

## Cleaning up our own backyard

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A hobby beloved of hacks everywhere is to turn over stones, see what crawls out, and then tell everyone. But we are a sensitive breed, and don't want anyone turning over stones in our own backyard in case they discover that we too have human frailties that might titillate the prurient – or worse.

When, last year, Labour MP Clive Soley had the temerity to write to executive chairman Les Hinton about allegations of sexual harassment at News International, among the dusty replies he received was *Sun* editor Rebekah Wade's challenge about complaints of sexual harassment from MPs' staff, and what payouts had been made to them.

Soley's response to her veiled threat was to raise a point of order in the Commons (11 Nov 2003) claiming that £500,000 had been spent to silence a secretary who had accused former *Sun* editor Stuart Higgins of 'crude and offensive behaviour.' Soley claimed there was "a climate of bullying and sexual harassment" at several NI titles, and that the police had not been called in when hate mail was sent to the victim on News International stationery.

The company admitted to only one such complaint, and queried the size of the award Soley quoted. Wade denied all knowledge of the incidents he referred to - and most of the press ignored the story...

All this was indicative of how careful you have to be when criticising journalists and media executives – make sure you cover your back, because they can ignore your central thesis, however accurate, and pick over the details where it's easier to make mistakes. The sting is in the tail. The media's crucial advantage lies in being able to set or shift the agenda. That is why its critics see the 'fourth estate' as accountable to no one.

It is not averse to turning on its own, of course, or pulling spurious justifications out of a hat. When *Independent* editor Simon Kelner broke ranks in 2002 to criticise, in *The Spectator*, the 'hypocrisy, irresponsibility, arrogance, cynicism and plain nastiness' of the tabloids, an Ephraim Hardcastle column in the *Daily Mail* derided him thus: 'Friends say his hatred for the popular press coincides with his recent realisation that no successful newspaper group is now likely to offer him an escape route from the dead duck *Independent*.'

I recall also Germaine Greer's bewilderment at the uncomradely responses of colleagues that persuaded her to quit *The Guardian* a decade ago. Her 'crime' had been to defend herself after a *Mail* reporter conned his way into her house because she said she had enough space to house a homeless person. For all her media savvy, Greer was, she told me, astounded by the harshness of reactions to her criticism of dubious journalistic practice.

More recently a 'celebrity couple' had their complaint about a newspaper 'stalking' their child turned down by the Press Complaints Commission because the offending paper insisted they had talked publicly about their private life. The paper's 'evidence' consisted of an article featuring an inaccurately captioned picture of their child snatched at another celebrity's family function, another containing personal information given innocently in a conversation prior to a formal interview, and a third had been compiled from cuttings by a reporter whom they had never met or spoken to. Their protestations about unfairness were ignored.

The PCC does not readily inspire confidence among those it is supposed to protect, and even editors are willing to express their doubts – off the record. Yet self-regulation is trumpeted as the safest form of accountability.

*'At the moment the people see only a body which claims unique privileges to itself without any of the concomitant responsibilities...prepared to change...but only when it suits them. They see a body scornful of whether or not its proceedings command public confidence. It cannot go on like this.'*

Although many complainants I have dealt with since 1993 say much the same about the PCC, this was a *Guardian* leader challenging Parliamentary self-regulation, in November 1996. It quoted Lord Nolan: 'the public needs to see that breaches of rules are investigated as fairly, and dealt with as firmly by Parliament, as would be the case with others through the legal process'. Change 'Parliament' to 'the Press' and you have the case for a more independent system of regulation.

It does not help, of course, that the real accountability nowadays is to the accountants – commercial competition being the basis upon which our form of press freedom operates.

Surely the starting point must be with journalists themselves. The decision by staff at the *Express*, twice in two years, to take their concerns about the paper's editorial line on asylum seekers and Roma to the PCC is a welcome indication that some do not regard the bottom line as the defining point of journalistic behaviour.

