

## The government should resist calls for further press regulation in the wake of the phone hacking scandal. Further regulation would seriously hamper independent journalism.

*In the wake of the News International phone hacking scandal, many have called for further regulation of the press and an investigation into the concentration of media sources.*

**[Matthew Partridge](#)** argues that these proposals would actually hinder independent comment and journalistic expression.



The public revulsion that has been generated by the revelation that journalists hacked into and tampered with Milly Dowler's voicemail is justified. However, if this backlash leads to overregulation of the press, or the end of the idea of adversarial journalism, then it will be bad for both wider standards in public life and British democracy.

Although David Cameron is still technically opposed to statutory regulation, he has hinted that he might give any new regulatory body statutory powers to enforce its judgements, which amounts to much the same thing. Other commentators have been less restrained. For instance, Neil Kinnock has [called](#) for the extension of impartiality controls to the print media. Similarly, Lord Mandelson has called for regulators to become "[more embedded in the system of newspaper legal teams and readers' editors](#)" while Tom Watson has argued for a ban on MP's [talking to the press anonymously](#).

Even some journalists are calling for greater controls on the press. Roy Greenslade, the former Daily Mirror Editor, has called for "a PCC Plus" with "enhanced sanctions" or one that, "at the very least, use[s] more frequently and transparently the sanctions already at its disposal". Alan Rusbridger has argued that "journalists should, and can, be [much more open about their sources](#)". The National Union of Journalists is pushing for their [ethics code](#) to be made compulsory throughout the industry.

In reality, all these proposals would severely hamper journalism. Given that the super-injunction controversy has demonstrated the extent to which celebrities are prepared to use the current system to sue papers into silence, making it easier to restrain publication would simply compound the problem. Forcing newspaper to be impartial, or creating a mandatory right of reply (which has also been suggested), would hamper both comment and campaigning journalism. Investigative journalism largely relies on anonymous sources, with [Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward's](#) famous investigation of the Watergate scandal largely based on anonymous leaks from local police, prosecutors and FBI Agent [Mark Felt](#).

Although media concentration is a serious issue, Rupert Murdoch's influence has been overstated. While the economics of American cable television makes the sectional appeal of Fox News viable, the broad-based readership of New International's print titles has forced a more even-handed approach. Even if the Sun did [swing the 1992](#) election (and this [has been disputed](#)) a few months later it was the turn of the Major government to feel the wrath of the then editor [Kelvin MacKenzie](#) after the ERM debacle. Whether [endorsing Labour](#) a few weeks before the 1997 election, or switching [back to the Conservatives](#) when they enjoyed substantial poll leads over Brown in 2009, their recent stances have followed, rather than led, public opinion.

The alternatives to the adversarial style of British journalism do not inspire much confidence. French privacy laws meant that it took Dominic Strauss-Khan's arrest for on charges of rape in New York to bring his serial womanizing to light and enable previous allegations of attempted rape to be taken seriously. Had the American media acted less deferentially to both President Obama and the Republican leadership, the potential downgrading of America's credit rating, or even default would be much more unlikely. It is also worrying that a lot of internet journalism involves, according to Bill Kellner "taking words written by other people, packaging them on your own Web site and harvesting revenue that might otherwise be directed to the [originators of the material](#)".

It would be a tragedy if celebrity anger, which is what is driving this scandal, is responsible for killing British journalism.