

# A reflection on ‘Great Britain’ (guest blog)

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*LSE student **Ross Longton** looks at the on-going challenge to find an ethical balance between the police and the media.*

[Great Britain pic](#)

Outside, the banner of a West-End theatre states: ‘Press. Police. Politics’. Inside, the London Metropolitan Police is portrayed as a venal and imbecilic organisation rendered helpless by ambitious journalists.

Although the play, ‘Great Britain’, is satirical, the reality is, the proximity between the police and our media is nothing to laugh at.

Many ethical challenges are continuing to emerge as law enforcement and journalistic-prerogative attempt to co-exist in society. With neither party willing to trust the other, the status quo is an on-going power struggle where both are quick to condemn, and slow to co-operate.

And now it seems, spy.

The National Union of Journalists has revealed that up to six of its members had been covertly monitored by the London Met for over a decade. That our security services are content to brand *The Times* journalist Jules Mattsson, freelance video-journalist Jason Parkinson and freelance photographers Adrian Arbib and David Hoffman as ‘domestic extremists’ is to say the least, worrying.

Reporting on corporate and state misconduct does not transform a journalist into an extremist. It makes them one of the most valuable members of society.

These continued surreptitious practices of our Police Forces are disturbing. The increasing ease with which Ripa is invoked as justification for spying on (sorry, ‘monitoring’) journalists not only heralds a crisis of distrust, but also has the potential to misrepresent journalists as threats to the status quo of the state.

Unfortunately, the solution is not a straightforward one. Whilst it is easy to vilify the police, what we forget is that journalists also get it wrong. Regularly.

We only have to look at the space where News Of The World once existed to be reminded of the dangers of zealous journalism. When un-regulated, the damage created by the pursuit of a story can be significant, and too often the media eagerly oversteps boundaries without caring for the consequences.

The death of the McCann ‘troll’ Brenda Leyland – who committed suicide this year when a journalist revealed her identity after meeting in confidence – is a harsh reminder of this.

Total journalistic inhibition is therefore not necessarily good for society. A line from the play: ‘Journalists, we destroy people’s lives on your behalf’, articulating this worrying truth.

When journalists such as Andy Coulson are only just walking free from jail, we have reasons to be thankful for the safety net that the police provide. They are, in some instances, the final check still needed on tabloid power – one that brings the industry back from the descent into an immoral practice of phone-hacking, slander and deception.

The main challenge now is to find an ethical balance between the police and the media – one where journalists are able to establish meaningful relationships with security structures whilst retaining their

integrity and independence.

It is by fostering of a dialogue of trust and respect from both parties, we may just find we are the recipients of a relationship that serves us better when working together, than it ever could apart.

What is clear though is that the targeting of journalists who shine a light on the failings of the state must end. The right to dissent against the state structures and its officials is our prerogative. And so is the right to report it.

As stated by Michelle Stainstreet, secretary of the NUJ: 'There is no justification for treating journalists as enemies of the state'.

Ripa, or not.

**This article by LSE student Ross Longton**

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