

LEVESON INQUIRY: CULTURE, PRACTICE AND ETHICS OF THE PRESS

SUBMISSION OF THE NEWSPAPER SOCIETY

I. General Background Information on the Regional Media Industry

1. The Newspaper Society represents the regional media industry. The majority of regional newspaper publishers, whether large group or small family-run business, are in membership of the NS.

2. **Regional Press Publications:** Regional media companies publish around 1,167 regional and local newspaper titles, (daily, weekly and Sunday, both paid for and free), 1603 associated websites, over 400 ultra local and niche titles. Some have broadcasting interests, owning around 22 local radio stations.

3. **Ownership:** There are 87 regional press publishers (July 2011). The largest regional media companies account for 87% of all regional press titles and 97% of the total weekly circulation. However, there are 39 publishers who produce just one newspaper title. NS members are commercial media companies, independent of government and government subsidy.

4. **Journalism:** The regional press employs around 30,000 people of whom 10,000 have editorial roles. Regional media companies have sought to protect this editorial element, particularly 'frontline' reporting staff, over the past years and its proportion has grown from one quarter to one third of the workforce. This is a substantial investment in journalism, unique to the regional press and illustrates the industry's strong commitment to local journalism. Even the BBC admits that it cannot rival the depth of local coverage provided by the regional press.

5. The regional press continues to train young journalists. For example, over 180 candidates sat the NCTJ examinations for reporters, sub-editors and sports reporters in July and November last year, with successful candidates from a wide range of local and regional press titles. Companies also work in partnership with their local universities and colleges. The NS does not collate statistics but both small family run firms and the larger groups have previously informed us that they have trainees and replace staff who move on to other titles in the regional or national press or other roles by new trainees.

6. **Audience and Readership:** The regional press is the most widely read print media in Britain (BMRB/TGI). It has around 33 million print readers a week (71% of all British adults), 14 million of whom only read a regional title and do not read a British national newspaper. Its online editions and websites attract around 42 million unique web users a month. The regional press increased its monthly audience by nearly a third over the past year.

7. Regional media companies are acquiring ever greater audiences through their investment and development of their editorial and advertising services across media platforms. These include websites, which carry audiovisual material, such as news

video clips and webcams live streams in addition to print, podcasts, mobile services, apps, all allow their local audiences to access their local titles' news and other information services whenever, wherever and in whatever form they want to do so, via smart phones, tablets and PCs, in addition to print. There have been notable increases in regional titles' monthly web traffic over the past year, in addition to the 'peaks' as communities turned to their local titles' websites during the summer riots.

8. This has enabled local newspapers to enrich their traditional coverage. Twitter, blogging, webcams, video streaming, local forums allow journalists and audience to interact, adding immediacy to coverage of sports matches, local festivities and events, local politics and news.

9. For example, local newspaper reporters were out in the midst of the summer riots, providing constant updates on what was happening and where, which were invaluable to local residents. The work of the local courts can now be covered not only by the 'traditional' individual reports of particular court cases and 'round ups' of the outcome of local magistrates' courts' cases, (the latter perhaps summarized from magistrates' courts' registers), which are usually published in the latest edition of the print newspaper, but also reported contemporaneously through Twitter and online reports, perhaps illustrated by video clips of the evidence shown to jurors in criminal trials and subsequently released to the media. A number of regional titles maintain political and lobby correspondents based in Westminster and the industry's local reporters still attend parish council and council meetings. However, local democracy and their readers' active participation have also been bolstered by installation of webcams into the council chambers and live streams of meetings made accessible from regional press websites, or digital debates and forums hosted by the local newspaper including those enabling local MPs and political candidates to be questioned direct by constituents.

10. **Revenue:** Regional media companies are commercial entities. Their newspapers and other media services are dependent upon the advertising and sales revenue. This means that they must maintain the commitment of their local readers and advertisers, despite the fierce competition from other media of every kind for their attention and expenditure. Their business relies upon their readers' trust in their local titles' editorial and advertising – they act upon the advertisements, search out the public notices and they look to their local newspaper to hold public authorities and others to account often identifying and alerting their local reporters and editors to issues meriting investigation, actively support editorial campaigns and they make a lively contribution to the general editorial/news/opinion/entertainment/advertising mix of the print and online publication .

II. Press Self-Regulation

11. Regional newspaper companies are keenly aware of the importance of a free and independent press in a democratic society. In their commitment to that tradition, they are as acutely aware of the responsibilities that entails, as they have been wary of any special statutory controls or scope for government interference in their content.

