

Why Newspapers *Still* Matter

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David Bell

It turns out that a weekend in politics is a long time! Two days ago, the stage seemed set for a battle royal in Parliament over the future regulation of the Press.

This evening it appears that an agreement has been reached which is acceptable to all three main political parties and to the industry's critics. As I speak it is not yet clear that the industry also finds it acceptable. As ever the devil will be in the detail not just of the agreement but also of the way that it is to be implemented.

We fixed the date of this lecture six months ago and, of course, had no idea that it would co-incide with today's vote or that the final stages of negotiation would be so dramatic. If anything we thought agreement would have been reached long since.

As you know I was one of the six Assessors who worked with Lord Justice Leveson on his Report. Our job was to advise the Judge, but the report is his and his alone. I am proud to have played a small part in the process and I have enormous respect for him and his team.

As assessors we agreed when the Report was issued in November to make no comment on its conclusions at least until there was agreement on a way forward. We have not been involved at all with any of the discussions that have taken place in the past four months. So I hope you will forgive me if I do not plunge into the detail of the Report. I will be happy, as best I can, to answer questions about today's apparent agreement in due course.

Tonight I want to pull the camera back a little after a lifetime first as a journalist on a local paper and in Fleet Street, and then as a newspaper executive . And to explain why I believe, passionately, that newspapers *still* matter, but that it is now up to our industry to *prove* this afresh in the face of the very significant challenges that now face us.

Nearly 35 years ago Roy Jenkins delivered a memorable Richard Dimbleby lecture. It still reads beautifully. Its title was Home Thoughts from Abroad and its subject was the future of British politics. He was not much interested in individuals or parties but “the system itself and whether and how it ought to be changed and improved”.

My son reminded me of this lecture as I started to think what to say this evening. I can never hope to match Lord Jenkins’ oratory or his massive intellect. But I do want to try and take something of the approach he took and stand back a little from the fray. Some of the evidence we heard at the Inquiry - and there were 474 witnesses - has, of course, influenced what I want to say this evening.

At the start I just want to make it clear that I love newspapers and what they do. I have spent all my adult life in and around them. Ever since I started as a trainee journalist on the Oxford Mail I have seen journalists act as the last line of defence - in the UK and far beyond. I have seen them defend the otherwise defenceless. I have cheered as they lifted up stones which those in authority would rather were never even moved. And in recent years, like all of us, I have seen far too many of them lose their lives bringing what a former owner of the *Washington Post* called “the first rough draft of history” to us in stories, pictures and video.

For the avoidance of doubt I mean *all* journalists- broadsheet and tabloid, national and local- whether they work in print or online or radio or television. There are countless examples of great journalism - from the The Times brave reporting of the shambles of the Crimean War in the 1850s to the Daily Mail’s brilliant and painstaking support for the campaign to bring the killers of Stephen Lawrence to justice. Not only has its author just, rightly, won a special campaigning award at this year’s Paul Foot Awards in recognition of years of hard ,detailed work. But just three days ago one of the murderers named by the paper abandoned his appeal.

Lord Raglan, the commander of the British army in the Crimea, banned his officers from talking to William Howard Russell, the Times' reporter whose ground breaking investigative reporting caused an earthquake at the time and led to Florence Nightingale's involvement in revolutionising battlefield treatment of the wounded. One of Raglan's officers dismissed Russell thus: "a vulgar low Irishman who sings a good song, drinks anyone's brandy and water and smokes as many cigars as a Jolly Good Fellow. He is just the sort of chap to get information, particularly out of youngsters." Forty years later, in 1895, he was knighted.

On a much more mundane, but still important, level I learned as a young reporter on the Oxford Mail how many people at a local level rely on the press to right wrongs whether they might involve an overmighty local authority or the incompetence of what in those far off days was called the Gas Board.

I am proud to put myself firmly on the same side as Thomas Jefferson who once said that, taken to an extreme, "were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter". Russell was not the first or the last journalist to discover that journalists cannot expect to be popular. Newspapers have always been unruly, irreverent and partisan and long may they continue to be so.

