WITNESS STATEMENT FOR THE LEVESON INQUIRY

By PETER STANLEY JAMES TAYLOR-WHIFFEN

1. As a national newspaper journalist for the past 10 years, I have a few comments on the ethics of the Press which I believe would be useful contributions to the Leveson Inquiry.
2. I am currently assistant chief sub-editor on the Daily Star and consider myself well versed in the practices of the national Press.
3. Certainly the Daily Star has crossed the line of decency in recent years and there have been occasions when I have been uncomfortable with the content and/or the presentation of some of our stories.
4. That said, I wanted to make a couple of points in defence of journalists based on my experience of national newsrooms in general (I've also worked for The Daily Star Sunday, The Daily Express, The Sunday Express, The Sun and The Mail On Sunday) and The Daily Star in particular.

Celebrities and the Press is a two-way relationship

5. Throughout the Inquiry little seems to have been said about how much certain celebrities wantonly use the Press to keep them in the public eye and therefore maximise their earning potential.
6. These are not of course people like, say, Steve Coogan or JK Rowling for whom fame is, as Mr Coogan said, a by-product of creating successful work. No, these are the (many) celebrities who appear almost to need to be pictured as often as possible and will go out of their way to ensure the press knows where they are - and then behave in a certain way in the full knowledge they are being photographed.
7. By and large these celebrities almost never object to negative coverage - not because they feel powerless to do so, but because it's a price they are happy to pay to remain in the public eye. One such celebrity who enjoys a very equal relationship with the Press is the model Katie Price, who lives her entire life through the media - even playing out two divorces (from Peter Andre and Alex Reid) in the full and apparently welcome glare of publicity. Ms Price and her publicity team regularly Tweet or issue Press statements reacting to an event concerning or a statement from one or other of her ex-husbands. In many cases we are often not aware of these incidents until Ms Price herself brings them to our attention.
8. The nature of this relationship is cyclical - every now and again Ms Price objects to something we do, and then we won't run anything on her for a few weeks - then we all make up again and she's regularly back on our news pages. This is, as I say, an equal relationship because she and we both seem to know the rules and how it works for both of us.

9. Other celebrities who similarly know how to "use" the Press in this way include Kerry Katona, who like Katie Price is featured regularly in (and obviously is paid a fee for) photoshoots and as a columnist for Northern & Shell's magazines, so seems to tolerate negative stories as a small price to pay for this exposure. In addition, if we do run a perceived negative story about Ms Katona, Ms Price or others who have a similar relationship with us, they know they will get a right of reply the following day - which gives them redress and enables us to run the story for another day from their point of view.
10. Not all high-profile tabloid celebrities live their entire lives through the press - the Beckhams, for example, while being experts using the media to their advantage, manage to maintain far more privacy than Katie Price or Kerry Katona because, as far as I can see, they prefer it that way. The same is true of Simon Cowell, who is frequently the subject of gossip re girlfriends etc but manages to maintain a very private personal life. This suggests to me that to a large extent many celebrities have as much or as little privacy as they desire and our coverage of them is consistent with the amount of publicity they themselves court. Of course if they act outrageously ie either consistent with a public persona they have either deliberately or unwittingly created (Kate Moss falling out of a nightclub looking drunk) or completely inconsistent with that persona ("Family man" Ryan Giggs having an eight-year affair with his brother's wife) that is seen as being in the public interest and, I believe, fair game for the Press.

The Press is more restrained than people think

11. The Daily Star, like all publications, has an obligation to the laws of libel and contempt and we adhere to them. About 20 times a week we will get emails from our legal department detailing various court reporting restrictions or legal advice about individual people or situations and we obey them.
12. I think some members of the public have a misconception that we print whatever we like, but this is not the case. We are, as I'm sure you know, privy to mountains of sensitive information that it would be illegal or irresponsible to publish - for instance, we knew Ryan Giggs was the "mystery footballer" who had taken out a superinjunction against Imogen Thomas for months before it was revealed in Parliament, but we were never going to publish that information until given the green light to do so. I know the name of one actor, one TV presenter and one other footballer who have taken out superinjunctions but because we follow the law, these will never be published until and unless we have permission to do so.

