

My name is Richard Peppiatt and my last full time newspaper position was as a reporter at the Daily Star, where I had worked for over two years. Before then I worked for six months at a news agency called Ferrari's, which did 'leg work' for the mainly tabloid press. Prior to that role I freelanced for the Mail on Sunday as a reporter for roughly five months, as well as freelancing for a variety of other tabloid titles.

I would describe corporate governance at the Daily Star as laissez-faire at best. There was little or nothing in the way of documents or official policies governing conduct. I was never asked or offered the opportunity to sign a code of conduct, nor did they exist to my knowledge an 'employee handbook' type resource to reference. The PCC Code was not something that I ever heard referenced in relation to how a story should be handled, although certain limitations such as not trespassing in hospitals were implicitly acknowledged. I have admitted that some stories I wrote at the Daily Star were wholly inaccurate, often written under pressure from superiors to distort the facts at hand. For me to have referenced the PCC Code to protest against this I would have been laughed out the door. That was the level of esteem the PCC held in the newsroom, both before and after Richard Desmond withdrew. Tabloid editors often talk of the "shame" they feel at a PCC adjudication, but - and I won't pull any punches here - they're lying. They couldn't care less what the PCC thinks, or about having to occasionally print a three paragraph correction. The transaction between newspaper and reader has already occurred, and the effect of that story is rarely diminished by a retraction months later. Getting the occasional slap on the wrist was just a cost of doing business.

I was only a reporter, so I was not privy to all discussions, but the impression I got from more senior colleagues and personal observation was that Richard Desmond's biggest interest is in the business, rather than journalistic, side of his newspapers, which is to say editorial decisions are dictated more from the accounts and advertising departments than the newsroom floor. The net effect of this is that stories which sell well (e.g. about Katie Price) had to be sourced on a daily basis, whether there was a tale to tell or not. This naturally led to fabrication in order to fulfill an unrealistic quota. Much more insidious was when this same philosophy was applied to stories involving Muslims and immigrants, when yet again a top down pressure to unearth stories which fitted within a certain narrative (immigrants are taking over, Muslims are a threat to security) led to casual and systemic distortions. In short, ethical concerns were always subservient to financial ones. Circulation felt like the main moral arbiter. This corporate self-interest is the reason that the Desmond's titles are constantly promoting each other's products. The newspapers have given obscene amounts of coverage to Big Brother and the Health Lottery in recent months, far in excess of their respective news values.

I resigned from the Daily Star in March, so it was before the phone hacking story really exploded. Prior to that the occasional gurgle of interest in red top behaviour had no discernible impact on Daily Star newsroom practices. This may be because private investigators were not routinely employed to my knowledge. Only on one occasion I asked a more senior colleague if he could

help me find a telephone number and address for a woman I wanted to speak to with regard a story, after having no luck through databases such as TraceSmart. He told me he'd phone someone and a few hours later a list of phone numbers and possible addresses were read out to me (none of which, it transpired were correct, I might add). I do not know for certain anything illegal occurred on that occasion, although my instinct at the time was that it was not wholly above board. I can say with confidence the Daily Star were far smaller users of private investigators than their rivals. This was not a matter of ethics, but of comparative budgets. They were often happy to let other papers do the dirty work, then just follow up their coverage. The majority of stories appearing in the Daily Star are sourced from the news wires or plagiarised from other newspapers, in particular the Daily Mail, which is such a heavy influence that for the most part it dictated the Daily Star's news agenda. In addition to the major news agencies such as Reuters, PA and Associated Press there are dozens of local agencies dotted around the country supplying content to the national press. Some of this content is lifted from local newspapers, or sourced from agency reporters' own contacts. Other stories still are concocted from PR content. Often national newspapers will also hire agency reporters to cover a story for them on their patch. I am not going to speculate too much into the behaviour of news agencies, because each is run in an idiosyncratic manner. But it is fair to say that in a highly competitive market in which agencies are competing to get their stories used by the national press, there is an obvious financial incentive in making your stories stand out from the crowd, and so the temptation to spin or embellish a story always exists. One obvious consequence of reporters cannibalising the work of other journalists is that the former is often wholly unaware of the veracity of their information. Sometimes the maxim that a story is "too good to check" comes into play, and in this manner falsehoods can easily become propagated across the media.

