

Editorial Reaction to Leveson: Kudos to Lord Leveson, but not to 'statutory regulation'

Paul Moura and Noelle de Guzman

As our [previous analysis](#) showed, the press had largely abstained from pronouncing its verdict on Leveson during the year-long inquiry, but now that the Lord Judge has finally released his report, initial feedback from newspapers indicate that they do show some degree of support for his findings—but not for his key proposal. The Media Policy Project, which has been examining papers' editorials on the Inquiry since it began in September last year, came to this conclusion after analysing the 12 staff-written opinion pieces that were printed on 30 November, the day after the report was published.

Hours after Lord Justice Leveson made his statement, *The Independent* on its website published two opinion articles whose titles speak for themselves: "Leveson: The press will be horrified by this radical change in the way that newspapers operate," and "There is only one flaw in Lord Justice Leveson's epic verdict—but it is a crucial flaw." Both assert that legal backing is unacceptable and unnecessary to implement the Lord Judge's suggested reforms. News International titles *The Times* and *The Sun* argued as much, with the latter, along with the *Daily Telegraph*, questioning the independence of a new regulatory body that has to be accountable to Parliament.

All three publications recognised the need for reform, but criticised statutory underpinning as a first step towards censorship. Commending David Cameron for his swift opposition to the newly announced recommendation, papers also raised a red flag on the proposed role of state-backed Ofcom, whose existing powers they viewed as a threat, in overseeing the industry's conduct and participation in the new system.

In an act of defiance, however, both *The Guardian* and the *Financial Times* just as strongly endorsed Leveson's key proposal. Calling on the press to respond to the report not with threats or lobbying but with action and humility, both praised Leveson for formulating a fairer and more transparent system than the one put forward by PCC chair Lord Hunt. The *Financial Times*, in particular, argued that law need not be equated with the death of press freedom, as the US First Amendment shows, but can help guarantee it by curbing possible state intervention. Underlying this show of support is an acknowledgement that self-regulation has failed to protect vulnerable members of the public from abuse of press power.

These statements show a slight shift—from rejection to willingness—in *The Guardian's* and *The Financial Times'* stand on legal controls, but also to an emerging rift in the industry's reception of the Leveson report. The sector is united in urging its members to take the lead in drawing up a robust plan for a post-PCC regulatory landscape, motivated by on the one hand, an adamant conviction that newspapers, not members of parliament, should be responsible for policing their ranks, and on the other, the need to convince both government and the public that the industry is indeed capable of imposing discipline on itself. But amidst views that cross-party agreement on government's response to the report is unlikely to come easy—both Labour leader Ed Milliband and the Deputy Prime Minister, the Liberal Democrat Nick Clegg, have stood up in support of statutory backing—a new cleavage within the rarely unified industry might give the pro-statutory camp one more reason to surmise that the sector does need external intervention.

MPP findings show two prime justifications used by newspapers for either supporting or opposing press regulation: Those in favour focussed on the need to protect the public from harm and unethical behaviour, while the other side stressed the importance of free expression as a tool used by the press to protect democracy. Perhaps this merits thoughtful reflection on the underlying

purpose of the press. Is it to inform audiences and protect the public from harm? Or to act as a check on government power and ensure democracy by any means necessary? These types of questions may now frame the debate about press regulation in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry.

This is the first in a series of posts looking at the way the press have covered the Leveson Report. The next post will focus on the framing of the story in front pages and agenda setting.

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