

Seminar 1: The Competitive Pressures on the Press and the Impact on Journalism 6th October 2011

How does the press today operate in a competitive environment? What are the pressures facing editors?

Presentation by Phil Hall

Ten minutes is not a great deal of time to discuss the complex nature of a newsroom and thus the pressure it brings to journalists, so I am going to get straight to the point.

When I started in this industry nearly 40 years ago there was pressure – it was mostly of a competitive nature because newspapers were vying for readers in markets where many publications were neck and neck in terms of their circulation figures..

When I became editor of the News of the World in 1995 the landscape had changed. That newspaper was selling 4.7 million copies and in my first conversation with Rupert Murdoch he asked what I expected to sell in five years time. I optimistically and maybe naively suggested 5 million.

His response was: “You will be selling 4 million or maybe 4.1.”

He knew full well the circulation trends of the newspapers and what he did in that conversation was to explain that there was no pressure to achieve the unachievable, the pressure was to deliver a great, campaigning newspaper.

A 20 per cent circulation fall will mean staff reductions and budget cuts, but it does not mean editors can justify a 20 per cent drop in quality of the newspaper. That would be a circular argument that could only end with the demise of the newspaper. So it is true pressure has increased as circulations dwindle.

Fifteen years ago national newspapers, with one or two exceptions, owned their own markets. The News of the World was so dominant its circulation figures were the same as its two main rivals put together; The Mail group was equally pre-eminent, likewise the Sunday Times. It was therefore not expedient to look for sensational stories purely to win a circulation war.

We were fortunate during my editorship to publish many ground-breaking stories with investigations into subjects as far ranging as gun-running, paedophilia, drug racketeers and illegal immigration gangs. Many of them ended with jail sentences. We campaigned over miscarriages of justice and solved an unsolved murder.

There are great competitive pressures, of course, to produce the best possible newspapers but there are also significant challenges to getting it right because of the libel laws, being fair because of the PCC code of conduct and justifying publication

because of the human rights/privacy rulings. The publish and be damned attitude has long been confined to the history books of Fleet Street.

I am sure the public believe big stories deliver big circulation increases and thus editors are under pressure to deliver a major scoop on a weekly if not daily basis.

That is a simplistic view and is not the case. Some of our biggest stories – the Jeffery Archer case for example – delivered no increase in sales.

In my opinion what sold the News of the World was the strength of the package – the sport, the columnists, the features and more than anything understanding its market and delivering what that readership demanded. Yes we broke big stories, but it was not the be all and end all of our operation.

The pressures are nothing more than personal, professional pride. There were no bonuses or proprietary pressure to push the boundaries beyond what is reasonable.

But as an editor I did demand high standards and I did expect journalists to produce agenda setting stories, but is that any different to a business leader in any other industry? I don't think so and those who suggest and imply that phone hacking has arisen because of the pressures to deliver big stories are in my view wrong.

It has happened because a group of people have indulged in illegal activity and the checks and balances that should be in place in any news-room – or any business for that matter – have failed. I sincerely hope we will discover why by the end of the Lord Leveson inquiry.

I think it relevant to point out that editors do have different pressures now to those I experienced.

A media lawyer working at a newspaper told me recently he spent a huge proportion of his time dealing with issues around the Human Rights Act, in particular privacy issues. Many have used that Act to try to protect themselves from perfectly ethical investigations operated by tabloid and broadsheet papers alike.

A news editor of my acquaintance claimed he would speak to the Press Complaints Commission two or three times a week to discuss issues around what is in the public interest.

And it is confusing. Editors have long argued that it is in the public interest to reveal the truth about misbehaving celebrities who present one image to the public but in reality behave in a completely different way.

For some years privacy actions have blocked the publication of such stories.

Yet only last week a judge ruled that the footballer Rio Ferdinand does have a duty to be consistent with the public image he presents and the way he behaves behind closed doors.

