
PRESSING ISSUES

MAKING THE MEDIA WORK FOR DEMOCRACY

EDITED BY IGGY WOOD



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FOREWORD

ALASTAIR CAMPBELL

An old journalistic mentor of mine used to tell me that our role was: “to inform, to educate and to entertain – preferably in that order.” Few would surely disagree with me that the third of these has taken on a far greater significance for most of our media than the first two. And that is before we even begin to assess the impact of social media, which is all about entertainment, and which has brought industrial scale misinformation in its wake.

There remain some very good journalists in the UK. But the landscape in which they are operating is unhealthy, dangerously so.

During some of the most consequential periods in recent British history, journalism, like politics, has fallen woefully short. Throughout more than a decade of austerity which hollowed out our public services and enfeebled our economy, all too many journalists parroted Tory lines about tightening belts, and all too few actually examined the lives of the people hurt most. During the Brexit referendum campaign, fanciful claims about the economic and fiscal advantages of

leaving the EU were reproduced with minimal scrutiny, as papers which had been banging the anti-European drum for decades operated as cheerleaders for charlatans rather than serious analysts of consequential change. As the public surveys the wreckage, little wonder our media is one of the least trusted in the democratic world. And when we do have the occasional jewel in a tarnished crown – like the BBC – the jewel adds to its own tarnishing by pandering to, rather than challenging, the political and commercial media forces seeking to bring it down.

These failures – along with many others – can be traced back to the structural issues which afflict our media landscape. The ownership of newspapers is dangerously concentrated, with three companies accounting for around 90 per cent of daily national newspaper circulation. Also, national journalists, both print and broadcast, are disproportionately drawn from a thin sliver of society. The most recent figures we have suggest that around 44 per cent of top journalists attended private

school. This elite capture has profound consequences for our democracy. It also puts those of us advocating for progressive politics at a significant disadvantage.

At the same time, we, as a society, have made it difficult to deliver high-quality reporting. While tabloid journalists remain relatively free to hound celebrities and members of the public, investigate someone rich and powerful enough, and you can expect a slew of aggressive letters from high-priced solicitors. Abroad, too, the UK, in common with the rest of the world, has failed to stand up for the rights of journalists, not least in Gaza, where so many have been killed.

For the first time in 14 years, Labour has the power to effect fundamental change. Its aim should be to foster a diverse ecosystem of outlets held to high editorial standards,

with members of the public protected from abusive practices, and journalists protected from both legal harassment and physical harm. The authors of this pamphlet set out the specific issues the government will have to confront and propose potential policies to address them. Labour needs to ensure that, by the next election, the public can readily access high-quality, independent journalism, which both holds the government to account and scrutinises their challengers. Only then will people be able to make informed choices about the future of our country.

Democracy is under threat around the world. A free press is an essential pillar of it. It is about time we really had one.

Alastair Campbell is a writer, podcaster and strategist. He served as Tony Blair's official spokesperson from 1997-2000.

PART 1

OWNERSHIP AND INFLUENCE

CHAPTER 1

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA

Hardeep Matharu, editor-in-chief of Byline Times, examines how both the traditional press and social media based news shape the decisions we make and the way we think

What is journalism for? It is a question the industry, and the society it serves, rarely asks itself. And yet, in many ways, it has to be the starting point for any discussion about the position of the ‘fourth estate’ in our modern democracy.

Traditionally, the job of journalists has been seen as holding the powerful to account. Yet a nexus of structural issues means that, in reality, all too often journalism in Britain operates as an extension of power rather than a check on it.

Issues around ownership, ideology, partisanship, and a ‘revolving door’ between the offices of the now mythical ‘Fleet Street’ and Number 10 all help explain why our press has not provided the accountability that is required more urgently than ever in this new era of populism – or, at least, not until much of the damage has been done (the governments of Boris Johnson and Liz Truss spring to mind). But, arguably, the most significant way in which ‘the

media’ – both Britain’s traditional press and, increasingly, the news generated and distributed through social media platforms – influences our lives relates to what is being carried around in our heads: the ideas we think with, not just the ideas we think about. The media has a key role in determining how we interpret what is happening around us and the range of thoughts and feelings we have in response.

This is all the truer in the digital era. While traditional newspapers could, in the past, claim an ability to influence the general tone of, and discussion points for, our national political conversations in society, the era of social media has transformed the media’s ability to shape how we think and feel. In the past, Rupert Murdoch’s front pages may have helped set the agenda of the day in Westminster and on terrestrial TV news broadcasts, but he could not sit down with you at the dinner table and rile you up and rile you up and rile you

up on a whole host of issues. Now, every day, at any hour of the day, millions of tweets, Facebook posts, YouTube takes, and TikToks can be pumped out by influencers and organisations who can do just that. The questionable stream of consciousness of X owner Elon Musk can accompany you from dusk until dawn via a smartphone.

Yet we this is not to say we should let the 'legacy media' off the hook. The proprietors and editors of these established publications claim they have little influence because their circulations are declining. But it is not accurate to suggest that they have no power and responsibility, or that they are values-neutral. While social media is undeniably a revolution in how news and information is produced and consumed, power relationships are still in place between Britain's established press and its proprietors and editors – all of which have online sites, the content of which is heavily distributed by the social media platforms – and those in positions of power. And digital platforms have enabled an evolution of the traditional press, providing new ways to reach many more people than ever before through the 'news feed' – whether it be the social media content of more traditional journalistic outlets or platforms such as TikTok where the younger generations go to inform themselves. More than half of the UK's adults – 52 per cent – have said they use social media as a news source, according to a 2024 report by the broadcast regulator Ofcom.

There are a number of areas in which the observation can be made that the

way in which journalists have presented issues has affected how these issues have taken hold in the public's imagination. In many cases, newspapers and journalists have taken their cues from politicians – advancing their narratives, rather than challenging them. These include:

- The depiction of people on benefits, including disabled people, as 'scroungers' or 'taking the state for a ride'.
- That Brexit – which many now accept was, at best, mis-sold to the public – was the 'will of the people' and cannot be questioned or even mentioned.
- That those calling for more rounded versions of our history are 'leftie wokeists'.
- That immigration is a key problem facing the country and we need to primarily consider the people coming to Britain through a net-gain or net-loss economic lens or the notion of 'integration'.
- That success equates to economic growth, wealth, and status.
- That the reality of the climate crisis is something on which there is legitimate debate.
- That more prisons are the answer to issues of law and order because rehabilitation is being 'soft on convicts'.
- That young people are not interested or engaged in making the world a better place.
- That Muslim perpetrators of crimes present a different level of threat than non-Muslim and white

perpetrators.

These messages may be conveyed with varying degrees of subtlety. At the more explicit end of the spectrum lie examples like the Daily Mail's infamous 'Enemies of the People' front page, which included photos of three judges who had ruled that Brexit required the consent of parliament. Yet even apparently minor choices about terminology and sentence structure, made consistently, can influence how we think about an issue. A 2024 report by the Centre for Media Monitoring highlighted the discrepancy in how deaths are reported on each side of Israel's war in Gaza: emotive terms like 'massacre' and 'slaughter' are disproportionately used to describe attacks against Israelis, while for attacks against Palestinians, "more passive language which omits the perpetrator (Israel) and the action (shot, bombed, killed) is used."

Austerity is one of the most salient and well-studied examples of journalists shaping the public discourse, wittingly or unwittingly. A 2022 internal review conducted by the BBC of its coverage of taxation, public spending, government borrowing, and debt provides tangible examples of how the media's influence on our cultural values is relevant to any discussion of British journalism.

Its most widely-reported finding at the time was that many BBC journalists lacked "understanding of basic economics" or else lacked confidence reporting it. Below are a few other pertinent extracts from the report.

"Too often, it's not clear from a

report that fiscal policy decisions are also political choices; they're not inevitable, it's just that governments like to present them that way."

"Maybe the debt is bad because debt just is... But is it bad? It can be ruinous for countries as for people, but not necessarily... Many economists argue that debt can be positively good when it enables us to invest in productive capacity for the future."

"After 2010, neither Labour nor the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition took public positions in favour of higher borrowing and debt. One respected academic who did, and says he was far from alone, argues that an anti-debt sentiment in the media took hold at that time. That is, the politics began, in his view, to distort economic reporting. One of the hardest tasks set by the BBC's commitment to due impartiality is to decide what constitutes a reasonable range of views."

"The agenda is often set by the government, the chancellor or the budget. And whatever they say is what we talk about. We don't tend to ask: what should they have done, what needed to be done that was done?" (an external source.)

"The newspapers are a big part... doing the early shifts, you're picking up what's in the papers because that's the news that's been

generated overnight that is the basis of the national conversation the next morning... I just wonder sometimes, do we let the papers take charge of what's going on?" (an internal source.)

One of the striking elements in these excerpts, and throughout the BBC review, is a basic lack of curiosity. Many outside of the industry would assume that asking questions is exactly what journalism is about. And yet a lack of genuine self-interrogation, of the underlying ways in which journalists think about journalism, what it is for, and how they conduct it – and how that then shapes our wider cultural values – is commonplace.

A big part of this is the reality of the environments in which journalists in the established media have to work. While the BBC at least has an explicit commitment to upholding public service-driven editorial values – such as to inform and to be duly impartial – much of the partisan press has no such thing, beyond standards set by the proprietors and editors.

Beyond even ideology is the economic realities newsrooms have to contend with. As online content that can be monetised through advertising revenue becomes increasingly dominant, a 'securing eyeballs' approach has skewed the types of stories being published and the ways in which they are written in order to engage with digital audiences.

For both these reasons, journalists who entered the profession for good reasons can all too easily find themselves having to work in a manner

that does not align with their values. For some, particularly those holding influential positions in the traditional press, the power and status that comes with their jobs outweighs concerns about the sorts of values and cultural opinion their publications may be shaping.

Then there are the tech companies and their social media platforms, with engagement prioritised above all else. Keeping people hooked drives everything. As revelations around Meta have shown, such an approach puts the wellbeing of people using these platforms at risk – but this is simply not the priority for companies primarily looking to monetise the need for human connection. The overall result is a push towards greater surface-level sensation rather than the presentation of complex issues.

A lack of exploration of complexity is at the heart of the dumbing-down of public discourse, which we have particularly witnessed in recent years in conjunction with populist politicians, misleading political campaigns, tech-driven personal 'truths', and a pointed lack of trust in our political system or its institutions.

In many ways, it is unsurprising that it is the medium of long-form drama on streaming services that has found success in igniting, and changing, national conversations on issues as diverse as an institutional scandal (ITV's *Mr Bates vs The Post Office*); male sexual violence, shame, and the costs of fame (Netflix's *Baby Reindeer*); and the lure of violent misogyny for young boys (Netflix's *Adolescence*). These series resonated because they are complex,

compelling, and about issues that really matter to people's everyday lives. They are explicit about wanting to have an impact on such vital human realities as vulnerability, identity, injustice, and violence – and have the money to do so effectively.

How, then, can the media evolve, alongside politics, to tell more human stories about things that really matter to people? How can it work to create greater understanding and contribute to something constructive, not cynical?

Social media platforms have opened the floodgates to misinformation and disinformation, which is often designed to have an emotional and visceral appeal. But there is something to be learned here by journalists about what type of storytelling can shape our values, for good and for bad.

Emotionality and viscosity can create compelling narratives in themselves. Simply providing 'dry' information for people that fails to speak to their real lives does not engage – while more psychologically-driven content does. There is something here that journalists need to scrutinise.

So too with transparency. The work of Jay Rosen, associate professor of journalism at New York University, has focused on a critique of the 'view from nowhere', a paradigm which aims to provide non-partisan, balanced 'horse race' reporting on politics in the US. He argues that it is unable to adapt to the ways in which politics has changed in the era of populism.

There is an alternative. News organisations which take a certain view on any given issue can be upfront with their audiences about it, and then use rigorous investigative journalism and reasoned argument to bring the issue's importance to life. Donald Trump was never a normal presidential candidate, but the 'view from nowhere' reporters couldn't acknowledge this for fear of being seen as partisan – helping to cast Trump as a 'normal' political candidate rather than one challenged the notion of US democracy itself.

The UK's journalism industry must be much more willing to hold a mirror up to itself – and politicians should be demanding much more of the media on behalf of the public it is meant to serve. The regulation of digital platforms is part of this picture, but so is challenging the entire culture of the traditional press, which remains unregulated and unprofessionalised, despite extensive evidence on what could help.

Philosopher and historian Michel Foucault observed that the discourse – the way in which we talk about and understand the world – is not neutral, but entwined with power relations. The ability to shape the narratives we all live with, on a societal, cultural, and personal level, has huge implications for the type of world we find ourselves in. Journalism needs to stop pretending that it is a neutral, moral arbiter merely reporting on current events. And we all need to stop giving it such an easy ride.

CHAPTER 2

OWNERSHIP AND PLURALITY

Iggy Wood, head of editorial at the Fabian society, argues that the government can take concrete action to break up our press oligopoly and foster a more plural media

Questions of ownership have historically been a sensitive subject for the Labour party. The party's original Clause IV, which called for the "common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange," was the subject of a defining, decades-long internecine struggle, largely fought along left-right factional lines, from the late 1950s until the New Labour era. Taking place in the shadow of Labour's postwar achievements on the one hand, and Thatcherite revanchism on the other, this ideological battle was largely fought over the ownership of the 'commanding heights' of the economy – those sectors that were seen as key to the country's trajectory, such as coal, steel, and utilities. Unfortunately, no high-profile debate ever took place, within Labour or otherwise, about ownership of the press – despite it playing just as important a role as, say, the processing of raw materials. Indeed, as Hardeep Matharu sets out, in many

ways the media produces the 'raw materials' of our public discourse. The press has a particularly foundational role, with the day's headlines often setting the agenda for the media more generally.

