

Summer reading ideas from the LSE Media Policy Project



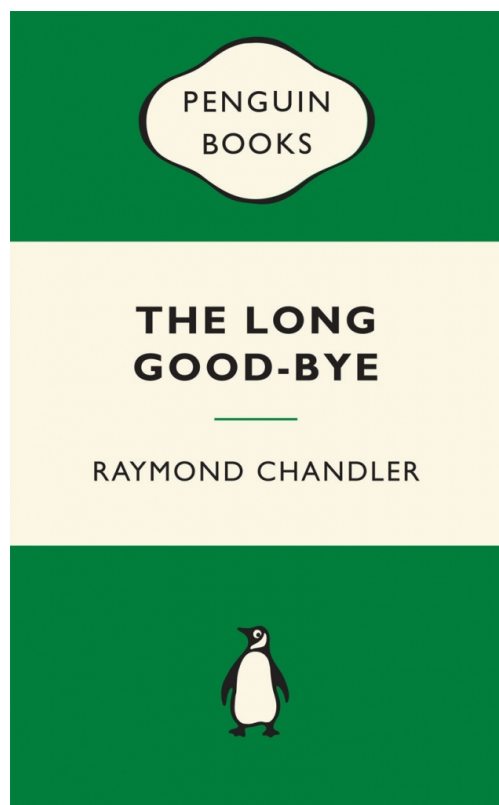
At the Media Policy Project we are often asked for readings by those wishing to get up to speed on complex policy issues: this is why we produce our **policy briefs** and **topic guides**. As many of our readers are likely to be taking summer holidays this month and next, **IMPRESS Project Founding Director Jonathan Heawood** (writing here in a personal capacity) suggests reflecting on current tensions in journalism through the novels of Raymond Chandler.

In a recent speech about the future of news the British newspaper publisher David Montgomery talked about the author who inspired him to become a journalist: Raymond Chandler. Hearing him sent me back to Chandler's great novels, *The Big Sleep*, *Farewell, My Lovely* and *The Long Good-bye*, and their protagonist, Philip Marlowe.

Marlowe, or the imaginary journalist

Reckless, relentless, living life on his own terms and inspired by a fierce moral code, Marlowe is certainly the kind of journalist we would all like to be – the kind of journalist we could believe in.

But Marlowe isn't a journalist. He doesn't even like journalists. And he loathes newspaper publishers. Marlowe is a private eye working the mean streets of 1940s Hollywood. 'Trouble is my business,' he tells us, when he's not being beaten up by bent cops, seduced by platinum blondes and threatened by mobsters, or wisecracking with them – Marlowe never walks away from danger when he can call it names to its face. He knows the corruption of the LA Police Department, the District Attorney, the movie stars and the millionaires who crash in and out of his downbeat, downtown office, but he taunts them all.



Marlowe's culture is one we now associate with journalism – to speak truth to power, regardless of the consequences – but his literary progenitors are the pulp detectives of the 1920s and 30s. The reporters of pre-war fiction were more likely to be comic figures, such as PG Wodehouse's Psmith or Evelyn Waugh's Boot; or adventurers like the Tintin of Hergé's early novels. The eponymous hero of Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 film *Foreign Correspondent* is in the Tintin mould – determined yes, but full of boyish enthusiasm. Marlowe lights his world-weary cigarette on the face of boyish enthusiasm.

The writers who followed Chandler borrowed heavily from Marlowe for their fictional reporters. Thomas Fowler, the foreign correspondent in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, published in 1956, is, like Marlowe, an outsider looking in, simultaneously at the heart of the action and divorced from it. His world is that of the lone detective: the pool of light on the desk; the bourbon in the filing cabinet; the knock at the door. And his moral dilemmas are, like Marlowe's, choices between bad and worse.

These tropes hardened in later representations of reporters in films, television series and books from *All the President's Men* to *State of Play* and *House of Cards*. The imaginary journalist of the late-twentieth century is Philip Marlowe through

and through: both moral and jaded, determined and despairing, public-spirited and alone. We seem to have imagined journalism through the lens of detective fiction.

