

## Old-style/New-style Abuse of Press Freedom

The Leveson Inquiry: Culture, Practice and Ethics of the Press

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It is the contention of this submission that the behaviour of the press relating to some of the great issues of the day not infrequently constitutes *gross professional misconduct*, by involving blatant distortion of the facts and demonstrating utter contempt for the responsibility to provide well informed and balanced treatment.

The potential damage to human welfare of such 'campaigns of misinformation' is several orders of magnitude greater than that involved in the abuses which led to the setting up of the Inquiry, however serious this may be, since, by undermining public support, they jeopardise the ability of governments to take the hard but necessary decisions which these issues demand.

The impetus for this submission was originally provided by recent articles on international aid in the *Daily Mail* and the material submitted below on this subject is largely the content of an Open Letter sent to the Editor of the *Mail* on 14<sup>th</sup> December, 2011. However, I also cite two other examples, dealing with quite different issues, to illustrate the fact that this serious problem is both long-standing and endemic within large sections of the press.

### HIV/AIDS Denialism

In the early 1990s, *The Sunday Times* ran an extended campaign which disputed the mainstream scientific understanding of the causation of AIDS by the virus, HIV, despite the difficulties which editors must inevitably encounter in dealing with such a technically complex issue. So great was the concern of the scientific community on this matter that the leading scientific journal, *Nature*, went so far as to publish (9<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1993) a two page article<sup>1</sup> by the Editor, John Maddox, entitled "*New-style abuse of press freedom*". It rebuked the paper for what it stated to be its "*seriously mistaken, and probably disastrous*" coverage of the matter, stating that "*The Sunday Times has so consistently misrepresented the role of HIV in the causation of AIDS that Nature plans to monitor its future treatment of this issue.*" Unhappily, *Nature*, unlike *The Sunday Times*, does not have a readership running into millions.

"*Disastrous*" is hardly too strong a term for the tragic early deaths of HIV-positive adults who declined to avail themselves of antiretroviral therapy (AVT), and, even more shocking, the unnecessary infection of babies with HIV during birth and the theft of their young lives due to the denial to them of such treatment. Furthermore, the influence of HIV/AIDS denial on the former government of South Africa resulted in the additional deaths of more than 300,000 people, according to estimates by reputable scientific research<sup>2,3</sup>.

1. Editorial (1993). "New-style abuse of press freedom". *Nature*, 366:493-494.

2. Chigwedere P., Seage GR, Gruskin S, Lee TH, Essex M (2008). "Estimating the lost benefits of antiretroviral drug use in South Africa". *Journal of acquired immune deficiency syndromes*, 49: 410-415.

3. Nattrass Nicoli (2008). "AIDS and the Scientific Governance of Medicine in Post-Apartheid South Africa". *African Affairs*, 107: 157-176.

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## Climate Scepticism

The greatest concern relates to the treatment of climate change by large parts of the printed media. On 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2004, the science historian, Dr Naomi Oreskes, presented the results of a major survey<sup>4</sup>, in the leading scientific journal, *Science*, of the stance on climate change of *bona fide*, 'peer-reviewed' scientific papers. She concluded that "*Politicians, economists, journalists and others may have the impression of confusion, disagreement or discord among climate scientists, but that impression is incorrect*". That 'incorrect impression' is largely created by the media.

Presentation of this issue reached its nadir with a major article by Christopher Booker in the Sunday Telegraph, on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2008. Under the heading, "*So it appears that Arctic ice isn't vanishing after all*", Mr Booker ridiculed inferences drawn from reports that, in the previous Autumn, "*Sea ice cover had shrunk to the lowest level ever recorded*", by pointing out that the ice, having shrunk "*from 13 million sq km to just 4 million from the start of 2007 to October... is now almost back to 13 million sq km*".

But of course the arctic ice shrinks during the long days of summer and extends its boundaries during the winter when the region is plunged into constant darkness! It has done so since time immemorial and, indeed, it will continue to do so even if, as feared, the North Pole becomes ice-free during the summer within the space of a few decades. Concern is generated not by the fact of this annual cycle, but by the 30% reduction in the area of sea ice during the summer which has been observed over the past 40 years, and its dramatic reduction in thickness (nearly 50%).