PRs often find channeling their content through news agencies is a good technique to get the attention of newsdesks, but they also deal directly with the national newspapers. PR firms give generous encouragement to editors to run stories featuring their clients. This can take the form of gifts, ranging from food and alcohol through to free holidays (as a lowly reporter I went on four free holidays in two years for helping 'push' stories from certain PR firms and companies, with more senior employees often doing even better than that). Other stories are obtained from phone-ins or emails from members of the public, who are often seeking money for selling their tale, and of course 'traditional' reporting, as in reacting to breaking news events, either by heading to the incident yourself or gathering information from TV, internet and radio or the newswires. Another way stories appear in the Daily Star (and they are not alone) are when they are simply made up, or based on such scant, dubious evidence as to essentially be untrue. I list in my resignation letter (attached) a number of stories that I wrote via this method, in the full knowledge, and on occasion request, of superiors. Most, but not all, of the fabricated stories featured the Daily Star's most referenced celebrities – Katie Price, Peter Andre, Kerry Katona etc. These people's careers are symbiotically linked to tabloid column inches, and therefore they were very unlikely to sue over false stories. Their management are begrudgingly aware

that their coverage in the tabloid press is likely to see-saw, sometimes they'd receive weeks of good press, sometimes weeks of bad. Without that, readers quickly become bored. For a period of about six months I believe Katie Price appeared on the front cover of the Daily Star nearly every day. This was not because her life is that much of a rollercoaster, but because reporters were put under immense pressure to think up new 'lines' about her personal life on a daily basis. Often this involved collusion with Katie Price's PR team (who, aware the Daily Star would write about her anyway, had a vested interest in helping out in return for a positive spin). Failing this, a story was often concocted off the back of flimsy evidence e.g Katie Price appearing in public without her wedding ring meant her 'marriage was over', even if there was no other evidence to back that statement up. To circumvent this issue unattributed source quotes make up much of the story, verifying the angle taken. Although unnamed sources are a valuable journalistic tool to protect sources, often in my experience of tabloids they are simply made up by the reporter to increase the word count and add a veneer of legitimacy to something that is speculation, at best.

Another ethically dubious technique used by the Daily Star (and other tabloids, if not to the same ridiculous degree) is the overplayed headlines that misrepresent the truth of the story beyond. It is such an endemic problem at the Daily Star that most days a comparison of the front page with the story inside is bordering on the comedic. One recent example claimed TV KING COWELL IS 'DEAD'. The story inside was about him leaving X Factor. This behaviour is purely a cynical ploy to encourage consumers to purchase the Daily Star over rivals. Often lacking a real scoop to encourage this, they simply pretend to have one. It's a con, plain and simple. The Daily Express is no better at this. Particularly distasteful are their front page claims of "miracle cures" for cancer/Alzheimer's/Parkinson's, which upon closer analysis are simply initial trials on mice, with many years of research ahead before they can even be considered medically sound. This type of misleading sensationalism deliberately plays on offering false hope to people whose lives have been affected by such illnesses, all in order to sell their paper.

Reporters, including myself, were often unhappy about some of the stories we were pressured to write. Certain executives would often overplay the strength of a story in editorial conference to please the editor, but would then lean on the reporter tasked with writing it to make the story fit what they'd pitched. This was the case with the infamous "Muslim Only Loos" story, where a strong news line was decided before the facts were known i.e. that there was only one 'squat' toilet and it wasn't paid for with taxpayer money. When later in the day these facts did become clear they were simply ignored.

To cite another example of this pragmatic approach to truth, at the beginning of October 2009 the TV star Matt Lucas' ex husband, Kevin McGee committed suicide. That day the news desk got a call from a member of the public who claimed to know McGee and the reasons behind the death. This call was passed to me and I noted down what he said, and informed the news desk, who were very keen to run the story. I tried arranging to meet the source, but he said he was unavailable for the next few days. I made the

news desk aware of unease of taking this man's (quite sensational claims) at face value without at least feeling him out in person, especially considering his preoccupation seemed to be mainly with how much money we'd pay him. However, the decision was taken by the news editor/editor to run the story on the front page regardless. The next morning a letter arrived from Matt Lucas' solicitors threatening legal action. That same morning the source also called back, claiming he was in touch with Matt Lucas and had some more information to sell. Again he was unavailable to meet, and again, the newsdesk decided to run his story. To this day, I've never met the man in question, and have no idea if he had insider info, or was just a fantasist. I understand that Matt Lucas did sue over the stories, and a significant sum of money was paid out. I expected to be disciplined (at the very least) for my part in the incident (not because I felt particularly culpable, but because blame tends to travel downhill) but was surprised when the whole thing was treated just like a cost of doing business, and it was barely mentioned again at all.