12. Newspapers are not above the law and have no special legal status. Publishers, editors and journalists simply exercise the citizen's right of freedom of expression and

rights to official information, within the limits imposed by the civil and criminal law. Hence new restrictions upon press freedom not only affect all newspapers, whether national, regional and local, imposing controls over investigation, reporting and comment in print and online, but also impact upon any individual citizen's freedom of speech and right to know.

13. In accordance with the industry's commitment to press freedom, the Newspaper Society has worked to promote freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of information, open justice and open government, through its work as a trade association. The regional media has firmly opposed the introduction of statutory press controls, press specific criminal offences or sanctions, state licensing of publications or journalists, statutory press regulators and statutory privacy laws.

14. The regional press has long been instrumental in establishing and promoting additional self-regulatory controls, over and above the law, which have been agreed by the whole industry, as currently contained in the Editors' Code of Practice. This Code is observed by the regional as well as the national press (and magazine sector) and is ultimately upheld and enforced by the Press Complaints Commission, through receipt, investigation, conciliation, adjudication of the public's complaints about press conduct and publication in breach of the Code.

15. The NS itself and its members' publishers, editors and others play a full role in the industry's voluntary self-regulatory systems and institutions governing editorial and advertising content.

16. Voluntary self-regulation has the strong support of the UK's regional and local newspaper industry. Their commitment and active involvement has been unwavering since the Press Complaints Commission's establishment over 20 years ago, in which they played an important role.

III. Current Self-Regulatory System

17. The newspaper and magazine industries strongly support the UK accepted model of self-regulation to maintain a press free from state licensing, statutory regulation or government control:

Industry's commitment and funding of current press complaints system

18. The industry currently funds the system under the oversight of PressBof (Press Standards Board of Finances) whose directors are drawn from the UK's newspaper and magazine trade associations including the NS.

19. Industry funding was the key stipulation of the Calcutt Report, as an important demonstration of the industry's commitment to self-regulation, in addition to avoidance of any burden upon the taxpayer or charge to a complainant. The regional press makes a substantial financial contribution to funding the work of the Press Complaints Commission and regional media companies have consistently honoured these arrangements.

20. PressBof's input and oversight of the system has been used to approve changes authorising the extension of the PCC's remit, the development of its powers and sanctions and extension of the Editors' Code, thereby ensuring industry involvement, agreement, support and compliance.

Industry's respect for The Editors' Code and current voluntary self-regulatory controls over press behaviour

21. The Editors' Code Committee draws up and amends the Editors' Code of Practice, subject to ratification by the PCC and PressBof. The Committee includes regional and local newspaper editors, in order to maintain a representative industry mix, but their work on the committee is wholly independent of the NS or their company.

22. Anyone can suggest changes to the Code at any time - public, parliamentarians, interest groups, or industry. The Code is also periodically reviewed and adjusted to accommodate changes in technology, the law, or the culture, relevant to newsgathering and reporting. If there is a need for stronger controls, changes can be made quickly. This flexibility is another advantage of self-regulation over statutory regulation. Regional newspaper publishers and editors are responsible for observance of the Code by all contributors to their titles, staff or freelance. Companies are encouraged to promote observance of the Code by its incorporation into contracts of employment and other employment practices, with potentially direct and serious individual repercussions.

23. The greatest strength of self-regulation in the regional press is the day to day observance of the Editors' Code of Practice by its 10,000 journalists and editors. They try to ensure that their newsgathering activities and the thousands of reports, features, investigations, campaigns and comment published by the regional press do comply with the law and with the Code. If something does go wrong, then editors usually deal directly and swiftly with readers' complaints, without need of referral to the PCC. Executives, editors, journalists and contributors to the regional press live alongside their readers and belong to the same communities as their readers, in the localities served by their titles. Regional newspapers' publishers, editors and journalists have to be both responsible and responsive to their audience, in order to maintain the trust that their readers place in their publications. Where the complaint cannot be resolved by the title in this manner, the complainant may refer the matter to the PCC for conciliation or adjudication, without waiver of any right to take legal action. Regional newspaper editors and publishers co-operate willingly with the PCC, respect its authority and the work of its staff.

Industry's co-operation with the PCC and current system dealing with complaints about press behaviour

24. The Press Complaints Commission ultimately enforces the Code by ruling upon breaches of the Code and imposing sanctions. There are ten 'lay' members, including the PCC Chair, who are independent of the press and seven industry members, who are serving editors, but who act independently of their organisations (and have no role in adjudications upon complaints within their own titles). These include regional newspaper editors. The lay members are recruited after open advertisement, with

space donated by the regional as well as the national press to assist a wide demographic and geographic circulation of such advertisements.

