

A
chance
for
change

*An opportunity to open up the media to
a wider range of voices and perspectives
and to break the grip of media moguls*

The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) was established in 1979 by people, mostly in the media unions, who wanted to resist the power of the corporate press and campaign for the real independence and accountability of the media.

Since, in 1995, Tony Blair decided that the support of Rupert Murdoch was crucial to electoral success and Labour abandoned long-standing policies on media ownership, we have been almost a lone voice challenging the orthodoxies of deregulation and liberalisation of media ownership.

Now suddenly politicians are rediscovering old truths and the CPBF is publishing this pamphlet to inform and encourage more people to join the battle for a democratic media system that serves the whole of society, not just the owners whose grip on our media has been so lavishly exposed in recent months.

The CPBF welcomes invitations to speak at meetings and debates, and to provide information on all media matters.

Go to www.cpbf.org.uk or look us up on Facebook. You can join the Campaign too – details are at the back of the pamphlet or online.

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A chance for change

For years questions about who owns and controls the media, about the ethical behaviour of journalists and about the social responsibility of the media organisations have been confined to people active in the field.

Two weeks in July 2011 changed all that. When journalists at the Guardian revealed that people working for the News of the World had hacked into the mobile phone of a murdered teenager, there was a public outcry.

There followed the closure of Britain's best-selling newspaper, the departure of two of the most senior police officers in the country, along with top News Corp executives, the abandonment of News Corporation's bid to take over Britain's largest satellite broadcaster, BSkyB, and the setting up of a major public inquiry into the ethics and regulation of the press, the Leveson Inquiry.

It was a political crisis that has rocked the media, police and political establishments.

This is hugely significant not simply for the media but for British democracy itself. Millions of people have had a shocking insight into how power works at the top of our society.

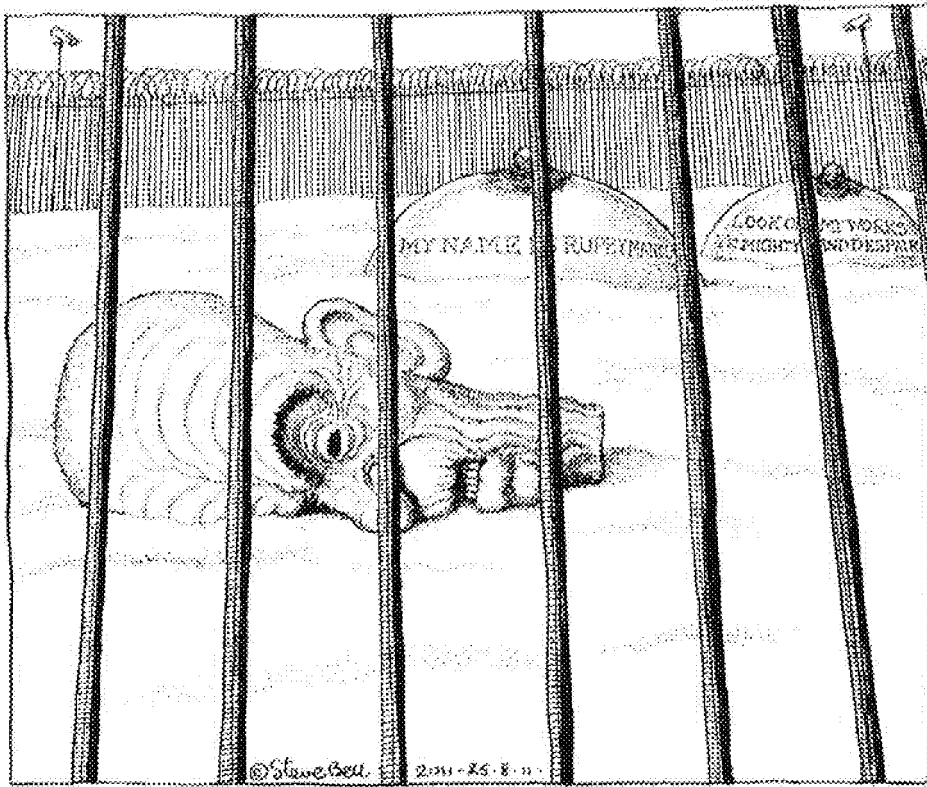
They are outraged by a newsroom culture that privileges profits over ethics, by the complicity between police and the press, and by the dozens of meetings between David Cameron and senior News Corp figures. Everyone can see that something is wrong at the heart of British society.

