Witness Statement to Leveson Inquiry: James Curran

Introduction

I am Professor of Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London and Director, Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre. Whilst at Goldsmiths I have held various visiting chairs including McClatchy Professor, Stanford University and Bonnier Professor, Stockholm University.

My specialist area of research is media history and political economy. I am the author and editor of numerous books about the media, the most recent of which are *Misunderstanding the Internet*, Routledge, 2012 (with Natalie Fenton and Des Freedman); eds. *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach,* Routledge, 2012 (with Toril Aalberg); and *Media and Democracy*, Routledge, 2011.

My early interest in the British press has given way to research in other areas of the media. This has meant that I have drawn extensively on earlier research in making this witness statement. But I retain an interest in the subject of the press both as an historian, and as a citizen (and chair of the Coordinating Committee for Media Reform). I also think that an historical approach can help to illuminate the present.

The central thrust of this witness statement is that a relationship has developed between the British press and politicians that is bad for journalism and bad for government. Improved self-regulation or co-regulation, however desirable in itself, will not adequately deal with this problem. I outline briefly proposals designed to improve this dysfunctional relationship.

There is an exclusively metropolitan focus in much discussion of the relationship between press and politicians which I am sure that the Inquiry will wish to avoid. Attention needs to be given to a 'perfect storm': the decline of the local press and the weakening of local democracy. Proposals to address this problem are also submitted.

Central Problems

A standard criticism of the press is that it dominated by rich shareholders, who render the press unrepresentative of the public (in a demonstrable way). This distorts the role of the

press in mediating public debate, and tends to encourage the promotion of centre-right perspectives.(1)

But there is another problem that is scarcely registered. At periodic intervals, a large part of the national press has entered into an informal coalition with government. The press has functioned as an extension of government rather than as an independent institution serving the public. This is a much more serious problem abridging the freedom of the press than many of the issues - important though they are – that usually vex journalists.

Journalists sometimes disguise from themselves the extent of this collusion by invoking the rhetoric of the 'fourth estate'. Thus, Alan Rusbridger (editor of the *Guardian*) told the Leveson Inquiry that the 'fourth estate' concept, however grandiose, captures an important aspect of the functioning of the press. It conveys that the press is 'an important, coherent and independent force in society. That "apartness" is crucial…'(2)

This theme is regularly invoked by journalists from left and right, and from prestige and popular papers alike. It is a shared delusion that is readily accepted partly because it seems plausible. There *have* been occasions when governments have been on the receiving end of sustained attack by much of the press: as in the dying days of the Macmillan Administration, the fag end of the second Wilson administration, most of the Major and Brown periods of government, and potentially the Cameron administration.

But these outbursts of sustained hostility have been punctuated by interregna where press oligarchs and ministers have become close allies. These alliances have twisted the role of the press into becoming government mouthpieces, crusading partners, and enormously distorting mediators of public debate. Such a moment occurred in the late 1930s when much of the press fell behind the Chamberlain government's appeasement policy.(3) 'No War Talk. NO MORE WAR TALK', Lord Beaverbrook instructed his staff in one notorious telegram. (4)

Another moment was the mid Thatcher era when much of the press became government cheerleaders. The press, an ex-Thatcher minister complained scornfully, 'could scarcely have been more fawning if it had been state controlled'.(5) The flavour of the relationship between the Conservative press and government – of mutually admiring reciprocity – is

eloquently conveyed by Woodrow Wyatt's diaries in this period.(6) Both ministers and editors were engaged in a *joint* crusade, as they saw it, to regenerate Britain – not just its economy, but its culture, its people, its international standing.

A different kind of accord developed, during the Blair era, between a market-friendly, Atlanticist, election winner and part of the press, based more on mutual, pragmatic calculation and personal friendship than on a shared mission. But this, too, had its costs.

This oscillation between coalition journalism and attack journalism is very different from the illusion of 'separation' between press and government that journalists so often invoke. It inspires hope and fear, a desire on the part of politicians to gain press approval and an even greater desire to avoid being mauled.

Centralisation of Press Power

One response is, simply, to say that politicians should go about their business in a more independent way with less regard to press coverage. There is much to be said for this. However, politicians' dysfunctional relationship with the press has structural causes, and will not be remedied merely through homily.