*Daily Express* journalists protested to the PCC about being pressured to produce stories they regarded as racist and demanded the right to protection if they act according to conscience. The self-regulator (sic) decided it had no jurisdiction to deal with the matter and referred it to the Committee of Editors reviewing the newspaper industry's Code of Practice. They in turn kicked the idea into touch. So journalists ordered to slant and twist stories to suit a dubious editorial policy designed to increase flagging circulation will remain unprotected from reprisals if they refuse to do so. How is that supposed to inspire confidence among the public and those who would like to retain their principles in the cut-throat culture of the newsroom? The media are quick, and right, to defend whistle-blowers in other areas of public life, those who act according to conscience. So is the public being asked to accept that journalists have no right to moral scruples, that they are mindless hacks paid to do what they are told and not to ask awkward questions?

### **Dangerous territory**

Evidently, editors are none too pleased that the report of the Select Committee on Privacy and Media Intrusion<sup>1</sup> backed calls from the NUJ and PressWise that journalists' contracts should include a 'conscience clause'. Bob Satchwell, executive director of the Society of Editors, told *Press Gazette*: "Editors and news editors are as much subject to the Code of Practice as any journalists, so there should not be a problem and, therefore, no need for a conscience clause."

*Press Gazette* also quoted *Manchester Evening News* editor Paul Horrocks as saying he thinks a conscience clause would be "dangerous territory" and adding: "It's the province of editors to take these sorts of decisions." He neglected to mention that it is also the province of editors to consider the views of their proprietors and the circulation of their papers, both factors that may militate against a tender conscience.

Aside from the need to protect journalists who are trying to uphold the very standards the PCC is supposed to exist to preserve, there is another factor to consider. Once a racist or other offensive story is printed, the damage is done. Even if a complaint is subsequently upheld by the PCC, the headlines and stories cannot be called back. The conscience of working journalists can thus be an important factor in improving the responsibility and reputation of the press – something that is sorely needed.

A former tabloid reporter, now in PR, once said to me he thought promoting ethical journalism was important, but added: "What editor is going to employ someone with a prize in journalistic ethics?"

His cynicism was echoed recently by Bettina Peters, Director of Programmes at the European Journalism Centre, who told me: "I would love to do more on ethics and/or diversity issues in training, but it is virtually impossible to persuade editors to send journalists for that kind of training and pay for it too..."

Some editors appear to defend bad practice in the misguided belief that they are defending press freedom - as if it were a licence for journalists to do what they will.

In the media hothouse, criticism from outside is rejected and, it seems, we love and protect our own reputations while happily destroying those of others. And not just because this makes good copy – it also helps to build our profile and it sells papers. Unfortunately, it also blinds us to our own faults, and we can appear arrogant and hypocritical to the outside world – the people journalism is supposed to serve.

This macho culture of the newsroom is not confined to the newspaper industry, nor is the bullying directed only at those in the public eye. The irony of Greg Dyke's post-resignation taunt that Downing Street had bullied the BBC was not lost on Helen Reed, who won an industrial tribunal against the BBC in 2002.

"We all support the press freedom issues at stake," she said, "but the BBC has a massive problem with institutionalised bullying. Its grievance procedures allow no right of appeal and no independent judgement; those giving evidence are not protected from career damage and a climate of fear and intimidation rules."

She found herself almost alone when she took her bosses to task: "Most decent staff and journalists fall prey to fear, intimidation, apathy and a subtle form of brain-washing. What starts out as 'pride in working for the BBC', gradually becomes the quiet terror of 'how to survive not working for the BBC' with its dominant share of the media market."

While Hutton was deliberating, an internal inquiry about specific allegations of bullying was underway inside the BBC. According to one senior producer, who must remain anonymous, about a dozen people gave evidence: "Some had kept diaries, some were in tears. It was clear there were serious problems of intimidation, abuse, spying on staff, etc. The verdict is that the incidents complained of 'did not constitute bullying and harassment' and 'would have been better dealt with elsewhere', which totally ignored the fact that five people felt so intimidated they did not trust the BBC's usual procedures."

The executive in charge concluded her report: 'I have made a few observations about some aspects of the programme and office, which I will be sharing with Peter Horrocks, Head of Current Affairs. I will also be talking to Peter about what support and training might be put in place in terms of team building, since I recognise that there are difficulties with some of the relationships on the team which would benefit from this intervention.'