But it has also presented an opportunity to open up the media to a wider range of voices and perspectives and to break the grip that media moguls have held for so long over our public information and discussion.

A lot will depend on how energetically campaigners for media reform seize this opportunity and press for structural reforms.

Whether it leads to the downfall of people at the top of government, as Watergate did in the US in the 1970s, or the prospect of wider political reform, is far from certain.

But, either way, the corporate media are facing their most serious challenge to date.



PHOTO

They are calling it Britain's Watergate

The media and democracy

There has just been an amazing event in Britain. The most powerful media company was stopped in its tracks, not by government but by popular protest – people power.

This showed itself soon after it was announced that the US-based News Corporation was bidding to buy up the majority share in BSkyB, Europe's biggest broadcaster. Tens of thousands of people took part in an online protest to the media regulator Ofcom against the move which would have given Rupert Murdoch's global media group an even more dominant position in the UK media.

Ofcom duly advised the government to refer the BSkyB bid to the Competition Commission for a full investigation, but Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt swept it aside. Instead he spent months in an unseemly process of secret negotiations with News Corporation stitching up a cynical deal which would allow the takeover to proceed.

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In the aftermath of the crisis it was revealed that all sorts of other formal and informal contacts with News Corporation were going on during this time. The figures are staggering. In the 15 months after David Cameron assumed office he met with Murdoch or his executives 26 times.

Altogether ministers had formal meetings with News Corporation executives on more than 60 occasions. Adding in social events such as receptions at party conferences, at least 107 meetings were held – an average of one every four days. It is a graphic illustration of the level of power and influence wielded by News Corporation over the British government.

Parallel with all this, the phone hacking scandal at The News of the World was pursued tenaciously by Guardian reporter Nick Davies. His stories were ignored, even derided, by the rest of the media. The Metropolitan Police failed to investigate the evidence in any serious way.

Politicians, too, with the exception of the persistently critical voices of Labour MPs Tom Watson and Chris Bryant, were supine, fearful of unleashing the attack journalism in which News Corporation specialises.

POLICE AND POLITICIANS SUBMIT

The phone-hacking scandal revealed the dark side of Rupert Murdoch's media power, and how it penetrated into politics, the Metropolitan Police and virtually every nook and cranny of public life.

The chilling effect of a media company which politicians regard as too large and powerful to upset was vividly demonstrated by the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee. The committee meekly deferred to Rebekah Brooks, then chief executive of News International, when she refused a formal request to appear before it in 2009.

MPs confessed they deliberately pulled their punches in the investigation out of fear that their personal lives would be put under surveillance by News International papers.

The committee did summon the courage to state that her refusal reinforced "the widely held impression that the press generally regard themselves as unaccountable".

This is the question: is the press, and not just News International, above the law, beyond regulation and accountable to no-one but itself? And if so, should this be the case, and what can be done about it?

Any attempts to link the BSkyB bid with the phone hacking scandal, or whether News Corporation was a "fit and proper" owner of BSkyB, were consistently dismissed by Hunt and Cameron. By June 2011 Hunt had concocted a flimsy deal which involved Sky News being hived off into an "independent" company.

IT CAME TO THE CRUNCH

Public opposition moved to a new level and hundreds of thousands of people registered their opposition through online sites 38 degrees and Avaaz.

Suddenly, in July, what seemed to be an invulnerable media empire was exposed for what it was and forced into humiliating retreat. Nick Davies's team reported that Glenn Mulcaire, a private investigator working for the News of the World, had listened to and deleted messages on the phone of the missing schoolgirl, Milly Dowler.

The resulting outrage triggered an emergency Parliamentary debate on 6 July, the establishment of the Leveson inquiry and the end of the BSkyB bid. The News of the World was published for the last time on 10 July 2011.

The departure of News International chief executive Rebekah Brooks and the resignation of Les Hinton, on whose watch as News International chief executive phone hacking was rife, followed. The revelation of close links with News International led to the resignations of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Paul Stephenson, and the Assistant Commissioner, John Yates, and on 19 July an apparently 'humbled' Rupert Murdoch was hauled before the committee, with son James and Rebekah Brooks.

On 17 August the MPs published damning documents which pointed to yet further dishonesty and evasion on the part of Rupert and James Murdoch, News International executives and former News of the World editor Andy Coulson.