But in the last few years something has changed. The critical functions of a free press, absolutely indispensable to ensure our society remains free, have been in grave danger of being overwhelmed in the public mind by a much darker, less sympathetic view of what newspapers are for. It is this that, I submit, we as an industry need to change. Consider some recent evidence:

In the ten years to 2013 the circulation of tabloid newspapers has fallen by an average of about 40 per cent. Circulation of what used to be called broadsheet papers is down on average about 45 per cent in the same period.

A YouGov poll published in this month's Prospect magazine says that only 40 per cent of those polled now believe what they read in broadsheets and only 10 per cent what they read in the 'red-tops'. According to You Gov just ten years ago 65 per cent of people believed the broadsheets and 14 per cent the red tops.

This same You Gov sample said that out of twelve national ‘institutions’ they were *least* proud of national newspapers. Only four per cent said they were proud of them. 38 per cent said they were ashamed.

Since MORI started its veracity index in 1983 journalists as a profession have only once been trusted by more than 20 per cent of those polled and the average over these thirty years is more like 17 per cent. Over this period no profession has consistently performed worse than ours.

It would be comforting to believe that these falls in circulation are *solely* the result of the rise of the internet and the other very serious commercial challenges that are affecting the industry. Comforting but not, I believe, correct.

Of course these challenges do threaten our very future and our profitability. Competition for attention has never been so intense. It may even be that one day the very word *newspaper* will be consigned to history as what we do now on paper is done only on electronic tablets or other delivery systems yet to be invented. We have a real fight on our hands.

In his lecture Jenkins chose to quote from a beautiful, if somewhat apocalyptic, poem by WB Yeats called *The Second Coming* which many of you may know. It was written in 1919 just after the end of the First World War. It is about the darkness before the dawn, about a world which had lost its bearings and the struggle to find new ones. Jenkins used it as a metaphor for what he thought was wrong with the British political *system*. I think this metaphor may also work for us.

The poem starts memorably:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

And continues a little later with the two lines that are lodged in my mind:

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

I believe that the uncomfortable truth for us is that there is a vacuum in the very heart of our industry - a real lack of the kind of conviction to which Yeats refers - and that we may have lost the trust of many of our readers in a more fundamental and damaging way than we still care to admit.

This came home to me at the Leveson Inquiry when time and again we heard witnesses from our own industry stressing the importance of the Editors Code of Practice as, if you like, the moral arbiter of what the industry does, the clear guidepost of what is acceptable and what isn't. Or if you like, to borrow from Yeats, the falconer among the falcons.

This Code is more than 20 years old. It has been written and regularly updated entirely by the industry. Not by a regulator like Ofcom. Not by judges. Not by the state, But by us. It is not perfect, but it reads very well.

To quote from its very first Clause: "The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information, including pictures" and "The Press, while free to be partisan, must distinguish between comment, conjecture and fact" and "a significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion once recognised must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence and - where appropriate- an apology published."

The events of the past few years seem to me to demonstrate beyond any doubt that this Code has too often been honoured only in the breach. Our readers are not stupid. They can see the gap between what we say we do and what we actually do.

It is tempting to say that the reputation of the industry has merely been temporarily tarnished by the alleged misdeeds -and many of them are still only alleged - of a very few and that the criticisms of the industry have largely been triggered by revelations about phone hacking and other illegal acts following brilliant investigative reporting by Nick Davies, the Guardian and the New York Times.

Tempting but wrong.

The witnesses , who are sometimes described as ‘victims’, who appeared before the Inquiry were not there only because their phones had been hacked, though some of them had been. They were there because in their experience the Editorial Code was scarcely worth the paper it was written on.

Listen to what Hilary Mantel, winner of two Booker prizes , said only this month about the reporting of her comments about Kate Middleton. She was reported in several papers to have said that Kate had been “gloss varnished” and had a perfect plastic smile and no personality. In fact, she said in a radio interview and the text of her speech absolutely bears this out, she was describing the “perception of her” and “my whole theme was the way we maltreat royal persons making them at once superhuman and yet less than human”

She went on “I don’t believe there was any lack of clarity, after all I have been practicing my trade for a number of years nowit was a matter of taking the words completely out of context – twisting the context – and setting me up as a hate figure”. Everyone here tonight will know instances when they too have seen this happen.

