

Social Responsibility and the Media

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It is fascinating and impressive to read the corporate social responsibility reports of media groups like the BBC, the Daily Mail & General Trust, ITV plc, News Corporation, Pearson, Reuters, the Scott Trust and Trinity Mirror plc. These audits are a welcome and long overdue development, especially for an industrial sector one of whose primary purposes is to examine and comment on the failings and achievements of others (don't mention Robert Maxwell and Conrad Black).

As a former Wapping resident it is especially pleasing to see that they are at last taking pollution issues seriously – at one time News Corporation was dismissive of local residents' claims that chemical emissions from their Wapping plant were damaging to the local environment and human health.

These audit reports are full of fine words and aspirations and evidence of achievements – but it is tempting to ask how many of their readers and staff ever get to see or comment on these achievements. The new vogue for publication-sponsored charity appeals, especially at Christmas, is perhaps the most public demonstration of their commitments. But there could be some very simple and telling modifications which might be welcomed by both staff and audiences. A point to which we shall return.

Now media corporations have opened these windows they will be difficult to close, and it is to be hoped that senior media executives will be at pains to clean up their act.

Certainly it now becomes easier for those who have the time, inclination and expertise to compare results with aspirations across the whole range of industrial and commercial activities with which media companies are associated – not least forestry, oil, transport, and leisure.

The audit process may also strengthen the argument for quarantining editorial from the risk of contamination by the other business interests of media companies through the creation of Scott Trust/Channel 4 style structures with agreed budgets (perhaps with access to additional resources on a performance related basis). Otherwise it may remain problematic for journalists to reflect upon conflicts of their own employers' corporate interests when breaking major environmental, industrial and political stories around the world.

A more transparent approach to management aims and policies should also make for improved industrial relations. Journalists at the BBC, the Guardian Media Group, Northcliffe Newspapers, the Telegraph Group and the Trinity Mirror Group do not seem to appreciate the ways in which the current round of cost-cutting measures has been introduced.

It is perhaps significant that the industry's move towards self-analysis came just after the humiliating admissions in 2003 at the *New York Times* that they had been unwittingly published fabricated stories by Jayson Blair. His disgrace undermined a proud tradition defined over a century before by proprietor Adolph Ochs - that his paper would supply the public with 'All the news that's fit to print'. The scandal led to resignations and to demands for even more fact-checkers and Ombudsmen/Readers' Editors on US papers.

The UK media has had its own catalogue of recent disasters. In 2003 we had the tragic suicide of Dr David Kelly - and the subsequent Hutton Report which dissected management failings at the BBC; and the suicide of Sky News reporter James Forlong, after he misrepresented footage for broadcast.

Earlier still, in 2000, there was the City Slickers share-tipping scandal at the *Mirror* which is only now reaching its final denouement, and more recently the *Mirror's* use of fake pictures to expose alleged war crimes by British troops in Iraq cast a shadow over that paper's reputation for investigative journalism.

Our own investigations at MediaWise have exposed other serious misrepresentations. Again in 2003, for example, there was *The Sun's* infamous 'Swan Bake' story (4 July 2003) and the *Daily Star's* 'Asylum seekers eat our donkeys' (31 Aug 2003). And our inquiries about the *Sunday Mirror's* 'For sale aged 3' (25 Jan 2004) resulted in a large payout to a young Christian charity worker in Montenegro who had been falsely accused of child trafficking.

There may be many good reasons for reporters to masquerade as child traffickers, arms dealers or indeed Arab sheiks - like revealing evidence of actual crime - but entrapment should not be one of them.

Sadly we have come across evidence of unscrupulous methods used by some journalists just to get the good story their newspaper is waiting for. Yet when we tried to reveal that a *Daily Express* story about Roma headlined 'Britain here we come' (20 Jan 2004) was faulty, that newspaper threatened to sue *The Guardian* if it carried the evidence we had collected in Slovakia - so the truth never came out.

This highlights one of the most irresponsible traits of the media - the reluctance to admit mistakes. Media lawyers warn their clients never to admit to errors for fear that it will undermine the credibility of their product and risk actions for damages. Ironically, for most people, a willingness to own up to errors is one of the best indicators that someone can be trusted. We have had to devise special 'quiz games' in our journalism training courses so that the competitive instinct gets the better of this reluctance, and journalists can acknowledge that they need to learn more, especially about legislation.