Christopher Booker's only qualification to comment on such matters seems to be his history degree, and it beggars belief that a reputable publication, with a circulation in excess of half a million, should open its pages to someone so manifestly lacking in understanding, particularly after his earlier, unfortunate forays into scientific matters in the paper. [For example, "*there is still no proof that BSE causes CJD in humans*", 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2002.] It also beggars belief that intelligent people could attach the slightest significance to such absurdity, but although they may not 'take it as gospel', they do, as the author knows from personal experience, infer that the evidence for even the occurrence of global warming, let alone its causation, is evenly balanced.

In contrast, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change<sup>5</sup> has stated that, "*Warming of the climate system is unequivocal as is now evident from observations of increases in global air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising average global sea level.*" [My emphasis] In other words, the occurrence of global warming is, in popular parlance, 'beyond reasonable doubt'.

Similarly, in a paper in *Nature* in 2008, Cynthia Rosenzweig and her colleagues<sup>6</sup> reported the results of a survey of data sets between 1970 and 2004. Where significant changes were observed, "*95% of the 829 physical changes have been in directions consistent with warming, such as glacier wastage and an earlier peak in river discharge.*" Similarly, "*90% of the approximately 28,800 [28,800!] documented changes in plants and animals are responding consistently to temperature changes... for example by earlier blooming, geographical distribution, etc.*"

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*"When we look at these impacts together, it is clear they are across continents and endemic. We're getting a sense that climate change is already changing the way the world works... It's real and it's happening now"* (Cynthia Rosenzweig, Head of the Climate Impacts Group at Nasa's Goddard Institute for Space Studies in New York).

According to the 20 Nobel Prize winners – some of our finest scientific minds – who contributed to the St James's Palace Symposium<sup>7</sup> in 2009, *"Political leaders cannot possibly ask for a more robust, evidence-based call for action"*. Similarly, the National Academy of Sciences USA, responsible for providing the American government with the best scientific advice available, has stated that (9<sup>th</sup> May, 2010), *"Some scientific conclusions or theories have been so thoroughly examined and tested, and supported by so many independent observations and results, that their likelihood of subsequently being found to be wrong is vanishingly small. Such conclusions and theories are then regarded as settled facts. This is the case for the conclusions that the Earth system is warming and that much of this warming is very likely due to human activities."*

However, whilst the scientific evidence for man-made climate change, and for the unprecedented dangers it poses for humanity, has grown stronger by the year, large sections of the media continue to be governed by obdurate prejudice on this issue. In 1993, *Nature* was able to respond to the *Sunday Times'* misrepresentation of the evidence for HIV by planning *"to monitor its future treatment of this issue,"* but if leading scientific publications were to adopt the same policy today with respect to the misrepresentation by the press of the evidence for climate change, they would have space for little else!

*"Never before have we faced such a global threat. The longer we prevaricate, the more difficult the task becomes"*, stated Lord Robert May, President of the Royal Society. Similarly, Professor Ross Garnault, the Australian government's advisor on climate change, stated that *"The failure of our generation on climate change mitigation would lead to consequences that would haunt humanity until the end of time."* If our generation does indeed fail in this way, the widespread abuse of press freedom in this connection will bear a heavy responsibility for the ensuing catastrophe - *"a catastrophe that will exacerbate human suffering to a magnitude that perhaps the world has not yet seen"* (Archbishop Desmond Tutu).

4. Oreskes N. (2004) "The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change" *Science*, 306: 1686.

5. IPCC 2007: Summary for Policymakers. In: *Climate Change 2007: the Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Party 1 to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [Solomon S. et al. eds.]. Cambridge University Press. Page 4.

6. Rosenzweig C. et al. (13 of them!) (2008) *"Attributing physical and biological impacts to anthropogenic climate change"*. *Nature* 453, 353-358.

7. *"Action for a Low Carbon and Equitable Future"*, Manifesto, St James's Palace Nobel Laureate Symposium, 26<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> May 2009.

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## International Aid Antagonism

The author was deeply disturbed to read the articles and editorial on international aid in the Daily Mail on 3<sup>rd</sup> December<sup>8</sup>. Surely, even the slightest concern for fairness, or the smallest concern to help readers come to a balanced judgement on this issue, would have led to the inclusion of information on the benefits provided by British aid (as confirmed by independent studies such as that by the Overseas Development Institute<sup>9</sup>, for example), as well as the matters to which objection was taken. In their absence, the impression given, hopefully mistakenly, was that of sheer spite - of spite, indeed, towards the poorest and most vulnerable people on the planet.

