

**THE POLITICS OF SLEAZE REPORTING :
A CRITICAL OVERVIEW
OF THE ETHICAL DEBATE
IN THE BRITISH PRESS OF THE 1990s**

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Evelyn Waugh's "Scoop" is a glorious send-up of journalistic practices which, though published in 1938, still holds true for today. Sociologists may write weighty theoretical tomes about the manufacture of the news consensus and the culture of the spectacle. But Waugh summed all this up in his wonderfully witty narrative. Here, for instance, in his description of "the fabulous" journalist Wenlock Jakes : "Once Jakes went out to cover a revolution in one of the Balkan capitals. He overslept in his carriage, woke up at the wrong station, didn't know any different, go out, went straight to an hotel and cabled off a thousand-word story about barricades in the streets, flaming churches... Well, they were pretty surprised at his office getting a story like that from the wrong country but they trusted Jakes and splashed it in six national newspapers. That day every special in Europe got orders to rush to the new revolution. They arrived in shoals. Everything seemed quiet enough but it was as much

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as their jobs were worth to say so, with Jakes filing a thousand words of blood and thunder a day. So they chimed in too”.

It is worth bearing in mind Waugh’s delightful descriptions of newspapers’ abilities to concoct the news since in the current debate over journalistic ethics nothing is quite what it seems.

A conventional overview of the ethical debate might run something like this : during the 1980s the Press Council, set up in July 1963 to oversee the press standards, failed to win the confidence of politicians, newspaper managements and the National Union of Journalists. Following a spate of controversies over press intrusions into private grief, the Thatcher government set up the Calcutt committee to investigate the possible introduction of a privacy law. Predictably the committee’s eventual backing for the privacy laws drew howls of protest from the massed ranks of Fleet Street editors and in an attempt to ward off legislation the industry wound up the Press Council and set up in its place the Press Complaints Commission with a beefed up Code of Practice.

In January 1993 a second report from Calcutt proposed new offences carrying maximum fines of £5,000 for invasions of privacy and the use of surveillance and bugging devices in certain cases. The Major government reacted favourably and later in the year proposed the introduction of a privacy law. The government was more sceptical of ideas promoted by the Labour backbencher, Clive Solely, for enforcing a statutory code on press accuracy. Similarly, a proposal from the National Heritage select committee for the industry to set up a voluntary body with powers to fine offending newspapers failed to win the support of the government or prominent journalists.

In November 1993, peeping Tom photographs taken secretly of a reclining Princess Diana working out at a gym and published in the *Sunday Mirror* and *Mirror* refuelled the privacy debate. A *Sunday Times* sting operation in July 1994 against two Conservative MPs Graham Riddick and David Tredinnick, which revealed them receiving £1,000 from a journalist to ask questions in Parliament, provoked more controversy. Then in October 1994, the *Guardian* began its own long campaign to expose sleaze among Conservative MPs taking cash handouts from lobbyists in return for asking parliamentary questions.

Debates over newspaper ethics rose to fever pitch as an unprecedented number of ministerial resignations occurred in the three years following John Major’s 1992 election victory and his

launch of a "Back to Basics" moral crusade, most of them following "scandalous" revelations in the press. In September 1997, the reputation of the media suffered a further blow following the paparazzis' alleged involvement in the death of Princess Diana in a car accident. Fears grew amongst journalists that privacy legislation would enter Britain "through the back door" with the incorporation of a European Commission directive on data protection. But in January this year the government pledged to protect the media from a law giving individuals right of access to personal information held on them in computer files and other data bases. And in recent debates over the Human Rights Bill the government has made clear its opposition to privacy legislation (just at the time when some prominent journalists –such as the editor of the *Guardian*– were beginning to argue in its favour if balanced by changes in the libel law).

Now let's look behind the headlines. Missing from the conventional overview is the political context. And here the complex series of factors which configured around the collapse of the Soviet Union are crucial. During the Cold War, the constraints imposed by the national security state meant that the elite had to stand relatively united in the face of the common enemy (the Russian Bear), the danger it posed being always exaggerated.

