

How the British press distorted reporting of... the British press

Martin Moore, of the Media Standards Trust, summarises an analysis of British press coverage of proposed new press regulation.



Academics like the term 'normative'. Not just because it sounds smarter than 'normal' but because it helps to describe how things ought to be. It links empirical evidence to broader questions of how politics and society should function. The press, more than many other aspects of society, likes to emphasise its normative functions. Less often does it assess whether it has achieved them.

The 'normative' view that British newspapers have of their own role is fairly straightforward: they represent the views of the public; they offer a diversity of views – both within their own pages and across competing titles; they report in a fair, accurate and – relatively balanced – way; they hold power to account; and they support their conclusions with evidence.

A comprehensive study of all articles published on press regulation in the UK national press in the year following the Leveson Inquiry has found that, when it came to the issue of press regulation,

few national newspapers fulfilled their normative functions. The study, written by Dr Gordon Ramsay for the Media Standards Trust, examined all 2,047 articles published on the topic in the daily and Sunday press from 29 November 2012 until 29 November 2013, combined with a meta-analysis of every public opinion poll on the issue from 2012 to 2014.

Did the press represent the views of the public?

The views of the public can be found in 24 opinion polls commissioned between May 2012 and June 2014 on various aspects of press regulation. These polls were commissioned by newspapers themselves, by broadcasters, think-tanks, pollsters and campaigners.

These polls showed that the public were generally supportive of the Leveson Inquiry and its conclusions. They showed that most of the public did not have a problem with legal support for press regulation, and do not see the use of the law – per se – as a threat to press freedom. Moreover, the data showed – time and again – that the public were highly sceptical of the newspaper industry's alternative proposals to Leveson.

You would not have known these views if you relied on the newspapers. The press were overwhelmingly negative about the Leveson Report and its implementation. The use of the law to support regulation was portrayed as equivalent to state control of the press. Indeed, the alternatives to the newspaper industry's own (unpopular) proposals were painted as state control. By contrast, in many newspapers, coverage of the industry's proposals was wholly positive.

Despite repeated emphasis on the importance of the press being able in the name of the public, public polling data was curiously absent from coverage. Less than 2% of articles on press regulation contained any reference to any polling data from the two dozen surveys. Even those newspapers that commissioned polls, notably The Sunday Times and The Sun, tended not to publish the unfavourable responses.

Did the public receive a diversity of views?

Providing a diversity of viewpoints is a pretty uncontested positive function that news media are expected to play in public life. Yet there was little diversity of views about the Leveson Report within or between papers. For nine out of ten newspaper readers, over 70% of the articles they read about this issue were entirely negative (in other words contained only criticism of Leveson or the Royal Charter, with not a single positive viewpoint). In one newspaper, the Daily Mail, the ratio of negative to positive articles was 33:1. In The Sun the ratio was 29:1.

If only leader columns in these papers are measured, the negative-only ration rises to over 90% - 145 out of a total of 159 leaders. For 90% of newspaper readers, every single leader column mentioning the newspaper industry's alternative proposals (the 'PressBof Royal Charter' and IPSO) was positive, while every single leader mentioning the Privy Council's rejection of the

PressBof Charter and the sealing of the Cross-Party Charter was negative.

Did the press hold power to account?

In the period immediately following the publication of the Leveson Report, in January and February 2013, senior news executives met almost daily with the Minister for Government Policy, Oliver Letwin ([20 meetings](#)) and with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport ([17 meetings](#)) to draft a Royal Charter that they found acceptable.

None of these meetings was reported on by the press. We only know about them because, six months later, the government was obliged to publish a record of Ministerial meetings. The freedom to report in the public interest did not, in this instance, include the freedom to report on the newspaper industry's own power to negotiate with the Government on policy issues.

As the favourable coverage of the newspaper industry's Royal Charter and IPSO demonstrates, many newspapers were also willing to use their pages to promote their own self-interest, even while being unwilling to scrutinise their own participation in the process.

Was the coverage fair?

We expect our press to express its views, but we also expect news reports – as opposed to editorials – to be relatively fair and balanced. Yet, based on the data, news reports on this issue were not fair or balanced. Two-thirds of all factual news reports (excluding comment and leader articles) contained only negative viewpoints on Leveson or the Royal Charter, either from sources, or within the rest of the article. To the reader, this gave the impression that opinion on the issue was settled, and that there was a consensus against Leveson and the Charter. The opposite was true, as public opinion clearly and consistently demonstrated.

In addition to the unbalanced use of sources, news articles regularly contained evaluative statements about Leveson, presented as fact. A Daily Mirror news article, for example, on 30 November 2012 – the day after the Leveson Report was published – introduced the proposals as “draconian curbs on the press”, and a Sunday Times news article on 9 October 2013 described the Royal Charter as “state regulation of the press”. Statements like these occurred throughout the news coverage, indicating that the opinionated language of leader articles became incorporated into factual reports.

Was the coverage accurate?

Separate to the insertion of opinion within news reports, much of the coverage of Leveson and its implementation was not accurate. Many newspapers claimed, for example, that a Leveson system of self-regulation would lead to censorship. Yet Leveson stated that no self-regulatory system should ‘have the power to prevent publication of any material, by anyone, at any time’

(Recommendation 17). The Leveson recommendations were repeatedly referred to as ‘statutory regulation’, despite Leveson’s assertion that ‘despite what will be said about these recommendations by those who oppose them, this is not, and cannot be characterised as, statutory regulation of the press’ (Summary, p17).

Nor was it true that whistleblowers would be arrested if Leveson was put into practice, as The Sun said. Or that off-the-record briefings by police would be banned. Or that politicians would have the final say over the content published in newspapers. Or that civil society groups that supported Leveson were bankrolled by Brussels. Or that the whole Leveson Inquiry was an establishment stitch-up engineered by a left-wing conspiracy. Yet each of these claims and others were made by newspapers.

Were claims backed up by evidence?

The most frequent newspaper criticism of the Leveson Report and the Royal Charter was that it represented a threat to press freedom. 862 articles contained a reference to this supposed threat. Yet of those, less than one-third tried to explain why it was a threat or presented evidence to support the claim. Over two-thirds presented the claim as fact, with no evidence. Only a handful of articles gave space to those who argued the opposite, despite this being the view of all three main parties, civil society groups, academics, and – as opinion surveys showed – much of the public.

Most of the UK national press therefore failed to represent public opinion, failed to offer a diversity of views either within their own pages or across competing titles, failed to report in a balanced way, failed to hold power to account, and eschewed accuracy and evidence to promote a broadly uniform editorial line that suited their own policy interests.

With certain honourable exceptions – the Guardian and Observer; the Independent and Independent on Sunday, and the Financial Times – on this issue the UK’s national press failed practically every normative test. Their function, in the area of press regulation, was less a quasi-constitutional role of holding power to account and facilitating a free and open market of ideas, and more a pursuit of their own self-interest, self-censorship of views that were contrary to their own, and preservation of the status quo.

The figures in this piece come from a report published by the Media Standards Trust in September 2014 – ‘How newspapers covered press regulation after Leveson’ by Dr Gordon Neil Ramsay which can be read [here](#). The full dataset is available [here](#).

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