In a paper for the conference we organised with the NUJ on Journalism and Public Trust in December 2004, Dr Karin Wahl-Jorgensen from Cardiff University summed up the results of a 2001 Mass Observation (MO) study into public attitudes, thus "(UK) Journalism cannot be trusted because news organisations are too commercially driven, biased, and aligned with government and special interests. There is a 'conspiracy of silence' on the part of government and media, who tell citizens only what they want them to know, and keep the important information secret."

Clearly this is a massive over simplification, but from the MO evidence she identified a crisis of public confidence in journalism "that has a financial impact on news media, as evidenced in the continuing decline of newspaper circulation and readership. But it also points to the apparent inability of mass media to serve their ideal role in a democratic society; that of creating an informed public."

Onora O'Neill made similar points in her Reith lecture, as did Lord Hutton in his report on the Gilligan affair at the BBC. According to Dr Wahl-Jorgensen, "In part, (MO) respondents saw news as unreliable because of the commercial incentive driving print journalism. As one elderly man put it, 'The media's main intention is to make money on stories that sell. Therefore we hear biased opinions about more sensational events rather than receiving true facts about more important and crucial issues of concern.'

"A female respondent felt that 'If the media supplied only factual information, I think they would rapidly lose their audience/customers, and quantities of political pundits, commentators, journalists and spin doctors would be out of a job. The newspapers and commercial radio and TV have to consider the political stance of their advertisers and owners.'"

This may be true, but few of us would want to believe that it directly affected editorial agendas. However, I have trained or worked with journalists in many parts of the former Soviet Union, and one of the most terrifying prospects of the move towards 'free market media' has been the degree to which journalists there feel beholden to the interests that control their outlets.

Professional training, money and career prospects are scarce, and for every brave journalist willing to take risks to get at the truth, there are dozens too scared or craven to challenge the new status quo, ruled by oligarchs and Mafioso who think nothing of threatening or killing their critics.

They are living proof of the slogan of the International Federation of Journalists: "There can be no press freedom if journalists exist in conditions of poverty corruption, poverty or fear."

Journalists there are poor, and the 'brown envelopes' they rely upon for stories are more likely to be stuffed with cash than with leaked documents.

The terrible irony is that, as markets open up, new investors are arriving – with global media companies in the vanguard. Yet they do not offer remotely the same terms and conditions to those who work for them in Germany or the UK. In my view this is one of the failings of the social responsibility audits – they obscure as much as they reveal. Commercial enterprises must first keep their investors happy, so there are some things which are best kept confidential...

In an era of global media control, pay and conditions should be equable across borders, and if social responsibility audits do not include such commitments they are so much window dressing.

Meanwhile in an age of 24-hour news there is a desperate desire to move stories on and publish something different with every bulletin and edition. What may begin as a perceived nuance in a politician's speech is quickly turned into a policy change or a personality rift. This constant tweaking runs the risk of polluting rather than illuminating public discourse. Politicians are perfectly capable of twisting and turning fact, figures and opinions to their own advantage without the media adding its five-penn'orth.

However it is increasing the case that media directs the political agenda – not just because government ministers prefer the studio and the press briefing over Parliament as a means communicating with the electorate – but because the print and broadcast media now has the power to influence policy.

One of our concerns at MediaWise in recent years has been the way that public debate and policy development has been influenced by coverage of asylum and refugee issues – ever since following the shocking headlines over one weekend in October 1997 when 180 Slovak Roma arrived at Dover. Headlines spoke of a 'tide' (*Guardian*), 'deluge' and 'flood' (*Daily Mail*), and 'invasion' (*Daily Telegraph & The Independent*) quoting as many a '3,000 gypsies head(ing) for England' (*The Sun*). Social unrest followed and soon the then Home Secretary Jack Straw introduced visa requirements for Slovakia.

Once the press had found a stick which made the government flinch, things got worse - not least because the proprietor of the *Daily Express* apparently decided that anti-asylum stories played well in the circulation stakes. Yet when his own journalists took the unprecedented step of reporting him to the Press Complaints Commission, the PCC washed its hands of the matter and editors joined forces to insist that journalists have no right to demand a 'conscience clause' to avoid carrying out instructions they felt to be unethical.

