

Post-democracy, Press, Politics and Power

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Abstract

Transnational media corporations now wield enormous power and influence. Never has this been displayed so starkly and so shockingly as in the revelations that emerged during the Leveson Inquiry into the culture and ethics of the press in the UK. This paper considers the implications of the relationship between media elites and political elites for democratic culture and media reform. The paper argues that the culture of press-politician mutual interest in which media executives and party leaders collude will continue as long as the solutions proffered focus on the ethical constraints of professional journalists rather than wider structural issues relating to plurality of ownership and control and funding of news in the public interest.

Keywords: Phone-hacking, journalism, democracy, press, power

Introduction: the relationship between news media and democracy

A HEALTHY news media is often claimed to be the life-blood of democracy. News provides, or at least should provide, the vital resources for processes of information-gathering, deliberation and analysis that enable citizens to participate in political life and democracy to function. The ethos and vocation of journalism is entrenched in this relationship with democracy and its practice. But under conditions of 'post-democracy' this relationship, hinged on a conception of independent journalism in the public interest linked to notions of knowledge, political participation and democratic renewal, has come undone.¹ This is brought into sharp relief when we consider the wily entanglement between political elites and media elites exposed in the hacking scandal in the UK in 2011.

News media and post-democracy: hacking and the Leveson Inquiry

In the summer of 2011 the *News of the World*, owned by Rupert Murdoch, stood accused of illegal, unethical behaviour through the systematic phone hacking of politicians, members of the royal family, celebrities,

murder victims and their families. Murdoch subsequently closed down the *News of the World* and several ex-editors and journalists found themselves under criminal investigation. Prime Minister David Cameron, publicly embarrassed by his employment as Director of Communications of Andy Coulson (a former editor of *News of the World*: 2003–7), who was arrested by the Metropolitan Police Service in July 2011 for allegations of corruption and phone hacking (and charged in June 2014), then called for a public inquiry chaired by Lord Justice Leveson to investigate the issue. Eighteen months later the Leveson Report (2012) into the culture, practices and ethics of the press was published. The report revealed a sordid relationship of kowtowing and mutual backscratching between politicians and media owners that raised serious doubts over whether certain newspapers in the UK could ever claim to be contributing to democratic sustenance.

Hackgate, as it became known, portrayed the mechanisms of a system based on the corruption of power—both of governing elites and of mediating elites and the relations between them. During the Leveson inquiry it was revealed that a member of the Cabinet had met executives from Rupert Murdoch's empire once every three days on average since the Coalition was formed.²

The Inquiry also heard about the close personal relationships between senior members of government and senior Murdoch employees. On 7 October 2009, the day before David Cameron addressed the Conservative party conference, Rebekah Brooks, then chief executive of News International (2009–11) and former editor of the *News of the World* and *The Sun*, sent Cameron the following text message:

But seriously I do understand the issue with the *Times*. Let's discuss over country supper soon. On the party it was because I had asked a number of NI [News International] people to Manchester post endorsement and they were disappointed not to see you. But as always Sam was wonderful – (and I thought it was OE's [Old Etonians] that were charm personified!) I am so rooting for you tomorrow not just as a proud friend but because professionally we're definitely in this together! Speech of your life? Yes he Cam!³

The Brooks–Cameron relationship is particularly indicative of a culture of press–politician mutual interest in which media executives and party leaders work together to 'push the same agenda', in Cameron's words. But we also heard four successive Prime Ministers give evidence to the Leveson Inquiry into the press admitting they were 'too close' to the big media players because the political stakes were so very high. In addition, the inquiry revealed the systematic invasions of privacy by headline-hungry journalists that wrecked the lives of ordinary people on a daily basis; the lies and deceit of senior newspaper figures; and a highly politicised and corrupt police force also in league with media power.⁴ Rebekah Brooks admitted to paying police for information in a House of Commons Select Committee in 2003 but denied it in 2011 (BBC News UK, 15 April 2011), and we discovered that over a quarter of the police public affairs department were previous employers of the *News of the World*.⁵ It is hardly surprising, then, that political parties, the police and other institutions were exposed as reluctant to investigate wrongdoing in the news media, hinder the expansion of large media conglomerates or introduce new regulation of news organisations and journalistic practice.

But the problem of phone hacking has a much broader and deeper reach than any slippage in ethical practice would seem to suggest, and rests not with the individual journalists but with the system of news production of which they are part. The reasons hinge on the increasing entanglement of political and media elites as news coverage has taken on an ever more important role in policy-making and elections⁶ and fewer and fewer people vote;⁷ on the failure of the Press Complaints Commission⁸ (the old newspaper industry watchdog) to uphold ethical standards and enable adequate self-regulation of journalists;⁹ all alongside the broken business model of newspapers with plummeting circulation and readership figures and the migration of classified advertising to online sites such as Craigslist in the US and Gumtree and eBay in the UK.¹⁰