Now, as then, the ownership of our press is a socialist's nightmare. According to the Media Reform Coalition (MRC), three companies – DMG Media, News UK and Reach – control 90 per cent of UK national newspaper circulation. This structure means that a handful of individuals – particularly Lord Rothermere, the controlling shareholder of DMG Media's parent company, and the Murdoch family, who retain control over News UK – have extraordinary say over what is published in British newspapers. And the problem is only getting worse. Since 2014, there has been a 27 per cent increase in the print market concentration of these publishers.

The status quo means that most

newspapers, almost necessarily, are either beholden to a rich owner or else obsessively chasing diminishing advertising revenue – sometimes both. Either scenario carries dire consequences for the quality of journalism, with the former affording private individuals immense power over our political system, and the latter resulting in ever-increasing clickbait and misinformation.

Naturally, that so much power lies in the hands of a few wealthy owners does nothing for plurality. As a whole, the privately-owned publishers lean to the right, usually advocating the laissez-faire approach to economics which benefits their wealthy owners. There are very real concerns about foreign state influence, too. The recent controversy over the possibility of the UAE effectively acquiring a stake in the Telegraph group has been a timely reminder to parliament of the problems with current media ownership models.

For obvious reasons, full-scale ‘nationalisation’ in the style of Herbert Morrison is probably neither practical nor desirable when it comes to the press. But tighter regulation of ownership, and financial support for smaller publishers, are two obvious tools the government could deploy.

REGULATION OF OWNERSHIP

Current “fit and proper” ownership rules concerning broadcast licenses are poorly defined. They would greatly benefit from elaboration – for example, there could be a requirement that the government is confident that the owner has not knowingly permitted unlawful

behaviour to be committed by their employees, or that they pay tax in the UK. In any case, it is an oversight that there are no such requirements for newspapers.

Even a ‘fit and proper’ individual, however, should not be able to acquire excessive market share. Under the current plurality rules, ‘organic growth’ cannot trigger a review – only mergers can. This means that the government has no power to step in and break up an oversized organisation if it grows organically. This should be reconsidered; oligopoly in the sphere of journalism infringes not only on the rights of the public as consumers, but as citizens.

Publishers may object, not unreasonably, that to punish an ‘organic’ monopoly would often be to punish a publication for the decline of its competitors, a particular risk in an age of falling circulations. This problem could be mitigated, at least in part, by channelling direct government funding into the furtherance of a healthier, more diverse media ecosystem – which would also bring a range of other, more important benefits.

STATE SUPPORT

As the MRC highlights, the media already enjoys government subsidisation. Aside from the obvious example of the BBC, the VAT exemption for newspapers and magazines, recently extended to digital-only news outlets, is worth £1.4bn a year. Government spending on media plurality, then, could mean simply a reallocation of existing subsidies.

In Sweden, public subsidies are

upfront and direct, including direct cash subsidies to newspapers to cover production costs. One aim of the policy is to ensure the survival of Sweden's 'number two newspapers' – ie, the second-biggest local newspaper in each region. The traditional argument against such direct government funding is the risk of political interference. Sweden, however, ranks 4th in Reporters Sans Frontières' press freedom index, well ahead of the UK at 20.

The Cairncross review, commissioned during the May government and published in 2019, proposed something akin to the Swedish system in the UK, recommending the establishment of an independent Institute for Public Interest News to distribute public funding. Part of Frances Cairncross's rationale was, in her own words: "the cost of investigative journalism is great and rarely seems to pay for itself ... given the evidence of a market failure in the supply of public-interest news, public intervention may be the only remedy."

The Conservative government rejected these plans. They should be revived.

STRUCTURE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

Even if we can make progress on ownership, however, our current, concentrated ecosystem has produced powerful norms and institutions that will themselves demand sustained attention. A lack of diversity in the media, in the broadest sense of the word, means that many consequential editorial and journalistic practices are now taken for granted by journalists

themselves, and so deeply embedded that they are hardly ever questioned. The government should not limit itself to encouraging what counts as media plurality within our current media paradigm. Once the link between money and the media is weakened, it should foster fundamentally different approaches to journalism.

Red-top sensationalism is one such institution of the British media. Shallow political journalism is another. Currently, political correspondents scrutinise politicians almost exclusively through the lens of gossip, power and intrigue rather than policy. This approach to political journalism, like other harmful practices, at least partly reflects commercial incentives and the political agendas of proprietors. It would be foolish to think, however, that simply by changing the structure of our media ecosystem, concrete change will quickly follow. Reform of media ownership must go hand-in-hand with incentives to break down our calcified fourth estate.

As far as political journalism goes, this is something the government can easily do something about. Preferably, it should end the lobby system altogether – which would probably involve all major government media briefings being made on the record, live on television – or else establish a larger lobby, with more specialist journalists and well-defined public interest responsibilities.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR THE GOVERNMENT?

Some of the measures proposed here could well benefit the Labour govern-

ment politically; others would probably make ministers' lives much more difficult. The same could be said of many democratic innovations. It would be the

mark of a confident political movement to do what is fair – and trust that, in the long run, a more level playing field will give your side the advantage.

What the government should do

1. Tighten competition law to prevent newspaper publishers acquiring an excessive market share, even organically, and expand 'fit and proper' ownership rules to include newspapers.
2. Revive plans set out in the Cairncross review to provide public funding for smaller news outlets.
3. End the lobby system in political journalism. At a minimum, expand its membership to include many more specialist journalists, and establish clear public interest duties.

CHAPTER 3

FROM MURDOCH TO MUSK

Peter Jukes, cofounder and executive editor of Byline Times, traces how the mass media and its supposed 'manufacture of consensus' has evolved into a digital assault on voters in the social media age

The evolution from Rupert Murdoch to Elon Musk – from the conservative media mogul to the far-right social media tech bro – is a step change in terms of political partisanship and the warping of an informed electorate. This shift can be seen in the transformation of the four main ways the political-media class converges: money, influence, networking and data, or MIND for short.

MONEY

Other than a brief period of reliance on advertising, private news publications have generally been the preserve of rich men, with the hive mind of the political media class drawn to their pots of money. Rupert Murdoch never funded parties directly in the UK, but his 'services in kind' and apparently unpaid contributions to party campaigns are immense. Though Conservative campaign headquarters spent millions during the 1992 election with advertisers

like Saatchi & Saatchi, the claim 'It Was The Sun Wot Won It', plastered on the front page of Murdoch's most successful tabloid after John Major's shock victory, was just as plausible an explanation.

In these uncosted political interventions, Murdoch was only following in the footsteps of his father, whose weaponised reports on the catastrophe of the Gallipoli operation during the first world war earned him the nickname 'Lord Southcliffe' – alluding to the great newspaper baron Lord Northcliffe, who was so influential in British politics that he was appointed to the cabinet, and whose Broadstairs residence was shelled by the German navy at the outset of the war because of his perceived role in stirring up British jingoism.

Murdoch Jr's innovation was to incorporate television and cable into the empire. President Ronald Reagan fast-tracked him to US citizenship in the 1980s so he could set up the Fox News

network. The uncoded impact of that channel on US campaigns is suggested by the \$800m it paid out in defamation costs for claiming the 2020 US presidential election was rigged.

Murdoch has been a major political campaigner for 60 years. The Sun was so averse to achieving Brexit that it actually had to register as a campaigning organisation with the Electoral Commission during the 2016 EU Referendum. One of its last front pages before the vote, the white cliffs of Dover emblazoned with the slogan 'BELEAVE', had as its namesake the branch of Vote Leave which was found to have unlawfully overspent, mainly on billions of social media impressions, in the last few days of the campaign.

But compared to Elon Musk, SpaceX and Tesla founder, Murdoch's monetary muscle seems puny. It is not just that Musk spent approximately \$288m on the 2024 US elections, making him the largest individual political donor of that cycle, or that he has promised to spend another \$100m before the midterms. His control and manipulation of the world's foremost source of news and journalism, Twitter, radically changed the news environment at a fundamental level in the lead-up to Donald Trump's second victory.

In terms of 'services in kind', Musk – the richest man in the world – effectively devoted his \$40bn acquisition of Twitter to one aim: to get Trump re-elected. Previously banned racist and far-right figures were promoted by him. Musk himself has more followers than anyone else on X. Blue ticks, once a mark of notability, were transformed into a

badge of notoriety – a pay-to-play scheme which financed viral right-wing memes.

Musk even confessed to 'rebooting' the platform in the month before the crucial election. It is unclear which algorithms were altered or how AI was used. Rather than just providing another conservative MAGA outlet like Fox, Musk manipulated what he calls the world's 'digital town square'. He has dominated the means of journalistic production, distribution and exchange in an unprecedented vertical and horizontal monopoly which makes Murdoch's operation pale in comparison.

Just one indication: Musk's net worth surpassed Rupert Murdoch's \$20bn around 2019. By 2022, when Musk was openly discussing buying Twitter, he had amassed 120 million followers, equalling the global reach of all of Murdoch's various media outlets combined. His estimated net worth of \$400bn in 2025 means he could buy out Murdoch 20 times over.

INFLUENCE

Though there are striking differences between the mass media industries of the press barons and the social media platforms of the broligarchs, they both exhibit the same tendency to parlay their commercial command of information spaces into direct political interference.

For over six decades, Rupert Murdoch has been a key influencer in British politics and, by gaming the regulator, managed to extend his financial clout.

Thatcher allowed Murdoch to skirt monopoly law and add the Times and

the Sunday Times to his tabloids, the Sun and the News of the World. Thatcher's parting gift before leaving office was to allow Murdoch to broadcast his Sky network to the UK from Europe, even though he had lost the license bid to British Satellite Broadcasting (BSB).

Blair was little better, advising Murdoch on how to evade EU regulation while becoming godfather to Murdoch's two daughters with Wendy Deng. Blair's spokesperson, Lance Price, described the media mogul as the "twenty-fourth member of the cabinet". And this deference persists, with every prime minister since paying obeisance to the Australian-born US citizen at some point.

Notice how these meetings were and are largely private. (Whenever Byline Times tries to use a freedom of information request to scrutinise these encounters between government ministers and Murdoch's lieutenants, we are always denied their content.) But while Murdoch uses the back door of Number 10 to meet Cameron, May, and other prime ministers, Elon Musk strode through the front door of the White House, perching on Trump's desk in the Oval Office before promising to take a chainsaw to US federal spending.

Whether drug-addled, as recent reporting by the New York Times suggests, or just high on his own hubris, Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (Doge) has interfered in the US state in ways unimaginable for Murdoch, abruptly firing thousands of workers, accessing the most sensitive data on citizens, and closing down the various branches of government that

were investigating an array of alleged offences by his businesses.

Murdoch's most senior management staff, including News UK's reinstated CEO Rebekah Brooks, were found not guilty of phone hacking and bribing public officials a decade ago – but they did at least have to stand trial. Musk managed to not just tilt the levers of power, but march in and take control of them. The equivalent power grab in the UK would have seen Andy Coulson replacing Keir Starmer director of public prosecutions just as he was helping to launch the Met's phone hacking investigation.

NETWORKING

Speaking of Andy Coulson – who was appointed head of communications for David Cameron in 2010 as he became prime minister – another way in which the media influences the government is through appointments.

There has long been a revolving door between news organisations and government communications departments. Alastair Campbell, who also features in this pamphlet, was the political editor of the Daily Mirror before he became Blair's chief spokesperson. But it goes much deeper than that, with media figures commonly installed by prime ministers to a variety of key positions. William Shawcross, Murdoch's biographer, was chair of the charities commission from 2012-2018 and then headed the review of the controversial Prevent anti-extremism programme in 2021. James Forsyth, The Spectator's political editor, was appointed by Rishi Sunak as his political

secretary. They had been best friends since they met at the elite private school Winchester. Forsyth had even been best man at Sunak's wedding.

In return for welcoming their media pals into high office, ministers and senior politicians can expect well-paid berths at newspapers for their opinions. The entire careers of Boris Johnson and Michael Gove are dependent on this cross-fertilisation.

But it seems the old Murdoch model of preferment is already changing, and most Conservative politicians these days in the UK look to another foreign billionaire for inspiration – Musk and his X. The distorted echo chamber of right-wing social media often leads the headlines, and Musk rewards them in various ways.

Firstly, X increases the reach and virality of wannabe 'edgelord' politicians. Robert Jenrick, the shadow justice secretary and failed Conservative leadership contender, seems to spend most of his time on X making short, inflammatory videos about crime, immigration and unlawfulness because, as it is currently engineered, this is probably the way he can make the most impact.

But there is also money involved. When Musk reinstated the far-right influencers Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (aka Tommy Robinson) and Andrew Tate, he was not only giving them a platform – he was adding to their income. Byline Times estimated that one (now disaffected) Reform party MP, Rupert Lowe, was making around \$50,000 a year for his provocative tweeting. This reinforcing vortex of disinformation

and provocation is the most likely explanation for the strange evolution of former prime minister Liz Truss, who now finds herself standing next to Trump's ex-campaign manager and War Room podcast creator Steve Bannon as he describes Robinson as the 'backbone of Britain'.

These unhinged memes do not just stay on social media. As our political editor, Adam Bienkov, has highlighted, they dominate the lines of inquiry pursued by the press corps in the parliamentary lobby. Conservative opposition leader Kemi Badenoch is frequently known to repeat some allegation made by an anonymous account on X, and the Labour government often finds itself tied down dealing with false accounts of grooming gangs or lurid stories of confected scandals from social media.