This confusion over what is in the public interest clearly puts a great deal of pressure on editors, particularly when they are working to tight deadlines, with dwindling resources in an age when advertising revenues are challenging.

What is in the public interest is one of the fundamental issues that the Leveson inquiry needs to address.

Inevitably the internet increases the pressure on a newspaper to be more creative and forward thinking in order to compete with the instant news platforms. But is it any more pressure than 40 years ago? In my view it is different, not greater.

It does however increase the pressure to get it right because the public, celebrities, almost anyone, can respond instantly through social media and have that complaint taken up around the world.

Clearly we are here because of the wider view that somehow the newspaper industry is broken, it needs fixing. I don't think it needs fixing, I do think it needs changing.

The Press Complaints Commission has never been a regulatory body in my view. It is a watchdog and if it has made one fundamental error it is that it has become invisible. It does do a great deal of positive work.

As the chairman of a PR company I regularly speak to the PCC when a client feels he or she is being treated wrongly by the Press.

In 90 per cent of the cases where the PCC have intervened, a story has been abandoned or a compromise negotiated.

It works in preventing the publication of inaccurate, intrusive stories or pictures gathered in an improper way. And it is my view it should be allowed to pro-actively investigate the behaviour of the media in big news stories, like the disappearance of Madeleine McCann.

I believe another pressure is the inconsistencies of the law that affects journalism. When Princess Diana was front page news editors in this country were constantly being asked to refrain from publishing photographs, while their colleagues around the globe were free to do as they wished.

Some editors followed and produced less attractive newspapers, others ignored it.

The curious aspect of this situation is that Princess Diana was surrounded by bodyguards and yet the paparazzi that pursued her were not arrested for harassment nor for endangering her life through dangerous driving.

And yet the Palace complained about how the pursuit of the Princess was over-zealous. Editors should clearly have shown more restraint, but why did the authorities not use the tools available to them to tackle the problem through the proper use of the law? I believe it would have stopped the practise overnight.

Likewise The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 that governs phone hacking, are the sanctions for breaching it consistent with the public revulsion shown over the Millie Dowler affair? I doubt it. But isn't this a police matter rather than a press regulation matter? Staff should not break the law whatever industry they are in, full stop.

Why are private detectives who are used by law firms, financial institutions and newspapers not licensed when they work in such sensitive areas?

When I started 40 years ago the news agenda in this country was largely provided by news agencies. As newspapers reduced their budgets, local papers folded and news agencies went out of business, the pool of stories was considerably reduced. That, of course, is a pressure for editors and news gatherers.

But in my experience there has been a benefit of the pressure to compete over fewer stories. To secure an exclusive story more than ever editors allow the subjects of their stories to "approve" the account before publication. That does not mean they can control the story but it does mean they can challenge inaccuracies and ensure absolute probity when they are quoted in an article.

I know there is a danger that as a former editor I can be accused of looking at The Press through rose tinted glasses. Let me make it clear that as a Public Relations operator I am very much on the other side of the fence. Poacher turned gamekeeper they say.

But my experience is that 99 per cent of journalists do act professionally, they are impartial, thorough and work within the PCC code of conduct and a vast majority of stories are accurate.

Are journalists sometimes rude, aggressive, and unreasonable? Of course they are, but I have absolutely no idea how we can legislate against human nature.

One thing is clear; it is not possible to set up a truly independent regulatory authority appointed by the Government.

If a newspaper were to criticise a Government minister over a misdemeanour and he or she complained to the new regulatory authority and they found against the newspaper, will the public truly believe that body has been impartial?

It will inevitably increase the pressures on editors to give Governments a wide berth when surely their role is to question and hold to account our leaders and politicians.

As I said I do not want to paint a hearts and flowers view of newspapers. It is tough, uncompromising, stressful and extremely competitive business. The laws that govern them are inconsistent and the PCC needs more clarity, more clout in what it does and greater visibility when it acts.

But none of the above pressures, in my view, explains or offers an excuse for illegal activity in the newsroom.