First, the power of the press is highly concentrated. The controllers of just four companies account for over 80 per cent of national daily circulation. They have enormous clout because, in Britain unlike in most other countries, the national press is dominant.

Second, press power in some groups is heavily centralised. This is a contentious point so it needs to be supported more fully through a brief detour. Some editors will insist that they do not take instructions from publishers. In a literal sense, this can be true. But this is not how publisher power is usually exercised. A newsroom ethos is engendered from the top though selection of senior personnel, the recruitment of new staff, through incentives and criticism, and through the editorial tradition of a paper. A determined publisher like Rupert Murdoch can get the paper he wants through shaping the culture of its news room.

This is illustrated by what happened at the *Sunday Times* between 1981 and 1986. Rupert Murdoch was debarred by Articles of Association from dictating the editorial policy of the *Sunday Times* when he bought it in 1981, yet he wanted to change the paper from being

centre-right to becoming robustly right-wing. This shift was accomplished partly through the choice of editor. Harold Evans, the paper's long-serving editor greatly liked by his staff, was a potential obstacle to change. He was flattered into taking the editorial chair of the *Times.* His replacement, Frank Giles, was a weak, caretaker editor appointed as someone acceptable to staff, but willing to go along with key new appointments imposed from above. After this softening-up transition,(7) Giles was replaced in 1983 by a forceful editor, Andrew Neil, whose views were, in his own words, 'on the same wavelength' as those of Murdoch.(8)

Under Neil, there was a determined attempt to change the culture of the news room by shifting the paper's news agenda and values. This led to running battles, rows, sackings and resignations.(9) According to Claire Tomalin, the former *Sunday Times* literary editor, the new regime inaugurated 'a reign of terror' during which 'I was extremely aware of a great deal of misery and bullying'. Similarly, Peter Wilby, the paper's former education correspondent, remembers that 'there was a tone of fear …. a horrible "totalitarian" atmosphere'. Don Berry, former Features Editor, concurs: 'I recall bullying……. . A lot of people were bullied. Life was deliberately made unpleasant for them in the hope that they would go'. 'It was like the Battle of the Somme', recalled another journalist several years later. 'You would come in at the beginning of the week, and find that another person had disappeared',(10)

This atmosphere produced different responses. John Shirley had a screaming row with the editor so loud that it stunned the news room into silence. He subsequently refused to allow the paper, of which he was still Chief Reporter, to cross the threshold of his home. Other journalists were less confrontational. 'The sense of intimidation', according to Isabel Hilton, 'was so strong that people actually started censoring themselves because it is very unpleasant to get into this kind of argument all the time ……. There are things you just don't bother to pursue because you just won't get them in the paper'. Donald McIntyre, the paper's labour correspondent, found himself locked into a continuing battle over his reporting. As he put it, 'you get to a point where you either had to leave or you just become a sort of joke'. Many chose to leave. Out of approximately 170 journalists on the paper, around 100 departed between February 1981 and March 1986.

What happened in this period was decisive. The paper's compass was reset and it was steered in a new direction. Because of what took place over a quarter of a century ago, Murdoch does not now need to remould the paper.

A number of editors have attested to Murdoch's forceful personality, and the vehement way in which he expresses his opinions.(11) Their response has generally been to want to please him by anticipating his views. As Andrew Neil said of his time as *Sunday Times* editor: 'when I did not hear from him and I knew his attention was elsewhere, he was still uppermost in my mind'.(12)

However, an interpretation focusing on Murdoch's 'charismatic personality' offers an incomplete explanation of how control is exercised. What the pre-Wapping *Sunday Times* example illuminates is the way in which a determined management can re-shape the culture of a newspaper. It is the conjunction of two things – Murdoch's interactions with his editors, and the pressures that can be brought to bear on staff – that goes some way towards explaining an extraordinary phenomenon: the way in which nearly all Murdoch's newspapers around the world favoured the Iraq War without being subject to a corporate diktat.

Of course not all British news organisations are the same. In particular, the two left-leaning newspaper groups in Britain differ from their rivals in that one does not have a dominant shareholder, and the other is owned by a Trust. Moreover, all newspapers are subject to a variety of influences such as news story conventions, news sources, consumer demand, and the wider culture of society. But even so, editorial power is relatively highly centralised in the British press compared with elsewhere.