So broad is Musk's influence that, even if he does not end up pumping tens of millions of dollars into Reform UK as promised (and there is nothing to stop him under current electoral law), he has radically changed the political atmosphere in this country. This was demonstrated in dramatic fashion last summer, when false allegations about the tragic Southport killings led to riots across the country – some of the worst seen in the postwar period according to the anti-fascism organisation Hope Not Hate. Not only was X a major vector of disinformation about migrants and Muslims which led to a hostel being firebombed and mosques attacked, Musk himself fanned the flames by claiming that civil war was "inevitable" in the UK because of its ethnic diversity, and – after more than 1,000 people were

arrested and imprisoned for inciting or committing violence – promoting the vilification of our police and courts.

DATA

Rupert Murdoch was always obsessed with data of a peculiar and provocative sort. His biographer, Michael Wolff, who spent many hours with the media owner a decade or so ago, relates his penchant for gossip. Frequently, when some random politician was mentioned, Murdoch would mutter “oh, we have pictures of him”, perhaps in the Sun’s legendary ‘black museum’ vault in Wapping.

This is not mere speculation. We now know, following 10 years of civil litigation concerning the phone-hacking scandal, the Leveson inquiry, and the criminal trials that followed, that – just like the now-shuttered News of the World – the Sun was also engaged in industrial-scale ‘unlawful information-gathering’ which extended far beyond voicemail interception to the use of private investigators to illegally obtain private medical records, financial statements, hack landlines and emails and even benefit from burglaries. John Ford, the infamous blagger and private investigator, claims the Sunday Times’ news-gathering operations also benefited from these ‘dark arts’. News UK has now paid more than \$1bn in settlements for these privacy intrusions.

Murdoch, then, tended to hold politicians hostage rather than to account. But Musk’s privacy intrusions are much more direct, extensive, and dangerous, as they target each individual voter. Since there is no personal

data protection legislation available in the US, it is likely that every time a user logs in to X, makes a comment, likes a tweet, or asks a question of Grok – X’s AI chatbot – these data points are used not only to identify the most viral arguments and assess online sentiment, but to directly profile individuals and target them with the most effective possible political advertising.

This is the Cambridge Analytica model which the investigative journalist Carole Cadwalladr, formerly of the Observer, exposed seven years ago. The online campaigning company hacked around 70m Facebook profiles (including mine) to profile the entire electorate around the time they voted for Brexit and Trump in 2016. Steve Bannon, Trump’s campaign manager and a close ally of Nigel Farage, was a cofounder of the company. Alexander Nix, its CEO, boasted of having swung the presidential election and EU Referendum – before abruptly becoming somewhat reticent when the data protection and spending implications of that claim sunk in.

Whether Nix and Bannon over-egged the power of their ‘weapons’ is a moot point, but there is little doubt that, having suffered very few penalties, this new model of social media data harvesting and microtargeting has become the norm. We leave hundreds of data points a day as we trawl through the internet or hook our smartphones up to our every activity. These data points are already resold for commercial advertising and bought up again by political campaigns. Musk and the MAGA campaign easily have the means

to find out more or less everything about us, and more importantly, feed us back tailored and emotive disinformation and propaganda to affect our political views.

So do not be fooled by reports that Musk has left the White House and broken ranks with Trump or the far-right. His appointees still occupy key roles in the federal government. Meanwhile, highly detailed state information on the entire citizenry of the US has been handed over to Palantir, the controversial data mining company founded by Musk's former PayPal associate and another South

African-born right-wing tech entrepreneur, Peter Thiel.

The combination of direct access to the knowledge base of the state and the use of smartphones to insert disinformation, unmediated, into your psyche, means that Musk has inaugurated a new era. We have moved on from an industrial process, wherein a mogul class used mass media to manufacture consensus, to something that may prove even worse: a tiny, hyper-rich group of oligarchs able to harness the digital power of algorithms to automate the very act of political discourse.

What the government should do

Taken from *The Little Black Book of Press Barons* by Matthew Gallagher, Jonathan Heawood, Emma Jones & Kyle Taylor (Byline Books, 2025).

1. Hold newspapers to the same standards as individual social media users under the Online Safety Act.
2. Close the loophole that gives newspaper publishers special exemptions online. Their social media accounts and websites should meet the same standards as individual users, especially when it comes to harmful content.

PART 2

CLICKBAIT AND SOCIAL MEDIA

CHAPTER 4

CLICKBAIT

Journalist Mandy Gardner assesses the incentives behind the increasing prevalence of clickbait – and documents its effects on victims of press abuse and its distortion of our media landscape

According to Ofcom, seven in 10 UK adults consume online news in some capacity, with more than half using social media as a news source. These figures are significantly higher for younger readers; 90 per cent of 16 to 24-year-olds use online sources for news, and eight in 10 use social media.

On social media, headlines are all-important, and clickbait has become a common strategy used to increase engagement and reach on social media platforms by capturing people's attention in the fast-paced, overcrowded online environment. Clickbait lures readers in through various psychological tactics, including emotional appeals and 'fear of missing out'.

Of course, sensationalist, overhyped headlines are nothing new. They have long been used, particularly by the tabloids, to grab people's attention and make them more likely to buy a newspaper. What is different now is that,

due to the way content algorithms work and a lack of social media regulation, clickbait has become a self-perpetuating cycle which feeds ever more sensationalist – and often untrue – content, which can drown out genuine news.

The effectiveness of clickbait-style posts is also affecting the kind of stories news sites and newspapers write – more simplistic, emotive news is the order of the day. To make matters worse, most newspapers and their websites are – if they are regulated at all – members of the Independent Press Standards Organisation, a complaints outfit set up by the industry that has shown itself unable or unwilling to enforce high standards. This exacerbates the problems with clickbait journalism, as it means there is little incentive for newspapers to get their stories right or conduct ethical newsgathering. That means more stories about murder, celebrities and controversy.

In many cases, it seems that the more awful the story, the better for clicks. But what is the impact of clickbait on those who are the subject of news – for instance, the families of people who have been murdered or killed? I have spoken to several, and a number mentioned distressing interactions with the media. It is also something I have personal experience of. The Daily Mail posted the CCTV footage of my daughter crossing the road before she got hit by the speeding car that killed her. The CCTV loaded automatically if you clicked on the headline on a mobile phone. The headline read: “EXCLUSIVE: Shocking moment young woman is killed by speeding hit-and-run driver escaping police – as she is flung 20 feet into the air and lands in front of horrified onlookers at London bus stop.”

I put in a complaint to IPSO after my brother alerted me. As a journalist, I knew it was pure clickbait. Worse: it was gratuitous voyeurism, and a clear intrusion into grief. I was horrified that my children could have seen it and remembered that as their last image of their sister. After six months of emails between the Daily Mail and me, mediated by IPSO, IPSO ruled in favour of the Mail. It was not an intrusion into grief, apparently.

I mentioned to IPSO throughout that my concern was that there was no journalistic justification for publishing the footage. The reason for doing so, and with the voyeuristic headline they used, was simply to get clicks. IPSO did not in any way engage with that argument, but simply issued a pro-forma response about ‘sensitivity’ of editing (they had

cut out the part after the impact and focused on ‘her last moments’) and the grainy nature of the footage (if it was so grainy, what was the purpose of posting it in the first place, given their argument was that it was to trigger witnesses’ memories?). None of it held water.

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) has acknowledged the fall in the quality of journalism which has resulted from the move to an online model. The decline, it says, has been caused by job cuts owing to the loss of revenue from newspaper sales and online advertising revenue to Google and Facebook. It has called for greater transparency from the tech giants. It has also expressed fears that AI will make the threat to jobs and quality worse. Far from standards improving since the Leveson inquiry, as some politicians and newspaper barons argue, it is likely that the reverse is happening.

It is true that journalism, like all industries, is facing myriad pressures and turbulence, but clickbait is not the answer. When it comes to intrusion into grief, the NUJ has explicitly stated in its code that journalists should do “nothing to intrude into anybody’s private life, grief or distress unless justified by overriding consideration of the public interest”. The independent regulator IMPRESS, to which no national title is signed up, has a similar clause. However, IPSO follows the Editor’s code, which allows newspapers off the hook in cases such as ours, and does not explicitly address clickbait.

The good news is that recent research suggests clickbait may be losing its allure. Recent US research shows

clickbait-style headlines often did not perform any better and, in some cases, performed worse than traditional headlines. Maybe readers are getting bored of a style that has become so ubiquitous, they speculated. Yet they also found that attempts to programme AI to spot and block clickbait had proven more complicated than anticipated.

Another study from Germany suggests that typical clickbait phrases might lead to a rise in click-through rates, but the articles fail to activate further user engagement thereafter. The researchers speculate that simplifying the news and reporting it in an engaging way could bring in new audiences, particularly young people. Some have tried this, including the News Movement, which aims to solve the undersupply of trusted, credible news on social media sites like TikTok.

And yet, what if frustration with the extent of hype and misinformation simply turns people, particularly young people, off news altogether? The danger, when trust is lost, is that it takes far longer to regain it.

Journalists are all too aware of the dangers of the trust issue at a time in world politics when independent journalism is of critical importance and democracy is under attack. There are some valiant attempts to address

it, including The Trust Project, an international consortium of news organisations that promotes standards of transparency and works with technology platforms to affirm and amplify a commitment to quality, inclusive and fair journalism so that readers can make informed decisions about news. More attention is being devoted to digital literacy too, giving young people the skills to work out what is more likely to be true and what is more likely to be misinformation.

But clickbait is not just about misinformation and hype. It's also about voyeurism and the hunger for ever more emotive content that focuses on individuals rather than broader, complex social issues. Social media doesn't generally do complexity – or ethics.

The fact remains that news is increasingly shared on social media sites, and that these are by and large unregulated outside of Europe. It is largely left to social media sites to regulate themselves. We have seen what happens when the press self-regulates. Without regulation, both of the press and social media companies, the commercial pressure to sell 'content' means there are likely to be more victims of bad practice and more distrust towards journalists.

CHAPTER 5

REGULATING SOCIAL MEDIA

Stephen Kinsella, chair of the Press Justice Project, argues that regulators already have many of the powers they need to stop social media platforms degrading the UK's news and information environment

Clickbait, as Mandy explores, is an important example of the negative impacts of social media platforms on the UK's information environment. Traditional commercial news titles have become heavily dependent on social media for traffic to their websites. Their need to secure a prominent place on enough social media users' newsfeeds makes them beholden to the platforms' 'recommender' algorithms. Stories are chosen and packaged to maximise the chances these algorithms will place their content prominently in potential readers' newsfeeds. In the battle of online algorithmic amplification, clickbait headlines and lurid, unbalanced reporting almost always outperform quality journalism. And too often, stories peddling total untruths outperform both.

An attention economy mediated by the recommender algorithms of Meta, TikTok, Google and X poses a significant

threat to quality journalism. But even more importantly, it is degrading the UK's entire news and information environment. Inflammatory content, falsehoods, and conspiracy theories pose a growing threat to social cohesion and the democratic integrity of the UK. Research carried out by Kings College London for BBC News in 2023 found that a third of the public now believe a variety of conspiracy theories to be "probably or definitely true". These theories range from claims of secret government plots aimed at controlling the population, to narratives suggesting that mainstream media and government officials collude to mislead us about terrorist attacks. The normalisation of such ideas has profound implications for how citizens perceive both their society and its institutions.

For policymakers seeking to respond to this degradation of public discourse, it is crucial to recognise that it is a

consequence of deliberate design choices made by social media companies. The business model of social media sites is, overwhelmingly, advertising. Sites are designed to maximise “eyeballs” which can be sold to advertisers – that is, to maximise user numbers, and the amount of time each user spends on the platform. Clickbait, conspiracy theories, hate and harassment, fake accounts, and misinformation all count as engagement and eyeballs.

Recommender algorithms prioritise content which keeps users on the site. Whilst “doomscrolling,” or “going down a rabbit hole” might be considered by users to be unpleasant or unhealthy, for the platform, it is a positive, designed-for outcome. A user compulsively scrolling, unable to stop, or getting sucked into viewing ever more extreme content, is a user who is being kept engaged, and whose eyeballs can be sold to advertisers and generate revenue for the platform.

To make matters worse, for a platform designed to maximise ad revenue, fake accounts, bots, and anonymous trolls still count as eyeballs. Social media platforms place great emphasis on their total number of user accounts as a key metric for their investors and advertising customers, even when those numbers are likely to be greatly inflated by inauthenticity. Adding extra steps in the account creation process which could make it harder to create a fake account is resisted as “friction” which could suppress their user numbers. And false, misleading, or inflammatory news stories shared by fake accounts – whether to serve the agenda of a foreign

state, or to generate click-throughs to a commercial content farm – still count as content, which helps keep other users of the platform engaged.

The riots which broke out around England in Summer 2024 provided a chilling illustration of the risks posed by this degraded information environment. In the wake of horrific murders in Southport, inflammatory false information about the killer spread rapidly, shared by commercial content farm sites, extremists, and fake accounts. Despite the obvious human costs – terrorised communities, injured police officers, and damaged local economies—the social media platforms collected higher traffic and, by extension, increased advertising revenue.

In both the UK and Europe, we are beginning to see regulatory efforts to tame social media’s ruthless pursuit of engagement-at-all-costs. In Europe, the Digital Services Act introduces obligations on platforms to mitigate negative effects on electoral processes, civic discourse and public security. In the UK, after a chaotic legislative process under the last government, we now have the Online Safety Act (OSA). The OSA has limitations, and is yet to be fully implemented, but it does provide opportunities to tackle some of social media’s most problematic design features.

