




# Newspaper Standards and Trust: is regulation the answer?

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/02/09/media-standards-and-trust-government-intervention-not-the-answer/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/02/09/media-standards-and-trust-government-intervention-not-the-answer/)

2009-2-9

 Newspapers are inaccurate and untrustworthy and need government intervention. That is the message of a preliminary report by the [Media Standards Trust](#), a lobby and research body set up by a group of the Great and Good disgruntled with the state of our press.


  On the [Today Programme](#) this morning, their very admirable chair, Sir David Bell (Financial Times) was taken on by Sir Christopher Meyer from the [Press Complaints Commission](#). The MST report is highly critical of the self-regulatory system presided over by the PCC. It implies that the inaccuracy and untrustworthiness of newspapers could have been dealt with by the industry's watchdog. And yet Meyer said that the MST had not actually spoken to the PCC before publishing their report. [The MST deny this – see Martin Moore's comment on this post]

That will happen in the second stage apparently, when the newspaper people get a chance to respond. I am not sure whether it will be worth their while to do so when the initial report is so sure of its position.

A poll by YouGov for the MST says that the public say they don't trust the newspapers to be accurate. Well, that is hardly news. I am not sure if there is ANYONE that the public is prepared to tell a pollster that they trust right now.

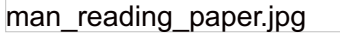
The MST points out that a combination of the Internet and recession is hitting newspaper resources. That, too, is not exactly scoop of the year.

And finally, it echoes [Nick Davies' chournalism thesis](#), that newspapers are driving standards down to keep profit margins up.

 I don't necessarily disagree with the basic analysis of pressures upon newspapers. However, I would contest the assumption that accuracy has worsened. In many ways I would argue that newspapers are less crass and give more data than ever before. This is partly because their readers are better informed, and partly because in a declining market, they have had to get their acts together and be less offensive to certain readerships. Their online operations also mean that readers have a chance to respond directly to what is written.

So I find it odd that the MST, which is doing some really interesting research on accuracy Online, has missed this opportunity to offer a more supportive critique at such a vital moment of change.

I think that all of us – including those newspapers currently facing apocalyptic forecasts for their very existence – should accept that newspapers could benefit from being more accurate and trustworthy. You only have to look at the reporting of [debates around science](#), for example, to see how important it is that journalists (on all platforms) should improve their understanding, be less prey to PR influence, and to explain better these complex and important stories. In that sense, the MST is asking the right question. How can this happen?

In the end I profoundly disagree with their general idea that more regulation and government intervention is the answer. 'Better an imperfect press than a muzzled one'  is my knee-jerk reaction. Newspapers are already losing their grip on public discourse and their power over public life is waning. The Internet offers greater accountability and transparency through market forces and open communication. So why raise the spectre of old-fashioned control, censure and regulation through central government? Are there ANY examples anywhere in the world where that has not led to greater secrecy, corruption and lower standards of journalism?

I find the MST stance confusing. Sir David is no advocate of government intervention. I have recently heard him defend the private sector free media as a business model and a way of upholding standards. Unless, of

course, he means this to be true only in the case of the Financial Times.

Polis has recently published a report on [Financial Journalism](#), so we, too, believe that standards in the news media need constant scrutiny. Journalists should always be subject to the law and held responsible for their mistakes. But as we point out in our report on economic and business coverage, standards are set by a complex mixture of commercial, ethical, editorial and regulatory pressures, with the latter perhaps the least important.

News is an innately imperfect craft. It is done in a rush without all the facts. But the structural pressures that produce distortion and deception have little to do with regulation. Yes, the extremely bad cases such as the Express' reporting of the McCanns should have been dealt with as they arose, rather than waiting until complaints had been filed and legal action taken. However, in general, standards are low for a series of cultural and editorial reasons.

I hope the MST review will now focus on how new technologies and new production processes can improve journalism as a whole, rather than get into a battle with the PCC. Newspapers have taken a disastrous view in the past of standards. They treated the public with contempt. Now the public is voting with their feet and heading off to the Internet and elsewhere.

Some editors, such as Rebekah Wade at The Sun have woken up to this and are trying to reconnect with their readers in a more meaningful way that will happen online as much as through the newspaper itself.

As newspaper sales continue to decline, it is a combination of market and technological forces that must drive trust and accuracy. The job of government and other institutions is to provide the resources for the kind of public service journalism that can give the citizen what they want.

Here is the response from MST Director Martin Moore post which I have extracted from his comment to this article:

*“Just to clarify a few things about our report. It does not recommend State regulation – it says the opposite. It does not say British journalism is bad – it says most journalism is very good but, if something written is inaccurate or intrusive, then you ought to have someone or somewhere to go that is independent and effective. The current system is neither independent nor effective. Oh, and we did speak to the PCC. To the Director, and to the Deputy Director. And we made a public call for them to conduct a review last summer – on which we said we were happy to collaborate. The call was ignored.”*

Read Stephen Glover's trenchant defence of the British press [here](#)

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science