If the concentration and centralisation of editorial power are two distinctive features of the national press, a third is the weakness of its professional culture. The British national press is strongly influenced by entertainment values and political partisanship, making it different from American print journalism, with its stress on balance, dispassion and a public duty to inform. Indeed many British journalists think of themselves as being members of a trade rather than a profession, while taking sides is deeply engrained part of the national press tradition. When in attack mode, national papers can be bullying, witty and unconstrained.

It is this concentration of firepower that can be switched on and off that partly accounts for why politicians desire to court the press.

Sense of Vulnerability

Politicians also have an increased sense of vulnerability for a number of reasons, not all of which are obvious. Due to a dramatic reduction of party membership, politicians no longer command effective party machines in the way that they once did. Political parties are not buoyed up, to the same degree as before, by stable partisan loyalties among voters. Nor can political parties call upon – with the same effect - class identities because these have become less salient. Increasing integration of a deregulated global economy has also reduced the power of government to manage the economy, collect taxes and sustain high employment. Compared to the past, contemporary politicians are like surfers riding high waves on flimsy boards.

The change in the system of government has also made the 'management' of public opinion more difficult. During the liberal corporatist phase (1940-1979), governments tended to rule by consensus achieved through conciliation between organised groups mediated through state institutions. The dismantlement of this system has made politicians more disposed to develop populist initiatives on the basis of electoral research, and more dependent on media goodwill. (13)

The enormous increase of investment in government public relations that took place after 1980(14) was indicative of politicians' sense of weakness rather than of mastery. Indeed, the rise of 24 hour news on dedicated news channels and news websites was often experienced by politicians as an additional pressure, requiring a speeded-up response and greater alertness to media needs.(15)

The conjunction of press concentration and ministers' increased sense of vulnerability and exposure helps to account for the extraordinarily assiduous courtship of the press by politicians. This is not just a Murdoch phenomenon, something that will disappear if the aura of his power is eroded. Governments have become preoccupied with courting leaders of all parts of the press. As Piers Morgan, former *Daily Mirror* editor, records in his diaries: 'Bored one evening, I counted up all the number of times I had met Tony Blair. And the

result was astonishing really, or slightly shocking – according to your viewpoint. I had 22 lunches, six dinners, six interviews, 24 further chats over tea and biscuits and numerous telephone calls with him…'(16)

Bad for Government

Governments from the eighteenth century onwards have courted the press, so this is not a new phenomenon. But it is difficult to avoid the impression that this courtship became more ardent, and politicians became more eager to please, during the recent past.

What has been the consequence of politicians' increasing preoccupation with news media? Good sources for press influence on public policy are not only politicians, civil servants and journalists, but academics in particular areas of public administration (health, defence, welfare etc.) concerned with public policy. I wanted with Jean Seaton to organise a special journal issue where these specialists could draw upon their research to reflect upon the extent and nature of press influence, but this has not proved possible within the Leveson Inquiry time frame.

So let me confine myself to brief comments about press influence on press policy. The press has flexed its muscles to render all the predecessors to the Leveson Inquiry to be, broadly speaking, failures, and successfully blocked the road to effective reform.

Press self-regulation, proposed by the first Royal Commission on the Press, is perhaps the most significant outcome of past press enquiries. However, it was advocated by the Commission as part of a professionalising project – something that has never taken root. The Press Complaints Commission (PCC) was in effect a mediator of customer complaints, with no concerted programme for improving journalism education, monitoring overall press performance, and honouring great journalism.

More generally, every major public inquiry into press self-regulation has found it wanting - in 1962, 1979, 1990 and 1993.(17) There was prolonged foot dragging over the appointment of lay members, the adoption of a code of conduct for journalists, and other improvements. Major abuses flourished in the press under the watch of the PCC that remained unchecked (and largely undetected). The British press is more distrusted than any other press in 28 European countries (18) – an implicit indictment of the PCC's record.

The other main initiative to come out of public enquiries into the press was anti-monopoly legislation. This arose from a recommendation of the second Royal Commission on the Press in 1962, leading to press specific legislation in 1965, subsequently revised in successive Acts.

This policy has been a failure. Out of 172 transfers of newspaper ownership to major press groups between 1980 and 2000, only three applications (all involving minor papers) were refused, and a further five were approved subject to conditions.(19) All major media mergers and acquisitions – including Murdoch's purchase of the *Times* and *Sunday Times* in 1981, his acquisition of *Today* in 1987, his consolidation of control of the merged satellite broadcaster, BskyB, in 1990, and the *Guardian*'s acquisition of the *Observer* in 1993 – were all permitted.