It seemed to me that reporters' employment contracts were structured specifically to limit the possibility of any ethical protest. Many, including myself, were on casual contracts, which is to say they can be terminated at anytime. The spectre of being 'let go' at any moment is a powerful deterrent against sticking your head above the trench if you disagree with something that is occurring. Even if someone was bold enough to complain, no channel existed for employees to raise concerns about ethical or journalistic practices. My feeling was certainly that the further up the chain of command you went the less, not more, concern over newsroom behaviour existed.

In a broader sense, Richard Desmond's investment in his newsroom operation was/is woeful, and this has resulted in too few reporters to adequately do their job. I recollect one day there being just myself and two other reporters to write the whole newspaper. We were forced to use pseudonyms just to make it appear to readers there were more of us. Any fact checking etc goes out the window when you have such a heaving workload. Discretionary payments were sometimes made to reporters for exclusive stories. On one occasion the news editor of the day offered £150 to whatever reporter could 'come up with' a story to fill page 3 (I was left in no doubt that by his phrasing he was not concerned for the story's veracity, for it was 6pm on a Sunday and he wanted to go home). I invented a story about model Kelly Brook seeing a hypnotist to help her get ready quicker, and was duly paid the bonus.

For me the true face of the Daily Star was exposed when I resigned from the paper, leaking my letter to the Guardian. A crisis management PR firm Outside Organisation (who now look after Channel 5's PR more broadly) were employed to deal with the fall out. One technique used was to contact other newspapers and attempt to discredit me. It filtered back through friends in the industry that they were spreading the rumour that I had been stealing money meant for sources, and that I was disgruntled after being turned down for promotion, that I wasn't a qualified journalist, hadn't worked for other organisations as I claimed - and even that I was a drug addict. None of these things are in the slightest bit true, but some continue to be repeated by Daily Star executives to this day. I very much expect they will repeat them in

evidence to you, and I therefore attach with this statement my NCTJ certificate, proof of employment from all the news organisations I have mentioned, and a cuttings screen-grab showing the number of stories I wrote while at the Daily Star (around 850). They have also taken the defense that I may have made up stories and acted unethically, but I was a lone "rogue reporter", and that I am not a reflection of their newsroom culture. To answer this I need do nothing more than refer you to a list compiled by Roy Greenslade of the scores of libels and apologies the Daily Star have admitted in recent years (also attached). In many they admit what they printed was wholly untrue. My name appears nowhere near the vast majority.

After resigning from the Daily Star I suffered a campaign of harassment and threats to my person, which likely included my phone being hacked. Within hours of the Guardian informing the Daily Star that they were preparing to publish my resignation letter, the threatening phone calls, text messages and emails began. They ranged from "We're doing a kiss and tell on you" and "Change your voicemail message" to "You're a marked man until the day you die" and "RD will get ya" (a reference, I'm certain, to Richard Desmond). The harassment became so persistent that I sent my girlfriend to go stay with a friend, and called in the police. When this step was publicised in the Guardian, the harassment stopped, but not before the details of a voicemail message left by a friend was emailed to me, and the message itself apparently deleted. I see no way that the information could have been known unless my voicemail had been accessed. The police have now traced the source of this harassment and given him a warning. He is a person linked to the tabloid world but that I have never met, and who would therefore not have the in-depth personal information he possesses without seeming collusion from the Daily Star/Outside Organisation. I am currently pursuing a civil claim against the individual to force him to reveal who ordered his behaviour toward me.

To conclude, although the Daily Star did not to my knowledge engage in phone hacking or use private investigators, it is my assertion that their journalistic ethics are just as corrupted. The truth (and by this I mean a moral, as opposed to legalistic truth) is treated with such flippancy, and their motivations so capitalistic as opposed to journalistic, as to be a prime example of the gross irresponsibility that has engulfed this country's tabloid press, and for which I am ashamed to have been part of.