For me one of the most painful examples, which also raises questions about the principles which underlie the Code and has nothing to do with hacking, involved the treatment of the Watsons in Glasgow. Perhaps you remember their evidence to the Inquiry which left many of us who heard it in the courtroom close to tears. Their teenage daughter was murdered in 1991. Their son Alan committed suicide in 1992, aged 15. He was found clutching copies of two articles about his sister which were simply wrong. All that the Watsons wanted was a, simple, satisfactory apology as provided for in the Code. But they had to fight for many *years* to get it. They deserved better.

The Watsons are far from being celebrities. An argument has gathered force that “celebs” should accept rough treatment as the inevitable consequence of fame. Those who live by the sword should not protest if they die by it. Of course it is totally legitimate to expose hypocrisy or double standards and this is certainly not a new debate. Lord Justice Lawton put it succinctly back in 1977 when he was one of three judges who upheld the Daily Mirror in a case involving three pop stars in a dispute with their agent : “it seems these stars present one side of their profile to the public and enjoy it, but do not like it when the warts are shown... if you don’t like the glare, stay out of the limelight” .

But the Code gives the same fundamental rights to everyone whether celebrities or not .We can each judge for ourselves whether the ‘glare’ concentrated on some of them has sometimes seemed out of all proportion.

In a seminar before the Inquiry formally got under way in 2011 Mr Paul Dacre, the Editor of the Daily Mail , singled out for special criticism the “Hampstead liberals” with “gilded lifestyles” who presume to know what is best for millions of people whose interests they neither know nor understand. He went on “ news, let me remind you, is often something that the rich, the powerful, the privileged doesn’t want printed.”

“ My worry “ he said “ is that this liberal hatred of mass selling newspapers has transmogrified into a hatred of self regulation itself” because “ the problem is that Britain’s liberal class, the people who know best and who really run this country by and large hate all the popular press”.

For my part, at any rate, this is simply not the case. And poll after poll shows that a clear *majority* in the country share serious doubts about our industry’s standards. They are clear about what they want: accuracy, fairness, swift and simple redress for those who feel they may have been misrepresented.

The Watsons did not want money. They wanted what the Code promises: a simple, accessible system which they could use to win public acknowledgement that their family had been grievously wronged. Mrs Watson’s witness statement, still on the Leveson website, makes sobering reading.

It’s a striking fact that most of the editors who gave evidence to the Inquiry had a hard time recalling specific instances in which they had actually disciplined *any* of their journalists for breaking the Code. One newspaper owner put it this way in his evidence: “we don’t talk about ethics or morals because its a very fine line and everybody’s ethics are different”. This is *not* what the Code says.

After a lifetime in newspapers I know as well as anyone that the vast, the overwhelming, majority of journalists *do* believe in the standards set out in the Code. But sadly a minority, perhaps a minority of a minority, have created the present climate and we need to change it.

Hugh Cudlipp was a great red-top editor, perhaps the greatest since the war. His Daily Mirror was unruly, irreverent and often partisan, totally connected to its readership. He relished rows with politicians and those in authority and wrote a book called Publish and be Damned.

But this is what he said in 1988 about what he described then as the onset of the Dark Ages of tabloid journalism “ when investigative journalism in the public interest shed its integrity and became intrusive journalism for the prurient, when nothing , however personal ,was any longer secret or sacred and the basic human right to privacy was banished in the interest of publishing profit.”

Or take Sir Tom Stoppard, one of our greatest living playwrights, in an article written only yesterday. He wrote a play called Night and Day in 1978 whose young reporter hero was passionate about the importance of the freedom of the press. Today’s national press, he said, has a “split personality, part St George, part jackal” .This, he went on, is “not what I was writing about in 1978”.

Sir Harold Evans is equally critical . In his Cudlipp lecture, just this January, he praised the quality of much of the British press , but he also talked of “ the disdain for personal privacy and other decencies *as set out in the Editors code and so often disregarded*”(my italics)It is, he said, almost as if “there is a negative multiplier effect” so that “every reform provoked by some abuse is followed by some still grosser offences”.

These are not the words of a judge, or a regulator or a politician. They come from a man whom I believe to have been the greatest editor in my lifetime , a very considerable investigative journalist who clashed repeatedly with politicians and judges.

