

That Feeling When You Are Held Accountable – IMPRESS CEO



Earlier this week *the Press Recognition Panel* agreed to recognise *IMPRESS* as an approved press regulator, convinced that it satisfied the 23 criteria set out under the Royal Charter. IMPRESS CEO *Jonathan Heawood* reflects on the process. See *here* for background to the decision.

Accountability is a long and abstract word. As I found out this week, it is also a feeling. That feeling when you watch a group of people discuss the organisation you founded. That feeling when you publish thousands of pages of paperwork and see every single one pored over, in public. That feeling when the ability of your Board members to do their jobs is exhaustively discussed. In public. Live streamed to the world.

Accountability is a strange feeling – but a good one.

As a result of this process of public accountability, IMPRESS has been confirmed as the first truly independent and effective press regulator in the United Kingdom. On Tuesday 25 October 2016, at about 3.25pm in a rather hot and stuffy room in central London, the Board of the Press Recognition Panel (PRP) agreed that IMPRESS meets the tests which Lord Justice Leveson laid down for a self-regulatory body, and which were subsequently enshrined in the Royal Charter on Self-Regulation of the Press. The PRP's decision was taken in public, at a meeting that was watched by thousands of viewers on Periscope, and at the culmination of a nine-month process during which IMPRESS's application was put out for consultation on three separate occasions.

The PRP's decision brings us into a new world. Until now, press regulators have been solely accountable to the industry they regulate. They have all, in turn, failed to stand up to scrutiny and they have all, as a result, failed to convince the public. When we conducted research with Britain Thinks earlier this year, we found that only 17% of the public now trust the press to regulate themselves – fewer even than would trust politicians with the job. A significant majority would prefer to see the press regulated by an independent body – a body such as IMPRESS.

In our first few months of operation, we have already signed up 50 news publications, with a combined audience in print and digital of more than 2 million people per month. As a result of the PRP's decision this week, those publications will benefit from new protections against the risk of exemplary damages if they are sued for libel or breach of privacy. They will also be able to arbitrate legal disputes and to resolve any complaints about breaches of the standards code. Their audiences can hold them accountable when they get things wrong; and trust them, in general, to get things right.

Our publisher members tell us that they value the commercial and reputational benefits that IMPRESS gives them. At a time when the British press is the least trusted in Europe, the IMPRESS Trust Mark goes a long way to recognising the dedication and public commitment of journalists who want to get it right, first time.

Of course IMPRESS does not regulate the entirety of the British press. Leveson anticipated this situation. He understood that some news publishers would not want to submit to independent regulation. That is why he recommended incentives to encourage them to do so. Now, some publishers are shouting at the tops of their voices about the horrors of these incentives. The Government appears to be influenced by their lobbying, and is continuing to prevaricate on the commencement of section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 – a provision which was agreed by all parties in Parliament and which reflects the findings of an exhaustive public inquiry. ^

Section 40 is hardly an unprecedented piece of legislation. The law is full of ways in which individuals and organisations are encouraged to follow a certain course of action. We all have the right to freedom of association, for example. We can form organisations to pursue certain goals. But if we want those organisations to have charitable status, with the huge tax and reputational benefits that follow, then we need to abide by certain standards.

In the same way, publishers who sign up with an independent and effective regulator such as IMPRESS will receive new legal protections. If they choose not to, they are no worse off than when they started – in a hostile economy, plagued by abysmal trust ratings and grappling with an advertising market that is flying out of their reach.

At IMPRESS, we want to see a diverse and dynamic news sector in the United Kingdom. We know that news publishers face considerable difficulties. We also know that the public deserve to have access to journalism that meets minimal ethical standards. The challenge for all of us is to balance the interests of publishers and their audiences so as to get the best possible outcome for everyone.

As of Tuesday afternoon, the post-Leveson model of press regulation is in place. If anyone has a better idea for how to ensure a free and accountable press, we would love to hear from them. Because we know what accountability feels like. And we can wholeheartedly recommend it.

This post 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 and Political Science.

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