



[Leveson Inquiry](#)

by [Denis Joe](#)

Two of the basic principles that underpin a democratic society are free speech and a free press: both are inseparable as the exchange of ideas, through informed debate, is what maintains a democracy. Historically the undermining of free speech and a free press was associated with totalitarian regimes, whose rule was based on force rather than the free will of the people.

Up until the end of the 17th Century nothing could be published without the accompaniment of a government-granted license. Publication was controlled under the Licensing Act of 1662, but the Act's lapsed from 1679–1685 and by the early 19th century there were 52 London papers

and over 100 other titles. Taxes on newspapers were lifted by 1855 and there was a massive growth in overall circulation. *The Times* is the oldest surviving title but from the 1830s there were over 100 titles reflecting the political views of the time.

By the early 20th century a higher literacy and a growth of 'popular' (what might be called 'tabloid' or 'redtop') journalism meant that around two-thirds of the adult population read a newspaper every day, with the 'Sundays' being the most popular.

Whilst the Education Act of 1871 was greeted by progressives as an enlightened move, the intellectual class became horrified at the idea of a mass culture which would detract from their own importance. Within four years of its first publication, *The Daily Mail* became the biggest selling paper at the beginning of the 20th century. Its slogan: 'The Busy Man's paper' was a thumbing of the nose to the leisured bourgeoisie. Alfred Harmsworth, the founder of the *The Daily Mail*, championed a new form of journalism: the human interest story, which became (and remains) that staple of popular journalism.

The success of the human interest story impacted greatly on every level of life. The extension of the electoral franchise and the growth of the labour movement led to the human interest story becoming an important component of political agitation and it also could be found in the broadsheets. The attraction of this type of journalism was that it brought the subject closer to the lives of many people and whilst some may find it snifty because it lacks intellectual rigour and objectivity (think of how the "and finally . . ." stories at the end of News at Ten became something of a joke) the human interest story can be seen as something that helped to create a sense of unity amongst working-class people. It could also be seen as a very strong expression of basic human dignity, which would suggest that, contrary to highbrow understanding, the masses were not 'escaping' their dreary lives through their reading habits, but were, in fact, engaging in it through their concerns with the lives of others.

The intellectual's backlash against the intrusion of mass culture was in part defensive. They saw their own position as the architects of culture being threatened, especially when Harmsworth suggested that the human interest story would replace the novel (see *The Intellectuals and the Masses* . John Carey , Faber & Faber, London, 1992. p.7). This snobbery has continued right up to the present day.

One of the major events that illustrated the attraction to the human interest approach took place in 1986, when the BBC reporter Kate Adie, reporting on the American Bombing of Tripoli, going against the BBC tradition of objectivity, gave a very emotional driven account of what was happening. The Tory government, at the time, heavily criticised Adie and the BBC, but many Liberals came to her defence, even though Adie's report had eschewed the objectivity associated with serious journalism. The impact that this event was to have on journalism is hardly commented on. Today, though, Adie's subjective approach is the norm as Michael Higgins & Angela Smith have suggested in their report on the incident (*Not One Of U.S. Kate Adie's report of the 1986 US bombing of Tripoli and its critical aftermath.* Journalism Studies. Vol. 12 No3 2011).

In the mid-20th century newspapers were more likely to indulge in self – censorship as noted in the preface to George Orwell's *Animal Farm*:

"The sinister fact about literary censorship in England is that it is largely voluntary. ... Things are kept right out of the British press, not because the Government intervenes but because of a general tacit agreement that 'it wouldn't do' to mention that particular fact."

Throughout the second half of the 20th century the newspaper industry in Britain faced censorship demands from the government, mostly around wars (most notably the wars with Argentina and in Northern Ireland: the infamous "D Notices") or the Official Secrets Act.

The other issue of censorship that the news media face is Britain's peculiar libel laws which are seen as partly responsible for Britain's drop in the league on media censorship (see [2011-2012 World Press Freedom Index](#) p3).

The recent conflict in the industry, that has led to The Leveson inquiry originated, not from government pressure, but from inside the industry. A relentless campaign by the Guardian Media Group against Murdoch's News International and the News of the World's reporting methods of the investigation into the murder of Milly Dowler (much of the background to the story is already known, so there is no point going into detail) in particular.

What started out as an investigation into morally questionable methods of obtaining information by NOW journalist, has quickly evolved into questioning the very independence of the media. This situation has created quite surreal events. Back in September, having worked hand-in-hand with the police in making a case against individuals who had worked for the News of the World, *The Guardian* was outraged at the Metropolitan police demands for journalist to reveal source information. The police later recognised their error and asked in a more polite manner (see [Defend a free press - don't just guard the Guardian](#)). Or the outrage of, media commentator, and *Guardian*

blogger,

[Roy Greenslade](#)

at the suggestion of licensed journalist from Labour's shadow culture secretary, Ivan Lewis, at the party's conference, in September. One is left wondering if the good professor actually reads the paper he writes for, as he seemed shocked by the proposals that Lewis was suggesting, even though they were not a million miles away from the demands that

The Guardian
was/is making.

In one sense it could be easy to see this as a question of reigning in the excesses of the tabloid press, and though there are other interest involved, as Brendan O'Neill [pointed out recently](#), this does seem to be the case. Also this can be seen as another aspect of the elite's snobbery towards tabloid readers and the 'lower classes' in general. But by making demands on the State to do something about the tabloids

The Guardian

and it's fellow travellers have presented a political class, desperate for any issue that would give it the appearance of actually doing something and justify its own existence, an open invitation to have interfere with the workings of the news media.

The Press Complaints Commission, set up as a voluntary and self-regulatory body in 1990, received extensive criticism for its lack of action in the News of the World phone hacking affair and David Cameron called for it to be replaced with a new system in July of last year. What this new system might be was recently. As [Mick Hume](#) noted "The Leveson Inquiry is not a neutral body to be persuaded. It is an imposition that must be opposed."

Whilst Leveson has talked about a new, 'independent' body; what does stand out is that this body will be anything but 'independent'. The Leveson inquiry, itself, was never independent, its goal could only be to find a satisfactory (that is to *The Guardian* an co.) manner of bringing the

press under some sort of state control ('statutory backdrop'); making it more 'accountable'.

That this new body is not envisaged as being made up of MPs or other state officials, but by upstanding members of the public, should not detract from the fact that it is an outside body intent on regulating the press. As Mick Hume has pointed out [ibid]newspapers can voluntarily opt in to sign up to this body the government have already stated that those who did not would have VAT levied on them.

The recent Reporters Without Borders 'report into press freedom saw the British press drop 12 places to 28 in the league table on a free press. There has never been a 'free' press in Britain. The libel laws, D notices, the Official Secrets Act as well as self-censorship have played their part in compromising the press and undermining its independence. But the recent proposals that are being put forward from the Leveson inquiry represent an enormous attack on the very principles of a free and democratic society.

As noted by the political theorist, Hannah Arendt, a phenomena of the post war period was diminished regard for authority. In the post- Soviet world this has been accelerated within all aspects of life: the political, the public and the familial. However the existence of the newspaper reader (*The Daily Mail* reader; *The Guardian* reader ; *The Daily Telegraph* reader; etc.) suggested that there still remained a relatively strong level of trust between the reader and the journalist. A press that is not independent and kowtows to the demands of an outside body or the state cannot maintain the trust of its readers.

Editors note: As the Leveson Inquiry trundles on, the chilling effect increases, so I've programmed a public discussion on the issue for April 2012 - click on [How chilling is Leveson for Press Freedom?](#)