The OSA does not seek to directly address disinformation or to improve the UK’s information environment, beyond some poorly worded carve-outs from content moderation for “journalistic content” and “content of democratic importance.” However, it

does give Ofcom significant powers to require platforms to address illegal content, particularly the “priority offences” named in the act. This is an important opportunity, because many of these priority offences are enabled by the same engagement-at-all-costs design features which are fueling the broader degradation of the UK news environment and political discourse.

For example, the presence in the OSA of fraud, hate and harassment, child sexual exploitation, and foreign interference as “priority offences” gives Ofcom ample grounds to require platforms to tackle fake and anonymous accounts. Clean Up The Internet proposes that platforms should be required to offer their users the choice to verify their identity, alongside measures to make verification status visible and options to filter out interactions from non-verified accounts.

Ofcom has acknowledged the problems with fake and anonymous accounts, and that optional identity verification measures could help – but has so far shied away from actually requiring platforms to adopt this (or any other comparable) measure to tackle it. This failure to move swiftly reflects a broader pattern of behaviour from Ofcom. It has so far taken a very slow, very timid approach to making use of its new powers, with its proposed Illegal Content and Child Safety Codes of Practice identifying engagement-at-all-costs design features as key drivers of harm, but failing to require platforms to take effective measures to tackle them.

The starting point for this government in improving the UK’s online

information environment should therefore involve encouraging Ofcom to properly use the powers it has under the OSA to tackle unsafe social media design features. A regulator doing everything possible to tackle fraud, or child sexual exploitation and abuse, or foreign interference, or violence against women and girls, would be compelling platforms to address features and functionalities like account creation and recommender algorithms. This would have immediate knock-on benefits for the overall quality of UK users’ online experience, including the quality of the news and information environment. Ofcom has so far been far too timid and far too slow, and DSIT far too reluctant to ruffle feathers in Silicon Valley. The government should make it clear to Ofcom that it should pick up the pace – that it wants to see noticeable reductions in harm, soon. Failing that, the government should seriously consider establishing a dedicated and more energetic regulator for this sector to pick up the baton dropped by Ofcom.

While making proper use of existing legislation is the quickest path to delivering improvements, the government should also fill a number of legislative gaps. This could include reviewing and strengthening the OSA, for example to place a clearer overarching duty on platforms to be safe by design and address design features (such as fake accounts, or recommender algorithms) which create risk, and to bring disinformation and content which is harmful due to its cumulative effect more fully into scope of the act. It could also include giving Ofcom

additional duties and powers around protecting electoral integrity, or (under court supervision) to act in emergency situations – such as the riots – including

to compel companies to implement targeted measures on a temporary basis to tackle specific threats to public order or public safety.

What the government should do

1. Encourage Ofcom to properly use the powers it has under the Online Safety Act to tackle unsafe social media design features.
2. Consider establishing a dedicated and more energetic regulator if Ofcom fails to deliver noticeable reductions in harm.

PART 3

PROTECTING JOURNALISTS

CHAPTER 6

SLAPPS

Sir Wayne David, the former Labour MP for Caerphilly and a minister under New Labour, sets out how the government can tackle strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs)

I had been an MP for over 20 years when, towards the end of the last parliament, I was fortunate to be drawn in the ballot for a private members' bill for the first time. The bill I proposed sought to outlaw strategic litigation against public participation (SLAPPs), defined by the Solicitors' Regulation Authority (SRA) as action taken by lawyers on behalf of their clients "to harass, intimidate and financially or psychologically exhaust another party with the aim of preventing lawful publication of matters relating to the public interest."

In general, the losing party in a defamation case covers the costs of the successful party. Theoretically, therefore, reporters and publications have nothing to fear from such litigation, so long as they can support their claims, or otherwise show that the reporting contributed to a "matter of public interest". Unfortunately, however, even the threat of facing costs can be an effective deterrent for

investigative reporters, especially when the claimant has far greater resources than the defendant.

As a shadow foreign office minister, I was acutely aware of several cases in particular which gave me cause for concern. One was a defamation case brought against the journalist Tom Burgis, the Financial Times and the publisher HarperCollins by a Kazakh mining company. Then there were the cases brought against Catherine Belton, the author of *Putin's People*. Of these, a claim by the Russian state oil company, Rosneft, was withdrawn after most of the passages complained of were found to have no defamatory meaning. Another was a defamation claim brought against Charlotte Leslie, a former Conservative MP and the managing director of the Conservative Middle East Council. The claim was brought by a businessman concerning a memo which had been written on his background and dealings

with Russia.

These cases, and many more which have attracted far less attention, encouraged me to bring forward a bill to seek a solution to SLAPPs. The then justice secretary, Alex Chalk, had been disappointed that the Conservative government had decided not to include an anti-SLAPPs bill in the King's Speech. He was more than happy to provide me with an outline of a draft bill and the assistance of Ministry of Justice officials. The Labour frontbench also gave support and assistance. Central to the bill was an early dismissal mechanism for abusive lawsuits.

The bill passed its second reading in the House of Commons with unanimous support. During its committee stage, it underwent detailed scrutiny, and here, too, the bill won cross-party support. It then proceeded to the Lords, but was never debated there, so it fell once last year's general election was called.

Since the election, the new government has been lukewarm about introducing legislation to tackle SLAPPs. In a backbench business debate in Westminster in November last year, the then minister for courts and legal services, Heidi Alexander, explained that this is a complex legal area which requires detailed consideration, and that care had to be taken to prevent unintended consequences. Not being a lawyer myself, I have more than a little sympathy with her points. But the fact remains that SLAPPs are an unacceptable abuse of the legal system. Their primary objective is not justice, but to harass, intimidate, and financially and psychologically exhaust an opponent by improper means.

Often, SLAPPs are characterised by the use of threatening tactics to silence free speech advocates who act in the public interest. Increasingly, they are often used to browbeat ordinary people who are seeking justice against those with huge financial resources who have acted improperly.

It is unfortunately the case that SLAPPs appear to be on the increase. The Coalition against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE) has said that there were 11 cases in England and Wales in 2020, 25 in 2021 and 29 in 2022. This might not seem to indicate a huge problem. But to be frank, it is difficult to know exactly how often SLAPPs are used, as they frequently operate in the pre-court space – before any papers have been lodged, and before there is a direct interaction with the justice system.

As a result, there is a well-founded suspicion that civil claims are just the tip of an enormous iceberg of aggressive activity designed to restrict or deter public interest investigation and reporting and the pursuit of justice more broadly. In the period before my private member's bill was introduced, I myself met many people who gave me appalling accounts of how they had received threatening letters sent by solicitors which had the clear purpose of seeking to intimidate.

One avenue by which SLAPPs could be tackled is professional standards. Lawyers are obliged to advise their clients regarding their duties not to override their public interest obligations or their duties to the court system. Advising clients to use SLAPPs with the intention of bringing cases without a legitimate

basis, sufficient merit or proper intent is a misuse of the legal system which may be considered misconduct warranting disciplinary proceedings.

In November 2022, the SRA, which enforces professional codes of conduct, issued a warning notice regarding SLAPPs. It expressed concern that certain law firms were pursuing SLAPPs on behalf of clients, and clarified that the SRA was able to take action against abusive practices regardless of whether a case met the government's proposed criteria. The authority set out a clear expectation that law firms should decline courses of action identified as SLAPPs. It also set out a number of areas of concern, including proposed publications on subjects of public importance, including academic research, whistleblowing and investigative journalism. The SRA indicated that failure to have proper regard to the warning notice was likely to lead to disciplinary action.

It was to tackle the abuses of the legal system identified by the SRA and others that I brought forward my private member's bill. During the committee stage, a number of amendments were proposed by the Conservative MP David Davies. Some of these amendments I

accepted, since they made clearer the original intention of the bill.

These late amendments did not alter the primary intention of the bill, but it is reasonable to say that they required greater thought and analysis. That additional scrutiny would have occurred in the House of Lords, and there would have been the opportunity for further meaningful dialogue with stakeholders about how best to proceed. In other words, while I am disappointed that the bill did not reach the statute book, I readily accept that the bill would have benefited from further deliberation, debate and fine tuning. For such a significant piece of legislation to be truly effective, it is necessary to work hard for the greatest amount of agreement amongst all those affected by the legislation and, if possible, a large measure of consensus needs to be achieved.

What should not happen, however, is that this draft bill is ignored and lawmakers forget about SLAPPs. The abuse of our legal system through the use of SLAPPs remains unacceptable and this abuse must be brought to an end. Our legal system should not be corrupted in this way and it is unacceptable that many people are not getting the justice which they deserve.

What the government should do

1. Introduce a new anti-SLAPP bill, building on the private member's bill proposed during the last parliament.
2. Consult on incentivised or compulsory mechanisms of alternative dispute resolution for defamation cases as an interim measure, to end the threat of excessive costs which give SLAPPS their intimidating effect (while also depriving poorly resourced claimants of access to justice).

CHAPTER 7

PROTECTING JOURNALISTS WORLDWIDE

Barbora Bukovská, senior director for law and policy at ARTICLE 19, calls on the British government to make the safety of journalists a key part of its foreign policy – including linking aid and trade to media freedom

A journalist investigates a hidden money trail. A whistleblower's story is about to break. A crew films war crimes on a ruined street, putting themselves in danger to make sure the world sees what is happening.

None of these scenes happens in a vacuum. Each is a direct challenge to those who profit from secrecy, violence, or unchecked power, and the responses they precipitate include a spectrum of risks that go far beyond abstract debates about freedom of expression. Understanding the scale and nature of these risks is essential to appreciate the true cost of media freedom and to consider what steps the UK government must take to ensure journalists' protection globally.

THE RISING TIDE OF PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

The work of my organisation, ARTICLE 19, which defends freedom

of expression around the world, shows that physical violence is the most visible and devastating threat that journalists face. In many countries, journalists are killed, assaulted, disappeared, tortured, and threatened simply for carrying out their work of bringing vital information to the public.

In Mexico, one of the most dangerous countries for the media outside of warzones, journalists who pursue stories about organised crime or official corruption are often met with deadly force or simply vanish, while meaningful investigations by authorities remain rare. In Brazil, covering topics like environmental destruction, police abuses, or political scandals exposes journalists to persistent threats and harassment from both criminal networks and state actors.

Across South Asia, including India and Pakistan, journalists have been killed by armed groups or targeted

for their reporting, particularly on sensitive issues like religious extremism or political unrest. In Europe, the murders of investigative journalists Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta and Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, in Slovakia, have become symbols of the risks faced by those exposing corruption and abuse of power. The Council of Europe's Safety of Journalists Platform has issued over 2,000 alerts on serious threats to media freedom in the past decade, including 500 related to attacks on journalists' physical safety and integrity, and 53 deaths.

RISKS TO JOURNALISTS IN CONFLICT

Attacks on journalists are nowhere more stark than in conflict zones.

In Israel's war on Gaza, the situation has become catastrophic for journalists, with over 180 journalists killed since October 2023, making it the deadliest conflict for media workers in recent history. Local journalists in Gaza work under siege, facing violence as well as forced displacement, hunger, and the destruction of media infrastructure.

The true scale of the crisis may be even greater, but it is impossible to fully assess the situation because Israel has barred independent foreign correspondents from entering Gaza since October 2023. This information blackout, and the lack of international scrutiny, contributes to impunity for attacks on journalists and other grave violations.

"All countries have a positive obligation to do everything they

can to stop Israel's genocide of Palestinians, which is presently the number one cause of death for journalists. We – not just journalists, but the majority – stand no chance of survival in a world of 'might is right' and depend on a system of respect for the law and humanity between states and peoples for our wellbeing. The UK must show more leadership in this regard. High-flown words about democracy and the government spinning its wheels are not helping; what matters is the outcome not the gesture. Take action that will stop the genocide." – *Matthew Caruana Galizia, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and son of Daphne Caruana Galizia*

Elsewhere, since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, at least 19 journalists have been killed while reporting, either caught in crossfire or deliberately targeted. In Sudan, with around 90 per cent of media outlets no longer operational due to the ongoing conflict, those journalists who continue their work face severe limitations under emergency and security measures. Many have been effectively forcibly disappeared.

LEGAL, DIGITAL AND ECONOMIC TOOLS OF CENSORSHIP

Legal systems are frequently weaponised to silence journalists through legal threats, arbitrary detention or imprisonment and denial of due process of law. Overbroad and vague criminal laws, including criminal defamation,

insult or false news/disinformation, including in Turkey, Iran, Kenya or Malaysia, chill reporting by threatening journalists with imprisonment or crippling fines for their work. These are used not only to silence individual journalists, but to intimidate entire newsrooms and discourage public interest reporting.

Harassment and intimidation extend beyond physical and legal threats. Journalists also face coordinated smear campaigns. Online harassment and abuse, especially gender-based, is rampant. Globally, women journalists face intersecting risks, including misogynistic abuse, racist attacks, and threats based on their identity or reporting focus. These intimidation tactics are designed to silence critical voices and discourage investigative reporting, leading to self-censorship and, in some cases, journalists leaving the profession altogether.

The expansion of digital surveillance compounds these threats. The use of spyware, facial recognition, and other biometric technologies poses a growing threat to journalists. Targeting journalists with these technologies undermines the confidentiality of sources, stymies investigative work, and plays a direct role in enabling physical violence and intimidation.

For instance, reports show that Pegasus spyware paved the way for the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. This spyware was used to monitor the phones of Khashoggi's associates and those close to him, helping authorities track his movements and communications

prior to his killing. In Mexico, Carmen Aristegui, a prominent investigative journalist, was repeatedly targeted with sophisticated phishing messages designed to install Pegasus on her devices, and these attempts intensified when she was reporting on a scandal involving the Mexican president.

