

Press regulation: three reasons why a 30 year old campaign must continue

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A [government consultation on press regulation](#) which asked for views on whether to commence Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, and whether or not to proceed with Leveson Part 2, recently closed. [Steven Barnett](#) argues that it is important to take a longer term perspective on the issue of press reform.



With the government's consultation on whether to proceed with the section 40 cost-shifting incentives of the Leveson framework now closed, there will be a brief political pause. Neither that consultation nor the intense political manoeuvring that is likely to follow should distract us from the long-standing and urgent need to tackle reform of press regulation in order to protect both the public and public interest journalism.

In his [Guardian blog last week](#), Roy Greenslade elided the current Hacked Off campaign (little more than five years old) and the more over-arching question of whether and why this problem needs to be addressed by policy makers. This is an increasingly common short-term perspective which should be resisted. There are three related issues.

First is what history tells us: that the newspaper industry's obsession with Hacked Off obscures a battle to combat abuses of press power which stretch back more than 30 years. The very first editorial of the [British Journalism Review](#) in 1989 carried a thundering editorial by the late and hugely respected Fleet Street giant Geoffrey Goodman. Amongst other things, he bemoaned a "contagious outbreak of squalid, banal, lazy and cowardly journalism" and, specifically in the print sector, the "virtually unchecked downward spiral in standards of journalism". The BJR began life because "Britain deserves higher standards than it is now getting". It still does.

When the Calcutt inquiry shortly afterwards made several recommendations for genuinely independent self-regulation to deal with some of those excesses identified by Goodman, the press wriggled and manoeuvred, threw out half the Calcutt package, and set up the Press Complaints Commission – which Calcutt himself promptly identified as little more than the industry's creature. But John Major's government of the early nineties was too weak to act (a missed opportunity, as Major himself subsequently admitted to the Leveson Inquiry).

Within ten years, private data were being unlawfully blagged, phones were being hacked, and dead children's parents were being door-stepped. Of course, in the meantime there were some outstanding examples of stories being broken and injustices exposed – watchdog journalism at its best as well as gutter journalism at its worst. But the industry remained impervious to the blatant abuses which, in Leveson's words, "wreaked havoc in the lives of ordinary people".

As late as 2009, even as these abuses were being sanctioned in newsrooms, the industry ruling body (the Press Board of Finance) submitted evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport select committee that "standards of reporting have been raised markedly", while Daily Mail editor-in-chief Paul Dacre told the committee that: "the journalistic landscape has changed dramatically since the '80s; journalists are much better behaved." It is an argument still being rehearsed by editors and proprietors as they continue their resistance to Leveson reforms.

Second, we should beware the siren voices of those who claim that the digital revolution has obliterated any need for change. Press power is on the wane, they say, despite mounting evidence of precisely the contrary: that online platforms and social media are actually magnifying the power of legacy news brands; that broadcast news and current affairs are frequently dominated by press agendas, columnists and front pages; that government ministers are still beholden to national editors and proprietors; and that abuses of intrusion, defamation and inaccuracy are causing as much distress to ordinary people as they were ten years ago.

Certainly the business model has transformed the newspaper industry, and online is becoming the dominant distribution platform. But that does not vitiate the need to tackle wrongdoing and repeated violation of the industry's own ethical codes. How journalists conduct themselves – or are ordered to conduct themselves by editors – matters whether the end product is in print or online.

Moreover, those who place their faith in IPSO, the body established by the press to replace the discredited PCC, will be disappointed. It is controlled by the new industry body, the Regulatory Funding Company, and its promises of reform are identical to commitments given over the years by the PCC. The small concessions wrung out of the industry in two and a half of years of operation have come nowhere near the very minimal requirements for effective and independent regulation.

Third, we should remember the continuing broad-based appetite for meaningful reform. Press attention has focused on Hacked Off, but in truth there is a consensus in favour of action which has barely shifted since Leveson reported. His recommendations are still supported by the great majority of the public who now have less faith in IPSO than they did a year ago (as I reported [here](#)), by most academics, by parliamentarians across all parties and by many journalists who are unable to speak out for fear of reprisals by their employers.

That consensus is in favour of protecting both members of the public and grassroots journalists from the worst excesses of an industry which still wields immense power and which remains determined to resist the kind of independent scrutiny which it rightly expects from every other trade or profession.

This government, like all its predecessors, was always likely to be swayed by press interests on which it relies for political support in difficult times. That should not deflect Parliament from pursuing a solution to a problem which has dogged this country for decades and shows no sign of diminishing.

Note: this article was originally published on the [LSE Media Policy Project blog](#).

About the Author

Steven Barnett is Professor of Communications at the University of Westminster and a prominent writer and broadcaster who has been involved in policy analysis at the highest levels, both nationally and internationally, for the last 25 years. He has advised government ministers in the UK, has given evidence or served as an adviser on several parliamentary committees, has been called to give evidence to the European Parliament, and has been invited to speak at numerous national and international conferences.

