

Brown at Leveson: the politicisation of the press

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/06/11/brown-at-leveson/

2012-6-11



Brown at Leveson

Reaction to Gordon Brown's appearance at the Leveson inquiry has mainly consisted of political journalists expressing shock at his high moral tone and flawless recollection of a spotless past. But let's leave the former Prime Minister's reversioning of history and look at what Gordon says is his main concern, the conflation of fact and opinion. I think he's right to spot a trend, but wrong to think it causes the bilious state of politician/journalist relations.

We all think we know what facts are (sacred) and how they differ from comment (cheap). We all like to think that we can distinguish the two. Most of the time it is useful if the former are available without the latter. Increasingly, we get both together divided by quite thin lines. In broadcasting this is done with a 'news' package followed by a Correspondent two-way, or an interview with an expert or someone involved in the story. In the media we have news pages and Op Ed pages.

But the real problem is not the growth in analysis and opinion handed out by everyone from Nick Robinson to Guido Fawkes. What really offends politicians (and often the public) is the selection of facts which can be so distorted that it amounts to a false representation. Look, for example, at how the Daily Express only ever reports bad things about immigrants. Without any overt comment, it gives the impression that all immigrants are criminal. In fact, all media outlets, including the BBC, chose facts and ignore others to tell their version of reality through the prism of their ideology, experience, etc

The easy bit is when journalists get facts wrong. That's what law and regulation are there for. If as Brown said, a paper said he was asleep at a memorial service when in fact he was praying, then any mildly effective regulator should be able to insist on a correction. The problem is that the PCC was not even mildly effective and politicians were prepared to go along with that for their own political advantage. Sorting that will be the 'easy' bit for Leveson.

Of course, politicians also select facts. As Chancellor and Prime Minister Gordon Brown became notorious for his representation of figures in particular, which many critics thought disingenuous at best. Double counting by the Treasury became a standing joke with political correspondents. Every new spending announcement had to be double-checked because it would almost certainly have been 'pre-announced' before. The figures would often include money from a different programme that had itself been announced. So hearing Mr Brown complain about misrepresentation is odd.

The reality that dawned on me watching Mr Brown at Leveson is that, firstly, he does live in his own moral universe and secondly, that he sees newspapers as politicians and politicians as journalists.

By that I mean that he obviously dealt with journalists and the media as political competitors who could be fought with, cajoled and occasionally allied. He was probably less good at it than Tony Blair because of his even more controlling personality. At the time he was in power he did not worry about the rights and responsibilities of the press, only their role in day to day politics.

James Robinson (then Observer Media Editor) describes the state of Brown's relationship with the media in 2008 in great detail [in this excellent article](#) which shows how close he was to Murdoch's Empire at the very moment when he was about to lose its political support.

Brown felt that it was entirely the job of a politician and his staff to try to create press coverage according to their own

version of reality. Some might call this control-freakery, others would call it sensible political marketing. The point is that it is no more objective than the newspapers.

The story he told Leveson of how the Sun revealed the cystic fibrosis of his son represents a ghastly low point in the often amoral relationship between Murdoch and New Labour that shows how far the ethical state of political communications had deteriorated. Anyone who feel comfortable with what the journalists did there really should be ashamed.

But it is also a distraction. Brown never really used his children for political advantage and there was no public interest in invading his privacy. But the fact that the information might have been obtained by criminal deception and should not have been published emphasises how this should have been dealt with through the regulators and even police. The fact that he didn't act shows how constrained Brown was by his politics and his perception of the power of the press.

How Leveson can change that – beyond improved regulation of the press – I do not know. From his [opening remarks](#) today, Leveson implied that he wants a kind of depoliticised press. That is as likely – and as desirable – as depoliticised MPs.

[For an excellent selection of views by spin-doctors who served under New Labour have a look at this article, [Can Downing Street Ever Be Honest?](#)]

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science