Roy Jenkins did not want to end his lecture on a bleak note. Nor do I. He was an optimist. I am too, especially on a day potentially as important as this one. So how is the trust to be restored? How is our industry to regain its bearings? For if great journalism does not survive, however it is delivered, our democracy will surely be at risk .

I helped found the Media Standards Trust in 2006 – long before anyone could ever imagine the events of the past two years let alone the summary closure of the News of the World after 168 years. Our aim back then was simple. We wanted our industry to take its Code *seriously*, to make sure it meant what it *said* it meant. We wanted the Press Complaints Commission, set up – as it was – by the industry itself to be the regulator that it *said* it was and not just the mediator that it had all too often become.

Over the years, as the PCC failed to change itself, the Trust reluctantly came to the conclusion that it needed root and branch reform, a conclusion that is now widely shared. But it always opposed regulation by the state or by politicians as did Lord Leveson in his Report.

I resigned from the Trust as soon as the Inquiry was announced in July 2011 and had no contact with it thereafter. Of course we all recognise that codes and rules can't *make* a culture. If we are to convince our readers, the people whose verdict the polls reflect, that newspapers do still matter it is we who have to prove afresh that we *do* what the Code *says* we do.

The charge against the industry, against all of us, is that we have too often turned a blind eye to what has been done in our name and been happy to talk about our rights, but less willing to recognise our responsibilities. Too often we have demanded real accountability from everyone but ourselves. Too often we have been unwilling simply to say sorry or print swift clarifications and apologies when we are just wrong.

So I believe that, regardless of what happens now, the first step on the road to proving that newspapers still matter and deserve to do so is for us to be seen to take the *principles* set out in the Code much more seriously.

But there are other steps that we can take as well. Earlier this month I was at a conference at which Jill Abramson, the most senior editor at the New York Times, described good journalism thus. It is, she said, work “that is thoroughly reported, elegantly told and honours the intelligence of its readers to leave them better informed”.

This is almost exactly what Hugh Cudlipp also believed . Polemical and populist as it was, his Daily Mirror also ran a regular section called Mirrorscope which analysed important issues fairly and clearly for a mass audience. It too was “ thoroughly reported and elegantly told.”

Newspapers have to demonstrate every day that what we do is relevant to, and connects with, our readers.. But how we connect, how we are relevant is indeed being turned upside down by the rise of social media and the dramatic powers and potential of an internet- based world. I think much of the industry has been slow to understand new ways to harness the power of its audience -in journalistic and commercial terms, slow even to use the data now at our fingertips to know in detail *who* our audience is or who our new audiences will be.

We are not as good at *really* connecting with our readers as we may think we are. There are examples , at the Svenska Dagbladet in Sweden and the Seattle Times in the United States to name only two, of newspapers that have turned many of the challenges we face to their advantage and are doing well as a result. We also have a lot to learn from other consumer-facing companies about how to know and connect with our readers. We need to do it quickly.

We can, however, take some heart from history. It was confidently predicted that radio would kill newspapers, that television would kill radio and the cinema, that VCRs would kill TV and the cinema. And so on. In fact we now have more TV channels, more radio stations, more screens than ever before. Of course the *way* we use these channels has changed just as the music industry has had to adapt to a whole new way of selling and delivering its products because of the internet. In all these cases we are talking of a ‘both/and’ world not an ‘either/or’ one.

And we must learn from some of our commercial mistakes. With hindsight one of these may have been the ‘take no prisoners’ price war of the last decade. Not only did these price cuts generate increases in sale which often evaporated as soon as prices were increased again; more seriously they did not do justice to the real, underlying *value* of newspapers. This may in turn be part of the reason why some of us are so nervous about what people will pay for news online although some in the industry are already understanding the commercial potential of new kinds of content.

None of this does away for a second, though, with the fundamental need in a free society for what newspapers do- to report without fear or favour, to defend the defenceless ,to be the scourge of the overpowerful, to use their power as *mass* communicators to shine an intense light and right wrongs.

Imagine for a moment a world without newspapers and the journalists who write them. The field would be left much more open to those who would prefer to conceal, to prevaricate, to pretend and to dissemble.

Whatever happens in the months to come- it is imperative that we regain the trust we have lost and prove that newspapers *still* matter, that we can uphold the standards we say we uphold

It is time, once again, for the falcons to hear the falconer.