

Why Monitor the Press?

Lord Justice Leveson's **launch plans** for his report make one thing clear: he wants to give the broadcasters a good go at reporting his views before the newspapers hit the stands. His press conference is timed for live coverage by lunchtime bulletins and he has opted to cram as many camera crews as possible into the QE2 Centre to report his speech. But he will not answer any questions. **Pierre Bordieu** could not have planned it better.

How the media should cover media policy related stories is always a difficult issue. Newspapers, of course, have their own interests to consider as well as those of their readers. Is it acceptable that they should use their influence to protect their own interests, or should they always give a balanced view of the issues?

The coverage of the Savile scandal and McAlpine by the BBC had serious flaws. But the BBC did eventually show that it was capable of setting its own journalistic watchdogs to work on itself, putting public interest journalism before any narrowly defined corporate interest.

Now it is the turn of the Press. Over the coming days, we will see the extent to which newspapers can bracket off their own interests and give a balanced view of the Leveson Report, including the criticisms he is likely to make of the press.

For media researchers it is an interesting laboratory in which to study the press. Will they report Leveson in a balanced way, or will they use their power to turn public opinion against the report or its author? Will they skate over what is likely to be **excoriating critique** of newspapers, and try to rubbish the recommendations? Or will they give some space to criticism?

After all, one of the key issues Leveson himself has been pondering is whether, because of their ability to shape public opinion, the press, or elements of the press, simply became too powerful, and whether this led politicians to kow-tow and cover up illegal acts by journalists.

Meanwhile **Ofcom has been grappling with a similar issue**: how to measure media power. Since their original advice to Ofcom, they have published more following a request from Leveson. But it is by no means clear if Leveson will pronounce on media **ownership and pluralism**. With some luck, and some support from Leveson, some of these proposals may find their way into a new framework for media mergers and plurality that will prevent future capture of the political elite by media barons.

Ultimately, the media plurality issue is one for Parliament and the **next Communications Act**. If there is political agreement, we are likely to see more consultation on this issue, probably after the Communications White Paper is published – expected early next year.

Unfortunately, as Ofcom point out, measuring media power and establishing limits is extremely difficult. But we can analyse how it is deployed by monitoring newspaper coverage of the Leveson Inquiry. This was an inquiry triggered by a huge public outcry, set up amid admissions from the leaders of all major political parties that they did not act sooner to deal with illegality – precisely because of media power. An Inquiry that over the past 15 months has heard from four prime ministers, dozens of present and former cabinet ministers, hundreds of media executives and journalists and thousands of lawyers and other experts. Clearly there is a public interest in treating the Inquiry and its recommendations seriously, and by an extension conducting research about the extent to which our newspapers do that.

That is why the Media Policy Project will be looking closely at how newspapers report on this issue. It is an opportunity for the press to show their commitment to the value and judgement of

their individual journalists and journalism itself, but it might be the time – as the [Daily Mail on November 16th](#) seemed to indicate – when some reveal that their journalism is of the campaigning and self-serving variety.

Together with student volunteers, MPP Researcher Noelle de Guzman has been monitoring press positions on Leveson since the Inquiry began, by looking at how the editorials of major national newspapers have approached Leveson. Her long term analysis of newspaper editorials about Leveson shows that the vitriolic attack on the integrity of the Leveson process in Mid November did not follow any long term trend. As we can see from [this graph](#), newspapers have not refrained to comment on the Inquiry, but they have so far been overwhelmingly neutral on the Inquiry itself.

LSE student Suzie Blaszkiewicz has conducted an [analysis](#) of the performance of UK newspapers at the time of the phone hacking scandal in July 2011. She found quite a difference in the way News International and other newspapers covered the issues – indicating that they may have difficulty separating their editorial functions from their own self interest.

There is no doubt that newspapers have ‘skin in the game’ when it comes to Leveson’s report. The outcome could transform the regulatory environment they work in, and have implications for costs and risks associated with newsgathering. It would appear that they have a clear interest in seeing off certain regulatory scenarios, particularly those that may involve a change in the law. But they still need to give proper public ventilation to the problems Leveson was asked by the prime minister to address.

And in retrospect, the current obsession with blocking any form of statutory regulation may seem over-stated. Self-regulatory bodies, when they are actually obliged to act as independent regulators, can be expensive and troublesome. If the choice is between paying for an extremely expensive Rolls-Royce self regulation operation and a co-regulatory solution that all the big players paid for – including large online providers, as is being [considered in Australia](#) – this might be more attractive to cash-strapped newspapers.

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