One part of the explanation for the failure of public enquiries to give rise to any kind of effective press reform is the newspaper flak that greeted their Reports. Indeed, even the appointment of the Royal Commission on the Press in 1947 was greeted with hostility in some papers (most volubly in the *Daily Mail*) as an encroachment on press liberty. Its investigation and Report was widely criticised as irrelevant and inefficient. 'Whether all this work was worthwhile I very much doubt', sniffed Viscount Camrose in the *Daily Telegraph* (30/06/1949). The key proposal of the second Royal Commission on the Press in 1962 for a Press Amalgamations Court was roundly condemned in the press, and again its Report was widely attacked as irrelevant and unnecessary. The Report of the third Royal Commission was savaged across the press. The composition of the Commission was judged in some papers to be unrepresentative, and its work of little value. 'One Big Yawn' declared the *Sun* (08/07/1977); 'a heavy wodge of platitudes ……' echoed the *Daily Mirror* (08/07/1977). The Calcutt Report (1990) had a hostile reception. 'The great danger', according to the *Financial Times* (22/06/1990) is that 'it appears to open the way for statutory control' or, as the *Daily Mail* (22/06/1990) put it, 'a hypocrite's charter' that is 'welcome to some members of the establishment ….. '. The Calcutt Report (1993) was widely excoriated. According to the *Sun* (15/01/1993), 'Calcutt report will stop us telling you the TRUTH: They just want to save their own necks'.

This flak, and the perceived need to win press support, has acted as a disincentive for politicians to push for press reform. I have had an incidental ringside seat in this process. I

was an academic adviser to the Royal Commission on the Press 1974-7. The Commission's key proposal was to toughen anti-monopoly legislation through a series of recommendations. I asked at the time what was happening to these, and was told through civil service contacts that they had been referred to an inter-departmental committee where they were likely to be buried. Their reading of the situation was that there was no political wind behind these recommendations because the Callaghan administration was seeking to mend its fences with the press, and did not want to undermine this delicate process. In the event, the Report's main anti-monopoly proposals were ignored.

I had another view of press policy-making, this time from a different vantage point. In 1995, the Conservative government published a very good (and unusually well written) White Paper on Media Ownership, which made the case for retaining substantial controls limiting media concentration (principally on the grounds that the press is central to democracy, and should be subject to stronger anti-monopoly checks than conventional business enterprise). This approach was initially welcomed by the Labour Opposition.

At that time, I was a member of a Labour Party advisory committee concerned with media policy (as a distinct from media strategy). A Scottish MP appeared – for the first time - at this committee to say that a decision had been taken at the highest level to shift Labour's position to favour greater media amalgamation. This produced an outcry from committee members. It was pointed out that Lord Donoughue, speaking on behalf of the Labour Party Opposition in the Lords, had recently welcomed the White Paper. What had happened in the meantime to cause the Labour Party to change its position by 180 degrees? After some evasive comment, the committee was told bluntly that the change was necessary in order to win press support. The Labour Party had languished in opposition for over a decade. If the party was truly to serve those who needed it most, Labour must win office. The party had to take difficult decisions in order to realise its larger objectives. What was striking was the honesty with which this pragmatic case was put. The meeting ended with most people dissenting from the change of policy. The obstreperous committee was never reconvened.

John Cunningham speaking for the Labour Opposition in the Commons duly changed tack, declaring in April 1996 that the Conservative government's anti-monopoly stance 'treat[s} newspaper groups unfairly in their access to broadcasting markets'.(20) In July 1996, Tony

Blair was invited to Hayling Island, Australia to address News Corporation executives. A clear signal had been sent and reciprocated in the mutual courtship between Blair and Murdoch. Its effect was to put pressure on the beleaguered Major administration to be less 'anti-press'. The 1996 Broadcasting Act partly reversed previous policy by allowing most newspaper groups (with less than a 20 per cent share of the national market) to expand into terrestrial television. The 2003 Communication Act, passed by Blair's administration, went further enabling Murdoch – if he so wished – to expand into terrestrial television. The argument that media expansion enabled a relaxation of old rules had become more persuasive, in a climate where pleasing media controllers had become more compelling.