On 12<sup>th</sup> May 1789, 'a sickly shrimp of a man', William Wilberforce MP, gave his first speech in Parliament on the slave trade: *"I will not accuse the Liverpool merchants. I will allow them to be men of humanity... and I verily believe that if the wretchedness of any one of the many hundred Negros stowed in each ship could be brought within their view, that there is no one among them whose heart could bear it."*

Likewise, the author 'will not accuse the Mail's Editor', but allow him to be a 'man of humanity' and, likewise, 'verily believes' that if the wretchedness of the people to whom he would deny aid could be brought home to him, his heart too 'could not bear it'. For example, in the early 2000s, Professor Jeffrey Sachs, economics advisor to the United Nations, was visiting the main hospital in Malawi, and the doctor suggested he stepped into the medical ward. Sachs recalls that<sup>10</sup>:

*"There was no medicine in the medical ward. The ward had 150 beds - there were 450 people in the ward. These 450 people were fit into a room with 150 beds by putting three people in or around each bed. Two people were lying head to toe, toe to head, in each bed - strangers sharing a death bed. Alongside or underneath the bed there was somebody on the ground, sometimes literally on the ground or sometimes on a piece of cardboard, dying beneath the bed. The room was filled with moans. Family members were sitting by the beds, swabbing dried lips and watching their loved ones die."* Of AIDS, of course.

Of the three examples cited by the *Daily Mail*:

- **48 Pitcairn islanders:** In the immortal words of John McEnroe, *"You cannot be serious!"* This situation is completely unrepresentative. The British Government probably doesn't know what to do with this handful of British citizens living on a rock in the South Pacific, and the author certainly doesn't! Inevitably, keeping them supplied isn't cheap on account of their geographical isolation. However, to use them to denigrate British aid more widely is simply absurd.
- **Land Rovers for Mugabe:** The treatment of this issue was highly misleading. *"£8M bought Land Rovers for Mugabe's thugs?" "British taxpayers' money was used to support one of the world's most vicious dictatorships"?* In fact, the aid programme involved was initiated in the 1990s, well before government-inspired thuggery and viciousness had become the norm in Zimbabwe, and at a time when the international community still had high hopes for the country. Indeed, Robert Mugabe was given an honorary knighthood by H.M. the Queen in 1994, doubtless to encourage him to continue down a path of responsible governance! In effect, the *Daily Mail* is blaming the British government of the day for a deficit in prophetic foresight.

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It was also misleading of the *Mail* to give such prominence to the Land Rovers issue in articles on aid, since, as it itself stated, most of them were *not* financed by the aid budget, but by the ECGD, a department charged with promoting British exports.

It is extraordinary to find a paper reduced to 'scraping the barrel' in its use of this unhappy episode from the 1990s to criticise current policy.

- The final example, India, is admittedly debatable, in view of the scale of that country's expenditure on its military (and its space programme!). However, it must be pointed out that hundreds of millions of people in India live in the most abject poverty and the UK's past responsibilities for this country also have to be born in mind. Furthermore, having set up worthwhile projects in the past, DfID probably doesn't want to walk away from them. Capricious funding is the bane of aid for development, with money often being wasted because of a lack of on-going commitment, and DfID may be trying to avoid this pitfall. [In contrast, debt relief provides a dependable source of funding into the future and is a superior method of assistance.]

The paper failed to mention that the financial crisis, for which the rich countries (reckless bankers, incompetent governments, and profligate consumers alike) are entirely to blame, is estimated to have pushed an extra 100 million people back into absolute poverty. These are not people whose children cry themselves to sleep at night because of hunger, but people whose children are too weak to cry. So once again, as with Third World Debt, *"Those who could be blamed the least, the poorest people in the poorest countries, are suffering the most"* (the late Cardinal Basil Hume).

Furthermore, as pointed out above, the paper did not so much as breath a word about the hundreds of millions of people who are receiving real and life changing benefits from aid and debt relief. For example, since 2001, the number of AIDS patients receiving life-saving drugs has risen 25-fold to nearly 7 million<sup>11</sup> – and that means that tens of millions of children will *not* be left orphans in a cold and callous world!