A CHANCE FOR CHANGE

These dramatic events highlight the utter failure of press regulation, as evidenced by the abysmal performance of the now totally discredited Press Complaints Commission, but they also raise a wider question: how was Rupert Murdoch, who started to build his UK media empire with the acquisition of The News of the World in 1969, able to achieve not simply such a vast amount of media power, but such sway over politicians?

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As he acquired more newspapers he used them to promote his views: pro-privatisation and deregulation, anti-EU, anti-trade unions, anti-the BBC – in fact anti anybody and anything that might stand in the way of his commercial interests.

Politicians have stood in awe of such concentrated press power; in Mrs Thatcher he had, of course, a natural ally, but under Tony Blair Labour deliberately tailored its media policies to suit Murdoch, in return for the support of his papers both at and between elections.

So we have a pattern of media ownership that fostered a belief that News International was invincible, that its newspapers were immune from ethical restraints, and that those who sought to criticise or highlight its misdeeds would themselves be harassed and attacked. Nor is such an attitude confined to the Murdoch press.

If democracy is to survive, this situation needs urgent remedy. The scale of this crisis – some have called it Britain's Watergate – does open up an opportunity to promote moves towards a democratic, responsible and accountable press.

The media barons held to account

The question of ownership

Ministers and regulators like to make well-intentioned statements about the need for a wide range of news providers and the prevention of excessive media concentration.

The problem, as so often, is that they don't always practise what they like to preach. Over the last 20 years a wave of deregulatory legislation has swept over the media, and attempts to limit media power have been dismissed.

Instead the imperatives have been on opening up media markets, promoting light touch regulation and stimulating growth and competition. Public interest concerns have largely been ignored.

This is best demonstrated by the fate of ITV, which was brought to its knees by the disastrous 1990 Broadcasting Act. The Act introduced the auction of the 15 regional franchises to the highest bidders and replaced the traditional public service regulatory system with the "light touch" Independent Television Commission (ITC).

Then the 2003 Communications Act cleared the way for a single ITV company, a decision driven not by public interest concerns but by the relentless lobbying of Granada's Gerry Robinson and Carlton's Michael Green with his PR chief, one David Cameron.

As a result, the regional companies merged, local news and programming was cut back, the money paid to ITN to provide national and international news sharply reduced, and popular and acclaimed current affairs programmes such as *World in Action* and *This Week* simply disappeared.

Local newspapers have gone much the same way. Mergers and takeovers concentrated ownership largely into the hands of four big groups – Trinity Mirror, Johnston Press, Newsquest (American-owned) and Northcliffe (owned by the Daily Mail group).

Their response to the recession, the collapse of advertising and the growth of the internet was to cut costs, shed staff and drastically reduce the quality

of the papers. In many areas news operations are centralised miles away from the communities about which the journalists are reporting.

The government response to this erosion of local and regional news has been to relax the rules on ownership and set up commercial local TV services, with 10-20 due to be up and running by 2015. They are taking £40 million from the licence fee – money supposed to be for the BBC – for initial funding, but this and the limited advertising they will attract for 90 minutes a day on air will never sustain investment in high quality news.

THE RISE OF MURDOCH

The most glaring failure in media policy has to be the resistible rise of the Murdoch empire, and what would have happened if News Corporation had taken total control of BSkyB. It was a critical moment.

News Corporation would have acquired the leverage to distort, damage or destroy other media. The merged organisation would have been a multi-media emporium able to bundle and cross-promote its products.

The takeover was stopped – for the time being at least – not by regulation, which it should have been, but by the public outcry at the News of the World phone-backing scandal. The affair showed all too clearly how flimsy the law to protect media diversity really was.

There is actually a “public interest” test, which was inserted into the 2003 Act after a rearguard action by worried members in the House of Lords in a bid to inject some democratic and cultural considerations into the purely economic, competition-based process in the Bill. It was still not enough.

The final decision-making power remained with the Secretary of State. Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt, who was publicly sympathetic to the takeover, was able to exploit the limitations in the test to eliminate the requirement for “fit and proper” in competition law, and sweep aside a host of other concerns about the power and behaviour of Murdoch’s media empire.

DOESN'T THE INTERNET CHANGE EVERYTHING?

Some people argue that such things don't matter in the age of the internet. But while there is indeed a great deal of diversity of information online, people generally look for news at the websites of traditional news outlets, or to search engines that “aggregate” their material from traditional news organisations.