At ARTICLE 19, we have also highlighted how economic pressures, such as job insecurity, loss of advertising revenue, and targeted financial harassment make it even harder for journalists to work independently. Some governments manipulate public advertising budgets to reward outlets that toe the line and punish those that are critical, threatening the financial sustainability of independent journalism. Journalists may also face vexatious lawsuits, asset freezes, or arbitrary tax investigations, all of which make it more difficult to withstand external pressure and maintain editorial independence.

IMPUNITY FOR ATTACKS

On average, 90 per cent of attacks on journalists, whether physical, legal or digital, go unpunished globally. This can be through failure to investigate the attacks independently, swiftly and effectively, failing to reform police practices which enable and encourage mistreatment of journalists, or failing to reform or abolish laws which target journalists reporting on certain issues or expressing criticism. The failure of governments to investigate attacks or bring redress is often motivated by self-interest. Where their own agents are responsible for violations,

or investigations would expose government failures, there are clear benefits for state actors to silence and discredit journalists and enable aggressors. Elsewhere, flawed judicial systems, a lack of political will, corrupt law enforcement, and fear of reprisal contribute to impunity.

THE UNITED KINGDOM'S ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY

This is not a distant problem. The United Kingdom, a country that claims to champion freedom of expression and media freedom, is implicated, sometimes by omission, but more often by design and deliberate political choice from governments that should know better.

When British journalists and publishers are detained abroad, such as Jimmy Lai and Lee Bo in Hong Kong or Alaa Abd El-Fattah in Egypt, the British government's response is often slow or entirely absent. When reporters from conflict zones seek safety, the UK offers no emergency visas. Many Afghan journalists who cooperated with British media during the fall of Kabul found themselves abandoned, as their pleas for protection were stalled by government bureaucracy.

Meanwhile, the government has resisted calls for greater transparency and oversight of surveillance powers that threaten the confidentiality of journalists' sources, undermining trust and exposing journalists and their contacts to further risk.

Internationally, the UK's reluctance to impose sanctions on those responsible for attacks on journalists, or to

support independent investigations into high-profile killings, has sent a message of indifference. Even when journalists working for UK-based outlets have faced credible threats from foreign states (such as the intimidation of Persian-language broadcasters in London) responses have been slow and inadequate, leaving journalists exposed.

Each of these failures widens the gap between the UK's rhetoric and its actions.

Addressing the interconnected threats to journalists will take more than a piecemeal approach. The following recommendations, reiterated repeatedly by ARTICLE 19, outline key steps the government should take to fulfil this responsibility and uphold the principles of freedom of expression and media freedom on the global stage.

1. Lead by example in international forums and in UK foreign policy

The government should align domestic and foreign policy on media freedom and ensure that commitments made in international forums are reflected in practice. This can be done in a number of ways.

The government should push for the inclusion of journalist safety and media freedom in all relevant bilateral and multilateral dialogues, trade agreements, and human rights mechanisms. It should ensure that any UK engagement with foreign governments includes media freedom and the safety of journalists as non-negotiable elements of bilateral and multilateral relations – including with regard to traditional allies.

On the international level, it should champion the adoption and implementation of international resolutions and guidelines, such as those issued by the UN Human Rights Council, that set out state obligations to protect journalists.

The government should also use its influence in the Media Freedom Coalition (and as a member of its executive group), and other international bodies to advocate for stronger protections for journalists and to hold governments accountable for violations.

2. Protect journalists in armed conflict

The government should promote adherence to international humanitarian and human rights law regarding the protection of journalists in conflict zones. It should ensure that all military and diplomatic operations in conflict zones include explicit protocols for the protection of journalists, in line with international humanitarian law. This could include regular briefings for UK and allied forces, clear rules of engagement, and rapid response teams for incidents involving journalists and media workers.

The government should also champion international accountability mechanisms, such as proposing and helping to fund special international tribunals or commissions of inquiry when national systems fail. For example, the UN's International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) on Syria has provided a model for documenting and prosecuting grave crimes where impunity reigns.

Further, the government should contribute to the development of

international humanitarian law – be it through treaty, custom or soft law instruments – and adopt an interpretation of international law that can better protect journalists from digital threats. For instance, it should be established that all cyber operations, including spyware, DDoS attacks, doxing campaigns or internet shutdowns must adhere to the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution, if they are reasonably expected to cause – whether directly or indirectly – death or injury (to include serious illness and severe mental suffering), physical damage, or loss of functionality.

3. Condemn the attacks and support ending impunity for violence

The government should publicly and unequivocally condemn all attacks on journalists and advocate for their independent, speedy and effective investigations to bring perpetrators and instigators to justice. This can be done directly or in coordination with like-minded states to deliver joint demarches to governments who are responsible, directly or indirectly, for journalists being attacked or killed.

The government should support international mechanisms to monitor, report, and respond to attacks on journalists, including through the UN and regional bodies. For instance, it should allocate resources to support international investigative missions, such as those led by the UN or OSCE, when national authorities refuse to investigate attacks on journalists. This was a key factor in the international response to the murder of Jamal

Khashoggi and the investigations into killings in Mexico and Malta.

At home, the government should fully implement and resource the UK's national action plan for the safety of journalists, ensuring it is not just a document, but a living framework that delivers real protection and accountability.

In countries where journalists are at risk, the UK should encourage states to establish special protection mechanisms for journalists, including emergency hotlines, relocation programmes, and safe houses. It should also support training for police, prosecutors, and judges on investigating and prosecuting crimes against journalists. Further, it should support the creation of gender-sensitive protection protocols, recognising the specific risks faced by female journalists.

There is a lot the government could do to support those journalists fleeing persecution through safe pathways and other forms of support. For instance, it should establish and maintain effective emergency visa schemes, direct funding and logistical support for emergency relocation of journalists under threat, including working with international multilateral institutions and civil society. By taking a leaf from the protection programs developed in some Latin American countries, which include relocation, bodyguards, and safehouses, the UK could contribute to a measurable reduction in journalist killings, as such comprehensive protection measures have been shown to save lives where implemented.

The government should systemat-

ically use Magnitsky-style sanctions against individuals and entities credibly linked to attacks on journalists. Publicly naming and sanctioning perpetrators raises the cost of impunity and deters future attacks.

Finally, it should link aid and trade to media freedom. It can do so by making continued UK development aid and preferential trade agreements conditional on measurable progress in investigating and prosecuting attacks on journalists.

4. Support holistic protection of journalists, including against legal threats, detention and surveillance

The government should advocate for the repeal of criminal defamation, insult, and “fake news” laws and the introduction of robust anti-SLAPP legislation internationally, including early dismissal procedures, limits on damages, and a public interest defence, while ensuring that English courts cannot be used to silence public interest journalism through vexatious litigation or misuse of the courts.

As a matter of priority, the UK should immediately adopt the Jimmy Lai bill, which would guarantee consular access for arbitrarily detained British journalists and media workers abroad, a right that is currently not guaranteed. By passing this bill, the UK would send a clear message that it stands firmly behind its journalists and citizens facing human rights abuses overseas. Beyond protection to its own citizens, the government should demand the immediate release of journalists arbitrarily detained abroad.

These actions cannot remain in the level of commitments only. The government has to make sure that British embassies and consulates are equipped and mandated to assist journalists facing threats or detention abroad, including rapid response protocols and legal assistance. Whether it is British or foreign journalists seeking protection in the UK, the government should provide support legal, financial, and psychological assistance for journalists and their families affected by attacks, intimidation, or harassment.

In order to protect journalists from digital threats, the UK should reform its own surveillance legislation and oversight mechanisms to ensure the confidentiality of journalists' sources is protected in line with international human rights standards. It should resist any expansion of surveillance powers that threaten press freedom. It should also demand transparency and accountability in the use and export of surveillance technologies, ensuring they are not used to target journalists or their sources. It can also support digital security training for journalists, including gender-responsive ones to address the specific risks faced by women journalists online.

5. Promote a safe, enabling environment for media freedom globally

ARTICLE 19 and others have long argued that to effectively protect journalists, governments must go beyond protection measures and actively promote a safe and enabling environment for media freedom globally. Defending media freedom requires

states to create legal and regulatory frameworks and enabling environments that foster a diverse, independent, and pluralistic media landscape.

Hence, the government should support independent media development, including funding for investigative journalism and legal defence funds for journalists facing physical, legal and other threats.

Government representatives should challenge and counteract narratives that delegitimise or vilify journalists, recognising that such rhetoric often precedes acts of violence and fosters public hostility towards the media. It should also support public education and media literacy initiatives that foster understanding of the role of journalism and counteract disinformation and campaigns to delegitimise the media.

THE BLUEPRINT EXISTS – THE UK MUST FINALLY BUILD ON IT

Every recommendation listed above here comes straight from ARTICLE 19's long-standing calls to action: calls we have made to the UK government not once, but over and over.

These are not radical recommendations, either. Others, including the United Nations and other international and regional human rights bodies, have documented and spelled them out in detail.

The government knows exactly what needs to be done. It has the tools, the international standing, and the expertise to make a real difference in protection of journalists. What is needed now is not another round of commitments, but a clear political

decision to implement the practical steps we have set out.

We are not asking for invention. The

UK does not lack options or suggestions. It lacks follow-through. The next move is the government's.

What the government should do

1. Put protection of journalists first: the government should link aid and trade to media freedom by making continued UK development aid and preferential trade agreements conditional on measurable progress in investigating and prosecuting attacks on journalists.
2. Protect British journalists and media workers abroad: the government should immediately adopt the Jimmy Lai bill, which would guarantee consular access for arbitrarily detained British journalists and media workers abroad.

PART 4

REGULATION AND STANDARDS

CHAPTER 8

HIGH STANDARDS

Professor Chris Frost, chair of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) ethics council and emeritus professor of journalism at Liverpool John Moores university, argues that press standards are as important as ever

It is tempting to dismiss the importance of press regulation as an irrelevance in today's age of online news and social media. Most newspapers are enduring failing circulations. How much damage can dead trees do?

But although print circulations have fallen, the same publishers' online presence has grown vast. Newspaper content reaches 49 million people every month: over 70 per cent of the British population. The top non-broadcast news sources – across the internet and on social media – are newspaper publishers.

In fact, with online readership more than making up for declines in print circulations, more people read newspapers today than ever in history.

In 1985, for example, print circulations were at their peak. Fourteen million people read newspapers every day. In 2024, only 8 million people read newspapers in print, but 19 million

consumed newspaper content online. So digital reach alone is now significantly greater than print circulations ever were, before taking into account the considerable 8 million people still reading the print editions.

Ofcom's annual survey of news readership confirms that newspapers remain the most popular online professional news media source. Of the 19 most popular news outlet websites, 13 are newspaper or newspaper-style online publishers.

Some commentators claim that social media has ended professional media's dominance of the news media market. But social media platforms are just that – platforms – and what they are platforming is frequently news publisher content. For example, the Reuters Institute 2024 Digital News Report confirmed that the news sources on X (formerly Twitter) which the public are most likely to "pay attention to" are

“mainstream news brands/journalists”. Even on other platforms, where “celebrities” were more popular news sources, professional news brands were hot on their heels.

The truth is that quality, trusted journalism has never been more important. And in turn, the capacity of unscrupulous publishers to cause damage to individuals and society more broadly has never been greater. The following are just three ways that the public is failed by press wrongdoing.

MISLEADING REPORTING

Firstly, the British public has been, and continues to be, systematically misled about a series of public issues by the press.

One such issue is the EU. On 9 March 2016, The Sun announced that “[The] Queen Backs Brexit”. The late Queen had in fact not given any indication of support for Brexit. On 6 February 2016, the Daily Mail published a frontpage story with an image of migrants emerging from a lorry, with the headline: “We’re from Europe – Let us in!” In fact, the migrants were not from Europe at all. Hundreds more examples exist, going back decades and preceding the referendum. In a vote as close as that referendum was, it is reasonable to conclude that press misreporting is likely to have been a factor in the outcome.

Another issue is climate change and net zero. Bob Ward, from the London School of Economics’ Grantham Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, has filed dozens of complaints over the years, poking holes

in the climate denialism in the reporting of the Telegraph in particular. He has said that some newspapers’ coverage of climate change has been “systematically inaccurate and misleading.”

Another very contemporary issue is the Labour government’s policy of charging VAT on private schools. On June 8 2025, an article in the Mail on Sunday blamed this policy for a privately educated child being denied NHS care. The truth was that the child had not been denied care but was instead required to pursue it under a different process, in a regime introduced by the previous (Conservative) government, and that none of this had anything to do whatsoever with policy on private school fees.

The intention of this chapter is not to reject the press’ ability and freedom to hold, publish, and even propagandise on behalf of views which are anti-EU, opposed to action on climate change, or opposed to the introduction of VAT for private schools. But the public is entitled to factual information on these subjects and debates, even if not objectivity. Currently, they are not getting it. This is to the detriment of the integrity of our democracy and public trust in the press.

Disinformation on these issues is likely to have an impact on how people vote in elections, referenda, and indeed, in how politicians themselves choose to position themselves and adjust their policies to meet the apparent anxieties of the public – even if those anxieties are misplaced, and formed on the basis of inaccurate reporting.

It is also important here to stress that inaccurate reporting can also

have a discriminatory effect when, as is often the case, false allegations are made against a group of people, or an individual on the basis of a particular characteristic.

Muslims and Asian people, in particular, suffer a significant amount of inaccurate coverage every year, much of which has a discriminatory effect. Just one egregious example of this was a Telegraph story on 26 June 2020, which claimed: “Half of UK’s imported Covid-19 infections are from Pakistan”.

