

Media/Democracy

Media/Democracy:
A Comparative Study

Edited by

Alec Charles

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Media/Democracy: A Comparative Study,
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FOREWORD

NATALIE FENTON

Rarely has the relationship between media and democracy been so centre stage. Whether in relation to media reform brought about by phone hacking in the UK (see Chapter 1), media concentration in Berlusconi's Italy (Chapter 4) or social media and the internet as a means to increased access to information (Chapters 2 and 5), the debate on whether or not and in what form the media are related to the nature and practice of democracy is raging; and rightly so. The narrative this book relays is that the relationship between media and democracy is fraught and complex. Yes, it is vitally important, yet it is far too often over-simplified. We are frequently told that one leads to the other. In one formulation, media are seen as a pre-requisite for democracy to flourish. Several chapters in this book challenge this assumption. In another version, democracy is translated as being no more than free-market capitalism which is then seen as a direct road straight to enhanced democratisation on the gravy train of commercial media. Both present varying degrees of media determinism that forge a type of logic that leads to arguments that support the inherent liberating and democratising impact of new media forms, such as the internet, regardless of actual content or the broader context of which they are part. The chapters that follow take us through the arguments of why both these approaches are misconstrued.

What both approaches all too often fail to point out is that the relationship between media and democracy also depends on the *existing* state of the media and of the market and indeed on the state of actually existing democracy in each individual context – where context is likely to be state-led because of the prevailing dominance of state legislatures but not state-bound due to globalisation. Thus, this relationship also depends on political culture and media policy; the nature of the economy and the market; media and communication technologies and formats as well as globalisation and social and cultural issues such as literacy, poverty, religious differences and daily rituals (Curran, Fenton and Freedman 2012). Each of these factors will have an effect on media circulation and on media consumption and they will also influence how democracy can function effectively.

In these sets of complex relations, news media are given a particular relevance with regards to citizen participation in political life. News provides, or should provide, the vital resources for processes of information gathering, deliberation and analysis that enable democracy to function. In an ideal world, unfettered by commercial pressures of failed business models, new technology and plummeting sales and circulation figures, this would mean that news media would survey the socio-political environment, hold the government and other officials to account, provide a platform for intelligible and illuminating debate, and encourage dialogue across a range of views. This is an ideal relationship, however, and it's hinged very much on a conception of independent journalism in the public interest linked to notions of knowledge, political participation and democratic renewal. But news media have been beset with many challenges over the last decade that have introduced considerable stress-lines to these ideals. A huge growth in the number of news outlets including the advent of and rapid increase in free papers, the emergence of 24-hour television news and the popularization of online and mobile platforms, has meant that more news must be produced and distributed at a faster rate than ever before. In a corporate news world it is now difficult to maintain profit margins and shareholder returns unless you employ fewer journalists (Fenton 2010). But fewer journalists with more space to fill means doing more work in less time often leading to a greater use of unattributed rewrites of press agency or public relations material and the cut-and-paste practice now known as churnalism (Davies 2008).

If you combine the faster and shallower corporate journalism of the digital age with the need to pull in readers for commercial rather than journalistic reasons it is not difficult to see how the traditional values of professional journalism are quickly cast aside in order to indulge in sensationalism and deal in gratuitous spectacles and dubious emotionalism. Set this alongside the fact that in many places, such as the UK (Media Reform Coalition 2011), there are an ever-smaller number of global media institutions dominating the media landscape; then the simple notion that more media means better democracy starts to look rather tenuous. The larger and more concentrated media empires become, the more concerned politicians are to maintain good relations with owners and senior executives and editors (Davis 2002). Parties, the police and other institutions are reluctant to investigate wrong-doing in the news media, hinder the expansion of large media conglomerates or introduce new regulation of news organisations and journalistic practice. Such patterns and relations have resulted in certain public policy areas being avoided for fear of either hostile reporting or media owner conflict. And, for the same

reasons, politicians are more likely to discuss populist policies. As such, a media system that may have many platforms and points of distribution but is dominated by a few, powerful voices and a news media increasingly run to secure financial reward or political influence is unlikely to foster greater participation in political culture.