This must mean that the need for oversight of media ownership and regulation has to be maintained. In fact, regulation needs to be updated to tackle powerful new communication technologies and the impact of Google and social media.

THE PUBLIC INTEREST

The crisis in the Murdoch media has had the positive effect of bringing media policy into the political mainstream. The Leveson inquiry will be looking at how to regulate not just the press but the whole range of the media. And the government is planning a new Communications Act for 2013.

These are opportunities to take into account the concerns that have come up about media concentration. But the government is still going in the opposite direction.

In May Jeremy Hunt launched a review in preparation for the new Act. He published a policy statement that was all about deregulation and treated competition as purely an economic issue. The terms “public interest” and “pluralism” each got just one passing mention.

But these are precisely what need greater protection. The public interest test should be applied whenever proposed media mergers or market concentration reaches designated thresholds, such as 20 per cent of the relevant market.

Alternatively, takeovers and mergers might be allowed to go ahead with strict conditions. Firms could be required to protect editorial standards and independence, the level of staff employed and so on.

Finally, there has got to be more transparency and genuine consultation in decision-making. The BSkyB buyout attracted an enormous public response, with 150,000 people sending protest messages online to Ofcom and Jeremy Hunt. There has never been such a level of interest in a media matter, yet the government took no notice.

It was only the prospect of a defeat in Parliament, where a handful of MPs had the guts to stand up to the party leaderships, that brought the process to a halt. That should not have to happen every time. There has to be public involvement and oversight throughout.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

✧ There need to be clear limits on the share of media markets that companies can be allowed to hold. Newspaper owners with a national market share of 20 per cent or more should be limited to a 20 per cent stake in a channel 3 or channel 5 licence, or a national or local radio licence.

✧ This must also apply at BSkyB, where 20 years ago the government allowed News Corporation to control 39 per cent. That must be reduced to 20 per cent.

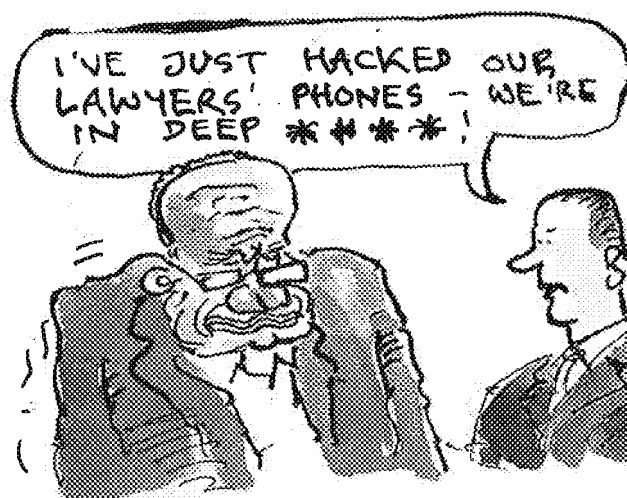
✧ The power to invoke the public interest test should be assigned to Ofcom rather than the Secretary of State, to get round the conflict of interest that was so blatant in the BSkyB case. Ministers are always liable

to be cowed by their perceived need to keep in with big media companies. They must not be allowed to make the final decision.

» Holdings above 20 per cent may be approved subject to rules on structure and behaviour, subject to oversight and enforced by law. The absolute maximum permitted holding in any particular market should be 30 per cent.

There are six markets: national and regional news in radio, television and newspapers.

» The government should support local media by investing in ventures which have to adhere to public interest criteria.



PART THREE

Free from the owners, free from the state

Regulating the press

The press does valuable work when it investigates corruption and malpractice, on the part of politicians or big business. How else would we have known about the scandals of MPs' expenses or the extent of phone hacking without the work of journalists and the willingness of certain newspapers to publish their investigations?

But what happens when it all goes wrong?

What happens when the story you read in the paper, or on a website, about your community, your family or your campaign is inaccurate or unfair?

What can be done when the privacy of crime victims is breached, or private grief turned into banner headlines – headlines driven by the need to boost the dividends of the shareholders who own the papers?

If you're lucky, a newspaper might print a correction or offer you the chance to write a letter. If you are rich, you might sue for libel or breach of privacy.

