past few months, the Government has shown what is possible when there is political and media appetite and a public relations necessity to achieve a desired end.



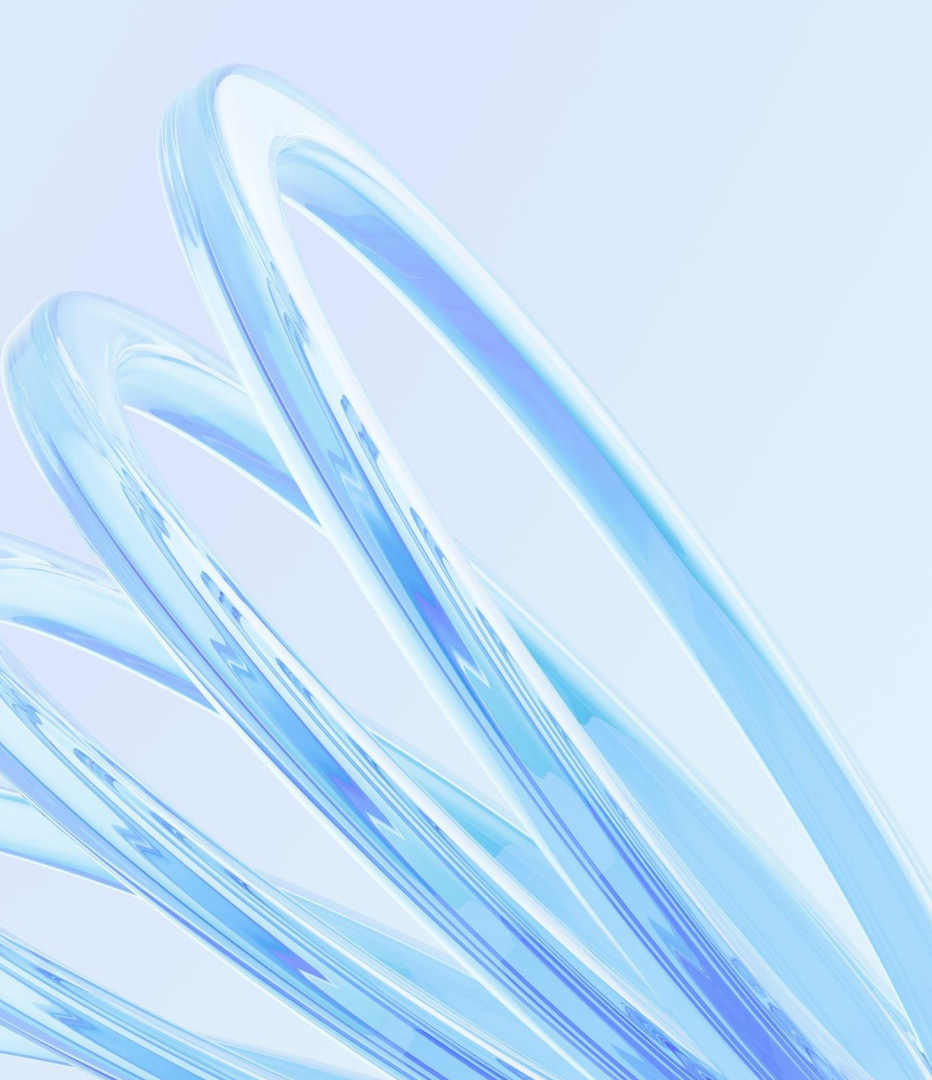
## Most mentioned politicians in the Post Office scandal conversation



Ed Davey's link to Government in-action resulted in many media write-ups, with his name gracing the majority of column inches when it comes to coverage featuring UK political figures.

Unsurprisingly, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and his party's attempts to rectify the wrongs of the case have taken up plenty of print, as well as commentary from his Labour leader counterpart Sir Keir Starmer.

Also seized upon by political journalists over the last few months - Kemi Badenoch's [soap opera](#)-esque back and forth with former Post Office chair Henry Staunton, who she would eventually remove from his position of influence.



Comment from politicians, and blame towards them, has been the focus of the unfolding media story. Accusations of a [lack of action](#) until the broadcast of the ITV drama hit Scottish National Party's First Minister Humza Yousaf. Yousaf's mentions in the press even eclipsed coverage of his SNP compatriot Marion Fellows, busy [campaigning](#) on behalf of the victims since before 2024's renewed interest in the case.

But it's not all about the current UK political line-up. Prime Ministers of the past Tony Blair and Theresa May have featured in a significant amount of press regarding their part in the injustice. May, for her Government's '[pushing through](#)' of former Post Office boss Paula Vennells' CBE, and Blair, for his concerns regarding [flaws](#) with the Horizon system, later disregarded.

A key lesson for every high-profile politician featuring in daily updates on the scandal - and for comms professionals tasked with planning for crisis - risk is always on the horizon and needs to be planned for.



# Breaking down the brand response

## What went wrong with the comms?

'The Post Office scandal is a dictionary definition of the phrase "PR disaster",' believes Gallium Ventures' Rich Went.

'The approach taken was atrocious from the start, with damage dealt over the course of decades, not just a news cycle.'