That number includes 75% of those in most need in Malawi, so that conditions in the medical ward described above have been transformed. Treatment to prevent infection of babies with the HIV virus during birth (a fairly simple procedure) has also risen from about 5% to over 50%.

Similarly, an estimated extra 42 million children, most of them girls, are attending primary school. Smallpox – a hideous disease – has been eradicated; and polio has been cut to 1,600 cases, a reduction of over 99%. Healthcare is now free for pregnant women in several African countries – increasing the number receiving it by half a million each year in Ghana alone. In Bangladesh, vaccination for the six common childhood diseases (it costs little more than a pound) has gone from 10% to 70%, child mortality has been more than halved (as in several Africa countries) - and the fertility rate has been reduced by more than 50%!

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The Overseas Development Institute (the UK's leading independent think-tank on international development), summarises the situation as follows: *"Overall, the rate of progress in reducing poverty and increasing access to basic health, education, water and other essential services is unparalleled in many countries' histories"*. As Salil Shetty, Director of the United Nations Millennium Campaign, says, *"Instead of just lamenting that Africa might miss the MDG targets, we should be celebrating the real changes that have happened in the lives of millions of poor people"*. Indeed we should!

What the International Development Department (DfID) doesn't care to flag up (I wonder why?) is that the real recipients of 'foreign aid' are the rich countries! Unfair trade rules, tax dodges by big corporations, and debt repayments, *each* cost poor countries far more than they get in aid. And those things don't take into account our habit of 'poaching' many of their brightest and best trained people, nor the impacts of climate change, for which we are entirely responsible. 'There should be a law against it!'

In conclusion: *"Telling lies to Bob [Geldof] and me is one thing. Putting their signature on a G8 communique and lying to their citizenry is another matter. Breaking promises to the most vulnerable people on earth is real infamy"* (Bono). It is indeed. We didn't have to make these solemn pledges to 'the most vulnerable people on earth', but we did make them and we should keep them!

8. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2069343/Foreign-aid-law-plan-Ministers-want-commit-Britain-billions-handouts.html>

9. "Millennium Development Goals Report Card: Learning from Progress", Overseas Development Institute, 2010. <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/6014.pdf>

10. Sachs J. (2005) "The end of poverty". Penguin Books, London.

11. "A Year in Review", UNAIDS 2011.

### Notes on other points raised by the Daily Mail

**"Charity should begin at home"**: Of course it should, but it shouldn't stop there – otherwise none of us would lift a finger for anyone outside our own family circles! In any case, developing countries are not in receipt of charity, but of a multiplicity of injustices, as outlined below. The irony is that 'enlightened self-interest' - an intelligent concern for our own welfare, and that of future generations - would lead us to take vigorous action to reduce the obscene chasm which has opened up between rich and poor, globally. Such a world is a dangerous and unhealthy one, as well as being morally indefensible. As an African proverb puts it, *"No one can sleep soundly, knowing that his neighbour is hungry"*.

**"Pensioners could freeze to death this winter"**: There's an 'easy answer' to this, indeed, several! (1) Action should be taken to ban 'regressive' tariffs, which result in higher prices for people using smaller amounts of fuel as a consequence of the imposition of standing charges and price reductions for higher levels of fuel use. After all, we don't face a standing charge when we visit the petrol station, nor do 'gas guzzlers' qualify for cheaper fuel! Better still, by far, would be the introduction of 'progressive' tariffs, with everyone getting a small, free 'fuel allowance', with a flat rate thereafter. This wouldn't cost the Exchequer a single penny. (2) A national drive on home insulation would combat fuel poverty; reduce future imports of fuel; create substantial numbers of jobs; and curb carbon emissions – a win/win/win/win outcome! It could be paid for by reversing the Government's measures favouring motorists, given that according to the Ministry of Transport's own, published figures, the real, *overall* cost of

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motoring has fallen substantially over recent decades. (3) According to the independent, highly respected IFS, the financial changes announced since the election (as distinct from those initiated by the previous government) have been regressive – i.e., hitting the poorest hardest. This bias should be reversed.

**“Corrupt regimes and vanity projects”:** It’s sad to see these dreary old prejudices being trotted out week after week. Of course, we should take the government to task when it fails to be vigilant regarding the use of aid and there’s always room for improvement, but these sweeping and destructive slanders help not at all.