The only other way at present is to use the Press Complaints Commission, a body paid for and run by newspaper owners. This is what the industry calls self-regulation and claims is better than anything else on offer.

That is not true.

THE FAILURE OF SELF-REGULATION

The press has had 60 years to make self-regulation work.

In 1949 a Royal Commission recommended the creation of a body to oversee press standards. The owners, unwilling to allow any oversight of their papers, tried to stop it coming into being. It took a threat of parliamentary action to get a General Council of the Press established four years later.

Over the next 30 years this body – later called the Press Council – was regularly criticised by politicians and the public for its manifest failures. Newspapers could still lie and distort with relative impunity, since most

people could not afford to sue and the Council had no way of enforcing acceptable standards of reporting. Editors openly scoffed at Press Council decisions that came out against their papers.

The situation deteriorated even further in the 1980s. Story after story based on inaccuracies and intrusions into privacy caused public outrage. There was a series of Private Members Bills to grant the right of reply to the victims but all came to nothing.

In 1989 the government set up an inquiry, the Calcutt Commission, which recommended a state-run tribunal with the power to fine newspapers and even stop stories appearing.

This was too much for the newspaper owners and at the last minute they did the least they could get away with, dissolving the Press Council and setting up a new body, which they called the Press Complaints Commission (PCC).

The PCC is even worse. It threw out the Press Council's union reps and its remit to protect press freedom. But, like the Press Council, it was still funded by the very newspapers which it was supposed to regulate.

The PCC is not in fact a regulator at all. It is simply a body that considers a very limited range of complaints about newspapers from members of the

public; it is in fact a dismal substitute for regulation.

Its repeated failure to enforce its own Code of Practice across the industry, the defection of key newspapers from its ranks, and the contempt with which News International was able to treat it during its lamentable "investigation" into phone-hacking have combined completely to undermine what little authority it ever possessed.

So what kind of regulation would be better?

BETTER REGULATION

An effective regulator has to be representative of both the journalistic workforce and the public. Editors could take part but the principle that the body should be free from proprietorial interference has to be central.

There would be a code of conduct setting out the principles of responsible professional practice. It is easy to draw up codes and the PCC and NUJ already have them. The question is not so much what the code says as how it is enforced.

Publications that signed up to it would carry a "kite mark" showing that they adhered to the code. This could be withdrawn if a publication persistently flouted it.

There must be power to enforce a full, prominent right of reply to those maligned by the media, and sanctions against those who flout the regulator's rulings.

If a regulatory system funded and controlled by the owners is ruled out, that leaves the questions: who pays, and whose authority backs up the decisions? The only alternative is the state.

NO ROLE FOR THE STATE?

Nobody in the industry wants the state to have any power over the media. That would mean effectively the licensing of the press, enabling government to exercise some political control.

The media are, of course, already subject to all sorts of laws. Some of these, like the laws of libel and official secrecy, hinder the press in carrying out its proper public functions, and these most certainly need to be reformed. Others, such as those that prevent trial by media, work positively in the public interest.

The real question is: what regulations would or would not be required for the media to be able to perform their proper democratic functions, independently of interference by the state?

With the right restrictions, the state can fulfil the two crucial functions: to supply the funding, and to give the regulator's independent decisions the force of law.

RAISE THE STANDARDS

One of the backbench bills that came to nothing towards the end of the last

century was the Press Freedom and Responsibility Bill put forward by Clive Soley MP in 1992. An updated version of its proposals is what is needed now.

It proposed a statutory body that would operate to a code of conduct in conjunction with the industry.

The law would give individuals a statutory right to the correction of factual inaccuracies. Corrections would have to be negotiated with individual newspapers, but if this process got nowhere the complainant could appeal to the regulator, which would investigate the case, and if necessary order the newspaper or website to publish a correction.

Failure to do so would result in the imposition of financial sanctions. The newspapers could appeal the fine in the courts.

The regulator would undertake wide-ranging research into press standards and behaviour, as well as investigate the workings of laws which prevent the press from carrying out its proper democratic functions, with the aim of changing or even abolishing them.

The membership of the new statutory body would be appointed by an open process of democratic consultation, but would be dominated by journalists, representatives of relevant voluntary bodies, and members of the public.

The regulator would not license journalists or publications. It would have no power to stop the publication of stories that individuals or institutions believed were being prepared about them.

Its concern would be to maintain high standards of journalism, in accordance with the code of practice, not with who is producing the journalism. It would most certainly have no power to stipulate in advance what can be published.