Let's take a specific example. The security specialist for the *Daily Express*, Chapman Pincher, has described how during the early Sixties he attended a conference at a Washington hotel where he learnt that President Kennedy had recently indulged in lengthy "gang-bangs" with a "bevy of nubile girls". In a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* (18 February 1997), Pincher wrote: "As these events had gone unreported in the media, I asked some of the American journalists at the conference if they knew about them. Some did; others were neither surprised nor interested. They could see no point in sullyng the reputation of their President who was also chief of staff of the armed forces at a dangerous time in the Cold War. That too was the view of Lord Beaverbrook, owner of the *Daily Express*, and its editor". Precisely.

The Cold War can, indeed, be viewed in part as an ideological tool serving to reinforce the power of the dominant elite and constrain the dominant discourse within closely defined parameters. With the crumbling of the Berlin Wall everything changed. The common enemy disappeared and elite members were left bickering amongst

themselves (though the 1991 Gulf war was an attempt to redefine old Cold War moral certainties and simplifications within a new Western civilisation v. barbaric, new Hitler Saddam frame). The ideological constraints imposed by the demands of the national security state during the Cold War were a kind of cork holding down all the inter-elite conflicts. Once the Cold War had faded these elite conflicts and corruption scandal burst out of the bottle (indeed, on a global scale). In Britain, newspapers, pursuing a reactionary moral/political agenda, helped provide the theatre in which these elite squabbles (often involving invasions of privacy) could be played out.

The conventional view of the ethical debate is ultimately based on notions of the free press which stress the essential adversarial relationship between politicians and the media. But as Franklin argues :

Relations between politicians and the media should not be understood as simply adversarial. They may on occasion pursue different goals but this occurs within an agreed framework which offers potential benefit to both groups... Politicians' and journalists' mutual reliance prompts a continual adjustment or "adaptation" of their relationships to ensure continuity despite the conflict and co-operation which characterise them¹.

In place of the free press myth and the accompanying myth of self regulation, the critical analysis provided here highlights the complex propaganda function of the press. It is obviously not the only function of the press : it competes with the entertainment, ideological and informational functions for prominence. Yet it is easily marginalised.

A superficial viewing of the statistics might suggest that the London-based mass selling press was performing its vital role as the fearless investigative Fourth Estate challenging the government between 1992 and 1995 and exposing corruption. Over this period, there were 14 resignations on grounds of scandal : this out of a total government list (Commons and Lords) of about 130. About half the cases involved sexual activities and about half financial irregularities. Virtually all were first revealed in the press. In all, over the five years between 1990 and 1995, when "sleaze" stories dominated the news there were 34 Conservative, one Liberal Democrat and four Labour

¹ B. FRANKLIN, *Packaging politics*, London, Edward Arnold, 1994, p. 18.

scandals ; of these 39, at least a quarter, involved sex. Not surprisingly the press lapped up every "sordid" detail, every spurned mistress's candid revelation, every call girl's shocking *exposé*.

A study of parliamentary reporting in the nationals between 1990 and 1995 found that "scandal and personal misconduct" was the third most frequently reported topic, way ahead of major issues such as health (eighth), education (tenth), social services (35th) and race (38th)¹.

Yet the Conservative Party was in a state of dramatic decline from its highwater mark under Mrs Thatcher in the 1980s. The newspapers through their ownership patterns are closely integrated into the dominant economic structures of society². And over this period they were in no way following a political agenda that sought the removal of the Tories. With the significant exception of the *Guardian's* *exposés* of Neil Hamilton and Jonathan Aitken, nor were they engaged in fearless investigative reporting. To a certain extent, they were concerned to expose hypocrisy. As Brian McNair has commented :

When politicians who on conference platforms preach about the social evils presented by single motherhood, or who choose to campaign around "back to basics" moral values, turn out to be unfaithful to their wives, or neglecting their illegitimate children, the voters have a right to know. The conduct of private life in such cases has a clear relevance to public policy and contradictions between the two are the proper subject of political journalism³.