This creates a cognitive dissonance between the investigative journalists of our dreams and the prosaic reality of news publishing. Marlowe sees this tension. In his world, newspaper publishers are more likely to be in on the conspiracy than exposing it. In *The Long Good-bye*, published in 1953, Marlowe asks a reporter why the Los Angeles papers have not covered a scandal affecting a newspaper publisher. After all, he says, don't the newspapers compete with each other? The reporter laughs at him:

Newspapers are owned and published by rich men. Rich men all belong to the same club. Sure, there's competition – hard, tough competition for circulation, for newsbeats, for exclusive stories. Just so long as it doesn't damage the prestige and privilege and position of the owners. If it does, down comes the lid.

Remembering the Hutchins Commission

It looks like Chandler had been reading [the report of the Hutchins Commission](#), published six years earlier in 1947. The Commission had been set up by the publishers of Time magazine to inquire into 'the present state and future prospects of the freedom of the press'.

Robert Hutchins, one of the leading academic lawyers of his generation, Chancellor of the University of Chicago and later the Director of the Ford Foundation, was asked to chair the Commission. He was keen to ensure that the press provided 'a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning'; 'a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism'; 'the projection of a representative picture of the constituent groups in society'; and 'the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society.' These ideals are a world away from the crudely libertarian character of most American media policy-making (or lack of it).

Hutchins recognised the conflict, which Chandler dramatises, between the truth-seeking culture of the investigator and the commercial interests of the publisher. In a section headed, 'The Bias of Owners', Hutchins describes the links between the interests of newspaper publishers and the wider interests of capital:

The agencies of mass communication are big business, and their owners are big businessmen. [...] The press is connected with other big businesses through the advertising of these businesses, upon which it depends for the major part of its revenue. The owners of the press, like the owners of other big businesses, are bank directors, bank borrowers, and heavy taxpayers in the upper brackets.

Hutchins was a firm believer in the principles of the First Amendment but he doubted whether the public interest in press freedom was likely to be served by a media which was entirely in the hands of men with narrow commercial and political interests. His Commission therefore recommended a range of measures, short of statutory regulation, to ensure a 'free and responsible' press.

THE COMMISSION ON FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Hutchins believed that government had a limited role to play in ensuring the conditions for press freedom but he placed the responsibility for achieving these goals squarely on the press itself. The Commission recommended that the 'agencies of mass communication' should 'accept the responsibilities of common carriers of information and discussion' by publishing a range of ideas – including 'attitudes different from their own'; and that, to avoid the omertà which Marlowe sees in *The Long Good-bye*, members of the press should 'engage in vigorous mutual criticism.'

Needless to say, these recommendations were not adopted by the press in the years following the Commission, which now languishes as a socially responsible footnote in the annals of American media policy. So the challenge remains: how can the investigative instincts of the journalist co-exist with the commercial interests of the proprietor?

Marlowe presents one answer: to live outside the system and resist the bribes and blandishments of power. This is appealing but impossible for most reporters, even in an era of digital publication. Recent research shows how today's lone wolves such as [hyperlocals](#) and [non-profit journalism outfits](#) are constrained by lack of resources and the threat of libel actions.

The death of investigative journalism?

Meanwhile, the model of investigative journalism inspired by Philip Marlowe has been discarded by publishers like David Montgomery. Having started out by wanting to be a watchdog reporter in Marlowe's mould, Montgomery soon put those dreams behind him. Now, as CEO of Local World, he plans to turn one of Britain's largest regional newspaper groups into a network of 'digitised transactional platforms', where a handful of sales staff will curate content produced by other providers, including bloggers, local authorities and the police.

[Local World is already posting profits of £43.6m](#). It looks like Montgomery may have found the holy grail of news publishing: a business model with minimal costs and no liabilities. In his own words, these digital platforms 'will make journalism look like stamp collecting – random and pointless.' Philip Marlowe would be turning in his grave – if he wasn't still alive in Chandler's novels, and in the minds of investigative journalists around the world.

Marlowe may not have been a journalist but his investigations provided the template for the reporters who came in his wake – both real and imaginary. Recent examples of investigative journalism – from the revelations of phone hacking and the abuse of MPs' expenses via tales of tax avoidance at HSBC to the appalling scandals of child sexual exploitation in Rotherham and Westminster – all take their narrative tropes from Raymond Chandler.

So read Chandler this summer, not just for the pleasure of his storytelling but for the insight he provides into the mythology and the tensions of journalism. Chandler was not writing about a journalist, but his hero evolved into the iconic figure of the investigative reporter who was then brought to life by real journalists in Britain, America and around the world.

On the other hand, if you want to escape into the realms of fantasy, turn to the recommendations of the Hutchins Commission.

This article gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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