At a time when resources are scarce and where there is a pressure to meet multiple deadlines across a whole series of news platforms, it is easy to see how the already constrained autonomy of journalists and their freedom to act ethically toward the collective gains of the profession can be eroded for the competitive gain of the commercial newspaper. Combine the faster and shallower corporate journalism of the digital age¹¹ with the need to pull in readers for commercial rather than journalistic reasons and it is not difficult to see how the values of professional journalism are quickly cast aside in order to indulge in sensationalism, trade in gratuitous spectacles and deal in dubious emotionalism. These economic drivers cannot be underestimated but they do not tell the whole story. Rather, the concerns spring from a thoroughly marketised and deregulated newspaper industry, many parts of which have long since relegated the motive of the press as fourth estate holding truth to power to the sidelines. As Trevor Kavanagh, associate editor of *The Sun*, noted in his own evidence to Leveson:

... news is as saleable a commodity as any other. Newspapers are commercial, competitive businesses, not a public service.¹²

News in these formulations is conceived of as being primarily for profit—a marketplace that operates on market principles. Treating

news in this way is part of a much broader political shift in focus from citizenship to consumerism and from states to markets. But of course, news is no ordinary commodity—it offers the possibility of directing the public conversation and hence is of relevance to politicians keen to convince voters of the benefits of their particular policy formulations. This puts news proprietors in a particular position of power. As the owner of the *London Evening Standard* and the *Independent*, Russian billionaire Evgeny Lebedev, tweeted after his appearance at Leveson: ‘Forgot to tell #Leveson that it’s unreasonable to expect individuals to spend £millions on newspapers and not have access to politicians’.

Concentration of media ownership

When news proprietors accumulate excessive power and influence, the problems associated with this power are exacerbated. In the UK, a thoroughly marketised and deregulated newspaper industry has led to unchecked media concentration over several decades, allowing some media groups to amass vast amounts of revenue along with social and political influence, with adverse consequences for ethical journalism and democracy. Currently, just three companies control 71 per cent of UK national newspaper circulation, while only five groups control 80 per cent of combined print and online readership.¹³ Rupert Murdoch and family were recently positioned at number 33 of Forbes Magazine’s list of the world’s most powerful people, with a net worth of \$13.4 billion.¹⁴ The work of Davis (2002) and Dean (2011) shows how such patterns of dominance and influence have also contributed to certain public policy areas—law and order, drugs, asylum seekers, immigration, Europe—being avoided or dealt with differently for fear of either hostile reporting or media owner conflict.¹⁵

In evidence to a House of Lords select committee in 2007, Rupert Murdoch said that he simply acted like ‘a traditional proprietor’ in regard to *The Sun* and the *News of the World*; he did not interfere except ‘on major issues, such as which party to back in a general election or policy on Europe’.¹⁶ On 21 April the

Independent newspaper reported that Murdoch had told journalists at *The Sun* that if the Labour party (then led by Ed Miliband) got into power, then the future of the company was at stake. He then directed them to be more aggressive in their attacks against Labour and more positive about the Conservative party. Miliband’s vilification by certain sections of the press was vicious and unrelenting—he was decried as weird-looking, a geek, terrible at eating bacon sandwiches; his Dad was a Marxist, they announced, and he did one over on his brother.

Market dominance of news media results in an excess of power and unruly political influence that breeds fear. Fear in politicians scared of their careers being wrecked and lives ruined by negative publicity, along with their parties’ chances of re-election. Fear in employees too intimidated to stand up to a bullying culture where market-oriented managers place commercial priorities above journalistic responsibility and integrity. Of course, it is not only journalists whose freedom is circumscribed by corporate compliance. Our ability to exercise our own democratic freedom as ordinary members of the public is premised on the basic fact that governments are not distorted by private interests of multimedia conglomerates. When governments as well as journalists are beholden to corporate power, then freedom is hard to come by for all but the most powerful.

Claims regarding the damage wrought by excessive concentration of media ownership are often dismissed as outmoded and irrelevant in a digital age where information abundance abounds. However, even online mainstream established news outlets still dominate our news consumption across all platforms, with increasingly homogenous content. In a nine-country study of news websites, Curran et al. (2013) note that ‘leading websites around the world reproduce the same kind of news as legacy media. These websites favour the voices of authority and expertise over those of campaigning organisations and the ordinary citizen’.¹⁷ McChesney (2014) also notes how the global power of new digital distributors has created the greatest monopolies in economic history, with new digital industries moving from competitive to oligopolistic to monopolistic at a furious pace until the

internet has come to rest in the hands of a very few giant global corporations.¹⁸ He argues that the hyper-commercialism, advertising and monopoly markets now found online enhance rather than disrupt the contours of capitalism and lead to rampant depoliticisation and undemocratic, commercial media policy, as the point of government regulation pivots on helping corporate media maximise their profits rather than advancing the public interest.

