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The British Media Advocates Self-Regulation

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The sword of Damocles hangs perpetually over the head of the British media's self-regulation system, according to this correspondent. This happens every time a bold newspaper dares to reveal details of the private life of one of the members of the Royal family or disclose the extra-marital affairs of politicians.

The British press has caused the downfall of many a politician. The author recalls the case of the Defence Ministry's Chief of Staff, Marshal Peter Harding, who was forced to resign after the sensationalist Sunday paper "News of the World" revealed his affair with Bienvenida Pérez, a Spaniard from Valencia.

All the newspapers have appointed ombudsmen to answer readers' complaints and contribute to ensure the accuracy, impartiality and good behaviour of reporters. The Press Complaints Commission, composed of newspaper and magazine editors as well as independent members, was created in 1991 to ensure compliance with a professional Code of Honour. In January 1993 the Commission's powers were strengthened, empowering a judge and two Commission advisors to levy almost unlimited economic sanctions. Finally, the Government rejected the creation of a special court. On some occasions, British newspapers go from mere witnesses of events to active participants. Example: during the fishing conflict between Spain and Canada, all the press gave its opinion and recommended boycotting Spanish beer and Julio Iglesias records.

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