

# The hacking trial was just round one in the fight to rescue journalism

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*The Coulson-Brooks verdicts and the trial itself will be treated by the blinkered, screeching anti-Leveson lobby as conclusive evidence that nothing more needs to be done, writes [Steven Barnett](#). In fact, we have barely reached the end of Act One. This is an opportunity finally and definitively to reclaim journalism for journalists, to implement the charter framework on press self-regulation that was based on Leveson's carefully crafted recommendations.*



This is a defining moment for British journalism. Not because of the phone hacking verdicts, which frankly told us little more than the trial had already revealed. In October 2013, three senior News of the World news editors – Neville Thurlbeck, Greg Miskiw and James Weatherup – [pleaded guilty to phone hacking](#). Then we heard that the voicemails of Prince William, Prince Harry and Kate Middleton were [hacked nearly 200 times](#) in 2005/6. We heard about News International's [email deletion policy](#) in 2010, which resulted in the destruction of 3.5m pre-2005 emails – and prompted the judge to [observe](#) that, if was part of a cover-up, “it may not be the most successful damage limitation exercise ever mounted”. And we knew back in 2003 that News of the World editors had paid police officers “in the past” because Rebekah Wade, as she then was, used those very words in front of a [parliamentary select committee](#) – even though parliamentary rules, astonishingly, prevented that admission being used in court.

So the verdict on Andy Coulson really tells us little, except that the criminality went higher within News International than had ever been admitted. And yet, I am prepared to bet my dog-eared copy of the Leveson Report that both the verdicts and the trial itself will be treated by the blinkered, screeching anti-Leveson lobby as conclusive evidence that nothing more needs to be done.

## Smokescreen

There will be blustering sermons from self-serving newspaper editors declaring that lessons have been learned, police incompetence fully exposed, and the few miscreants involved will be deservedly punished – now we can, and should, move on. Then will come the predictable punchline: thankfully, we will be saved from any further repetition of such scandalous behaviour by our shiny new system of self-regulation, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). But as we read these sanctimonious rationalisations from the nation's leader writers and columnists, we need to remember two very important lessons from the past three years.

First, we now know that there was a long history of vehement denials, systematic cover-ups, and shameless attempts to discredit the Guardian's search for the truth. These were followed by sob stories from those same newspapers about journalists being arrested at six in the morning. They had clearly forgotten that this is what happens when the police finally do their job and are concerned about suspects concealing evidence if given advance notice of their arrest.

Second, and much more importantly, criminal activity was not even half the story of wrongdoing. The Leveson Inquiry detailed a morass of vile, intrusive, profoundly unethical, sometimes downright vicious, but non-criminal press behaviour. A coach and several horses were driven through the industry's own code of conduct, and the industry did virtually nothing about it.

Anyone who really believes the press has already changed its ways should read the [recent article by Paul Weller's partner Hannah](#), who wrote movingly about the distress and fear inflicted on her children by a *Daily Mail* photographer and the subsequent battle to obtain redress from Associated Newspapers. None of that will change

with the verdicts announced. IPSO is as toothless and as manipulated by the industry it purports to regulate as its useless predecessor.

Nevertheless, in a piece of brazen deceit, IPSO is being trailed by its promoters as the “toughest regulator in the Western world” which delivers “all of the key elements” of Leveson’s recommendations. As the Media Standards Trust demonstrated in [a forensic demolition of IPSO’s claims](#) last November (which has never been rebutted), it satisfies just 12 of 38 recommendations. Fundamentally, while affecting to be “independent” of the industry, it is dominated at virtually every level of its operation by the “[Regulatory Funding Company](#)” (RFC).

This mysterious body controls IPSO’s budget, its members’ pay, the regulatory code, investigations, sanctions, and will decide whether an arbitration system – the core of Leveson’s recommendations – should even be set up. Its constitution guarantees that it will ultimately be controlled by four publishers: Murdoch’s News UK, Associated Newspapers, the Telegraph Group and the Mirror Group.

The industry rejoiced when IPSO announced its [appointment of Sir Alan Moses](#), the highly respected Appeal Court judge, as its first chair. Here, surely, was vindication of its claim to genuine independence. In truth, Sir Alan will find himself bound hand and foot by the rules laid down in the RFC’s articles. Rumour suggests that he will demand change; frankly, he might as well whistle. There have been fine and good men and women before him who sincerely believed they could rein in the unaccountable power of Britain’s national press, and all with more experience of political skulduggery than even the most skillful Appeal Court judge. They failed, and so will he.

### **It’s not over yet**

We must use the verdicts of this trial to send a resounding message to those newspaper groups who, even now, will try to argue we have reached the final act of this dismal affair. In fact, we have barely reached the end of Act One. This is an opportunity finally and definitively to reclaim journalism for journalists, to implement the charter framework on press self-regulation that was based on Leveson’s carefully crafted recommendations, and to send a very clear message to those responsible for dragging journalism through the gutter: that there will be real and meaningful penalties for trashing ordinary people’s lives, in breach of the industry’s own code, in order to sell newspapers.

At the same time, there must be protection for the kind of genuine, informative, hard-hitting, watchdog journalism – whether in broadsheet, tabloid or online form – which is the foundation of a healthy democracy. These are not incompatible aims. On the contrary, they are both enshrined in the charter framework, and can both be achieved with a combination of political willpower and journalistic integrity from those publishers that understand the need to stand up to corporate bullies. On their own, these verdicts change little. But they might just become a catalyst for urgent and permanent reform.

*Note: This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#) and gives the views of the author, and not the position of the [British Politics and Policy](#) blog, nor of the [London School of Economics](#). Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

### **About the Author**

**Steven Barnett** – *University of Westminster*

Steven Barnett is Professor of Communications at the University of Westminster and twice gave oral evidence to the Leveson Inquiry. He is a board member of Hacked Off.