In short, two things happened. The press's system of self-regulation was allowed to remain inadequate, despite all the energy that was put into building an effective system of press self-regulation, all the evidence received, and all the detailed recommendations that came out of previous public inquiries. And press anti-monopoly controls were bypassed, diluted and rendered ineffective, with the result that media consolidation was allowed to increase unchecked.

This is one example of the way in which the lobbying power of the press has distorted the process and outcome of public policy-making. By way of a small digression, this record has implications for this Inquiry. To judge from the past, one of two things will happen to the Leveson Report. It will be attacked in the press as an expensive waste of time if it fails to make substantive recommendations. But if it does advance substantive proposals, it will be denounced as an assault on press freedom. And after the Inquiry is over, it may be that some senior press executives and publishers will lobby government and opposition in order that the Report gathers dust.

But it is just possible that this time that the Leveson Inquiry will break the mould. The Inquiry is different from its predecessors, not only in the sense that it is a judicial process with witnesses giving evidence under oath. Crucially, it is an open process in which testimony is given in public, and reported extensively in the media. This has given rise to a small shift of attitude within part of the press (compare senior journalists' comments in the opening seminar of the Leveson Inquiry [Day 1] with subsequent press discussion). The context of the Leveson Inquiry is also different in that, in 2012, *both* leaders of government

and opposition are agreed that something needs to change in the relationship between press, politicians and public. That was not true in 1949, 1962 and 1977 when the last three Royal Commissions on the Press reported.

Bad for Journalism

If the close relationship between press and government has been bad for public policy making, it has also been bad for journalism. Coalitional journalism - that is the press working in partnership with government - is not what the press is meant to do. It contradicts the notion of the press as a 'fourth estate', that is an *independent* institution of the people that holds government to account.

This rhetoric is belied by the recent history of the press. A book, *Culture Wars*, (co-authored with Ivor Gaber and Julian Petley), Edinburgh University Press, 2005 describes how a campaign initiated by the Conservative Party leadership in 1985 against left-wing Labour councils was taken up by Conservative newspapers, working in partnership with the government and Conservative Party. Indeed, Conservative Central Office sent out three briefing documents that quoted newspaper articles, some of which it had helped to inspire.

Critical oversight of the local state by the national press is highly desirable. But in this case it was one-sided. It was not matched by equivalent oversight of right-wing councils by the national press because local government was rarely reported in national papers, and the main inspiration of the press campaign was to damage the Opposition. In effect, *overall* press coverage was skewed by a partisan agenda.

Another limitation was that the press campaign was accompanied by inaccurate reporting. We investigated a sample of lurid stories by interviewing wherever possible both journalists and their sources. Eight of these stories were found to be untrue, or substantially misleading. For example, the *Mail on Sunday* (2 March 1986) reported that Haringey Council had banned black bin liners as being racially offensive. This was not supported by the council minutes, and was not true. Our investigation suggested that the story originated as an ironic joke by a council store keeper talking to two park attendants, which was taken literally. They complained to Councillor Bullard, who at that time believed it to be true, and

protested at a public meeting. The story was relayed by a local freelance reporter to Chester Stern who reported the council's supposed black bin liner ban in the *Mail on Sunday.* The excitement of the hunt in this government-press crusade led to corners being cut.

Open Debate

So what can be done about the collusive covenant between press and politicians that is bad for journalism, bad for government and bad for the formation of public policy? One response is to expose this covenant to public scrutiny, and positively encourage a debate about media reform.

Political reluctance to reform the press is based not only on press intimidation but also high-minded principle. It is rooted in part in the belief that any form of state action in relation to the press is a threat to the freedom of the press. This is a view strongly cultivated by the press, and accepted by many politicians.

However, it is not a wholly consistent view. The press receives a large subsidy (over £500 million a year) as a result of VAT exemption: in libertarian theory, this makes the press beholden to a state sponsored privilege that poses a threat to press freedom. There is consensual support for the public funding of broadcasting, and its content regulation, that flatly contradicts the libertarian arguments that hold sway in relation to the press. To be consistent with the libertarian arguments that determine thinking about the press, we need to move to a US model of broadcasting; miniscule public funding that results in PBS, the American equivalent of the BBC, accounting for less than 2 per cent of viewing time; broadcasters 'set free' through the abolition of the Fairness Doctrine (the US equivalent of the UK's 'due impartiality' rule); and wholesale deregulation. But very few people advocate this. In an unexamined way, the political consensus adheres to two seemingly different approaches to media policy that are at odds with each other.

