

The increasingly close ties between leading politicians and journalists in Britain have been to the detriment of the public interest

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The British press, from the Sun to the Telegraph and most points in between, were quick to castigate the Crown Prosecution Service for its attacks on the ‘free press’ after the acquittal of Rebekah Brooks and despite the conviction of Andy Coulson. There are no winners in this case, writes [Mick Temple](#). Neither the press, police nor politicians emerge well from the hacking trial.



So now we know. The ‘wicked witch’ was not wicked after all – just ignorant. Rebekah Brooks was so unaware of the methods employed by journalists under her command that we shall have to reassess the well-founded stereotype of the all-knowing editor with their fingers on the pulse of their newspaper. Innocent of the charges against her, are we to conclude that she was merely one of the most incompetent editors Fleet Street has ever seen?

Apparently unaware of this reading of events, Rebekah Brooks left court feeling, in her own words, ‘[vindicated](#)’ by the jury’s decision that she was innocent of hacking telephones, perverting the course of justice and conspiracy to pay public officials. And our national newspapers felt equally vindicated.

Despite former *News of the World* editor Andy Coulson being found guilty of conspiracy to hack voicemails, the British press, from the *Sun* to the *Telegraph* and most points in between, were quick to castigate the Crown Prosecution Service for its attacks on the ‘free press’. The [Daily Telegraph’s editorial](#) trumpeted that Brooks’ not guilty verdict was a ‘devastating blow’ to those who have attempted to ‘besmirch’ all newspapers with the bad practices of some journalists.

The Sun’s front page proclaimed a ‘[Great Day for Redtops](#)’. But for most of us long-term observers and supporters of the British press – and I must add, opponents of press regulation – there was little to celebrate. In addition to Coulson, let’s not forget that a number of people employed by the *News of the World* have already admitted or been found guilty of phone hacking, and that two dozen journalists, mostly from the Murdoch press, are still awaiting trial on comparable charges.