The press is constantly calling for the effective regulation of public and private bodies, and drawing attention to the cosy relations between the regulators and the regulated in numerous areas of political and economic life. It needs to recognise that the standards it insists should be applied to others should equally be applied to itself.



PART FOUR

The public interest: journalism we can trust

Help journalists to help society

According to an opinion poll for ITV News at Ten, 80 per cent of people no longer trust the media in the wake of the News of the World phone-hacking scandal; only one in ten of 2,000 people polled said that they did.

Journalists have become accustomed to public disdain – other polls have ranked them below politicians and estate agents in public esteem – but the News of the World has dragged them down to a new low.

It has become a cliché to say that that the Murdoch press has “poisoned the well of British journalism”: Google the phrase and you get 14 million links!

The repulsive practices of the Murdoch press are now brutally exposed – and some are even worse than phone-hacking, such as “entrapment” (setting people up to commit crimes and shopping them to the police) and the bribing of police and officers of other public agencies to provide private information about people from their computers.

It's not just the Murdoch papers; most of the popular press employ the same means to get their stories – as the world will find out as evidence comes to light from the investigations conducted by the Information Commissioner.

Carried out four years ago, these show that hundreds of journalists on nearly all the national papers were involved in phone-hacking.

THE REAL PUBLIC INTEREST

There's never been such a devastating exposure of corruption between British government, media and police as we saw this summer, with News International journalists at the heart of it. But there's another side to the story: it is journalists who have done the exposing.

The Guardian's single-minded investigation into the News of the World, the Daily Telegraph's relentless uncovering of MPs' expenses, the London Evening Standard's campaign on adult literacy ... these are just a few examples of

journalists admirably discharging their duty to keep the public informed.

Owners and editors of the press like to think that journalism in the public interest is journalism that interests the public: sensationalism and gossip.

They can't see the difference, but there is one. Even the discredited Press Complaints Commission's Code of Practice has a perfectly good definition of the real public interest. It covers:

- » Detecting or exposing crime or serious impropriety.
- » Protecting public health and safety.
- » Preventing the public from being misled by an action or statement of an individual or organisation.

Nothing wrong with that, and probably most journalism conforms to it. The problem is that a lot of intrusive and objectionable media coverage does not.

Even the use of surreptitious means is justified to get essential information. The Guardian's investigations editor has admitted he used material from phonetaps in the paper's expose of bribery and corruption on the part of BAe Systems.

This was clearly in the public interest. On the tabloids, on the other hand, underhand methods are used not to uncover vital facts but to dredge for tittle-tattle to feed the paper's hunger for celebrity gossip.

This is not what journalists ought to be or want to be doing. So why do they?

A number of NoW journalists have explained that such things were considered normal practice. One anonymous "red-top insider" (not on the News of the World) told the trade paper, the Press Gazette: "Lots of journalists were doing it [mobile phone hacking]. It was quite normal practice.

"It came about because of the massive pressure to get a story. When you have your editor shouting at you to get a story you lose your morality. If you need to get a story and everyone else is doing it, you think that's normal. And you don't really see the celebrities as being real people. You see them as a product, as a story."

It's all down to the imperative on popular papers to hang on to their shares of a declining market, to drag each other down a spiral of declining standards.

The journalists have little defence if they want to keep their jobs. Their union, the National Union of Journalists, has been outlawed at News International for 24 years. In fact the pernicious influence that the Murdoch papers have had on British journalism can be dated back to the Wapping dispute 25 years ago, when the company got rid of not just the print unions but, shortly afterwards, the NUJ as well.

It was after Murdoch withdrew the NUJ's right to represent members that his editors – brutal right-wingers like Kelvin MacKenzie and Andrew Neil – tightened the grip on their staffs. With the demise of the union, journalists lost their collective voice in the newsroom.

ACTING ON PRINCIPLE

Like everyone else, journalists are sensible people who want to get on in their careers. They know the score in their offices, and they know that those who don't toe the line are soon out of the door.

It's not often that they chuck in their jobs in protest at what they are under pressure to do, but it has happened more often on Murdoch papers than anywhere else. Even before Wapping, in 1984, the Sun's NUJ chapel protested strongly after a series of editorial atrocities that included the faking of an interview with the widow of a Falklands War hero.