But in their sleaze reporting, the newspapers were in the main performing their complex propaganda function reflecting the crises and conflicts within the ruling elite, appealing (as John Fiske stresses⁴) to people's traditional subversive contempt for the powerful and cynically seizing on the scandals in attempt to boost circulations

¹ B. FRANKLIN, *Newszak and news media*, London, Edward Arnold, 1997, p. 32.

² Gr. WILLIAMS, *Britain's media : How the are related*, London, Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, 1994.

³ Br. MCNAIR, "Journalism, politics and public relations : an ethical appraisal", in M. KIERAN (ed.), *Media ethics*, London, Routledge, pp. 23-36.

⁴ J. FISKE, "Popularity and the politics of information", in P. DAHLGREN and C. SPARKS (eds), *Journalism and popular culture*, London, Sage, 1992, pp. 45-63.

and profits¹. The *Guardian's* celebrated *exposé* of Neil Hamilton, the Conservative MP accused of taking cash in exchange for asking parliamentary questions, was archetypal in that it relied heavily on the evidence provided by a disgruntled member of the social elite, Mohammed al Fayed (father of Dodi, last lover of Princess Diana)². Newspaper readers were reduced to being passive consumers and voyeurs of the strange spectacle of the Tory Party self-destructing.

Underlying newspapers' coverage of the ethical debate lies the operation of consensual news values. As Dogan comments :

The problem with the coverage of sleaze was how scandal of a predominantly sexual nature spread from Sunday tabloids to Sunday evening BBC and ITN news. By Monday the broadsheet press were covering the scandals³.

And behind the formation of such a consensus, the political factors remain the most interesting and significant.

Power in all advanced capitalist countries has over recent decades (despite the dominant political rhetoric of "freedom") become increasingly centralised and authoritarian. Economies have similarly become centralised, dominated by a few multi-national companies. In each sector monopolies rule. In newspapers, for instance, Murdoch and Rothermere and the press empires they control are mere manifestations of this trend of advanced capitalism towards monopoly. In the political arena, the collapse of the Cold War helped accelerate the narrowing of the dominant consensus. Now little distinguishes the three major parties in Britain. Tony Blair, the Labour leader, proclaims himself a follower of Margaret Thatcher, mouths Thatcherite rhetoric with consummate ease and dudifully follows Thatcherite policies : the faces of those in power have merely altered. Not surprising then that so many of the newspapers, once so loyal to the Tories, have shifted to the New Labour camp.

The emergence of New Toryism as New Labour represents, in one respect, the death of (classical) politics. In its place has emerged

¹ N. CHOMSKY and Ed. HERMANN, *Manufacturing consent : the political economy of the mass media*, London, Vintage, 1994. See also the Chomsky archive web site at <http://www.Worldmedia.com/archive/index.html>

² D. LEIGH and V. LEIGH (ed.), *Sleaze : The corruption of Parliament*, London, Fourth Estate, 1997.

³ D. HOGAN, "Sobriety in the Last Chance Saloon", in *Self regulation in the media* (papers from the annual conference of the Association for Journalism Education), London, 1998, pp. 26-29.

the politics of personality, of sexual scandal and sleaze. The Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, of course, represents the ultimate manifestation of this process in the United States. Newspapers no longer draw their central inspiration from politics but from the worlds of Hollywood, entertainment generally, television and sport. In fact the three spheres (politics, the media and culture) have become largely indistinguishable. As Hartley argues :

(...) politics, media and culture are contained within each other... there's a two-way, mutually determining relationship between politics and journalism : the journalistic mediation of the public sphere has determinate effects on how political questions are acted out and realized socially ; and conversely journalism as a whole, even its least political components, is a product of modernizing political energies¹.