One BBC insider commented, "[there is] no mention of the dozens of pages of evidence. The inference is that it has all been swept under the carpet and did not happen as far as the BBC is concerned. People here fell incredibly let down - it's as if the BBC is setting the standards under which bullying is acceptable, almost condoning what has gone on here. And if things continue or even get worse, where is there to go now?"

### **Central points ignored**

Imagine now what it is like for those with no media experience when the press pack turns up on the doorstep. Those with the guts to complain are often bitter about the arrogance and superciliousness of initial responses, from editors and the Press Complaints Commission. Many feel that their central points are deliberately ignored or side-stepped. For months the PCC and one local newspaper editor continued to misspell the name of a complainant in correspondence. The man had typed his name on all his letters about an inaccurate account of the murder of his son. One of his grievances had been that the paper has misspelled his dead son's name.

Writing the first draft of history may be an imprecise trade, but for many 'victims of media abuse', this is the *only* draft of their history, and they want the record set straight at once. It does none of us any good when editors and media lawyers use 'We stand by our story' as an opening gambit, and hope their challengers will whimper and desist.

There will always be a need to defend the territory from unnecessary restrictions, but journalists' own personal sense of ethics or professional pride should dictate that they must be as openly

critical of our own practices as they are of others. Isn't that part of the trade's 'duty of care' to the public?

When almost 100 UK media luminaries gathered at London's Frontline Club in February 2004 to debate BBC journalism post-Hutton, they were unanimous in rejecting Harold Evans' call for a Royal Commission on the Press, but none quarrelled with the idea that to preserve public trust in journalism we need to rethink what we do and how we do it.

In the wake of the plagiarism and fiction scandals at *New York Times* last year, 20 senior US newspaper executives met at The Poynter Institute in Florida to discuss accessibility, accountability, attribution, sourcing, corrections and newsroom culture. Their conclusions<sup>2</sup> matched those of the US Committee of Concerned Journalists (CCJ), which has been investigating what the public expects of journalism. After two years of public meetings attended by 3,000 people, and the testimony of more than 300 journalists, the CCJ came up with a revealing checklist<sup>3</sup>:

- Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
- Its first loyalty is to citizens.
- Its essence is a discipline of verification.
- Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
- It must serve as an independent monitor of power.
- It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
- It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
- It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
- Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

Robust and revealing journalism, that shows neither fear nor favour, is the best way to build public trust and confidence in the trade. It is the way we assert our accountability to the public as citizens. However we also have to convince them that we are not a breed of bullies and scorpions. Admitting swiftly to our mistakes is the simplest method - through a regular and prominent corrections column. Another is to provide a right of reply, as many European countries do. Claims that this would choke the columns must be regarded as an admission that papers are routinely unfair. Broadcasters could help by scheduling regular reviews of on-air, on-line and print journalism.

Fear of a media backlash may have persuaded successive governments to fight shy of statutory controls, but how would the industry react if civil society groups were to devise alternative methods of holding us to account?

Among those I have heard bruited about in reputable quarters is publication on the internet of the assets, political affiliations and financial interests of individual journalists. Or lists of untrustworthy journalists to whom no-one should speak. Others have mooted the idea of hiring private detectives to spy on editors to expose their infidelities, financial dealings and substance abuse.

I am sure the media would denounce them as vindictive busybodies, just as they considered Clive Soley nothing but a snoop and a troublemaker when he made his Higgins allegations. But who knows what support such naming and shaming might win if the public at last refuses to accept journalists operating with impunity and journalism condoning unethical conduct in pursuit of profit?

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<sup>1</sup> [Select Committee Report on 'Privacy and Media Intrusion 2003 \(HC 458-1\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> *Taking Aim: how to make sure your newsroom hits the mark of excellence*, Poynter Report Special Issue, Fall 2003. Website: [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org)

<sup>3</sup> The results of their project can be found in *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel. Website: [www.journalism.org](http://www.journalism.org)