Conclusion

The hacking scandal reveals the mechanisms of a system of news provision based on the corruption of power, and one that displays many of the hallmarks of neoliberal practice. This speaks to a 'post-democracy' characterised by increasing deregulation of corporate media interests that allows excessive influence over and inappropriate interference in the political public sphere; that ever more commodifies the news such that its only value is in the profit it generates; wherein accountability is lost and the logic of capital becomes the sole driver of commercial newspaper practice. Furthermore, the power of multinational media corporations is not dispersed in the age of new media; rather, new forms of media capital come to the fore. The solution does not lie simply in reform of unethical journalism (even if the Leveson recommendations were fully implemented).¹⁹ An independent and effective system of self-regulation of the press is to be welcomed, but will only ever deal partially with the problem. Ensuring communities have access to a diverse range of media and political systems are not beholden to corporate pressures also requires controls to prevent the excessive concentration of media ownership—both online and offline—and a means of encouraging new, non-profit, public interest news media to emerge and flourish (for example, by allowing such publishers to claim charitable status). Only then can the relationship between news media and democracy have any chance of survival.

Notes

1 C. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004.

- 2 A total of 20 Cabinet ministers met senior Murdoch executives 130 times in the first 14 months of office. See the full list on Number 10's website: <http://www.number10.gov.uk/transparency/who-ministers-are-meeting/> (accessed 23 October 2015).
- 3 *Transcript of Morning Hearing 14 June 2012*, pp. 82–3, <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Transcript-of-Morning-Hearing-14-June-2012.pdf> (accessed 23 October 2015).
- 4 B. Cathcart, *Everybody's Hacked Off: Why We Don't Have the Press We Deserve and What to Do About It*, London, Penguin, 2012.
- 5 H. Warrell, 'Police chief testifies on Met public relations staffing', *Financial Times*, 20 July 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ef6997cc-b1e5-11e0-a06c-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2oxe2Hkdd> (accessed 30 December 2013).
- 6 A. Davis, *Public Relations Democracy*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002.
- 7 S. Coleman, 'It's time for the public to reclaim the public interest', *Television & New Media*, vol. 13, January 2012, pp. 7–11.
- 8 The Press Complaints Commission has since been replaced by the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). IPSO fulfils only 12 of the 32 Leveson recommendations for independent and effective self-regulation of the press (Media Standards Trust, 2013, The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO): An assessment is available at: <http://media.standardstrust.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2013/11/MST-IPSO-Analysis-15-11-13.pdf>). Consequently it has been derided as a 'sham regulator' (Hacked Off, 'The truth about IPSO', <http://hackinginquiry.org/the-campaign/the-truth-about-ispo/>). Although the majority of national newspapers have signed up to IPSO, *The Guardian*, the *Independent* and the *Financial Times* have not.
- 9 CCMR (Co-ordinating Committee for Media Reform) (2011) *Ethical Practice: A New Settlement for British News Publishing*, <http://www.mediareform.org.uk/policy-research/ethics/briefing-paper-on-ethics>. Also see A. Phillips, N. Couldry and D. Freedman, 'An ethical deficit? Accountability, norms and the material conditions of contemporary journalism', in N. Fenton (ed) *New Media, Old News*, London, Sage, 2010, pp. 51–67.
- 10 N. Fenton, (ed.) *New Media, Old News: Journalism and Democracy in the Digital Age*, London, Sage, 2010.
- 11 P. Lee-Wright, A. Phillips and T. Witschge, *Changing Journalism*, London, Routledge, 2011.
- 12 'Trevor Kavanagh's speech to the Leveson Inquiry: full text', *Guardian*, 6 October 2011,

- <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/oct/06/trevor-kavanagh-leveson-inquiry-speech> (accessed 30 December 2013).
- 13 Media Reform Coalition (2015) Who Owns the UK Media, London, MRC, <http://www.mediareform.org.uk/who-owns-the-uk-media> (accessed 23 October 2015); Media Reform Coalition, *The Elephant in the Room*, London: MRC, 2014, <http://www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ElephantintheroomFinalfinal.pdf> (accessed 23 October 2015).
 - 14 Forbes, 'Rupert Murdoch and family', *Forbes* [online], n.d., <http://www.forbes.com/profile/rupert-murdoch/> (accessed 31 October 2013).
 - 15 Davis, *Public Relations Democracy*; M. Dean, *Democracy under Attack: How the Media Distort Policy and Politics*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2011.
 - 16 House of Lords (2008) Communications – First Report session 2007–08. Houses of Parliament, London: The Stationery Office. Available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200708/ldselect/ldcomuni/122/12202.htm#evidence> (last accessed June 2014).
 - 17 J. Curran et al., 'Internet revolution revisited: a comparative study of online news', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 35, no. 7, 2013, pp. 880–97.
 - 18 R. McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy*, New York, The New Press, 2014.
 - 19 The UK now has a Leveson framework in place with a Press Recognition Panel (PRP) ready to receive applications from potential regulators as from September 2015. IPSO, the rebranded and slightly revised Press Complaints Commission, will not apply for recognition (and would not meet the criteria). However, IMPRESS—another regulator that has arisen from civil society—will. If a news publisher joins IMPRESS then financial incentives for others to follow will begin. The PRP have a year before they must report to Parliament whether or not the system for regulating the press has failed. So in September 2016, if nothing has changed, then Parliament will have to decide what to do next. The Conservatives' slim majority may not be enough to kick an issue with large cross-party support and huge public backing into the long grass yet again.