In 1989 two reporters quit the Sunday Times (edited by Andrew Neil) over the way their copy was doctored in the "Death on the Rock" story – the shooting by the SAS of unarmed IRA volunteers in Gibraltar. The same year, on The Times, the arts editor quit over being ordered to run a blurb for a Sky TV programme, and in 2001 the paper's middle east editor walked out over pro-Israeli bias forced onto his copy. In

2003 a Sun feature writer resigned over the paper's pro-Iraq war bias.

A VOICE FOR THE WORKERS

It is no coincidence that the media with the highest professional standards – the Guardian, Financial Times, the Independent and Telegraph groups, the BBC and ITV News – are those with the strongest NUJ representation.

Among the reforms needed to raise standards of journalism must be the restoration of the right of journalists to organise in these workplaces; the Daily Mail group – now the biggest in the UK since News International lost the News of the World – is another non-union stronghold.

Along with the restoration of union rights must be the introduction of the "conscience clause" long sought by the NUJ, to empower journalists to refuse instructions to work unethically without putting their jobs at risk.

The clause is already in the union's Code of Conduct, and the union has tried to persuade editors and the Press Complaints Commission to adopt it, so far without success, but it will have to be incorporated in the code of practice of any new regulatory body.

PREFACE

Scratch my back, or I won't scratch yours

Politicians and the press

A robust working relationship between politicians and journalists is a test of a well-functioning democracy. But political collusion of one form or another is in the DNA of Britain's national press. The major newspapers are unashamedly partisan, and their most successful publishers have amassed political power through granting favourable coverage.

Press barons like Lords Northcliffe and Beaverbrook were feared and courted by the Prime Ministers of their day but none more than Rupert Murdoch. For almost 40 years his national newspapers were deployed to gain maximum political and business advantage as he built up a group with an unprecedented cross-media reach.

He backed the Conservatives from the late 1970s, swung behind Labour in 1997 and then switched back to the Tories in 2009. When Labour was in power Murdoch was described by former Downing Street spinner Lance Price as "the unacknowledged 24th

member of the Cabinet ... his voice rarely heard, his presence always felt".

In return for editorial support, successive media proprietors have benefited commercially. Governments have been prepared to turn a blind eye to anti-competitive practices such as predatory pricing or side-stepping the regulations. In Murdoch's case, Margaret Thatcher's administration waved through his purchase of The Times and Sunday Times in 1981 and then gave the go-ahead for the launch of Sky Television in 1989.

Prime Minister Thatcher was an ideological soulmate. Privatisation, diminishing the power of the unions and extending the power of the market was an agenda that could have been written in Murdoch's editorial offices.

When chancellor Nigel Lawson wanted to put VAT on newspapers Margaret Thatcher struck it out. "Why invite a bad press for your budget?" she asked.

NEW LABOUR, NEW RELATIONS

In 1995, in the first year of his leadership in opposition, Tony Blair travelled to Hayman Island, Australia, to do Murdoch's bidding. Once in office he appeased Murdoch's interests, including his anti-Europeanism, promising that "New Labour will have no truck with a European super-state" – arguably against his natural instinct to put Britain at the heart of such an institution.

Favoured correspondents got exclusives, and some appeared to suffer from a journalistic "Stockholm syndrome". Andy McSmith, political editor of the Independent on Sunday in 2003, has spoken of the fraught period building up to the invasion of Iraq. At one lobby briefing he had asked Alastair Campbell a question about WMDs, for which a journalist from a newspaper that supported the war called him a "surrender monkey".

Just as Blair had wooed News International and swung Labour to a political stance that fitted their agenda, so too did David Cameron and the Tories. Hiring Andy Coulson, former News of the World editor, was a part of that approach, and approval for Murdoch's attempt to take full control of BSkyB would have been true to the pattern.

In opposition the Conservative culture spokesman, Jeremy Hunt, who took up the ministerial role after last

year's election, had said exactly what Murdoch wanted to hear. The Tories would "rip up the BBC Charter", rein in the regulator Ofcom following its uncomfortable investigation in the pay-TV market – in which it had censured BSkyB – and relax the rules on cross media ownership.

Last year the new government was soon presented with the BSkyB bid. While it was going through the regulatory process, under the benign supervision of Jeremy Hunt, there were dozens of meetings between ministers and News Corp executives, including Murdoch and his son James, chairman of BSkyB and head of European operations. Precisely who said what to whom is now a matter for the Leveson inquiry. The judge's tasks include inquiring into the "contacts made, and discussions had, between national newspapers and politicians" and to make recommendations about the "future conduct of relations between politicians and the press."