Theories of democratic political participation have long since recognized the roles the media play in activating political citizenship and participation. Media coverage plays a significant role in creating awareness and engagement. News matters at a fundamental level to society. But a simple abundance of news, one that just assumes that the more news we have the more democratic our societies are, speaks to a naïve pluralism that has been shown to be blatantly false. More news does not necessarily help democracy, even if consumption is high, if the nature of news content serves the interests of the news industry over and above the public's information needs. In such cases contemporary coverage can actually lead to a mood of anti-politics, thwart political participation in the public sphere and diminish democracy. Once again, it becomes clear that context is king.

Partly because the relationship between democracy and media is so complex and contingent it is also never fixed and constantly open to contestation – although the terms and extent of that contestation may be constrained under particular circumstances. The media, as democracies, are not homogenous, static entities. Both are ever changing, both contain power and shape the space where power is competed for, albeit in different ways. As a consequence, both also contain difference and division as well as being subject to social forces and indeed social movements that may challenge established and vested interests. When this happens and it most often happens at the point of crisis – whether due to the failings of democratic systems or the dismal behaviour of some parts of the media – it is then that the opportunity arises to rethink the relationship between media and democracy. This book speaks to these moments: it offers a welcome depth of context, international comparison and complexity for an issue that deserves nothing less.

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CHAPTER ONE

MEDIA AND/OR DEMOCRACY

ALEC CHARLES

This chapter takes a broad look at the relationships between mass media forms (both old and new) and political, corporate and popular power. The issue of the phone hacking scandal in the UK has, for example, exposed the questionably close relationships between traditional news media outlets and political power; and an increasing public awareness of such relationships threatens to undermine public trust not only in traditional media institutions but also in traditional political structures. In the UK, for example, media institutions have not merely fostered a democratically healthy mistrust of (a scepticism in relation to) politicians and political parties, strategies and structures; they have also, since the 2009 revelations of parliamentarians' often extortionate expenses, increasingly promoted a reactionary (and, some might say opportunistically cynical) distrust of the practices and processes of democracy – a distrust which has spread to encompass not only the institutions of politics but also (somewhat ironically) the media institutions which have traditionally underpinned that democracy. The feral pack (as Tony Blair dubbed the British press upon his exit from office in June 2007) have thus begun to fall upon themselves in one last desperate feeding frenzy.

An alternative, however, to the continuation of the democratic functions of the traditional mass media appears for some to lie in the mysteries and promises of the internet; and yet, while the internet has undoubtedly done its bit to promote distrust in established democratic processes, it appears, in western democracies at least, to have failed to fulfil its promises of democratization through the propagation of socio-political dialogue. The internet has not, in effect, generated a new public sphere (a renaissance of democracy through an electronic arena for the development of popular consensus); it has instead, under the guise of populism, reinforced unaccountable and virtually anonymous structures of corporate and demagogic power, and opened the door to resurgent forms of political extremism.

Yet what then can countries relatively new to, and developing towards, western modes of democracy learn from this? And what can the older entrenched democracies of the West learn from the deployment of old and new media in the democratic development of such nations? This collection explores these developments from both perspectives – exploring the relationship between media and democracy in Western Europe, as well as in West Africa, South America, Central Europe and the Arab region. This opening chapter specifically compares recent developments in Britain with the series of uprisings that have become known as the Arab Spring.