But while the dominant rhetoric surrounding the spectacle of sleaze stresses the moral and the ethical, the underlying factors are principally political. The growing obsession with human interest stories and celebrities throughout the mass selling newspapers and the current moral panic over the tabloidisation² and “dumbing down” of all the media can then more easily be understood within this political context (normally excluded from the ethical debate). The coverage of the royal family, and the late Princess Diana, in particular, is archetypal in that it highlights inter-elite conflicts and focuses on the “human interest” dimensions of sexual scandal and sleaze³. Yet again some of the main factors are political. During the Cold War, all critical discussion of the royal family was taboo. Anyone critical of the monarchy was immediately branded a Commie sympathiser and told to emigrate to Siberia. But once the Cold War rivalries began to fade the constraints on the dominant discourse in certain significant areas were relaxed. The monarchy was one such area with even some Conservatives, critical of the absurd over-concentration of wealth in one family, declaring republican views.

¹ J. HARTLEY, *Popular reality : Journalism, modernity, popular culture*, London, Edward Arnold, 1996, p. 79.

² M. BROMLEY, “The ‘taboiding’ of Britain : Quality newspapers in the 1990s”, in H. STEPHENSON and M. BROMLEY (eds), *Sex, Lies and democracy : The press and the public*, London, Longman, 1998, pp. 25-38.

³ T. MAYES (ed.), *Disclosure : Media freedom and the privacy debate after Diana*, London, London International Research Exchange Media Group, 1998.

It is easy also to marginalise the political factors that led to the formation of the Press Complaints Commission in 1990. Newspapers had played crucial and diverse roles in Thatcherisation of Britain during the 1980s. The Conservative attack on trade unions was exploited by Rupert Murdoch, owner of News International, when he shifted his titles from Fleet Street to Wapping and his flagship titles, the *Times*, *Sunday Times*, and in particular the tabloid *Sun* and *News of the World* became avid propagandists for the Thatcher cause. Yet they were not alone : virtually all of Fleet Street deferred pathetically to Thatcher's power (just as the mainstream US press deferred to Reagan), thus providing the crucial propaganda, ideological base for here 11 years of rule¹. The closing of the Press Council (originally proposed by the National Union of Journalists in 1945 and on which the NUJ had significant representation) and the formation of the PCC was part of a political campaign by the Conservatives to marginalise the trade unions, in particular in the newspaper industry. Some of Thatcher's Fleet Street editor friends were represented on the PCC and they immediately attempted to take the moral high ground : significantly just at the moment when the standards of newspapers (under the influence of growing monopolisation and competitiveness) were generally agreed to be falling to new depths.

Thus it is more useful to see the PCC as a PR vehicle for Fleet Street management with only limited relevance to journalistic standards. As Stephenson and Bromley argue :

Apart from a few general platitudes, the PCC Code is made up of restrictions. Contrary to what its supporters often claim, it does not set standards. It attempts to second guess what the public will balk at ; the rest is fair game².

John Tulloch has usefully highlighted the way in which the PCC functions as a crucial instrument in the state management of the media³. The Press Council had made some attempts to reflect the social, geographical, racial and educational diversity of the country. Its membership ranged from a Labour peeress to a nurse from Bristol,

¹ R. KEEBLE, *Secret state, silent press : New militarism, the Gulf and the modern image of warfare*, Luton, University of Luton Press, 1998, pp. 27-37.

² M. BROMLEY and H. STEPHENSON, "Digging journalists out of holes", *British Journalism Review*, vol. 9, n° 1, pp. 59-66.

³ J. TULLOCH, "'Managing the press in a medium-sized European power", in *Sex, lies and democracy*, op. cit., pp. 63-83.

a British Steel boilermaker and a female undertaker's assistant. But the PCC since its formation has made no pretense of exerting a democratic constraining influence on the press. Its membership is drawn almost exclusively from the "great and the good". For instance, current members include Lady Browne-Wilkinson, a solicitor, Sir Brian Cubbon GCB, permanent secretary at the Home Office 1979-1988, the Rt Rev John Waine, Bishop of Chelmsford, Baroness Smith of Gilmorehill, Lord Tordoff, former Liberal Democrat Chief Whip in the House of Lords, Professor Robert Pinker of the London School of Economics and a brace of prominent journalists. Lord Wakeham, the chairman, is a former Chief Whip in Margaret Thatcher's government.