There were various problems with the story, which implicitly blamed Pakistani migrants for additional Covid infections (this being a time of great public concern about the spread of the virus). But the upshot was that the grand total of Covid cases which could be traced back to migration to Pakistan over the relevant period was 30, at a time when 22,000 new cases were otherwise being reported every week.

SENSITIVE TOPICS

The second way the public is let down by press misreporting is in more specific ways around topics of special concern. One such topic is domestic violence, and another is suicide reporting.

Despite countless experts and academics calling for sensitivity in these areas, some newspapers continue to routinely flout the guidelines which exist. For suicide reporting, this has often meant taking one minor detail from a Coroners’ Report and casting it as a key factor in a suicide.

This robs the deceased of their dignity, and does not even accurately inform the public about what has

happened: suicide typically follows extended periods of mental health challenges, and can rarely be accounted for by a simple trigger.

Examples include a student who was reported as having died by suicide after losing his phone on a night out and a woman who did so after being denied Botox treatment. In both cases, the incident which the suicide was attributed to was one of many potential factors and followed years of mental ill health; yet the reporting blamed the deaths on these apparently vain and superficial events.

Similarly, and against the strong advice of charities working to end violence against women, some newspapers indulge in victim-blaming and reputational laundering of the perpetrators in reporting incidents of fatal domestic abuse. The most common feature of this kind of reporting is a headline which implicitly blames the deceased woman for her death, and coverage which goes on to offer sympathetic character references for the culprit.

Examples include Emma Pattison, the headteacher who was murdered by her husband in 2023. The Daily Mail reported the story as if Emma’s successful career was partly to blame for her murder, asking in its headline: Did Living in the Shadow of his High Achieving Wife Lead To Unthinkable Tragedy?

In a different story about another incident of fatal domestic abuse, one newspaper quotes a neighbour: “They were a nice couple who had been here ages.” And in another, in which a

woman was murdered in particularly brutal circumstances, a neighbour was quoted as saying: “[They got on] very well, very happy... when they came over there a happy couple”. This sort of coverage implies that violence against women occurs on an isolated basis by men who are otherwise not prone to violence and have been “pushed too far”. The reality is that fatal domestic violence is typically rooted in hatred of women, and often follows a pattern of abusive behaviour, perpetrated behind closed doors (and certainly out of view of neighbours).

Lisa King, director of communications at Refuge, has said: “We know how serious the consequences of unethical, sexist and inaccurate press portrayals of fatal domestic abuse are, leading wider society to dismiss warning signs and underestimate the danger posed by men who go on to carry out these horrific murders.”

Anthea Sully, Chief Executive of White Ribbon, the charity which works with men and boys to tackle domestic violence, has also commented how this reporting puts people in danger: “Press reporting that promotes myths around fatal domestic abuse demeans victims and, by reinforcing commonly held beliefs, puts people in danger.”

PRESS INTRUSION

Finally, there are many cases of press intrusion committed against individuals. On February 11 2025, a family were doorstepped by reporters from the Sun about the death of their son before they had even been informed by the police that he had died. After the Manchester

Arena bombing in May 2017, several families described the egregiously intrusive behaviour of reporters, with Figen Murray speaking about the way her young daughter was informed of her brother’s death by a reporter on the doorstep.

Heather Teale, a woman from Applecross in Scotland, was the subject of extraordinary press harassment after the death of her daughter Bethany in January 2018. This culminated in a series of phone calls from a reporter, despite Heather audibly breaking down. “Why are you doing this to me?” she asked. “Because grief sells newspapers,” said the reporter.

And then, of course, there was the phone hacking scandal: the illegal act of intercepting and publishing private voicemail messages. This crime was perpetrated across multiple newspaper titles, and subsequently covered up. Targets included victims of crime, some well-known people, and their families. In fact one of the few groups underrepresented among phone hacking victims were people suspected of actual wrongdoing: this was a crime motivated by profit alone, and not public interest reporting.

JOURNALISTS DESERVE BETTER

Quality journalism provides a vital service to society. For every case of unethical reporting, there are dozens of examples of reporters working tirelessly to inform the public, expose wrongdoing, and hold truth to power.

Sadly, their work is compromised by the few who act irresponsibly. As a result, confidence in the press remains

low, and the public is being exposed to unacceptable harm every day, at the hands of what is perhaps the most powerful industry in the country.

There are several factors which drive ethical failures in the newsroom, but there is only one way to address them all. That is through robust and independent regulation, which operates to the benefit of both working journalists and the public.

The status quo is unacceptable.

IPSO, the complaints handler popular with national newspapers, is controlled by editors and executives. It serves no one but them, and has stood idly by through the scandals and failures outlined above.

Working journalists – and their readers – deserve better. The government must act to raise standards in the press through stronger and more independent regulation without further delay.

CHAPTER 9

THE 'BACKSTOP' REGULATOR

Nathan Sparkes, chief executive of Hacked Off, and Julie Elliott, a Labour peer and former MP, trace the history of attempts to regulate the press and propose a new path forward

Who guards the guardians? Or in other words: to whom should the press be answerable for their critical public role to inform, scrutinise, and hold those in power to account? That is the question which seven inquiries into press standards over the last eighty years have sought to address.

While in one sense the question is abstract, in another it is both practical and urgent. National newspapers have consistently been accused of spreading disinformation on major public issues. They have indulged in coverage which is discriminatory, abusive, and which falls short of the Editor's Code they devised and claim to adhere to.

There are numerous intrusions into grief and private life every year. Every major violent or tragic incident leaves victims of press intrusion in its wake, from 7/7 to the Grenfell fire to the Manchester Arena bombing.

Meanwhile, despite plummeting hard

copy sales, the newspaper industry's power is undiminished. The online reach of newspaper websites gives the press unprecedented influence on public debate and ability to intrude into ordinary lives.

Over the past decade, this conduct has occurred under the watch of the complaints-handler IPSO, a body established and run by the newspaper industry itself.

How did we get here, and what must be done to raise standards?

THE LEVESON INQUIRY

Over the past 80 years, there have been three royal commissions, a government-ordered review and a public inquiry into press standards in the UK. All have expressed serious dissatisfaction with press behaviour, but their recommendations have been systematically ignored. The most recent investigation into press standards was

the Leveson Inquiry, which reported in 2012 after the phone hacking scandal caused widespread public revulsion.

Leveson was tasked with finding a solution to low standards and illegality in the newspaper industry, and crafting a system of regulation which balanced the rights of the public against the freedoms of the press. Leveson was wary of the dangers to press freedom of statutory regulation, while also mindful that self-regulation had (once again) failed.

The previous complaints-handler, the Press Complaints Commission, was powerless to prevent multiple scandals of unethical conduct in the press as well as the phone hacking scandal itself (the scale of which it denied, until the Guardian and New York Times proved otherwise).

Leveson's proposals were modest, and could best be described as "audited self-regulation". Newspapers would have one more chance to self-regulate, but their self-regulator had to be audited by a new body. The purpose of this audit was to verify that the self-regulator was fit for purpose: that it was genuinely independent of the newspaper industry, and it had sufficient powers to be effective.

Leveson found the principle of self-regulation for the press attractive as it would rely on industry funding, saving the taxpayer from picking up the bill. But he also recognised that self-regulation had failed for decades and had been a fig leaf, providing cover for the press to act with impunity.

The pattern of the past seven decades was clear. Periodically, a scandal in the

industry would ignite public interest in the issue and the press would promise reform, but meaningful reform would never materialise, and the press would soon return to its old ways. Leveson referred to this as a "pattern of cosmetic reform".

As a result, Leveson recommended that newspapers should be incentivised to join an independent and effective self-regulator, which passed the audit. If they did not, he recommended that parliament provide for a statutory backstop regulator.

The framework Leveson proposed was ultimately brought into effect in 2013, after a "rainbow coalition" in parliament forced prime minister David Cameron's hand. Led by the leader of the opposition, Ed Miliband MP, and with the support of coalition governing partners the Liberal Democrats as well as the SNP, the Green party, Plaid Cymru, and a brave band of Conservative backbenchers, parliament gave its approval to the framework, and a cross-party agreement was reached.

A royal charter – crucially, a non-statutory vehicle, – established the independent auditing body, the Press Recognition Panel. Its chief responsibilities are to verify whether the self-regulator is sufficiently independent, and to produce an annual report commenting on the success – or otherwise – of the framework. The framework would be successful if all significant publishers were regulated by an independently audited self-regulatory body.

This system was supported by two pieces of legislation. The first of these was a package of amendments to the

Crime and Courts Act 2013, designed to incentivise newspapers to sign up to an independent regulator.

One of the critical clauses in the Act was subject to ministerial commencement. In other words, it could be brought into force only at the discretion of the government.

The second was a reform to the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013, which would protect the royal charter from political interference in the future.

THE NATIONAL PRESS REFUSES TO COMPLY

The response of the largest newspapers to the Leveson reforms was grimly predictable. First they tried to frustrate the royal charter agreed by parliament; instead proposing their own royal charter. This was rejected by the privy council.

They then rebranded their old complaints handler, the Press Complaints Commission, as “IPSO”: the “Independent Press Standards Organisation,” and set it up to operate in much the same way as its predecessor. It has not been put forward for the independent audit proposed by Leveson, and it is clear from its rules that it would not pass. Its current chair is the former Conservative minister Lord Faulks.

The most fundamental flaw with IPSO is that it lacks any meaningful power. All of the executive functions of the organisation are outsourced to industry-controlled bodies.

The standards code, known as the “Editors’ Code”, is administered by IPSO but owned and controlled by the

Editors’ Code Committee, a group of newspaper editors (IPSO’s chair is given one seat on the committee of 12).

The rules which govern how IPSO operates are the ultimate responsibility of the Regulatory Funding Company, a group of newspaper executives. IPSO is a façade behind which the newspaper industry itself exercises complete executive control.

The largest newspapers claim to have good reasons for refusing to comply with Leveson and persisting with IPSO. They argue that a royal charter is close enough to statute to represent a threat to press freedom. Regulation should have no statutory element, they protest, on account of the risk that statute, which is at the mercy of politicians, will be abused by ministers to chill the freedom of the press to hold politicians to account.

This argument is wholly misconceived. The Leveson system creates no basis for politicians to interfere in regulation. On the contrary, the system carries additional protections which make it impossible for politicians to amend the regulatory framework without a supermajority in the Commons, Lords and Scottish parliament. In contrast, a simple majority is enough for any government to bring in legislation which affects the press, with or without the royal charter.

The argument is also advanced in bad faith. National newspapers criticise the royal charter, yet as mentioned above, they had proposed a royal charter of their own. They criticise the (alleged) risk of political interference, yet IPSO – the complaints handler they set up

and control themselves – has installed a politician as its chairman; an appointment which would be impermissible under the Leveson system.

They criticise the very principle that elements of statute should give meaning to press standards, yet for years they have lobbied aggressively – and successfully – for the standards book written by newspaper editors themselves, the Editors' Code, to be referenced in various legislation.

The truth is that newspaper owners do not have a principled objection to Leveson, or statute or royal charters. The principle they object to is that of independent accountability. That is their red line.

The result is that IPSO has never launched a standards investigation against any of its members. At the time of its establishment, the press claimed that IPSO could levy fines of up to a million pounds. No such fine has ever been levied.

Fortunately, the newspaper industry is bigger than the handful of white men who own national newspapers.

The independent media is thriving in the UK. Many of these publishers have joined the independent regulator Impress, an alternative to IPSO, which meets Leveson's audit requirements. Impress' publisher membership now outnumbers IPSO's, although IPSO's publishers are responsible for many more titles.

IPSO members, wealthier and more powerful than the Impress membership, successfully lobbied Conservative governments to abandon the crucial provision in the Crime and Courts Act

2013 which would have incentivised newspapers to leave IPSO and join an independent regulator. This has left publishers to choose themselves – without inducement or consequence – whether or not to subject themselves to independently enforced standards. Unsurprisingly, they have chosen to operate within an unaudited, ineffective framework controlled by themselves.

This brings us to the regulatory landscape today. The largest and most powerful publishers remain in IPSO, responsible for most newspaper titles and the vast majority of online and print news content consumed across the UK.

Meanwhile 200 independent, local, and a few well-known but more investigative or ethically-focused newspapers are in Impress.

THE CHALLENGE FOR GOVERNMENT – AND AN ELEGANT SOLUTION

Legislators could respond in one of three ways.

Option 1 would be to do nothing, and allow the current position to persist. This would be undesirable for at least three reasons, and unsustainable for one more.

The first and most obvious disadvantage of doing nothing is that it would leave the public vulnerable to discrimination, abuse and misinformation in the press. These were some of the problems identified by Leveson in his report into press standards back in 2012, and they were intended to be addressed by his reforms. If there is no meaningful reform, and the largest publishers are able to avoid independent regulation, then wrongdoing will go on.

Secondly, the lack of regulatory coherence among publishers creates problems in itself. Complainants have no single body to go to for any particular concern. Differing approaches to regulation result in different standards. Properly regulated publishers are potentially put at a commercial disadvantage, given the scrutiny they are subject to. For example, a publisher in IPSO might get away with publishing a sensationalist story which generates readership and subsequently advertising revenue, despite being substantively untrue. A publisher in Impress, on the other hand, would be less likely to publish such a story on account of its greater regulatory responsibilities, and the real prospect of an investigation or fine.

Furthermore, the lack of a clear regulatory framework for all national newspapers makes positive policy interventions in the media more difficult. Regulatory coherency would allow legislation to single out newspapers for supportive interventions in the newspaper industry, such as exemptions from additional and overburdensome regulation or financial support. This is currently impossible without creating dangerous loopholes.

