

1) Who you are and your current job title.

My name is Camilla Wright. I make this statement in my personal capacity as editor of Popbitch in compliance with a notice sent on 26 June 2012. In this statement I have answered the questions asked of me in good faith and to the best of my recollection. Nothing in this statement should be taken to indicate any waiver of legal privilege.

(2) To what extent were you personally involved in drawing up this proposal for a new system of self-regulation based on contractual obligations, as now set out by Lord Black?

I had no involvement in it.

(3) How far would you personally, in your capacity as editor, expect to be involved in the final decision as to whether your publication signed up to the contractual obligations envisaged by this system? Please explain in full how that decision would be taken.

I would expect to make the decision on behalf of my publication after appropriate consultation. This decision would be made using the following criteria and bearing in mind that Popbitch is an online only publication: commercial considerations, whether signing up would make a negative or positive impact to the editorial mission of the publication, whether signing up to these contractual obligations would provide any benefits to my publication, whether I thought this system bore any relevance to the operation of my publication and precisely what the system was going to look like, cost and work, and whether it appears to work in the public interest .

(4) In so far as you are able to do so, please indicate whether your publication is at present fully ready and committed to enter into these contractual obligations. If it is not at present fully ready and committed, please explain why, and detail any changes that would need to be made to the proposal, any further development to proposal required, or any preparatory steps that would need to be taken at your publication, in order to put it in the position of being fully ready and committed to enter into these obligations. If there are no circumstances in which it would be prepared to enter into obligations of this nature, please explain why not.

The proposal set out by Lord Black is undoubtedly a well-meaning attempt to provide a basis under which the major newspaper publishers, who have seemingly on occasions ignored the already established PCC code when it suited (thus creating the culture, practices and ethics for which this Inquiry was established to investigate), might be persuaded to follow their own code. As such, the proposal appears to be written by and for the vested interests of the newspaper business. It appears to have almost no relevance to editors of independent web publishers such as myself.

Being asked, as an obvious outsider to the national newspaper industry, to

sign up to a contract whose architects and principal beneficiaries were the same media bosses in this gentleman's club, undoubtedly has limited appeal. The composition of the trust board and complaints committee would appear to be drawn from, and relevant to, national newspapers rather than digital media.

As we have been uninvolved in the drawing up of these proposals we are unaware of what would be expected of us in financial terms at all and therefore unable to even consider entering into negotiations for this contract. It would be like agreeing to sign a contract to buy a house without knowing what price you were expected to pay. Or what kind of house you'd end up with.

The proposal suggests that a great deal of work has been done to ensure that incentives are provided to encourage publishers to join, however nothing which would be relevant to publications such as Popbitch has been provided. The incentives are said to fall into four areas - inhibit access to press cards, PA copy, a kitemark and major advertising. We do not use press cards or use PA copy. And a state, or industry, approved kitemark might have the reverse effect than the one obviously intended – i.e. readers could find it preferable to get a publication aimed at revealing the behaviour of the rich and powerful of the media establishment which was not already pre approved by them. If – and it appears to be a big if – you can legally restrict the trade of these advertisers, it would appear doubtful that the major advertising campaigns alluded have any relevance to us either. And even if it is plausible to give major advertisers more power, surely involving them in the policing of the press, whose job should be to monitor the behaviour of these large corporations, is not desirable. There should be clear blue water between advertising and editorial. It would at least be democratic if parliament were to make decisions affecting the regulation of the newspaper industry rather than rich businesses like Barclays, RBS/Nat West, Vodafone, Nestle etc.

One of the difficulties that independent publishers without multi-millionaire backers have is that UK defamation and privacy law and in particular the associated legal cost makes it easy for the rich and powerful to file frivolous and vexatious legal claims to shut up or even shut down any challengers, while making it prohibitively expensive to fight them. It therefore could be useful for small publishers, particularly online publishers, to agree to a code of practice that rewards them with access to legal advice or arbitration help in such circumstances. In return, it is possible to imagine that there could be a generalised voluntary code of ethics and practices relevant to independent or digital publishers which is not so proscriptive that such benefits as described would be attractive.

(5) What specific differences would membership of a system of the kind set out by Lord Black, underpinned by contractual obligations, make to the culture, practices and ethics of your publication?

It would be unlikely to have much effect. Firstly, the kind of practices which Lord Black's system hopes to regulate are not necessarily applicable beyond

the newspaper industry. We already have a policy of responding as quickly as we can to complaints or queries made to us about things on the website, messageboard or newsletter, and have a well-publicised email address that is answered personally to enable easy contact of us. It would be inappropriate to claim that we are immune from making mistakes but corrections agreed are made with appropriate prominence on the website or newsletter. No reasonable request for a right of reply has been refused. And from the nature of digital media – things can be removed, amended or added to immediately, through the updating of a web page or the adding of copy to an email to subscribers. Such things are not readily available to newspapers – which presumably must get exponentially more emails/calls and complaints to answer and therefore present more difficulties for them in responding to them. Anything we do is subject to possible scrutiny by UK and EU media law already.

Whatever the benefits (perceived or actual) may be, statutory regulation of digital media would mean moving in the direction of countries such as China and Russia - however small the step. Ideally we should be trying to move towards the model they have in the USA where freedom of expression is enshrined in law. The legal work needed in UK is to enhance the rights of freedom of expression and widen the definition of public interest reporting as, currently, it is not fit for purpose. There may be benefits brought by the proposed Defamation Act, but it is still just a Bill, and privacy law is currently a complex and expensive shambles.

(6) Is there any other comment you wish to make on the proposal put forward by Lord Black, or on the proposals put forward by others, that are now published on the Inquiry website at <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/about/module-4-submissions-on-the-future-regime-for-the-press/>

The kind of one-size-fits-all regulation generally proposed appears to be aimed squarely and solely at major newspaper publishers, with digital media just tacked on. The Inquiry has already intimated it is not seeking to regulate online platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, amateur blogs. The category for independent online publications which fall between those with interests in print media and these forms of digital media is small, and while obviously related to print media, the culture and practices are different enough to almost say that you might as well ask us to be regulated by the Food Standards Agency as the PCC, or the proposed successor put forward by the newspaper industry. Any regulatory system has to be fair to all to be adopted. Many online publications are already hosted abroad to avoid regulation, and it wouldn't be difficult to see others looking at other tricks, such as simply rebranding as weekly books on kindles, to avoid all regulation and most laws.

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Camilla Wright
12.07.12