

Comment & Criticism

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Educating for a better newsroom culture in a Leveson compliant future

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Amidst all the argy bargy about royal charters and last minute bids for political unity it's often difficult to remember that Leveson was originally charged with finding a way to drain the morally fetid swamp that newspapers had come to represent for the public.

His brief was not just to build a new regulator or highlight the corruption apparently endemic amongst the national press, the police and politicians but to inquire into the culture, practices and ethics of the press.

Leveson talks in his report very little about the future for journalism and for journalists. He did take some evidence about the way newspapers had developed their business models over the past ten years or so and in doing so outlined some of the challenges to our

present and future students:

The Inquiry has heard different interpretations of the impact of these economic pressures on newspaper business models. It is common ground that falling revenues and the increased need to produce copy 24 hours a day has resulted in fewer journalists having to do more work. Editors have argued that the financial levels affect staffing levels but that this simply means that journalists work harder and that there is no reduction in the quality of journalism. The Inquiry has been told that the economic difficulties have not affected training of journalists. Others have suggested that the effect of journalists having to produce more stories in less time and with less resource is that material is not as thoroughly checked as it once was, press releases are reproduced uncritically and stories are recycled around the media with little development or additional checking. The impact on regional newspapers has been more severe, with a number of titles merging or closing... Across the press the same challenge faces all titles in respect of how to make money from content online in a world where advertising revenues and revenues from physical circulation continue to decline, whilst readership online is growing... That is not to say that... there are not parts of the UK press that are profitable and, in some cases, highly profitable. (Leveson 2012: 98)

As can be seen he clearly identifies the stark reality of many modern journalists having to work harder and longer at the same tasks as their colleagues of ten years before. He comes to no conclusion about whether this ramping up of workloads reduces the quality of journalism but it is difficult to imagine in the era of 24-hour news that the technological advances of twitter, digital cameras, i-pad editing and Facebook can make up the deficit in newsrooms with half the staff of 20 years ago.

He also identified that the industry for which we are preparing students is one that generally wants to behave well:

The press... does claim to operate by and adhere to an ethical code of conduct. Newspapers, through whichever medium they are delivered, purport to offer a quality product in all senses of that term. Although in the light of the events leading to the setting up of this Inquiry and the evidence I have heard, the public is entitled to be sceptical about the true quality of parts of that product in certain sections of the press, the premise on which newspapers operate remains constant: that the Code will be adhered to, that within the bounds of natural human error printed facts whether in newsprint or online will be accurate, and that individual rights will be respected. (Ibid. 736-737)

Leveson mentions hardly anything about the way journalists are trained throughout his report. Indeed there is far more about the training of police and their dealings with the media than there is about training and educating journalists. Nevertheless it is clear from the above that he sees high standards of the press as something to be desired and something that the industry, and therefore employers wants.

Going on from that he identifies that training is one of the key tools in the regulatory toolbox:

“Most of these tools could form part of any regulatory tool kit whether it was self-regulatory, co-regulatory or statutory regulation. The purpose of regulation is to deliver an outcome that society wants. However, regulation is not the only way to influence or change behaviour. I thus turn to the categorisation identified by Mr McCrae of the different ways in which changes to behaviour can be encouraged and influenced, namely: enabling, engaging, exemplifying and encouraging... This includes removing barriers (of whatever sort) to the desired behaviour, giving information and providing viable alternatives, including through capacity building, skills, training and facilities.” (Ibid. 1742-3)

Of course neither Lord Justice Leveson nor McCrae are alone in identifying training as crucial in encouraging ethical behaviour. Betrand identifies it as one of his M*A*S (Media accountability systems) and other writers on ethics such as Keeble, Frost and Harcup

all see its central importance both in preparing the student and developing the journalist.

Despite mentioning training infrequently Leveson is also clear that it has a role in improving standards:

“For example, the PCC has worked hard to improve the coverage of mental health issues. To this end, the PCC has produced a guidance note on the subject and has delivered training to journalists.¹⁹ It is difficult to form a clear judgment about this, but the sense I have is that press reporting on some aspects of mental health issues has improved, and the insensitive and in many cases offensive language deployed in some sections of the press ten years ago is now rarely used.” (Ibid. 1519)

He is also confident that training and education as happens in the newsrooms of AJE members is also important:

Finally, I would also like to add a word on journalism training. I have not sought to look at the adequacy of the training available to, or provided to, journalists. However, a number of professors of journalism have given evidence to the Inquiry and it is apparent from their evidence that the schools of journalism are committed to offering high quality training in which ethical journalism plays a full part. Largely as a result of the financial pressures on parts of the press, journalism training is increasingly moving away from newsrooms and into the universities. There is also an important role for ongoing in-house training, including in relation to new laws and ethical or compliance issues that are highlighted by particular cases. A number of titles have told the Inquiry that they work with the PCC to deliver training on specific issues as appropriate. It is clearly important that the industry generally, and employers in particular, should place a high priority on training to ensure, *inter alia*, that all journalists understand the legal and ethical context within which they work. (Ibid, 736)