LEVESON CAN DO BETTER

When Cameron announced Leveson's appointment, he tried to keep a step ahead of the inquiry by proposing an immediate amendment to the ministerial code to require ministers to "record all meetings with newspaper and other media proprietors, senior editors and executives – regardless of the nature

of the meeting.” Permanent secretaries and special advisers would also be required to record such meetings.

Almost immediately Cameron, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, the Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne and the Labour leader Ed Miliband publicly listed their meetings since taking office. But the lists gave no hint as to either the purpose or the outcome of their deliberations.

Cameron used the catch-all term “general discussion” alongside eight of the entries for meetings with the Murdochs or News International editors. There was no indication as to the topics covered, nor was there any clue as to what transpired during Rebekah Brooks’ two visits to Chequers or the Prime Minister’s social engagements with the Murdochs.

Past editions of the Sun reveal the inadequacy of Cameron’s declaration. His engagements for August 2010 listed Rebekah Brooks’ second visit to Chequers but made no mention of the discussions, but they must have preceded the publication of a two-page article by the Prime Minister which launched a hotline for Sun readers to expose “benefit scroungers”. (Sun, August 8 last year.)

Similarly, his five engagements in October 2010 with Brooks and News International editors made no reference

to another signed two-page article re-launching his “Big Society”. (Sun, October 8)

Negotiations with the Sun’s editorial team might have been conducted by Coulson himself or brokered by Downing Street’s special advisers but the point remains: politicians and their spin doctors socialise with media proprietors, executives and editors for a purpose and the outcome needs to be declared.

A CODE OF PRACTICE

If the “future conduct of relations between politicians and the press” is to be policed effectively, the Leveson inquiry must insist that ministers can no longer hide behind terms like “general discussion”. Any code of conduct that emerges from the Leveson process must ensure that:

- » Ministers avoid meeting or socialising with proprietors, executives and editors when a takeover bid or similar application or referral is being considered by the government or regulators such as Ofcom, the Competition Commission and Office of Fair Trading.
- » Ministers, party leaders, shadow ministers and special advisers list not only the date and nature of meetings and social engagements but also the purpose and any outcome.

» Full declaration of negotiations aimed at securing party political promotions in newspapers and other media outlets, such as signed articles, endorsement of press campaigns or interviews.



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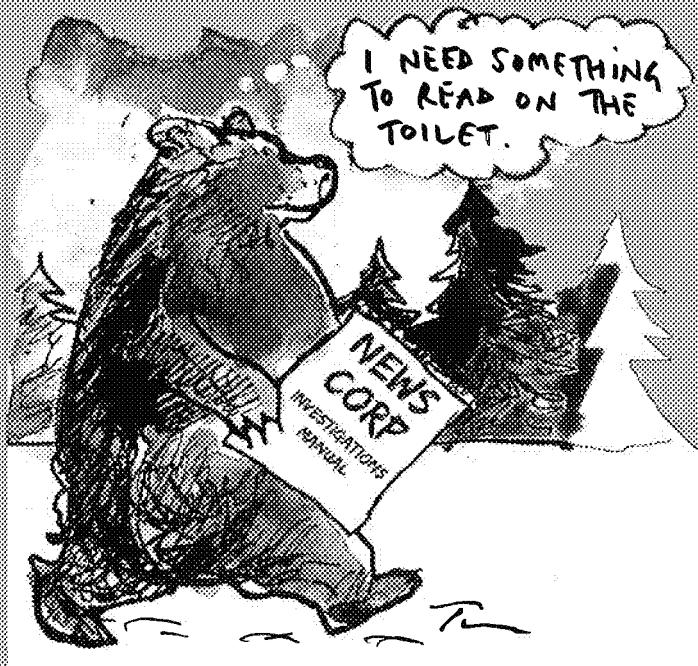
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www.cpbf.org.uk
freepress@cpbf.org.uk



Produced by the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, 22 Old Bedford Street, London, E1 8DF
www.cpbf.org.uk

Written by Tim Loxton, Jonathan Cook, Pauline
Richardson, Tom Ginnane, Julia Peck, and Graeme Williams

Cartoons by Steve Bell and Tim Tompkins

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