In addition, unreflective recoiling from the thought of statutory regulation in relation to the press ignores one thing: the press is already subject to statutory regulation in relation to defamation, national security, competition and so on. So the debate should be about not whether there should be state regulation but what form it should take.

In short, one small step towards cultivating a healthier relationship between press, politicians and citizens is for a public discussion to develop about the press that is not dominated by the press.

Paper Tiger

Another small step is to obtain a better understanding of the limits of press influence.

The British press has been in decline for a long time. The total circulation of national newspapers has decreased almost continuously ever since 1959.

The British press is held in low regard by the public. As mentioned earlier, the British press in 2010 was the least trusted press in Europe. This is consistent with previous Eurobarometer surveys. Numerous domestic surveys also document how little trust the public have placed in the British press during the last twenty years.(21)

The British press also faces a new rival in the form of the internet and social media. The internet provides access to alternative sources of information and commentary about public affairs. The internet also enables the press to be scrutinised and rendered more accountable through Twitter and posts. This said, the significance of the web as a separate conduit of information about public affairs in Britain (as distinct from some other countries like South Korea) has tended to be overstated. In Britain, the legion of bloggers did not build a mass audience. In 2008, 79 % of internet users had not read a single blog during the previous three months.(22) This was partly because leading British newspapers and TV organisations established very successful news websites, supported by cross-subsidy, large corporate newsgathering resources, and prominent brand names. In 2010, the ten most visited news websites in Britain were all controlled by leading news organisation from the pre-internet era and content aggregators.(23) The news and comment about public affairs that is given most prominence by aggregators like Google is derived mainly from mainstream news media.(24) It is this that tends to be consumed since most people do not scroll beyond the first page of search results.(25)

In fact, the loss of press influence occurred much earlier than the arrival of the internet. The primacy of the press was undermined first by the rise of radio in the 1930s, and then by the rise of television in the 1950s. The majority of British citizens said in 2010 that their main

source of news about Britain, and about the world, though not about their region/locality, came from television, far in excess of those nominating other media.(26)

This decline of the British press needs to be understood in the context of what social science investigation, over two generations, reveals about the nature of media influence. People are not blank slates on which the media impose their views. On the contrary, people have opinions, values and sense-making 'schemata' formed through early socialisation and the powerful influence of social networks. This gives rise to selective media exposure (*Guardian* readers tend to be left-wing, *Telegraph* readers to be right-wing), selective interpretation and retention of media information strongly influenced by prior disposition. Put simply, people are difficult to influence.(27)

So why do politicians pay so much attention to the press? Is it because they view the press as a proxy for public opinion? This seems unlikely since empirical evidence reveals a large and recurring mismatch between how people vote and how newspapers vote (measured in terms of circulation) for over half a century.(28) In any case, politicians have had access to more reliable data about public opinion than press comment ever since the 1940s.

Perhaps, the only explanation for the enigma of press power is that the press influences the political class more than the public. Press coverage affects the standing of politicians among their peers. The press also influences TV broadcasters who do matter. Television does not dictate what people think but it can influence what people think *about,* and also influence their framework of understanding about public issues (especially among those with limited interest in politics, low ego investment in holding a particular view, and among those who are cross-pressured).(29)

<u>Anti-Monopoly controls</u>

But politicians deal with the 'reality' of power, as they see it, and are unlikely to change radically their working perceptions. For the dysfunctional relationship between politicians and the press to change, the underlying structure that distorts it - the concentration and centralisation of press power – needs also to change.

I support the Enders proposal that no media corporation should be permitted to control more than 15% of the total revenue of the core media industry.(30) This is framed by the

Enders team in terms of sustaining a competitive market, and preventing market dominance from choking off competition. But the justification for this measure goes further. Media concentration should be limited in order to diminish the concentration of power that has distorted public debate and public policy.

In addition, anti-monopoly measures need to be introduced at a lower level, in relation to designated sub-markets (such as the national news market supplied by TV, radio, press and website news). For these measures to work, a more flexible approach is needed so that the recurring objection to the refusal of an acquisition of a media business – that the business will otherwise close – needs to be addressed. Media organisations that have between 15 and 30 per cent of a designated market (with a ceiling set at 30%) should be subject to public service duties as a condition of retaining their powerful market position.