13. However, our restraint is not just based on fear of flouting the law. We regularly withhold or tone down stories on purely moral grounds - that is, because it would be immoral to run them in the form they are presented to us. For example, we tend to be sensitive on stories around children or on families where extreme coverage would cause distress. And many, many times over the course of a week we subs will reword a phrase in a story (often submitted by a news agency) because we think it is too harsh on the subject of the story, or we think it has been spun too far to be an accurate representation of what actually happened. In countless instances we soften the impact of a phrase - not because we have to, but because it's morally the right thing to do. I suppose what I'm saying is our internal self-regulation - not just on legal but also on moral or humane grounds - makes the Press a far more palatable and responsible beast than some think it is.
14. I am concerned that some members of the public see all journalists (especially since the phone-hacking scandal came to light) as immoral, or amoral, low-lifes with no sensitivity or empathy for those about whom they write and that this perception may be a factor in any future measures to regulate the press. However, this perception is simply not true - indeed, in my general experience, and certainly on the Daily Star, the opposite is true. If we hear or see TV pictures of a devastating human tragedy (whether affecting large numbers, such as the 2011 Japanese tsunami, or a single family or community, such as the 2007 murder of five-year-old Liverpool boy Rhys Jones), the sense of horror in the newsroom is often palpable as people watch the developments unfold. Like most people, most journalists are decent and sensitive people - a fact that too often seems to be overlooked.
15. It perhaps seems incongruous to some people to talk about the decency and sensitivity of journalists alongside the case of Madeleine McCann but I think it should be noted there were staff on the Daily Star who were uncomfortable with the stories implying Madeleine's parents were involved in her disappearance.
16. It is important to add that such concerns were taken into account by the most senior editorial staff but the fact these stories came direct from the Portuguse police clearly satisfied these staff that the stories were "safe" to run and headline in the way they did.
17. Of course, as I'm sure happened in many workplaces, pubs and streets across the land, a tiny minority of people at the Daily Star (perhaps one, maybe two) speculated with such enthusiasm that the McCanns might have been directly responsible for Madeleine's disappearance that it almost seemed as if they wanted this to be the case. However, this was absolutely not the prevailing view. Indeed, the overwhelming view was that we hoped, and still hope, Madeleine will be reunited safe and well with her parents.
18. That said, I'm sure I was not alone at the Daily Star in viewing the £500,000 damages paid by Northern & Shell to Kate and Gerry McCann as a welcome sign that we would finally be forced to stop the conjecture suggesting they were involved in her disappearance.

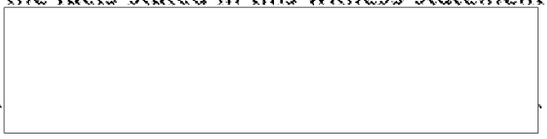
Countering claims by former Daily Star reporter Richard Peppiatt

19. During my time on the Daily Star I have worked with Richard Peppiatt, who gave evidence to the Inquiry on 29th November. He was presumably invited because of his open letter of resignation to Richard Desmond in March, which gained him a little bit of fame in the media village.
20. I have nothing personal against Mr Peppiatt, nor am I able to defend some of the recent practices of the Press or some stories specific to the Daily Star. Some of what he told the Inquiry was true. However, to ensure a fair Leveson Inquiry I do feel Mr Peppiatt's former position within the Star needs to be put into context. I am speaking not for Daily Star management but purely for myself, as someone who knows how the news operation works and based on my observations of Mr Peppiatt's place within that operation.
21. Mr Peppiatt is - or was - one of the most junior reporters at the Star until his letter to Mr Desmond which was reproduced in the Guardian in March 2011. The letter surprised me as he came across as someone who enjoyed the idea of being a "tabloid hack" - so much so that a lot of the stunts he claims he was made to do were his idea, or at least contained his embellishments.
22. It is my view that he was never made to do anything he didn't want to do, and his claims of "bullying" are simply the stuff of fantasy. Mr Desmond may sometimes give his editors a hard time, but Dawn Neesom (Daily Star editor), while sometimes forthright, certainly doesn't - as I've seen elsewhere - reflexively "kick downwards" so there is absolutely no all-pervading culture of bullying.
23. In fact I'd say the Daily Star is one of the most relaxed places I've ever worked, and that applies right through the paper, from the newsdesk to the art desk, the back bench to the picture desk, the middle bench to the reporters, the features desk to the sports desk. Everybody works very hard and knows what is expected of them to create the best possible product, but it is also a very convivial place where ideas and observations are welcomed and everyone is approachable, including Mrs Neesom. This is certainly not the case everywhere I've worked - the Mail on Sunday is extremely heirarchical - but at the Daily Star if anyone is unhappy about a story there is always an opportunity to say so (directly to the editor if one wants to, for she is always on the editorial floor) and even if there is disagreement, no grudges are held and no-one suffers because they had the temerity to have an opinion.
24. My observation is that Mr Peppiatt is thoroughly enjoying his time in the spotlight and the attention of being called to give testimony to the Leveson Inquiry. He even appeared to suggest to the inquiry that a senior staff member at Northern & Shell ordered someone to hack his phone, which appears to me to be patently untrue. Even if the Daily Star did hack phones (which I'm certain it doesn't), Mr Peppiatt simply wasn't, and isn't, important enough to be hacked or threatened - but my sense is that he would like to be.

24. He comes across to me as relishing his self-perceived role as a professional mischief-maker (for many months his own Twitter profile described him as someone who enjoyed "getting up the nose of billionaire media moguls") but the tenor of his (in my opinion inaccurate) slant on Mrs Neesom's appearance before the Inquiry (http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2012/jan/12/dawn-neesom-leveson-inquiry-star?newsfeed=true) smacks of one more interested in gaining attention for his opinions than the future of the Press.
25. I hope those leading this Inquiry are able to put his views into perspective as being from someone who believes he's coming across as some sort of crusader (current Twitter status: "Fighting the good fight for press reform"), but seems to me to be peddling an account of tabloid life that is pure fantasy.

26. I hope my views are helpful to you. I am proud of the many achievements of the national Press in this country, which in my experience is largely represented by hard-working, honest and sincere individuals. I am proud to be in their company. Whatever the outcome of the Inquiry and the subsequent implications of that outcome, I am grateful for the opportunity to make a contribution.

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

SIGNED:  .....

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DATED:...31 JANUARY 2012