Not only is its membership drawn from the "great and good", most of the cases that reach adjudication involve, similarly, the great and the good. As Jeremy Tunstall identified¹, of the 13 complaints adjudicated by the Press Complaints Commission in March-April 1995, four were from the Earl Spencer and three were on behalf of a nephew of government minister Peter Lilley. Of the remaining six cases four complaints came from sizeable commercial companies and their senior executives ; one complainant had successfully sued the *Daily Express* for defamation ; the final complaint was from a man in prison as the result of a major fraude case. Tunstall concludes

All thirteen adjudicated complaints seemed to come from people at the extreme top end of society².

Most of the major controversies over privacy have involved royals, aristocrats, politicians or other elite members. (Though Robert Maxwell, former proprietor of the *Mirror*, was able to keep the details of his pension funds fraud from the gaze of the media through his heavy handed use of libel writs³. And the late Vere Harold Esmond Harmsworth, Lord Rothermere, proprietor of the *Daily Mail*, that great defender of the family and all the traditional middle class values, saw that his open and long-standing relationship with his mistress was a no-go area for the gossip columnists right up until his first wife's death⁴). As Tulloch rightly concludes :

¹ J. TUNSTALL, *Newspaper power*, London, Clarendon Press, 1996.

² *Ibid.*, p. 407.

³ T. BOWER, *Maxwell : The outsider*, London, Mandarin, 1991.

⁴ Roy Greenslade, in his Guardian obituary of 3 September 1998, spoke of Lord Rothermere's "mass of contradictions". A less sympathetic portrait would have

The impression remains that the PCC, constructed out of a pact between the great and the good and the newspaper establishment, is most concerned to look after its own¹.

While newspapers' obsessive coverage of elite squabbles dominates the headlines, the public remains largely apathetic. Of complaints investigated by the PCC last year only 13 per cent involved invasions of privacy (compared with 15 per cent the previous year). Of far more concern are inaccuracies which accounted for 54 per cent of the complaints in both years².

Moreover, while the media are swamped in scoops about randy royals and promiscuous politicians, usually justified on the grounds that what interests the public is in the interests of the public, the really important issues are left uncovered. For at the heart of the ethical malaise of the London-based mainstream newspapers lie these crucial factors amongst others

- the monopolistic ownership structures ;
- the accompanying hyper-competitiveness between newspapers and with other expanding media such as television and the Internet ;
- the decline in journalistic morale with the destruction of the trade unions and the introduction of individual contracts, serious staffing cutbacks and growing casualisation ;
- the narrowing of the consensus over news values ;
- journalists' growing dependence on the PR industry ;
- and the tightening of links between Fleet Street journalists and the secret services³.

Indeed, while the media have in recent years been in countless controversies over invasions of privacy the more serious development lies, paradoxically, in the growth of the secret state to which the 1989 Official Secrets Act and the 1994 Intelligence Services Act have added extra powers. As the UK Press Gazette commented (on 6 September 1993) : "The greatest invasion of privacy is carried out every day by the security services, with no control, no democratic

identified rather his hypocrisy, described once by George Orwell as "the principal vice of the English".

¹ J. TULLOCH, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

² Press Complaints Commission, *Annual Review 1997 : Serving the public*, London, 1998.

³ St. DORRIL, *The silent conspiracy : Inside the Intelligence Services in the 1990s*, London, Heinemann, 1993.

authorisation and the most horrifying consequences for people's employment and lives. By comparison with them the press is a poodle".

Yet these are areas in which the PCC shows a distinct lack of interest. Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin once described British press proprietors as aiming at power "and power without responsibility : the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages". Until the major political issues outlined here are highlighted and tackled, the London-based mainstream press will continue to exert its power without an appropriate sense of responsibility¹.

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