

## SUMMARY OF SEMINAR 1, 6 OCTOBER 2011 : THE COMPETITIVE PRESSURES ON THE PRESS AND THEIR IMPACT ON JOURNALISTS

**Lord Justice Leveson** opened the event by setting out his desire to hear a wide range of views on key issues and explaining that the process of taking formal written and oral evidence on these issues was happening in parallel with the seminars.

**David Bell** introduced himself, Elinor Goodman and George Jones as assessors for the Leveson Inquiry who would be chairing discussion throughout the day.

**Claire Enders** of Enders Analysis gave presentation on the economic conditions that the press is operating in. She showed that the UK population was consuming news in increasing quantities but increasingly getting their news via TV and the internet, with the printed press facing reduced circulation and revenues. She described newspaper readers as typically aged 40 plus, politically active and engaged with other media. There are many competing sources of news in the digital environment, including paid for content on some newspaper websites, but web revenues are not sufficient to offset the decline in the physical market. The regional press had been hardest hit by declines in advertising revenue, which has translated into a 40% drop in staffing levels compared to a 10% drop among the national press.

**Phil Hall**, former journalist and editor of the News of the World gave a presentation on his perspective of the pressures facing editors. He said that, whereas there had been genuine competitive pressures many decades ago that was no longer the case – the remaining national titles had generally loyal readership and competing for circulation was simply not a real issue. By contrast, he said, real competition was between editors and journalists for professional reasons. Big stories did not materially increase sales. Pressures on editors certainly increased as circulation and revenue falls because of the need to sustain quality with fewer resources. But also the Human Rights Act and the approach of the courts to privacy placed constraints on newspapers looking to pursue stories in the national interest. The current regulatory system was not broken but did need changing and the PCC should be allowed proactively to investigate behaviour. Where behaviour is illegal the law should be used to constrain it, but often isn't. The vast majority of journalists act professionally and the vast majority of stories are accurate. Regulation truly independent of government was difficult to imagine. The pressures on editors are very real but do not justify illegal activity.

**Richard Peppiatt**, who worked as a journalist for the Daily Star, gave a presentation on his perspective of the pressures facing journalists. He said that he had tried to consult widely with other journalists who did not feel able to speak openly. He said that much of the art of journalism was avoiding lying whilst still managing to give a predetermined, and sometimes misleading, impression of events. Stories are written to suit the newspaper readers' prejudices and the editor's agenda. The PCC, despite claiming to have reined in 'feeding frenzies', had not managed to prevent serious abuses. Jobs in newspapers are declining and journalists have limited options to object when bullied or required to do things they don't agree with. In the current climate speed trumps accuracy.

In audience debate on the commercial pressures facing the press the following points were made:

- There was nothing new in the pressures facing the press and they were not unique to the UK or to any particular part of the media.

- Regional and national press were looking for new business models and ways to monetise online activity. Standards of accuracy and ethics should be no different online from the printed papers. The plethora of news media sources is an opportunity to reinforce trusted brands that people will turn to.
- Competition between national titles was limited – possibly around 3% of the market was genuinely contestable. Mostly people are very loyal to the title that they buy. Newspapers provide comment and opinion not available from TV. Most readership from the News of the World has been lost – some hundreds of thousands did move to the Mail on Sunday and the Star on Sunday but that hasn't been sustained. Headlines do not tend to make much impact on market share of a title, but really big stories do increase overall readership across the market.
- Free newspapers compete for advertising but not obviously for readership. No evidence that standards of accuracy are lower in free papers compared to paid ones.
- It was worth noting that newspapers don't operate in a normal market as all quality papers are loss making and subsidized by their owners.
- The public were still keenly consuming news media of all sorts and what was important is not where it is read but how it is obtained.
- Commercial pressures cannot be an excuse for lowering standards. Neither inaccuracy nor illegal behaviour can be justified.
- There were fewer journalists having to produce more material and this led to more desk based research, more reuse of items reported elsewhere and more reliance on 'trusted sources'.
- There was limited or no acceptance among the audience of the picture of newsroom life painted by Richard Peppiatt.
- The question was not about economics but about ethics and whether there been changes in newsroom culture.

In audience debate on the pressures faced by editors and the impact on journalists the following points were made:

- There was disagreement about whether there were genuine differences in culture between the tabloid and mid market press and the broadsheets. Some felt that there was a clear divide, others that the differences were essentially stylistic.
- There were differences as to whether reporting on the celebrity culture led to more use of questionable techniques. Some felt that the pressure to get personal stories on high profile figures led to reporters obtaining material by any means available. Others, particularly current editors of national daily papers, argued that there was no essential difference between reporting on celebrities or, for example, politics, and that there was no systematic difference in standards or ethics, or the skills required and techniques used, between those reporting on different subject matters.
- There is nothing wrong with reporting that is brash, opinionated and partial. The concerns are around breaches of standards, whether in relation to accuracy or methods of information gathering.

- Newspapers are hierarchical, with the editor as law and the proprietor as king. The culture is set from the top and influences what is written about and how it is covered as well as the way in which stories are obtained.
- 'Competition can occur as much or more within an organization than between different organizations.
- 'Feeding Frenzies' – large scale wholly inaccurate reporting – do happen. One person argued that the increase in circulation for a big story led to pressures on journalists to get a story on threat of the sack. There are documented cases where stories, without foundation, have been literally made up [examples quoted – the McCann Case, Rebecca Leighton and Christopher Jeffries].
- The difficult market for journalist jobs, and the increase in the use of freelancers, makes it difficult for journalists to object to doing what they are asked to do.
- Before 1953 there had been no code at all. The intrusive techniques used today can be seen as a natural progression of previous approaches and the press has always felt a little bit as though laws (such as not acting on what is heard on a police radio) do not apply to them. Neither commercial pressures, changes in technology nor the casualisation of the workforce led to breaches of standards – the phone hacking cases that were originally prosecuted dated from 1992 when the commercial and technological pressures had not really started to bite.
- Journalists now have to work harder and quicker but standards are not allowed to slip – commercially that would be problematic.
- Arguably standards of journalism are rising because you can be so easily and quickly picked up on errors on the internet. Legal judgments have led to papers giving people advance warning of stories and time to respond.
- The BBC has historically been cautious about celebrity stories and this has made it look out of touch and too much in hock to the establishment. But it is right for the BBC not to lead the charge on that sort of story. They do cover these stories – often as stories of what is being reported in the press, thus maintaining their high-minded stance.
- The law of contempt is quite vague but well understood.
- Accuracy is considered to be of prime importance. All editors and journalists who spoke said that they had never knowingly published something untrue and would not do so.
- A question was raised about whether headlines were sometimes written with more regard for increasing circulation than for accuracy. Others responded that writing an accurate, short, punchy headline was not easy and that headlines did not really sell newspapers – editors always aimed for accuracy and this was borne out by the fact that the PCC had mostly not upheld complaints about headlines.
- A question was raised about whether there is a culture of impunity in newsrooms, supported by a lack of action from the police and other enforcement agencies when laws are broken? People asked if there would be consideration of the extent to which the press have been able to get away with anything because politicians were not willing to tackle the press? David Bell confirmed that the inquiry was dealing with issues in modules and that it would move in due course to issues around the relationship between politicians and the press.