So what should we be doing in our institutions to pick up on Leveson’s exhortations? As he correctly identifies, training is moving away from newsrooms and into the universities. Indeed I would say that trend is now virtually complete with hardly any entry level training now being carried out at newsroom level. Of course there continues to be an important role for ongoing in-house training, as Leveson identifies but even here more of this is moving towards the universities. Part time masters programmes, CPD sessions and summer schools as well as partnership of all sorts including Knowledge Transfer Partnerships are all becoming more common and as universities plan for the inevitable fall off of applications to master programmes – already happening in some places – these will take on even more significance.

Most journalism schools have already been looking at their training and of course have been including the developing saga in court 59 as part of their curriculum.

The NCTJ has also been keeping an eye on developments and an early comment at Leveson: in one of his seminars: “One seminar attendee suggested that the National Council for the Training of Journalists does not teach ethics. The Inquiry would be interested in experience of how ethics are taught and promulgated amongst journalists.” (Leveson, 2012 p21) stung it into action and it has now introduced a new ethics module into its diploma that will be a required element of all NCTJ-accredited programmes. The BJTC has long insisted on teaching about regulation and ethics teaching. The AJE, in common with many other industry groups, has based its summer conference around the theme.

So what about our own changes? The first thing to consider surely is admissions. What type of programmes should we be offering our students and how do we select the next intake of future journalists? I think the outcome of Leveson will combine with the pattern already identified of the lessening attractiveness of post-graduate programmes. Students already up to their ears in debt, looking at a potential career in an industry which admits to pressurising its journalists to work ever harder for fewer rewards, both financial and in a newsroom culture that is prone to bullying and dissatisfaction are going to be less inclined

to consider journalism as a career and there is already evidence in some centres of falling numbers applying. This is most likely to affect applicants in 2015.

Leveson does suggest though the importance of in-house training and CPD. This opens up opportunities in the post graduate field for part-time programmes either of a traditional type or more innovatively looking at patchwork MAs, distance learning and specialist programmes on day release, summer school or good old-fashioned evening classes.

It is also worth looking at the criteria used for admissions to mainstream journalism degree programmes. Evidence on newsroom culture could be said to imply too little rebellion in the newsroom, too little determination to challenge decisions from the top. Are we selecting people for study who are too willing to do as they are told; too easily prepared to go along with the prevailing wind? Journalism has traditionally attracted odd-balls, rebels and eccentrics. Has the move to degree programmes made journalism more mainstream and less rebellious and if so, is that a good thing? I merely ask the questions here but it could be that our decisions at application time are making a huge difference in the way they industry runs in terms of newsroom culture.

Newsroom culture is important as Lord Leveson identified. He picked up comments made by Professor Christopher Megone, who has worked extensively with industry bodies (mainly in finance and engineering) on issues of workplace ethics. He told Leveson that the culture in a newsroom was paramount and needed to be considered alongside and code of standards:

“If there is an unhealthy culture then an organisation can have an ethical code but it will have little influence. Members of the organisation can undergo ‘ethics training’ but it will have little effect. As soon as they return from the training to their desk or office, the pervasive culture will dominate their decision-making. The culture brings to bear all sorts of ‘accepted norms’ which an afternoon’s training will be relatively powerless to affect. (I do not, of course, think that good ‘ethics training’ is pointless, but simply that its effectiveness depends on whether, or to what extent, other factors are in place in the organisation...)” (Ibid. p86)

Leveson felt that against that background an operative code of ethics would have therefore a number of potential functions and in doing so he identifies many of the areas in which we should be concentrating our education. Indeed it clearly helps identify the difference between journalism training and education, a complex and much-agonised component of any degree programme. Leveson felt such an operative code would:

“serve as a reminder of the special importance and roles, the freedoms and privileges, the power and responsibilities of the press. It would, in other words, provide a full context for the choices which fall to be made in practice so that they can be made in accordance with the principles to be derived from this context. It would, in short, explain what ethical (or, as it is sometimes described, ‘public interest’) journalism is.” (Ibid. 87)

He goes on to identify very clearly the sort of outcomes a good journalism degree should have and identify the sort of education we should be working hard to fit alongside the training that is a central core to virtually all good programmes. Such a code would, he says:

“help journalists to understand the circumstances in which they are called upon to make ethical decisions. It would help them to make the right choices in practice. It would do this not as a matter of rigid and disconnected prescriptions and prohibitions, but by promoting ‘a stable disposition to act in certain ways for the right reasons’. It would recognise and explain the circumstances in which the temptations and motivations to act unethically (including commercial motivations) may be especially strong, and why they need to be resisted... It would not expect to stand alone. It would take its place in a context of ethical culture, sources of advice and guidance... It would have consequences in terms of how individuals and organisations are perceived, in terms of rewards and sanctions. (Ibid.)