Thirdly, and as a direct result, the British press continues to suffer abject levels of public confidence. There is a serious risk to maintaining an informed electorate with an unregulated newspaper industry that the public do not trust, and are given no reason to trust.

Finally, this solution is unsustainable for the simple reason that, without the buy-in of the largest titles or significant external funding support, the

independent regulator Impress and even the Press Recognition Panel are at risk of running out of funds eventually. This could leave over 200 publications, which have done the right thing and signed up to high standards, high and dry without any regulatory membership.

Option 2 would be to compel newspapers to all join a regulator under the Leveson system. So far as protecting the public is a priority, this is an attractive solution which would guarantee minimum standards of accountability across the press.

The argument against is that publishers have set up IPSO and do not wish to be independently regulated. This is a novel argument: that the government should acquiesce to the desire of a handful of corporations – after decades of scandal, abuse and stubborn refusal to reform themselves – to remain unaccountable, simply because they don't want to be regulated. This argument would be recognised as absurd if it were to be advanced by, say, the medical or legal professions – both subject to detailed statutory regulation. It is testament to how powerful the newspaper industry is that it is accepted in the case of the press.

That said, it would be naive to overlook the reality that governments, and their advisors, are sensitive to press hostility and are instinctively wary of upsetting newspaper owners. That is the reality of politics in the United Kingdom.

This chapter proposes a third option. Leveson foresaw, in his report over 10 years ago, that national newspapers might not accept independent

regulation, even had his incentives been implemented. He proposed a failsafe solution of regulation by Ofcom, the statutory body which already regulates broadcast media and has recently taken on functions regarding the regulation of online safety.

Invested with the appropriate powers, Ofcom could also take on a modest but impactful role on press standards.

It could operate alongside IPSO, allowing newspapers the option of persisting with industry-controlled complaints-handling if they wish, while retaining the ability to enforce basic standards on those occasions IPSO falls short.

This is how this option would work in practice:

- Newspapers would remain free to choose between joining an independent regulator (such as Impress), or opting for industry-controlled complaints-handling (via IPSO or an in-house body).
- Those publishers which joined an independent regulator like Impress would face no further regulatory responsibilities.
- Publishers which refused to join an independent regulator, on the other hand, would be subject to an appeals mechanism overseen by Ofcom, with complainants dissatisfied with the outcome of a complaints process given the right to seek Ofcom's review.

Complaints eligible for Ofcom review could be limited to the most egregious and damaging forms of press wrongdoing, such as inaccuracy, privacy

intrusion and discrimination, including hate speech. IPSO and the in-house systems could be granted a grace period to satisfy a complainant (three months, perhaps), before a complaint would become eligible to be referred to Ofcom for review.

Ofcom could also be granted the proactive powers which are so important for a press regulator, but which IPSO remains starved of. This would enable Ofcom to launch its own investigations into egregious or repeated breaches of standards at specific newspapers, where there has been a severe failure in ethical standards or a pattern of misreporting.

This approach would enable a progressive government to address the problem of an unregulated press causing consistent damage to the public interest whilst avoiding the political challenges that the introduction of compulsory independent regulation would generate.

The press has been given many chances over many years. It has consistently failed to live up to its promises of improvement. This proposal is a compromise, which provides a basis for a progressive government to take forward the agenda of higher standards in the press. It seeks to address the miserable levels of public trust in the media, and to ensure public protection from press abuse without the immense expenditure of political energy that compulsory independent regulation would require.

The closer we get to the next general election, the more daunting the prospect of standing up to Murdoch and other press owners becomes for any administration. The government ought to take

action on this now, and introduce what is a long promised and popular reform. Proper accountability is in the public

interest and is no less than what the victims of press abuse and the British public deserve.

What the government should do

1. Give Ofcom powers to act as a backstop regulator for newspapers which do not join an independent regulator recognised under the royal charter.

CHAPTER 10

LESSONS FROM ABROAD

Lexie Kirkconnell-Kawana, chief executive of the regulator Impress, outlines a typology of press regulation in democracies, and suggests what the UK could learn from other countries

There is a common, often strong-held view that any attempt to regulate the UK press amounts to unjustifiable state censorship. This ‘laissez-faire’ position has been adopted by successive governments for most of modern history. Meanwhile, broadcasters have long been subject to statutory regulation, and, following the Online Safety Act, social media platforms, search engines and their users – ie, the rest of us – are too. This leaves the UK in an interesting position, in which the speech rights of the press (principally the proprietors of news websites and print titles) are elevated above the rights of everyone else.

The laissez-faire position is, broadly speaking, that the press should remain untouched by the state or any regulatory body to ensure a diversity and plurality of views, giving audiences greater

choice. (This argument, historically, has largely been applied to print media. The consensus that broadcasters should be regulated was because beaming news into people’s homes was seen as giving broadcasters undue influence. In the digital age, of course, format convergence now means such distinctions have fallen away.) Importantly, the advocates for this position say that the press should be able to and can self-regulate, and that readers can ‘vote with their feet’ should the press fail to self-regulate effectively.

So how have those arguments held up over time? Perhaps the most obvious problem is that the unregulated UK press has not delivered a plurality of news sources. Users have very little choice in the UK; while the UK boasts thousands of news websites and titles, this choice is an illusion, as the UK

media market has steadily concentrated towards monopoly.¹ It has not delivered greater freedoms for journalists, nor promoted public trust in the press. Going by the numbers, the UK ranks 20th on the Reporters Sans Frontieres press freedom index, far behind other democracies, and ranks the lowest of all 28 countries in media trust on the Edelman Barometer. When we break down media trust further, it is public, regulated broadcasters doing the heavy lifting to eke out the little public trust there is: when we remove broadcasters from the mix, public trust in media plummets further.²

Giving a class of press proprietors more rights than everyone else, then, would seem to have failed to deliver any of the foundational justifications of the laissez-faire position in any practical way. One could argue that a lack of plurality, fewer journalistic protections and low trust are attributable to variables other than the lack of regulation, so it is worth extending our analysis to other democracies to extrapolate how, controlling for different market contexts, regulation interacts with press freedom. As it turns out, the relationship is much more complex – and complementary – than the laissez-faire absolutists would have you believe.

The principles that most countries try to incorporate into media regulation are: independence – ensuring decision-making is fair and impartial,

and not captured by state or industry influence; effectiveness – compliance with ethical standards and enforcement of decisions and remedies; coherence – the model must ‘make sense’, corresponding to media use and media effects; and the public interest – that the public and civil society are able to participate in decision making or be represented in some way to give the system democratic value. With this scope in mind, three different, broad models for press regulation emerge.

VOLUNTARY BODIES

In some countries, voluntary or self-regulatory industry bodies are funded by the press in an attempt to demonstrate that it can regulate itself autonomously without the need for further state intervention. In the UK, the Independent Press Standards Organisation, which is owned and run by press groups, and adopts the Editor’s Code of Practice, which is managed by (as its name suggest) newspaper editors, is a primary example. In Spain, the Federacion de Asociaciones de la Prensa de Espana (FAPE), an association of journalists, has an arbitration commission which could be regarded as the Spanish self-regulatory body. The outlier in this model is the United States; there is no national press council or self-regulatory body in the US. Instead, it has a handful of industry associations, some of which provide legal support and

¹ See the findings on media concentration from the Media Reform Coalition’s Who Owns the Media ? report, published 2025

² Newman, N, Reuters Institute Digital News Report: United Kingdom, 2024

or train journalists, but none of which have an explicit standards-setting, complaints handling or dispute resolution function.

All three jurisdictions suffer from media concentration and political interference. These systems often fail the test of independence, since they are wholly dependent on and subject to the industry which they serve; they fail on effectiveness, since the industry is often reticent to sanction itself; and they fail on public interest, because while the public can bring complaints, they have no decision-making power or representation under these models.

CO-REGULATORY BODIES

This model provides legal arrangements for cooperation between the press councils or self-regulatory bodies and state media, communications or broadcast regulators; it also covers systems where a press council or self-regulatory body is given recognition in law or delegated powers by the state. The German press council, the *Presserat*, for example, was established in 1956 and is legally recognised. It is explicitly mentioned in Article 19 of the reworked Interstate Media Treaty. In Belgium, and more specifically in the French- and German-speaking communities, the *Le Conseil de déontologie journalistique* has been legally recognised by two decrees, one for each of the communities covered by its jurisdiction. The Danish Press Council is recognised in law through the Danish Media Liability Act, which establishes it as an independent public tribunal to deal with complaints about the mass media, and the Luxembourg

Press Council is recognised in law through the Law of 8 June 2004 on freedom of expression in the media, which defines its role and functions; the law also outlines the rights and duties of professional journalists and publishers, as defined in the council's code of ethics.

All countries are represented in the top echelons of press freedom indexes. They present a varied picture in terms of concentration (Germany and Belgium have high media concentration, whereas Denmark and Luxembourg are more pluralistic) and political interference is limited. These systems are marked by strong coherence and effectiveness, as they often reconcile press and broadcast regulation and ensure there are legislative backstops reinforcing the decision-making authority. They also typically strike an (sometimes uneasy) balance between the state, which plays an arms-length role in oversight, and the industry, which is represented by the self-regulatory body. In practice, this may give only the illusion of independence from both. For the same reasons, they often struggle to promote the public interest, because the public are ancillary to the controlling interests of the state and the industry.

STATE BODIES

In Portugal, the government media authority, the *Entidade reguladora para a comunicacao social*, has decision-making powers over press content. It has no direct powers over journalists, but over media companies themselves and what they publish. In Singapore, the press and media are regulated through a combination of laws; for example, the

Newspaper and Printing Presses Act governs the licensing of print media. The Press Council of India, a statutory body, plays a key role in promoting ethical conduct and ensuring standards in India.

Portugal is one of the highest rated countries on press freedom indexes, while Singapore and India rank at the bottom of those same league tables. There are various degrees of media ownership concentration across these three countries (Portugal has the highest plurality and India has the lowest). However, all these countries enjoy very high public trust in the media.

While these models, which centralise control to the state, are often highly effective at ensuring compliance and highly coherent, they often fail in terms of independence, because they are subject to political capture, and fail on public interest, because the state acts as the representative body for citizens, rather than allowing direct participation (outside of bringing complaints).

This comparison between the models is by no means comprehensive, and there are many more examples that support various interpretations of the 'best' regulatory conditions for press freedom to operate. To be clear, my argument is not that state regulation of the press can never infringe on press freedom – far from it. Undue state or political interference can have devastating effects on the role and function of journalism in society. My argument is that the absolutist position, which suggests only industry self-regulation assures press freedom, is clearly not

supported by a comparative analysis.

The interplay in a democracy between the state, the press and the public is a delicate one. The world over, there are numerous historical and contemporary examples that show us how to achieve fair, proportionate and balanced systems for power brokerage; press regulation is one important tool to achieve this.

THE PRESS RECOGNITION PANEL

In the UK, the most recent system emerged after the Leveson inquiry as part of the royal charter on self-regulation of the press, which created a body – the Press Recognition Panel – that could review and oversee industry self-regulatory bodies, if they elected to be subject to such oversight, to ensure they were independent of both state and industry interests, and to ensure those bodies were effective at holding news publishers – who voluntarily signed up to be regulated – to account. The system was designed with legal backstops, in the form of incentives for publishers to sign up to self-regulatory bodies, to ensure the system was coherent. Self-regulatory bodies would also be required to ensure public and representative groups could participate in decision-making, and also established a kitemarking system.

The system sought to carefully balance the various principles of independence, effectiveness, coherence and public interest in a thoughtful and innovative way. Yet after the initial stages of implementation, commitments to adopt the model were walked back by the industry, and successive govern-

ments failed to support it. Rather than being celebrated, a pedigree system which many other countries could learn from and emulate – given few countries have gotten this balance right so far – was lambasted as state-controlled, state-backed censorship, and largely abandoned.

Subject to the most criticism was the now-repealed section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. Section 40 gave judges the discretionary power that, where it was just and equitable to do so, they could order a shift in court costs, meaning a news publisher that had not signed up to an approved self-regulatory body could have had to pay costs of both sides of a case, even if they won. Critics claimed this law would effectively force news publishers to sign up to approved regulation. No alternative incentive was or has been proposed by any government, or the industry, to encourage news publishers to join an approved regulator, leaving the recognition system incomplete.

WIDER CONSEQUENCES

An important finding in the most recent Edelman Barometer is that the British public not only have the lowest trust in the media of all countries compared, but also have the lowest trust in all institutions (including NGOs, business and government). This demonstrates the importance of media trust and the effects of its absence. The media has a fundamental sense-making function; trusted news helps inform individuals and shape national identity. If people don't trust the media, why would they trust institutions and each other? Not

only has our commitment to voluntary self-regulation failed to deliver on its own terms, then; it is likely entrenching more general public distrust, to the detriment of all public institutions.

So what should we do about it?

The arguments that underpin the *laissez-faire* position in the UK do not hold. They have produced a system that does not support press freedom, plurality, or public trust. Our regulatory framework needs to be fundamentally reevaluated considering national and international evidence that shows different regulatory models are more compatible with these important principles. This could be in the form of public inquiry or consultation.

The government should endorse the incomplete recognition system established by the royal charter and create the conditions for it to operate and give effect to its objectives. It would be welcome to build in review periods to see if there is marked improvement in public trust and or plurality to evaluate its overall compatibility with press freedom.