Humbert Humbert Humbug

The veteran British disc jockey and children's television presenter Sir Jimmy Savile died in October 2011. The following month the BBC's flagship *Newsnight* programme launched an investigation into claims that Savile had been an active paedophile. By the middle of December the BBC had, however, decided to drop the *Newsnight* investigation and later that month the BBC included a number of Jimmy Savile tribute programmes in its Christmas schedule. In early October 2012 the BBC's commercial rival ITV aired a documentary which advanced allegations of paedophilia against Savile. The editor of *Newsnight* posted onto his blog a defence of the BBC's decision to drop the investigation but within three weeks the BBC had admitted that this blogpost contained errors. At the start of November *Newsnight* then broadcast an erroneous report that a former politician (whom it did not name) had committed acts of sexual abuse against a young boy. Within a week *Newsnight* had withdrawn this false accusation, but by this time the internet was awash with reports of the identity of this politician – and the presenter of ITV's *This Morning* had handed the Prime Minister a list of alleged paedophiles (a list garnered from the internet – a list which identified the said politician) live on air. On 10 November 2012 the BBC's Director General resigned. The police investigation into the crimes committed by Savile meanwhile expanded to encompass allegations against other public figures.

On 29 September *The Sun* newspaper (Britain's best-selling daily news title) had reported that a documentary was about to broadcast allegations that Jimmy Savile had abused children – or, as the paper's headline announced, "Savile is branded paedo on telly show." From 1 October 2012 *The Sun* had turned the focus of its outrage upon the BBC, reporting that the BBC had "ignored gossip" about Savile. (This now seems somewhat ironic, as the failure to ignore similar gossip would later get the BBC and various members of the Twitterati into further trouble.) In another piece

that day, *The Sun* suggested that the BBC had “ignored claims by girls of 14 about sex attacks by Jimmy Savile in his Television Centre dressing room.” This line was repeated the following day: “At best, they ignored the gossip, at worst they suppressed a horribly sordid truth.” The day after that (3 October), *The Sun*’s leader pointed out that “no one did anything about it. Not those working with Savile at the BBC who strongly suspected he had a penchant for young girls.” On 4 October the paper reported that “the former boss of [BBC] Radio 1 knew of accusations about Jimmy Savile and child sex abuse as long ago as 1973.” On 5 October the tabloid headed its leader with the words “BBC shame.” The following day’s leader was headlined “Dodgy Beeb” – the headline another article on 6 October denounced the “Shameful silence over Savile.” Another piece that day advanced allegations of a “sex ring” inside the BBC. On 7 October the paper alleged that “many the late DJ worked with at the BBC knew he was a pervert but did nothing to stop him” – beneath the headline “Sick BBC secrets.” By 12 October the paper was citing accusations that “the BBC knew full well that Jimmy Savile had a sick lust for young girls but left victims at his mercy.” The next day *The Sun*’s leader spoke of the corporation’s “disgraceful complacency” and in another article repeated claims that the BBC’s “bosses knew what was happening but covered it up.” The following day (14 October) the paper predicted that “senior heads at the BBC will roll.”

On 29 October *The Sun*’s Trevor Kavanagh commented that the BBC Trust now appeared somewhat “dubiously named.” The same day the paper also suggested that “public trust in the BBC has nosedived in the wake of the Jimmy Savile scandal.” *The Sun* then appeared to be battling the BBC for that trust, that connection with the public so easily broken by such scandal. In an age in which the cynicism of the populist press has contributed to the diminution of the public trust in the processes of democracy, the possession of such trust seems all the more valuable.

The moral outrage of such papers as *The Sun* in relation to this matter masked their exploitation of this case as a distraction from practical, professional and political embarrassments. For just as the BBC were becoming enmired in the Savile revelations, so the UK press were preparing themselves for the publication of Lord Justice Leveson’s report into their own practices and conduct. What better for these newspapers – and in particular for those populist titles which were rightly expecting Leveson to rap them squarely across the knuckles – than to be able to point out, by way of a distraction, the greater moral failings at the heart of the nation’s most trusted media organization – the BBC?