Definition's Peter Davenport agrees that the approach was 'disastrous' for the Post Office, but not so much for Fujitsu:

'By comparison, Fujitsu has, to date, fared better, partly because it was not a well-loved national institution and partly because it fronted up at the inquiry, made what must have been a highly embarrassing apology and said it would pay towards compensation for the victims.'

Centring the people involved is where the community-situated Post Office brand could have fared better with its approach, believes FP Comms' Nicola Millington, who has over two decades of experience in the field of PR, with intricate knowledge of the dynamics that shape public perception.

'It is essential to recognise that the individuals who operated these Post Offices were not merely business owners but integral members of their communities – people and families whom many of us grew up with and knew personally.'

'While Fujitsu, the institution of the Post Office, and legal representation treated this as a white-collar crime, the humanity of those behind the counters serving the public was regrettably disregarded from the outset.'

The case, once made public, caused a mismatch between any kindly cosiness the Post Office brand still held in the eyes of local communities using the service every day and the realities of its actions.

'That gap between what an organisation says, and what it actually does, is the dissonance that leads to value-based crises,' explained Wadds Inc. founder and management partner Stephen Waddington in the Vuelio webinar ['Preparing for the unexpected - redefining crisis communications strategy'](#).

A brand personality built on community values and care needs to be authentic, or risk future trouble with its stakeholders across the world. With the close connections of media, social sharing, and politics we have now in 2024, any misrepresentations and mismatches are likely to be found out, with or without a legal scandal:

'If you, as an organisation, are going to lean into a value-based and purpose-led approach to your comms, it has to be authentic and it has to be meaningful with the communities you serve as an organisation,' added Stephen.

# Message delivered

## Lessons for handling a brand crisis in the making

While it's impossible to predict and prepare for every possible crisis that could hit your brand in the future, planning for those possibilities is a must-do task for every organisation:

'By creating a comprehensive crisis communications plan that includes a risk and response analysis, impacts assessment, audience mapping, and clarification of roles and responsibilities, your brand will be better prepared to act speedily and effectively should a crisis occur,' says Peter.

Horizon scanning software, like [Vuelio's Media Monitoring](#), can provide a solid start for your future planning, tracking your brand's reputation in the press. The ability to categorise resulting press coverage by sentiment and Share of Voice helps to keep comms on track when a crisis emerges, maintaining your message, and reducing the risk that often comes with no brand response.

But what happens if said crisis has gotten to the point that a major broadcaster plans to retell the story on prime time television?

When it's too late to stop the story in its tracks completely, tread with caution to mitigate any extra turmoil for your brand, and those impacted by it.

## **Look ahead**

Crisis can negatively impact every part of your brand, and as well as its stakeholders, if left unchecked.

Minimising this damage means connecting with those stakeholders and understanding their different viewpoints. Where appropriate, arm each with the information they need to communicate:

‘Brands should formulate comprehensive messaging frameworks prioritising transparency, empathy, and accountability,’ advises Nicola.

‘Consistent, clear communication across relevant channels is pivotal in shaping public perception and pre-empting any dissemination of misinformation.’

Media that will cover the story, and create the narrative, will need content. Be the source to get ahead of any long-term damage.

‘Ultimately, crisis communication planning should be a continuous, adaptive process, attuned to evolving circumstances and stakeholder expectations,’ adds Nicola.

‘By emphasising transparency, empathy, and proactive engagement, brands can adeptly navigate the intricacies of legal disputes and media depictions. The absence of investment in this safeguarding will prove detrimental to your business.’

## **Be proactive**

'Address everything you can before wider release of the story, being as transparent as possible about the events before the public sees a version that could massively harm your representation,' advises TAL Agency's Megan Boyle.

'If you leave any kind of response until after the airing, it can give the impression that you're only bothered once you start to see the negative outcry, so addressing everything head on as soon as you can is vital. If you're in an ongoing legal dispute that prevents you from being fully open about the goings on, you should still make statements and press releases about what you can say, as saying nothing at all is always the worst option. Above all, be sympathetic and authentic in any and all responses.

'Coming off as cold or uncaring even if your message is good can still have people view you negatively, and times like these call for the human element.'

## **Learn the lessons of the past**

As warned by Peter:

'The lessons from this case for businesses are clear: Don't screw up and if you do, don't lie about it. You will be found out and the price you pay could be catastrophic.'

Rich concurs with a simple rule for companies dealing with disaster:

'When faced with legal disputes — especially TV-worthy ones — the strategy is now simple: do the opposite of what the Post Office and Fujitsu did. Get ahead and go out of your way to actively reassure the public, take ownership of the issue, and control the narrative.'

# Prepare for crisis with Vuelio and Pulsar

## Vuelio Media Monitoring

Prove the effectiveness of your PR and comms tactics and provide a base for future planning through multi-channel media coverage categorised by sentiment, Share of Voice, and bespoke tags.

## Vuelio Political Monitoring

Vuelio gives you full visibility of everything that's happening across Government, Parliament, stakeholder organisations and social media, delivered in a way that works for you.

## Pulsar

Apply audience intelligence to your strategy with social listening and audience segmentation. Spot potential crisis ahead with this AI-driven trend detector to plan your strategy.