Failing that, the government should consider co-regulatory or more interventionist state mechanisms such as recognition in law for self-regulatory bodies, delegating legal authority to those bodies to make them publicly accountable, or an independent government body given extended powers to regulate the press.

Our democracy in the UK deserves a press that is free yet answerable to the public it serves. Reviving the royal charter's recognition system—or enacting an equally credible co-reg-

ulatory or state model—would finally align the UK's rhetoric about press freedom with a structure that earns public trust. As the evidence shows

anything less leaves news, and the UK public it informs, trapped in this spiral of distrust and diminishing accountability.

What the government should do

1. Endorse the press recognition system established by the royal charter and create the conditions for it to operate and give effect to its objectives.
2. Establish a public inquiry or consultation to assess the national and international evidence on different regulatory models.

CHAPTER 11

THE CASE FOR LEVESON 2

Victim of press abuse and psychotherapist Jacqui Hames explores the close relationship between the media, the government and the police – and argues that the second part of the Leveson inquiry must be revived

When David Cameron announced in July 2011 that there would be a public inquiry into the ethics, culture and practices of the press, the public's strength of feeling was palpable. A universal outcry had followed a series of articles in the Guardian which revealed that the News of the World had hacked the phone of murdered schoolgirl Millie Dowler after her abduction. This egregious act alone was damning enough, but the story triggered further revelations of widespread phone hacking on an industrial scale.

Phone hacking was not the only emerging concern, either. Further shocks followed about press abuse more generally. Cameron highlighted some examples in his speech, including the disappearance of Madeleine McCann in 2007 – following which the editor of the Sun, Rebecca Brooks, 'obtained' and published Kate McCann's private diary without permission – and the arrest and

general condemnation of Christopher Jefferies for the murder of Joanna Yates in early 2011, despite being wholly innocent (eventually, eight newspapers would have to pay damages). Such incidents gave rise to enormous public concern about the seemingly unchecked power of newspaper editors and owners, who apparently had free rein to abuse absolutely anyone without accountability.

The Metropolitan police also came under fire. Serious questions were asked about the quality and scope of the investigation into Clive Goodman, who pleaded guilty to phone hacking offences related to members of the royal family and received four months imprisonment. More broadly, stories were rampant of senior officers having cosy relationships with news editors – and even fast-track routes into lucrative roles as newspaper columnists. Heads rolled, including those of the commissioner and

assistant commissioner.

The Murdoch organisation went into damage limitation mode, closing the paper with the most obvious links to phone hacking at the time, the *News of the World*. Just five days after Cameron's announcement, Murdoch himself appeared before the culture, media and sport select committee and declared that it was "the most humbling day of his life." Many were not convinced.

As a country, we had been here before. Press regulation in the UK began in 1953 with the founding of the General Council of the Press, which became the Press Council in 1962, and was replaced by the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) in 1990. During this period, there were also three royal commissions on the press (in 1947-49, 1961-62 and 1974), as well as the Younger Committee on Privacy (1972), the Calcutt report (1989-90) and the Calcutt review (1993).

In all, in 70 years, there had been seven inquiries into the conduct of the press. On all seven occasions, politicians had been swayed by the influence of powerful press owners to retreat from the recommendations. Would it be any different this time?

What was already different was that we had a coalition government. This could have proved a gamechanger. Cross-party agreement on new legislation would be easier to implement if the press could not hold the threat of negative coverage during the next election over one particular party.

Following consultations with the deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg, and Ed Miliband, the leader of the opposition, David Cameron announced

the inquiry. On 28th July, the eminent judge, Lord Justice Leveson, was formally appointed chair together with an independent panel.

It was designed to be a two-stage inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005. Part one would inquire into 'the culture, practices and ethics of the press' and make recommendations for a new regulatory system. Specifically, it would consider the extent of unlawful or improper conduct within media organisations; the relationships between journalists, the police, and politicians; and potential cover-ups or corruption that prevented earlier accountability.

Part Two, often referred to as 'Leveson 2', was designed to investigate instances of criminal conduct. It aimed to:

- Examine the extent of unlawful or improper activities within News International, other newspaper organisations, and other entities within the media, as well as by those responsible for managing personal data.
- Assess the manner in which any relevant police force investigated allegations or evidence of unlawful conduct by individuals associated with or connected to News International. This would have included reviewing the Metropolitan Police's re-evaluation of their initial investigation and examining the actions of prosecuting authorities.
- Investigate the extent to which the police may have received corrupt payments or were otherwise complicit in misconduct or in hindering proper investigations.

- Evaluate the degree of corporate governance and management failures at News International and other newspaper organisations, including the role of politicians, public servants, and others in relation to any inadequacies in investigating wrongdoing at News International.

Based on these inquiries, Part two would have considered the implications for the relationships between newspaper organisations, the police, prosecuting authorities, and relevant regulatory bodies. Additionally, it would have provided recommendations on any necessary actions to be taken.

David Cameron stated that Leveson 2 would convene only when relevant criminal proceedings were complete. He went on to state that the inquiry would have the power to see any document and summon any witness under oath, to be examined by a barrister, in public. Fifty-one individuals and organisations were granted 'core participant' status. I was one of them.

In 2002, my former husband, David Cook, was the senior investigating officer into the historical murder of private investigator Daniel Morgan, who had been employed by several newspaper groups including News International, now News UK. Morgan was found axed to death in a pub car park in south-east London in 1987.

David appeared on Crimewatch with a view to triggering new lines of inquiry. Just a few days after his appeal, the harassment began. Our mail was tampered with; objects in

our garden were moved; and people made attempts made to obtain private financial information. Most worryingly, we were put under surveillance: a white van appeared at the end of my driveway, and David was followed taking the children to school and nursery. And that's just what we knew about at the time. We later discovered that our phones were being hacked, and our Metropolitan police personnel files had been obtained.

We initially believed that this campaign was being perpetrated by suspects in the murder, and we were put under the umbrella of the victim protection scheme. However, when one of the vans was stopped, it turned out that the occupants were in fact working for the News of the World.

When challenged, the editor at the time, Rebecca Brooks, stated that the surveillance was carried out because the newspaper suspected that David and I were having an affair – despite the fact we had been married for four years and had two children. It was hard not to conclude that the real reason for the surveillance was to intimidate and subvert the murder investigation.

The impact of this surveillance on our life was profound. We were left feeling distressed and anxious. We had to take our house off the market due to concerns about allowing strangers access to our home. We had to inform the headmistress of our daughter's school and the head of our son's nursery about the possibility of strangers hanging around outside. All aspects of our daily life were reviewed, including whether it was safe to invite our

children's friends to our home.

My decision to be a core participant in the Leveson Inquiry was driven by my desire to expose the unethical practices of the press and to seek justice for the intrusion we experienced. I provided written and oral evidence to the inquiry, detailing the impact of the surveillance on our lives, including the breakdown of my marriage. I expressed frustration at the lack of a coherent explanation from the News of the World as to why we were placed under surveillance.

I believed there was a chance for answers to these questions, but it would only be during part 2 of the Inquiry, when the outstanding criminal trials would be complete.

The Leveson report was published in November 2012. I attended several private and public meetings with politicians including David Cameron, Nick Clegg, Ed Miliband and Harriet Harman. All looked me in the eye and promised we would have independent regulation of the press. Indeed, it appeared they had delivered as I watched from the public gallery the following year, when legislation was passed to enable the creation of an independent press regulation system.

Yet, under pressure from vested interests, politicians removed the incentives for participation in the new structure, and the important 'access to justice' mechanism designed to provide low-cost arbitration to the public. They also cancelled the crucial second part of the inquiry.

For the past 12 years I have watched as Labour politician after Labour politician promised to put it right,

to stand up for us and the public, to deliver a press that can be truly free to hold power to account, to investigate and expose on our behalf – and to be respected as it should be, instead of one of the most mistrusted in the world. Now, with Labour in government, it is their chance to deliver.

There are several compelling reasons why part 2 of the Leveson Inquiry into the press is still necessary more than a decade after it was first proposed.

1. Unfinished accountability. Without the second part of the inquiry, important questions remain unanswered, including the extent to which unethical practices were normalised – and who allowed them to flourish. This was a scandal of illegal behaviour which consumed multiple newspaper titles and was then covered up for over a decade. Police investigations failed to uncover the truth. Yet only one senior editor or executive was ever convicted, and there has been no investigation into the corporate governance practices at these publishers which allowed this to happen. Without Leveson 2, we will never know the full extent of criminal and corrupt behaviour, the guilty will continue to walk free, and the reforms necessary to prevent newspapers spying on members of the public from going on (or other illegal behaviour to take place in the press) will not be implemented.
2. Justice for victims. Many victims of press abuse – including people who had their phones hacked or personal lives destroyed – have been denied

justice. Part 2 was meant to address how certain newspapers acquired private information, and whether the police or government failed to act on known misconduct. Dozens of victims of press corruption provided evidence to Leveson part 1, but were advised to wait until part 2, which had more relevant terms of reference. Without part 2, victims are left without closure.

3. Press standards and public trust. In the absence of meaningful reforms, concerns about media ethics persist, including issues around misinformation and sensationalism, online harassment driven by tabloids, and politically biased coverage. In fact, public trust in the press has continued to fall and today Britain's press is among the least trusted in Europe and lowest in the G7. A thorough inquiry into past failings could strengthen efforts to uphold ethical journalism and rebuild public trust in the media.
4. Lessons for the digital age. Part 2 could also explore how unethical practices have evolved in the online media environment, and how lessons from the phone-hacking era apply to modern digital journalism and social media. This would help

shape modern media regulation to ensure that it balances press freedom with accountability.

Finally, the government's cancellation of Leveson 2 raised serious concerns about political interference. Major media groups lobbied to shut down further investigation, fuelling suspicions of a lack of transparency and undue influence over public policy. It is notable that Labour's change in position on Leveson 2 appears to have occurred around the time of increased engagement between Keir Starmer and Rupert Murdoch. Reinstating Part 2 would send a clear message that no one is above scrutiny, and that press freedom must be matched by press responsibility. We must demonstrate that we have a press that holds power to account – not to ransom.

To truly restore public trust in journalism and democratic institutions, we must complete what was started. The Leveson Inquiry was never just about the past. It was, and still is, about safeguarding the future of ethical journalism in the UK – and in doing so, strengthening our liberal democracy by establishing true free speech, instead of a pale imitation filtered through narrow political and financial interests.

What the government should do

1. Reinstating the second part of the Leveson Inquiry.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

This pamphlet does not establish a collective position – each set of proposals reflects the opinion of that individual author or coauthors. As with all Fabian publications, the views expressed do not represent the views of the Fabian Society.

Iggy Wood

1. Tighten competition law to prevent newspaper publishers acquiring an excessive market share, and extend ‘fit and proper’ rules to newspapers.
2. Revive plans set out in the Cairncross review to provide public funding for smaller news outlets.
3. End the lobby system in political journalism. At a minimum, expand its membership to include many more specialist journalists, and establish clear public interest duties.

Peter Jukes

4. Hold newspapers to the same standards as individual social media users under the Online Safety Act.
5. Close the loophole that gives newspaper publishers special exemptions online. Their social media accounts and websites should meet the same standards as individual users, especially when it comes to harmful content.

Stephen Kinsella

6. Encourage Ofcom to properly use the powers it has under the Online Safety Act to tackle unsafe social media design features.
7. Consider establishing a dedicated and more energetic regulator if Ofcom fails to deliver noticeable reductions in harm.

Sir Wayne David

8. Introduce a new anti-SLAPP bill, building on the private member's bill proposed during the last parliament.
9. Consult on incentivised or compulsory mechanisms of alternative dispute resolution for defamation cases as an interim measure, to end the threat of excessive costs which give SLAPPS their intimidating effect (while also depriving poorly resourced claimants of access to justice).

Barbora Bukovská

10. Put protection of journalists first: The government should link aid and trade to media freedom by making continued UK development aid and preferential trade agreements conditional on measurable progress in investigating and prosecuting attacks on journalists.
11. Protect British journalists and media workers abroad: The UK should immediately adopt the Jimmy Lai bill, which would guarantee consular access for arbitrarily detained British journalists and media workers abroad.

Nathan Sparkes and Julie Elliott

12. Give Ofcom powers to act as a backstop regulator for newspapers which do not join an independent regulator recognised under the royal charter.

Lexie Kirkconnell-Kawana

13. Endorse the press recognition system established by the royal charter and create the conditions for it to operate and give effect to its objectives.
14. Establish a public inquiry or consultation to assess the national and international evidence on different regulatory models.

Jacqui Hames

15. Reinstate the second part of the Leveson Inquiry.

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ABOUT THE SOCIETY

The Fabian Society is an independent left-leaning think tank and a democratic membership society with over 6,000 members. We influence political and public thinking and provide a space for broad and open-minded debate. We publish insight, analysis and opinion; conduct research and undertake major policy inquiries; convene conferences, speaker meetings and roundtables; and facilitate member debate and activism across the UK.



PRESSING ISSUES

EDITED BY IGGY WOOD
WITH A FOREWORD BY ALASTAIR CAMPBELL

The UK media is among the least trusted in the democratic world. Largely owned by a handful of corporations, and with a track record of abuse, misinformation and sensationalism, this is perhaps little surprise.

As ethics, privacy and other public protections have been neglected, new and genuine threats to the standing and freedom of the press have emerged. Meritless threats of expensive litigation, a failure to safeguard professional standards and credibility and, abroad, even the threat of physical violence, have all made it harder for journalists with integrity to produce the free, fearless reporting we so desperately need.

In this pamphlet, journalists and experts set out the problems that characterise the media landscape, propose a range of changes to improve standards, and set out how the government can uphold the rights of journalists both at home and around the world.

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