Right at the start of the Jimmy Savile scandal, in its leader on 1 October 2012 *The Sun* had specifically observed that “the BBC is lucky not to be the subject of a judge-led inquiry.” On 10 October Jane Moore wrote in *The Sun* that “the vastly expensive Leveson Inquiry” should be matched by “an official inquiry for which the BBC will be asked to trawl through its own files and computer database to establish who knew what and when about the Jimmy Savile scandal.” On 11 October *The Sun*’s Bill Leckie had written that the Savile scandal was the BBC’s equivalent of News International’s phone hacking scandal; a week later he said that this had been “a big understatement” – adding that “if tapping into voicemails was crime enough to close a national newspaper, what’s the price for raping children?” The same day (18 October) *The Sun*’s leader called for “an inquiry that is completely independent and led by a judge appointed by the Government” – in other words, a Leveson equivalent that might transfer some of the heat from *The Sun*’s News International onto the BBC. A week later (on 25 October) Leckie again asked: “If tapping into voicemails was enough to bring down the *News of the World*, what price does a publicly funded broadcaster pay for aiding and abetting a paedophile ring?” Again on 26 October *The Sun*’s leader called for “a fully independent judge-led public inquiry” into the scandal at the BBC. On 30 October paper’s leader yet again called upon the government to convene a public inquiry. On 5 November the paper was clearly pleased to report that the Culture Secretary had intimated the possibility of just such an inquiry.

Had such an enquiry taken place – and found the BBC as culpable as *The Sun* had been insinuating – then that paper would no doubt have again displayed the unrestrained glee it had trumpeted when in January 2004 it had reported the conclusions of Lord Justice Hutton’s public inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the suicide of WMD expert Dr David Kelly. On that occasion *The Sun* had published the judge’s leaked findings immediately before the report’s scheduled publication, findings which had called into question the journalistic practices of the BBC. The paper had thus rejoiced that “*The Sun* has got its Hutton, Ship, ship, ship, hooray” – in an extraordinarily provocative reference to its own January 2004 headline “Ship ship hooray!” – reporting the case of the suicide of another controversial doctor (the similarly grizzled, bearded and bespectacled serial killer Harold Shipman). It was as if in this nasty little ditty *The Sun* had been clearly announcing to the British public and to the political establishment that, unlike, the BBC, it was untouchable: it not only published the leaked report but it did so in a style which brazenly invoked its own ethical impunity. When, however, by the end 2012, that impunity was looking somewhat fragile, the paper sought, in its calls for another

public enquiry into the BBC, to distract attention from its own crisis of public confidence.

Rather than seeking to restore public trust in itself (through a transparent investigation into allegations of its own misconduct and through a clear shift in editorial policies), *The Sun* thus elected instead to undermine public trust in the BBC – to drag its parent organization's greatest rival down to its level. If public trust (not blind faith, but a critical trust) in the news media's establishment of a healthy dialogue between power and the people is crucial for the functioning of democracy, then this cynical exploitation of such appalling crimes undermines the possibilities of news institutions' mediation and perpetuation of viable relationships between politicians and their electorates – for the sake of corporate commercial concerns. Rightly then might some (such as Lord Justice Leveson) come to question this newspaper's moral authority and socio-political role.

Paper Tigers

In 2007 the royal affairs editor of the UK's then biggest-selling newspaper *The News of the World* had been sentenced to four months' imprisonment for illegally hacking into the mobile telephone voicemail messages of members of the royal family. Between 2008 and 2011 a growing series of allegations of phone hacking emerged against the newspaper. Other titles were implicated in similar practices. On 10 July 2011 *The News of the World*, having been dragged down by this scandal, published its last ever edition. Three days later Prime Minister David Cameron announced the establishment of a public inquiry into the conduct of the press – and on 14 November that year Lord Justice Leveson commenced that inquiry. Following months of dramatic testimony broadcast live to the nation (including such witnesses as Tony Blair, David Cameron, Gordon Brown, John Major, Rupert Murdoch, Piers Morgan, J.K. Rowling, Sienna Miller, Steve Coogan and Hugh Grant) and further months of press speculation, the inquiry's report was published on 29 November 2012.

