

Crusaders or pigs in raincoats?

For several years I have lived in the same London street as a high profile platinum-album-selling British musician. In the spirit of the super-injunction age, let's call this person XYZ. Not long ago, in the middle of the day, I opened the front door to a young and very fetching blonde with a dazzling smile and low-cut blouse who asked if it was correct that XYZ lived in this street. Rather more distracted than I should have been, I said yes. What number might that be, asked the blonde, with an even more dazzling smile.

At this point, thankfully, I recovered from my little fantasy. Why do you want to know? I asked. A rather unconvincing and ill-prepared tale ensued about a parcel

from a friend of a friend which had to be hand-delivered, at the end of which I was sufficiently in command of my wits to ask the obvious question. Are you a journalist? Clearly lacking the subterfuge of, say, a Paul McMullan, she responded with a rather sheepish yes (while still fluttering her eyelids). But, she added quickly, it was a very important assignment.

I closed the door, wrote a scribbled note to warn of the impending intrusion, satisfied myself I wasn't being followed and pushed the note through XYZ's letter-box on the way to the pub. The subsequent answerphone message of thanks stayed on our machine for months, replayed many

times by my children as evidence of the exotic company I keep. I have never spoken to XYZ before or since. This particular journalist was seen skulking round our street for several hours (in tandem with a less fetching male accomplice) and some days later a garbled piece appeared in a tabloid newspaper linking XYZ romantically to a sporting celebrity in a story which was 45 per cent complete fabrication, 45 per cent wild exaggeration and 10 per cent approximately true. The names were spelt correctly.

It is important to stress at this point that XYZ has never courted publicity, never been featured in *OK!* or *Hello!*, never been involved in any corruption nor infidelity nor public drunkenness nor any other misdemeanour which could possibly justify press interest. This celebrity's name was made purely through having a superb voice and an exceptional talent for song-writing, providing genuine pleasure to – literally – millions of concert-goers and music lovers around the world.

I have no idea whether this person has had a mobile phone hacked, health records stolen or bank details blagged. Since clearly regarded as legitimate fodder for the tabloid press, it would be surprising if XYZ had not been

targeted by others. But it does raise a fundamental question about the kind of journalism we want to foster and the kind which, frankly, is little more than prurient gossip-mongering disguised as public interest information.

In light of the revelations about phone hacking and some of the criminal and immoral practices which were endemic on the *News of the World* – and probably elsewhere – we are warned in threatening tones that injunctions, regulatory bodies and, God forbid, any kind of statutory regulation would risk returning to Soviet-like authoritarian dictatorship. It is, goes the argument, only complete journalistic licence which stands between a free democracy and totalitarian autocracy.

This is an argument which confuses two entirely different models of journalism. On the one hand is the caped crusader – the Clark Kent figure who is committed to rooting out corruption, standing up for the bullied and the downtrodden and confronting evil. On the other hand, there is the famously evocative image from *Spitting Image* in the 1980s in which pigs in raincoats carrying shorthand notebooks turned over unsuspecting victims while cravenly sucking up to their foul-

mouthed editors and bullying proprietors.

In the aftermath of phone hacking and the very clear message from politicians (and the public) to the Leveson inquiry that something must be done to prevent these obscene journalistic practices from taking root again, we have heard many plaintive cries that the caped crusader must be protected at all costs. No one could possibly disagree with that.

But we have to ask ourselves – not just as journalists, but as people who care about the nature of our public life and the sort of society that we aspire to – how many of these plaintive cries are actually camouflaged attempts to protect the pigs in raincoats. Because it may just be time to accept, as many other healthy, vibrant and informed democracies around the world appear to do without the slightest damage to their democratic freedoms, that perhaps we should finally call time on the mucky side of the trade.

Yes, people may enjoy reading about the private life of XYZ, not to mention the many other skilled, talented and gifted actors, athletes,

entrepreneurs, artists, architects, dancers and so on who light up our lives. But we are not entitled to gatecrash their private lives simply because they have an exceptional talent or have achieved something extraordinary. And we are certainly not entitled to pursue the kind of vicious, brutal, destructive and ultimately stultifying journalism which became the hallmark – in particular – of many stories in the *Nems of the World*. In other words, this is not just about the techniques of good journalism. It's about the definition of good journalism.

If Leveson is about anything at all, it should be about understanding the difference between freedom of speech and freedom from abusive and intrusive speech. This is the chance for journalism professionals to protect the caped crusaders while also defending the legitimate right of XYZ and others to live their private lives in peace. And if it needs an independent body with statutory teeth to make it stick – well, it doesn't seem to have fettered our television journalists.

Steven Barnett

The writer is professor of communications at the University of Westminster. His book on television journalism is being published in November.