25. From its origins in the Calcutt Report, the PCC has been charged with concentrating upon providing effective redress for complaints against the press, by way of swift apology, correction and reply and wherever practical seeking conciliation, as well as adjudication upon complaints in breach of the Editors' Code of Practice and publication of adverse adjudications by the titles concerned.

26. This is a brief summary of the PCC's work and sanctions, describing its regulation of the regional as well as the national press:

'The PCC acts by: negotiating remedial action and amicable settlements for complainants; issuing rulings on complaints; using published rulings as a means of guiding newsroom practice across the industry; publicly censuring editors for breaches of the Code; passing on pre-publication concerns to editors to prevent the Code being breached; passing on requests to editors that their journalists cease contacting individuals, and so prevent media harassment; issuing formal guidance, based on its interpretation of the Code, to the industry on important issues; instigating its own investigations under the Code in the public interest where appropriate; conducting training seminars for working journalists and editors; and liaising with other press councils internationally. We are committed to transparency and accountability and publicise all of our rulings. We also raise awareness among policymakers, public agencies and charities, lawyers, officials, journalists and the general public about the work of the PCC.'

'The PCC can enforce a range of sanctions, summarised below: negotiation of an agreed remedy (apology, published correction, amendment of records, removal of article); publication of a critical adjudication, which may be followed by public criticism of a title by the Chairman of the PCC; a letter of admonishment from the Chairman to the editor; follow-up from the PCC to ensure that changes are made to avoid repeat errors and to establish what steps (which may include disciplinary action, where appropriate) have been taken against those responsible for serious breaches of the Code; formal referral of an editor to their publisher for action.'

27. Regional and local newspapers have respected the PCC as the industry's regulator and co-operated with the operation of its staff in implementing the self-regulatory system. No regional title has ever refused to publish an adverse adjudication. Publishers and editors take the PCC's guidance, decisions and sanctions seriously.

28. The PCC and all its services are free, so it costs nothing to any complainant to make or pursue a complaint against the regional press, which they have been unable to directly resolve with the editor and title itself. Due to editors' co-operation, the PCC process is fast, resolving or conciliating complaints on average in just over a month (30.5 days in respect of investigated complaints). It is fair – the Commission has a majority of lay members. Any complaints about the way that a complaint has been handled – other than the substantive decision - can be referred to the Independent Reviewer.

29. Readers do complain to the PCC when they are unhappy about regional press practice and content.

30. The PCC's annual reports contain statistics about the complaints received, amicable resolutions brokered and rulings made, in addition to other contacts. Its previous surveys have suggested strong satisfaction rates from members of the public who have approached it. Its assistance is not confined to post-publication complaint: if and where applicable, we would assume regional and local newspapers would have co-operated on this aspect of the PCC's work, such as observing private advisory notes/desist requests, or if the PCC helped any individuals raising their concerns with specific newspapers before publication.

31. The regional press also assists public awareness raising of the PCC and complaints system, for example by hosting open days for the PCC; by publicising the help available from the PCC to those suddenly the centre of media attention; by participation in any work which the PCC Director might instigate to highlight problems with the media in the wake of extraordinary events, such as the Cumbrian shootings; by day to day publication of PCC publicity or standard notices of how to complain about newspaper and website content.

32. We refer you to submissions made by PressBof and the Press Complaints Commission for more detailed description of the self-regulatory system and their roles within it.

IV. Future Regulation

33. The future of press regulation and the Inquiry's impact are obviously of crucial importance to the regional media industry and its work in its local communities.

34. The NS and its members are strongly committed to maintenance of press self-regulation, but are engaging fully in constructive discussion about its future development.

35. The regional media's prime concern is that any future system is effective, efficient, workable in practice and its funding affordable by the industry (national, regional and local), so that it commands the confidence of the public and the commitment of the industry.

36. The regional industry would not want to jettison any aspects of the current system which have worked well, especially in complaints handling. As outlined above, the regional press has felt that the Press Complaints Commission has offered a fast, free and fair, complaints and conciliation service for readers whose grievances could not be resolved immediately and directly with the title concerned.

37. Regional press participation in the self-regulatory system has also helped to ensure that the PCC's regulatory remit, Editors' Code and observance, complaints process, adjudication and funding arrangements were as relevant to the regional media as the national.

38. However, the NS and its members welcomed the appointment of Lord Hunt as the new chairman of the Press Complaints Commission, with consideration of future regulatory developments as his priority. The regional media is also fully and constructively engaged. It will continue to be so, in order to help to achieve the shared objective of an effective self-regulatory system which upholds press standards, without comprising the principle of press freedom, and which addresses individuals' complaints about press conduct in breach of such standards.

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