As Hanretty (2013, 10) has pointed out, “the reception given to the Leveson Report by newspapers was more negative than the reception given it by politicians; this in turn was more negative than the reception given to the report by the public.” Like much of the press, *The News of the World*'s surviving stablemate *The Sun* railed against the Leveson report's recommendation of the need for statutory powers to reinforce the public oversight of a process of independent industry self-regulation. On 30 November 2012 – the day after the report's publication – *The Sun* had done

its best to undermine the integrity of Leveson's findings – and indeed, by insinuation, even the integrity of the judge himself. It had published one story pointing out that Brian Leveson – who had “refused to answer any questions on his report” – would the following week be “leaving the political firestorm he ignited to take an expenses-paid trip to Australia.” Leveson, the newspaper said, would be giving a lecture at “a £620-a-ticket conference in Sydney’s University of Technology.” It added that he would then be giving a “free talk” at Melbourne University’s Centre for Advanced Journalism. It noted that the Judicial Office had pointed out that Lord Justice Leveson’s tour was “not at the taxpayer’s expense” and that his costs would be met by the universities in question, before adding that “Melbourne University declined to say if it is contributing to the air fare for the judge’s wife, who is accompanying him.” The actual situation then was that a judge had published his report but had not submitted to a round of Q&A on the subject and was then visiting Australia to speak at an averagely priced academic conference and at a university centre of journalism, his expenses to be paid (as might be expected) by the academic organizations he was visiting. The version of events, however, suggested by *The Sun* newspaper’s innuendo might seem rather different: those casual readers who managed to skim only the first few of paragraphs would perhaps assume that the judge’s “expenses-paid trip” would be at the taxpayer’s expense – otherwise why would one bother to mention it? – it would hardly be newsworthy, would it, unless one were trying to undermine an opponent’s integrity by snide innuendo, to report that the judge was getting his air fare paid to allow him to speak at a conference on the other side of the world? Further insinuations accrue to this account: that Leveson was running off from the mischief he had provoked, like a guilty thing pursued, shamelessly refusing to answer the reasonable questions of Her Majesty’s press (as if judges regularly submitted to interviews on the subjects of their most recent judgments); that Leveson might somehow personally be profiting from an exorbitant registration fee for the Sydney conference; that further questions remained to be answered as to who paid his wife’s air fare.

A generous interpretation might suggest that *The Sun* was not in fact displaying an extraordinary hypocrisy but was ironically parodying the very attitudes, practices and hypocrisies which had prompted Lord Justice Leveson’s inquiry in the first place. How, after all, could a newspaper whose Sunday stablemate had behaved so outrageously that it had been forced to cease publication, and whose former editor had been implicated in phone hacking, conspiracy to pervert the course of justice and the loan of a former police horse to the Prime Minister, a newspaper whose

management has been seen by many as representing some of the most disreputable practices of the industry – how could such a publication possibly think that it could get away with such scurrilous insinuations about the well-respected senior judge who had just published a report criticizing such unethical practices? That would of course be completely absurd. Wasn't *The Sun* therefore just mocking itself, and, in doing so, wryly admitting to have learnt its lesson and humbly yet humorously pledging to turn over a new leaf? Anything else would surely be a matter of the most unspeakably poor judgment and taste.

