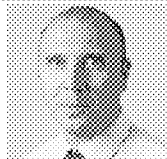


ANNEX 4: GUARDIAN ON-LINE ARTICLE

Is Paul Dacre's press accreditation plan really credible?

Mail editor comes to Leveson inquiry with surprising proposals – from anyone else, they would not have been taken seriously

Comments (30)



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Historic example of future Paul Dacre backed system. Photograph: Richard Jones/Sinopix

Paul Dacre came to the Leveson inquiry with ideas. Some of which we got to hear, although Robert Jay had three hours of questioning to get through. And if anybody else had proposed them, they would have been ... well, dismissed almost immediately. But this is Paul Dacre, and if the Mail editor-in-chief has an idea, we all ought, at least, to take him seriously. Who knows, we might agree after all.

He proposed, in effect, the industry licensing of "first class" journalists for want of a better description. There are, apparently, 17 bodies producing press cards, when many of us for the NUJ card that is recognised by the cops was quite enough. But Dacre suggests that owners (not the union) should register their

reporters for a centralised industry-run accreditation scheme for "kitemarked" journalists and publishers.

The perks he suggested would be that kitemarked hacks would gain behind-the-scenes access to anything from government briefings to interviews with footballers after the match. One plus – dealing with the state licensing issue – is that it would be an industry-run scheme. A second is that it could deal with Johann Hari-like problems, making it easy for a journalist to be struck off, or rather barred from future employment from participating newspapers. Dacre himself even used a comparison with the General Medical Council.

Yet, while the "Dacrecard" scheme is an idea that shouldn't be rejected at the first time of asking, it doesn't take much thinking to come up with objections. Would third parties participate? Could a hospital or the Department of Health, say, hold a press briefing closed to "accredited" reporters only? Surely their duty is to communicate to the public. Will the likes of the Premier League or Manchester United, quite literally play ball, when they like to choose who gets to turn up to press briefings or interview Sir Alex.

Then there's the question as to how to deal with bloggers. They may thrive on being marginal, but this risks pushing right to the fringes of the system. Meanwhile, where would foreign media, with their own rules, fit in? Nor is it certain that a Dacrecard system would be effective. Whilst some of the reporting closed shops, most obviously the political lobby, confer benefits, being outside it does not hamper quality political journalism. It could be surprisingly easy to make a mockery of the Dacrecard system.

The debate, though, is worth having. If newspapers wanted to get behind a scheme, and even promote it, it could have some merit in dealings with the public. Cards could be linked to an easy access database – at least allowing people to verify a reporter's bona fides if that were deemed necessary. But whoever ran it would have to be not just independent of government, they would have to be independent of any one owner or group of owners.

Leveson has also heard repeated complaints about the conduct of "paparazzi" photographers, chasing Sienna Miller down the street, staking out JK Rowling endlessly. They too could be told to hold Dacrecards, which has some attractions. Could the scheme be enforced in an era when an iPhone picture is good as anything most cameras can manage? Members of the public should be exempt from the card requirement – while picture desks ought to notice if the same Joe Patel with the same bank details kept turning up with snaps of pregnant celebrities day after day.

Paul Dacre's plan may not survive sustained contact with the real world over the coming days. But it would be unwise to reject it straight away when all the press has – like it or not – something of an image problem.

[ends]