If we wait till impoverished societies sort out their problems with corruption before tackling poverty, we’ll wait forever, because extreme poverty is one of the main engines of corruption. As Professor Jeffrey Sachs explained, *“Good governance raises incomes, but also, and perhaps even more important... higher income leads to improved governance. A more literate and affluent society is better able to keep the government honest... second, a more affluent society can afford to invest in high quality governance”* – for example, pay civil servants, teachers, police, etc., a living wage.

During the author’s visit to Tanzania and Zambia last year, it became abundantly clear to him that, despite the high levels of corruption in those countries, large numbers of decent and able people are doing good things there. He visited a secondary school which had been built by entirely by the local people, with the exception of the timber and metal roof - that had been provided by the government using the proceeds of debt relief. He asked the Deputy Head, *“How long did you have to wait for them to do it?”* He replied, *“About a month”!* The author visited a clean, spacious and apparently well staffed new clinic, and saw numerous new pumps providing clean water in remote valleys. In each case, these developments were made possible by the provision of aid and debt relief.

### **So who’s really aiding whom?**

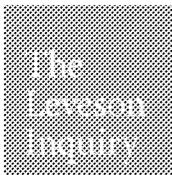
We shouldn’t delude ourselves that we are really giving them anything! Unfair trade rules, tax fiddles by big corporations, and debt repayments, *each* cost poor countries far more than they get in aid.

**Unfair trade rules** are reckoned to cost poor countries as much as seven times what they get in aid. Editorials in *The Economist* have stated that European trade policies *“wreck the lives of poor farmers... have had a devastating effect”* (8th Dec, 2007); *“this wasteful and wicked system... terrible for poor country farmers... dreadful news for the hungry poor”* (3rd May, 2008). Note: *“devastating”, “terrible”, “dreadful” and “wicked” – yes, “wicked”!*

**Tax fiddles by big multinationals** cost poor countries about one and a half times what they get in aid, according to Christian aid, but as much as three times as much according to Angel Gurrer, Secretary General of the OECD: *“Tax dodgers in developed and developing countries deprive governments of revenues. Many take advantage of the lack of transparency in tax havens. Developing countries are estimated to lose to tax havens almost three times what they get from developed countries in aid. If taxes on assets hidden by tax dodgers were collected in their owners’ jurisdictions, billions of dollars could become available for financing development”* (*The Guardian*, 27th November, 2008).

**Debt repayments** by poor countries, often on money loaned a generation ago; which should never have been handed over in the first place; and inflated by compound interest, amounts to about five times as much as they get in aid, taking all developing countries into account. And this is after the welcome debt relief in recent years (Jubilee Debt Campaign, using data published by the World Bank).

And those things don't take into account our habit of 'poaching' many of their brightest and best trained people, nor the impacts of climate change, for which we are entirely responsible!



culture, practices and ethics of the press.

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1. If you are happy for the Inquiry to publish your submission please add and sign the following statement of truth to the end of your submission/statement:

Statement of Truth

**I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.**

**Signed**

**Date ... 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2012 .....**

Please be aware that by signing the statement of truth you are confirming that you agree that the contents of the submission/statement are true. Please take extra time to ensure that you are completely happy with your submission/statement before you sign it.

If you have provided a submission/statement in your private capacity you should state your full name in the submission/statement but should provide in a separate document personal details (e.g. address, contact address, mobile telephone number and e-mail address), which will not be published.

Please remove any personal details such as home address or telephone number before forwarding the final signed submission/statement.

If you have provided the submission/statement on behalf of an organisation, please state this clearly in the first line of the submission/statement.

- 2. Your signed submission/statement, in its entirety, should be returned to us by email.
- 3. Returning your signed submission/statement will confirm that you are content for the Inquiry to publish it on its website in the form you have provided. If this is not the case and you have any concerns or wish for certain sections to be withheld please make this clear in any response.
- 4. Your signed submission, once received, will initially be provided to those groups who have been designated as Core Participants to the Inquiry (a full list is available on our website: [www.levesoninquiry.org.uk](http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk)).
- 5. If the Core Participants do not raise any matters your statement will then be referred to in open session and at that point it will be published, along with your name, on the Inquiry's website.

The Inquiry intends to begin publishing submissions/statements on the website shortly and would therefore be grateful for your response by return.