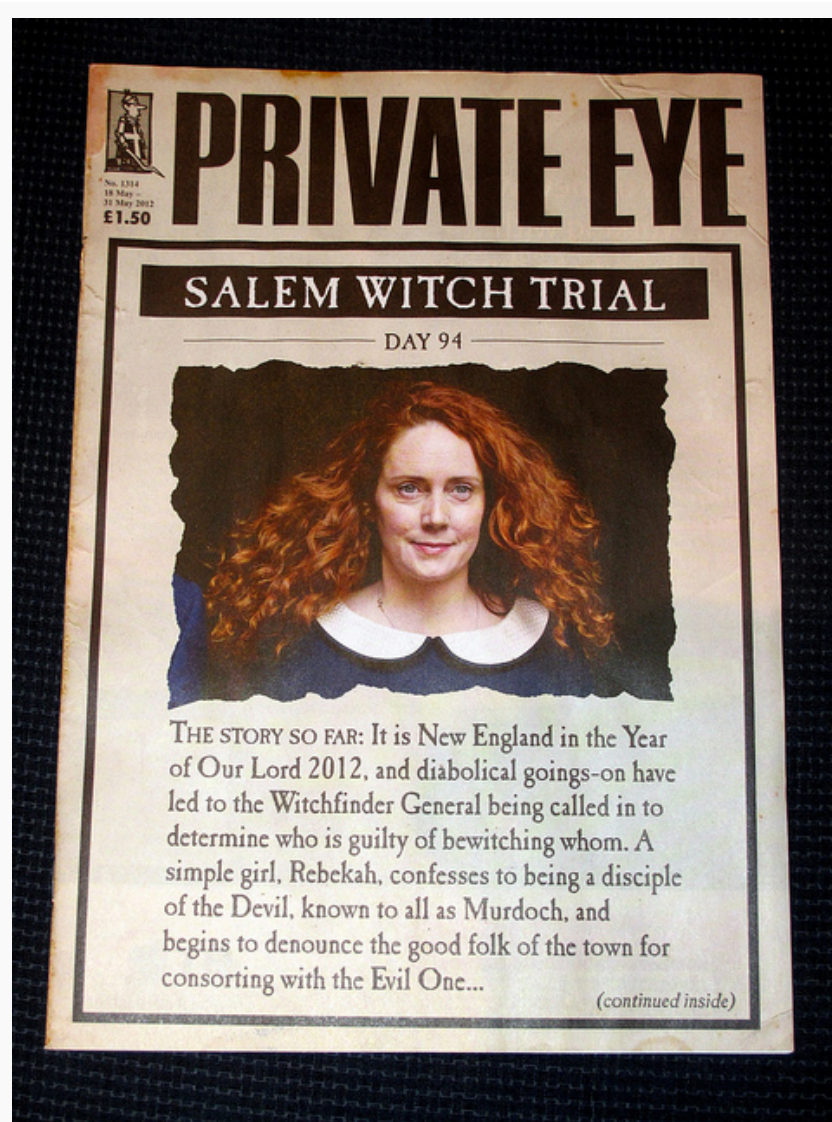


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The press also made a lot of the huge cost of the trial, at the expense of 'terrorist' and 'paedophile' investigations. For [the Daily Mail](#), this 'disproportionality' of the police response was led by 'the left-leaning *Guardian*' and a 'handful of tabloid-hating celebrities'. The result was that the 'public purse has paid the most outrageous price for politicking and expedience'.

In truth, neither the press, police nor politicians emerge well from this trial. The police directed unprecedented resources at this case, for their critics far beyond an appropriate level. Their own wrongdoing appears to have been largely swept under an increasingly grubby carpet.

Our newspapers, and not just the redtops, have suffered a considerable blow to their already dreadful public image. The press, still resisting the post-Leveson calls for statutory press regulation from pressure groups such as Hacked Off, have retreated to the 'few bad apples' defence which was formerly the exclusive property of our police force. As some of us predicted in the immediate wake of Leveson, don't hold your breath waiting for press regulation. It won't happen now.

But perhaps it is the image of politicians, and in particular that of the prime minister, that has fared the worse. And our newspapers have been quick to try and swivel the spotlight onto political malpractice. On the day after Ms Brooks was found innocent and Coulson guilty, the increasingly critical *Daily Mail* focused on the consequences for David Cameron: as its front page headline starkly put it, the verdict on Coulson was 'Humiliation for Cameron'.

Adding further to the pressure on him, the *Guardian's* Nick Davies alleged last week that David Cameron had misled the Leveson Inquiry with his account of the appointment and vetting of Andy Coulson. Mr Cameron has also been publicly criticised to an unprecedented degree by the trial judge. The prime minister's apology for believing Andy Coulson's lies to him when he appointed him as chief spin doctor was made while the jury was still deliberating on charges of conspiracy against Coulson.

To coin a cliché, there are no winners in this case. Despite their triumphant response to Rebekah Brooks' innocence, a section of the press has been exposed as even more vicious and sleazy than we suspected. Our police have been exposed as at best incompetent and at worse corrupt. And our politicians, most damagingly of all, our prime minister, have been clearly shown to lack essential judgement. Despite many warnings from those who knew, the prime minister allowed a corrupt and mendacious journalist into the heart of government.

While I concur with *The Economist's* judgement of the Leveson Report as decidedly '[mediocre](#)', Leveson's central message was clear and indisputable. The relationship between British politicians and journalists needs to change. Senior politicians have for too long responded like Pavlov's dogs to the temporary obsessions of newspapers like the *Sun* and *Daily Mail*, and are so afraid of powerful press barons like Rupert Murdoch that they openly court their approval and support in return for policy pay-offs. Our politicians maintain a belief in the king-making powers of the British press, whose influence on the public is in all probability far less than frequently claimed.

The evidence presented to Leveson showed a relationship corrupted by mutual suspicion and cynicism in which the public have been the chief losers. In a democracy, the exchange of information between journalists and politicians is both necessary and inevitable but the increasingly close ties between leading politicians and journalists in Britain have been to the detriment of the public interest. The public sphere has been poisoned by a 'daily drip-feed of falsehood and distortion', as [Nick Davies so aptly puts it](#).

If we believe that an informed population is essential to democracy, then public trust in our press is crucial. If the electorate's perception of both the press and politics is predominantly of worlds inhabited by the devious, ill-informed, corrupt or incompetent, they are unlikely to believe political news reporting and far less likely to engage in any meaningful political activity. Declining electoral participation rates, falling party memberships and unprecedentedly low levels of public trust in both politicians and journalists do not suggest a thriving political public sphere. Although our newspapers are only one factor, they have contributed to the decline.

But perhaps the biggest danger to our public institutions is not the aura of sleaze that the last few years have fostered. The appearance of incompetence is potentially far more damaging. For example, Bill Clinton's competence turned out to be more important to the American public than his somewhat sleazy personal life.

We appear to have an incompetent political class, exemplified by the inappropriate appointments and friendships of David Cameron and his knee-jerk response to the trial; an incompetent police force whose failure to investigate the original allegations of press (and police) corruption contributed to an even bigger scandal; and an incompetent press where the owners, executives and editors of some of our major newspapers seemed unable to comprehend the corruption within their own empires.

Note: This article was originally published on the PSA's Insight blog 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. Featured image credit: Surian Soosay

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