Even so the PCC was prevailed upon to issue guidance notes to editors warning about 'the danger that inaccurate, misleading or distorted reporting may generate an atmosphere of fear and hostility than is not borne out by the facts.' (23 Oct 2003)

We have seen similar techniques being used against any group regarded as socially undesirable - from paedophiles to 'Gypsies' and Travellers resident in the UK. This latter group has seen a revival of past campaigns to rid the country of nomads that goes back centuries - witness *The Sun's* 'Stamp on the Camps' campaign launched in 2005, which has resulted in complaints not just to the PCC but also to the Crown Prosecution Service.

And what has all this to do with Corporate Social Responsibility? Well, the MediaWise credo is that 'Press freedom is a responsibility exercised by journalists on behalf of the public'. We believe that journalism is a vital part of the process of open democracy - so the corporations that own and control media outlets have a very special social responsibility - not as rumour monger or scare-mongers but as the ferrets of reliable information to contribute to informed public debate.

Journalists are the eyes and ears of civil society and the means by which the many different voices of the public are able to express themselves to those who develop and manage our social, cultural political and physical environment.

The primary audience of the journalist is the general public - not least because their employers expect them to help attract readers, listeners and viewers. To that extent journalists could be seen as popular advocates - alerting political, industrial, commercial and cultural decision-makers to the responses of the public to what is happening around them, and to them, and to what is being done on their behalf.

Information is power, and so as purveyors of information, and opinion, journalists do have power, and the responsibilities that go with it. They straddle the gap between two worlds - mediating dialogue between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Their articles and programmes become the stuff of public debate. If they get it wrong everyone suffers.

Yet journalists are often expected (by editors and the public) to become instant experts on the topics they cover. However resourceful and inquisitive individual journalists may be, pressure of time means they must rely, often too heavily, upon 'common sense' and a few words from an 'expert'. Their words assume a special authority, even among policy-makers, simply because they are published or broadcast.

So this is an ethical as well as a professional dilemma. Yet they operate within a highly competitive industry in which there is no formal career structure, and where everyone is judged by the impact of their latest offering.

Most of our clients are individual members of the public whose lives have been directly affected by inaccurate or intrusive media coverage. But we also deal, especially, with social groups who are made vulnerable by inaccurate or sensational media coverage - from young Muslims, to Travellers, from the mental health service users to single mothers.

Most complainants we have dealt with over the years support press freedom. They want to be able to trust what journalists tell them, but increasingly they do not. We are currently engaged in a long-term project about Journalism and Public Trust. We are hoping to discover precisely what the public wants of journalism, and what journalists believe their role to be in an open democracy. Our aim is a 'compact of trust' between journalists and the public to define that relationship.

It may take some time to come up with a definitive shopping list – it took the Committee of Concerned Journalists in the US three years – but we do have an outline to offer, which we would commend to those within media corporations who devise their 'wish lists' for social responsibility.

Here is the MediaWise 10-point plan for inclusion in media companies' next internal audit, designed to improve public trust in journalism and to strengthen confidence among journalists that they are recognised as important stakeholders in the media.

- An independent Reader's Editor/Ombudsman on every newspaper.
- A regular Corrections column or programme, which might include regular review of the company's own journalism.
- A commitment to give suitable prominence to upheld complaints (and to offer compensation if appropriate).
- Agreed minimum competences with which all journalists must comply within two years of joining the company.
- A conscience clause in journalists' contracts.
- Equitable wage rates for staff and freelancers, and an end to so-called 'self-billing' (an arbitrary system of deciding how much freelancers will be paid, after their work has been published).
- Commitment to the development of some form of transparent career structure within the industry.
- Mid-career skills updating and specialist in-service training to keep journalists up-to-speed on legislation and social developments.
- A commitment to diversity throughout the workforce, and especially in newsrooms.
- Tough action on discrimination and bullying in the work place.

In our view this would vastly improve the standing and standards of journalism, and provide the basis for a genuine 'compact of trust' between journalists and the public.

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