For this to be acceptable in relation to the British press, these public obligations will need to relate to process rather than content. They should be directed towards mitigating the effects of media concentration in two ways: through limiting the centralisation of power within media organisations, and through promoting internal pluralism. Thus the former approach could lead to a conscience clause in the contract of employment of journalists, strengthening the security of tenure of editors, and establishing staff representation at a managerial level. An example of the latter approach would be to introduce a quota for the origination of local copy in giant local press groups, some of which are now centralising their news operations on a regional basis.

Reviving Local Journalism

The functions and financial autonomy of local government have greatly diminished since 1980. Local electoral turnouts are low, and shrinking. Political parties are finding it increasing difficult to recruit people even to stand for local office. There is a cumulative crisis of local democracy – to which direct mayoral elections, a highly contested issue, is at least a response.

This crisis has coincided with the emasculation of the local press. This began with the rise of low resourced free sheets, which had the effect of reducing coverage of local government.

This was followed by the rise of the internet which has diverted revenue from local newspapers, both paid for and free.

Between 2000 and 2008, the internet's share of classified expenditure soared from 2 to 45 per cent while that of the local and regional press plummeted from 47 to 26 per cent.(31) Over 100 newspapers folded between January 2008 and September 2009,(32) and more closures have taken place since then. Editorial budgets have also been cut, encouraging a passive, scissors-and-paste form of local press journalism.(33)

Two things are thus coming together – an erosion of local democracy and a cumulative decline of local journalism – that is contributing to an increasingly serious situation. The gravity of this situation is not immediately apparent in London, the headquarters of the national press, where the local weekly press has long been especially weak. But it is an issue that should concern the Leveson Inquiry.

The internet is both a cause, and a possible solution, to the decline of local journalism. The internet lowers costs, and enables new forms of professional-amateur partnership in the production of news. But it does not obviate the need for salaried staff to provide a stable supply of accurate and informed journalism.

A Local Press Fund should be established to support the revival of local journalism. No new money is likely to be available from the Treasury. However, there is an alternative to the top-slicing of the license fee, now to be directed towards supporting local TV. The establishment of Channel 4, in its original form, introduced the concept of redistribution from the profitable private media sector in order to support greater media diversity. There are three ways of extending this precept as a means for funding the regeneration of local journalism. These are a 1 per cent levy on the UK turnover of content aggregators; a levy on internet search advertising; or a levy on internet service providers (as in Spain, France and Hungary). The Local Press Fund would be administered by a Public Trust, independent of government with representatives drawn from different parts of society, with different perspectives.

<u>Conclusion</u>

A more effective system of self-regulation of the press is needed. But this will not redress the distortions arising from the concentration and centralisation of press power. It will not bring to an end the collusive covenant between the press and political leaders that has been bad for both journalism and government. And it will not address the harmful consequences of the decline of the local press.

Footnotes

1. This is a central theme of J. Curran and J. Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*, 7th edition, Routledge, 2010, and of J. Curran, J. Petley and I. Gaber, *Culture Wars*, Edinburgh University Press, 2005: and a subsidiary theme of J. Curran, *Media and Power,* Routledge, 2002 and J. Curran, *Media and Democracy*, Routledge, 2011.
2. Alan Rusbridger, 'The Importance of a Free Press', Leveson Inquiry Seminar 2, 6 October 2011.
3. R. Cockett, *Twilight of Truth*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1989.
4. J. Curran and J. Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*, 7th edition, Routledge, 2010, p. 41.
5. I. Gilmour, *Dancing with Dogma*, Simon and Schuster, 1993, p 23.
6. S. Curtis (ed.) *The Journals of Woodrow Wyatt*, Vol. 1, Macmillan, , 1998, p.125.
7. F. Giles, *Sundry Times*, Murray, 1986 describes poignantly his dawning realisation that he was being used.
8. A. Neill, *Full Disclosure*, Macmillan, 1996., p. 164.
9. This draws on interviews conducted during 1986-7, some by a former research assistant, Brendan Wall. *Sunday Times* journalists' recollections are examined more fully in Curran and Seaton, *op. cit*., 2010, pp. 80-81.
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