The only obstacle to that interpretation is the fact that the rest of the coverage of Lord Justice Leveson's report in that day's edition of *The Sun* adopted a similarly dismissive attitude. It columnist Jane Moore argued (with a surprising degree of complacency) that "much of the criticism levelled at newspapers was about excessive practices from way back that industry self-regulation put paid to long ago" while another columnist, Lorraine Kelly, railed against the idea that Government might "interfere in Press freedom." In a series of short opinion pieces, it gave space to Conservative MP John Whittingdale's concerns that Leveson's findings might eventually lead to the "government licensing of newspapers", to former Conservative MP Louise Mensch's attempts to assure us that Leveson had vindicated the relationship between *The Sun*'s publishers and the Conservative Government, a Government which would ensure that (whatever Leveson said) "our free Press will stay free", to the Head of the Press Complaints Commission's argument that he remained unconvinced that "statutory regulation would have prevented the horrors of the past" and to the perspective of a father of one of the victims of the al Qaeda attack upon London of 7 July 2005 that Parliament must not "start interfering and passing laws to regulate the Press in any way." (One might recall in this context that on 8 November 2005 *The Sun* had featured a picture of 7/7 survivor John Tulloch on its front page alongside a headline supporting the then Prime Minister's tough stance against terrorism: "Tell Tony he's right." But as Professor Tulloch told *The Guardian* two days later, he did not in fact support Mr Blair's position on terrorism at all: "*The Sun*'s rhetoric is as the voice of the people yet they don't actually ask the people involved [...] what they think.")

Still on 30 November 2012 *The Sun* went on to quote half a dozen of its readers – all of whom appeared unanimous in their belief that public regulation would undermine the freedom of the press – and that the freedom of the press was necessarily a good thing. There were no suggestions that the freedom of the rich, powerful, influential and self-appointed guardians of public morality might somehow be held publically

accountable to the public who paid their wages. The readers of *The Sun* – or at least those selected by the newspaper for their comments – seemed somewhat to fly in the face of public opinion in their opposition to Leveson’s key recommendations; by contrast, a survey of the British public published by the pollsters YouGov in the immediate wake of the publication of Leveson’s report (Kellner 2012) had pointed out that “58% think new laws should be passed by MPs to encourage newspapers to join this new system of regulation; 26% oppose new legislation.”

That same day (30 November 2012) *The Sun* cited Prime Minister David Cameron’s “serious concerns and misgivings” over Lord Justice Leveson’s suggestion that (in the words of *The Sun*) “it was Parliament’s job to set up an independent Press watchdog.” (It is not entirely clear, however, that Leveson’s report had recommended that Parliament do this: rather, he had recommended that Parliament consider the approval of statutory powers to allow the operation and oversight of an independent body.) *The Sun* also took some pleasure in pointing out that a documentary made by actor Hugh Grant (who had sensationally reignited the phone hacking scandal in a *New Statesman* article of April 2011), a documentary entitled *Taking on the Tabloids* and broadcast by Channel 4 on the eve of the publication of the Leveson report – had been watched by just over half a million viewers – in *The Sun*’s words, “a paltry 2.3 per cent of people watching TV” – and that this rating was “75 per cent down on the channel’s average for the time slot.”

The Sun’s own leader column on 30 December 2012 argued yet again against what it emotively and misleadingly described as Leveson’s “main proposal for new legislation that could bring in State control of newspapers.” It argued specifically against the suggestion that the Office of Communications (Ofcom) might be involved in the oversight of the regulatory process on the grounds that (1) Ofcom was “unelected and all-powerful” and that (2) Ofcom was “created by the Labour Party.” It neglected to point out that Ofcom was created not by the Labour Party itself but in fact by a Labour Government. A Labour Government which had been elected. A Labour Government which, prior to its re-election in 2001, had specifically promised the establishment of Ofcom in its manifesto: “we will merge the five separate regulators into one, to create the world’s most competitive and advanced regulatory system.” In that sense, there are some who might suggest that Ofcom is closer to having a democratic mandate than, say, the media organizations controlled by Rupert Murdoch.