So our education should ensure that students get this support to the code, the assurance that they understand the contexts to help them make the right ethical choices, an understanding of the pressures they will face and why they need to be resisted and that the code, any code, is not expected to stand alone but is part of an armoury of guidance, knowledge and understanding.

Part of this is understanding the culture in newsrooms and learning to deal with it. We need to ensure that we do not have the double standard in our training newsrooms that was identified in the AJE's evidence to Leveson:

AJE members who have been practitioners (they continue to think of themselves as journalists) are well aware of a difficult double standard. That they should teach what is right, but also teach what is actually done. Honesty to the student requires that they be made aware that while there is a right way to do things, they might well be asked to do something different in the newsroom. This double standard can be reinforced by anecdotes from visiting speakers from the workplace. (AJE 2012: 10)

We need to provide more certainty to students that while they may well be expected to do things differently in the newsroom, that doesn't mean they are obliged to do them just because everyone else does. We should be explaining that doing things the right way is important for all the reasons identified in Leveson and the thousands of other books and journal articles discussing the importance of journalism. As we told Leveson in our evidence:

"Ethics is not something to be left at the university door with the academic gown but needs to be nurtured and developed alongside other professional skills in the newsroom. (AJE 2012: 9)"

We should also be hoping that if anything has come out of Leveson it will be a profound sea change in the newsroom culture that on the one hand often saw editors bullying staff into unethical behaviour and on the other led senior staff to seemingly take a macho pleasure in behaving badly and encouraging their juniors with bar-side boasts to join them in their unseemly antics. Yes, journalists do have to behave unethically with regard to a private individual's rights on occasion if we are to prove the wrongdoing or abuse of the public's rights by those in power. We need to teach our students to understand the difference and to be able resist the blandishments of colleagues and the threats of editors.

One way of doing this, of course, is a method most of us already use, which is to present good practice as example whether through inviting journalists to speak to students who we identify as exemplifying good practice or by providing examples of good practice in seminars for discussion. Leveson strongly recommends this:

Exemplification includes leading by example and achieving consistency in policies. The Inquiry has heard many references to examples of excellent journalism and adherence to excellent ethical standards within the British press. The Inquiry has, however, heard fewer instances of use of such examples of excellence within the industry to promote ethical behaviour. The PCC receives complaints and, unless mediated, produces adjudications on them which lead to reminders to papers and journalists of the nature of the code and the production of additional guidance on good behaviour. The Inquiry has been told of many examples of excellent investigative journalism, ethically conducted, being lauded within the industry: examples include Thalidomide, phone hacking and MPs expenses. (Ibid. 1744)

The honourable Lord's words do remind me that one criticism that the PCC has faced in the past (see evidence to the 2010 PCC review of governance from Frost or Jempson) is that the over-reliance on mediation, so prized by the PCC led to a reduction in the number of adjudications and so a reduction in the guidance the PCC could offer to the industry. Ofcom, for instance, produces lengthy reports of both the complaints adjudicated and its decisions and the reasons for them. This provides sound guidance to journalists and aca-

demics on how Ofcom interprets its code. Whilst the PCC adjudications are reported, often the details of the complaint are too limited (although sometimes this is for good reasons of maintaining privacy) the reasoning behind the PCC's decision is also often too limited. One thing the AJE should be pressing whatever regulator we finally get, is more resolve to adjudicate all but the most simple of cases and more detailed reporting on the reasons for adjudication decisions. This would provide far more detailed tools for us to use in ethics seminars and as examples alongside the work students are doing in their practice modules. We should be doing all we can to avoid a divide between theory and practice that would allow students to assume one can be more easily ignored or even discarded.

Finally in our armoury for training and educating the next generation there is assessment. Most of us test and assess learning from our law and ethics modules in some form, but there is always a risk of ghettoising the assessment of ethics and good practice to the ethics module. We should ensure that our practice modules also test good professional practice alongside the practice skills those modules are designed to foster. We need to make it clear to students that the ability to spot a good story and present it in a form that commands attention are important skills, but they also require an ethical approach and consideration of the rights of individuals.

The Leveson inquiry may have covered 16 months and 2000 pages, and Leveson may not have concentrated the full force of his analysis on academe telling the inquiry: "I have not sought to look at the adequacy of the training available to, or provided to, journalists." But his words do have resonance for us and we do have our own part to play in improving the standards of press journalism.

Bibliography

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