

The Only Way Is Ethics: newspapers after Leveson (Polis Conference Guest Blog) #Polis12

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Joan Smith and Ian Katz

The Leveson Inquiry is carrying out the most extensive investigation into the practice and ethics of the British press in history. With a nation shocked by endless tales of private investigators and phone hacking, never before has there been such a consensus amongst the core institutions about a need for increased regulation of the media. Yet, where will this leave the tabloids and investigative journalism in general? Polis Intern Stephanie Gale reports on The Only Way Is Ethics session at the Polis Journalism Conference (video available)

Chaired by the FT's Ben Fenton and consisting of Ian Katz (Guardian), Joan Smith (Independent) and Graham Johnson

(ex Sunday Mirror) there was a mixed outlook upon the future of the tabloids but a wide scale agreement on the need to prevent the media from straying from the path of public interest.

Clearly, the effects of Leveson are already becoming evident. According to Ian Katz, "the bar is already being set higher"; meetings at The Guardian concerning news stories are taking 45 minutes longer than their equivalent last year, facts are increasingly rigorously checked. But most key to the change, it seemed to me, was his claim that there are now discussions about fulfilling values; is an article valuable, is it in the public interest?

But whether or not such discussions will be taking place at the tabloids seemed another matter altogether. The audience found it rather humorous when Joan Smith stated, "It's as though the tabloids have just discovered people have sex", but underneath this wit was an important question – will the tabloids continue to have such a sensationalist interest in people's private lives? And if so, will they continue to use questionable means to do so? Katz and Smith seemed reasonably optimistic, with Katz claiming, "What's going to be snuffed out is intrusiveness".

Similarly, Smith argued that increased regulation of tabloids, for example of their online pages, could certainly help to ensure stories are in the public interest. Her suggestion was a code-of-conduct which tabloid websites could sign up to in order to ensure their investigatory processes and content fulfil a certain standard.



Graham Johnson and Ben Fenton

In contrast, Graham Johnson confidently argued that circulated tabloid newspapers are on the decline, with the only real future for tabloids being with their online content. He described tabloids as "vehicles for media propaganda to serve corporate interests" and stated that they have cut themselves off from society given that their journalists and editors are predominantly private schooled and out of touch with the working-class readers they are trying to attract. Subsequently, he believes Leveson will contribute to the withering of tabloid newspapers.

Despite such an array of opinions on the future of tabloids, what became clear amongst the entire panel was a need to

establish what the public interest actually is. Ben Fenton highlighted that with all the debate concerning public interest, no one had actually defined it. Aware of this, Ian Katz extracted his telephone to research exactly how the Press Complaints Commission does define it. What Fenton's point made evident was the need for media outlets to establish guidelines specifying what is to be held valuable and what is not, and that both editors and journalists are aware of these guidelines to avoid corrupt practices.

Following the conference, I have now returned to my working-class town where many members of my family have tabloids delivered to them daily. Do I agree with Graham Johnson? I'd like to, I really would; but unfortunately I don't feel that the future of tabloid newspapers is diminishing – they have always been run by the non working-class for the working-class – no change there. Moreover, there seems to be no sign here of an easing up of interest in people's private lives, albeit I will admit that people of my generation interested in celebrities tend to use the internet as their predominant source of news rather than newspapers.

What the conference highlighted to me was the need for rigorous regulation of tabloid newspapers to avoid the invasions of privacy that occurred prior to Leveson. There also needs to be clearly established guidelines for what is in the public interest, with such guidelines being adopted by all media sources.

This report by Polis Intern Stephanie Gale

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