The Leveson Inquiry proposed solutions not merely to the problems of the misconduct of certain newspapers (those problems could, as many

opponents of Leveson argued, already be addressed by criminal and civil laws – laws, for example, against the illegal interception of private communications, or the bribery of public officials, or defamation) but also therefore to the increasing public distrust of these popular newspapers. Its proposed system of publically monitored independent regulation (a system which maintained and indeed reinforced the press's responsibilities over its own conduct) offered a structure which might restore public trust in these institutions so essential for the preservation and development of democratic processes – that is, public confidence in these institutions' ability to sponsor such processes. The public had, after all, never lost confidence in the populist press's capacity for celebrity gossip and salacious scandal – people continued *en masse* to buy papers for these purposes – but the public perception of the ability of these organs to serve the public interest (to confront power and to empower the people) had so diminished that these papers seemed to hold little greater moral authority (and therefore little more capacity for societal good) than that, for instance, of the social networking site. Without public trust in the capacity of the most prevalent and popular organs for the dissemination of information and establishment of dialogues essential for the sustenance of democracy to serve such functions, those functions cannot be served. This cannot be good for democracy.

Opinion polls showed that the overwhelming majority of the British public supported Leveson's recommendations. Indeed those recommendations were supported not only by the Labour Party and other opposition parties but also by numerous voices within the coalition government (not just the Liberal Democrats – as a party – but also individual Conservatives) to an extent that it seemed clear that Leveson's proposals would most likely have been endorsed in any free vote by a majority of elected parliamentarians. It therefore seems extraordinary that the Prime Minister – who had established the inquiry in the first place and who had previously pledged to implement its recommendations unless they were completely “bonkers” (*The Andrew Marr Show*, BBC One, 7 October 2012) – swiftly announced that he would not be implementing the said recommendations. The Prime Minister's personal friendship with News International's former Chief Executive Officer Rebekah Brooks had been revealed by the Leveson Inquiry: as she told the inquiry in May 2012, David Cameron signed his text messages “LOL, which he took to mean as ‘lots of love’ until I told him it meant ‘laugh out loud’.” Ms Brooks was charged in July 2012 with conspiracy to intercept communications and in November 2012 over alleged payments to public officials. Nevertheless, upon the publication of Lord Justice Leveson's report, Mr Cameron had yet again

chosen to side with his friends in the Murdoch empire. In his response to the Leveson Report the Prime Minister informed Parliament on 29 November that “we should [...] be wary of any legislation that has the potential to infringe free speech and a free press” – again (as the newspapers themselves were so wont to do) equating a general freedom of expression with the continued privileging of the power of the press elite. He said that he was not convinced that “statute is necessary to achieve Lord Justice Leveson’s objectives” – on the grounds that “this would create a vehicle for politicians whether today or some time in the future to impose regulation and obligations on the press.”

On 12 January 2013 Mr Cameron’s government announced its proposed alternative to the statutory underpinning and public monitoring and accountability of an independent regulatory system for the UK press, as envisaged by Lord Justice Leveson – the establishment instead of a press regulator backed by royal charter. The proposal required that any amendment to this charter would require the approval not only of Parliament but also of the three main political parties. One need look no further than the BBC to see how various governments have been able to apply significant political pressure upon that organization through the processes of the periodic renegotiation of the terms of that organization’s own royal charter; one wonders however why Mr Cameron’s proposed safeguard upon any limitation of the freedom of the press would require not only parliamentary approval (which would appear democratic) but also cross-party approval. It might be argued that any governing party with a simple parliamentary majority could abuse this power to limit press expression or even bias it in its own favour; it might also however be argued that this emphasis upon the need for the approval of the three main political parties would further empower these entrenched institutions and further marginalize smaller political parties. It might also be supposed that the evident obstacles to reaching such a consensus between the three main parties would effectively prevent the substantive development of the terms of this charter, the remits, responsibilities and powers allotted to this regulatory body. Under such circumstances the newspapers – without any need to establish their own consensus and therefore with their greater tactical agility – would have clear advantages in their relationship with such a regulator.

On 14 March 2013 David Cameron called a halt to cross-party talks on press regulation, instead calling on other parties to support his plan for a royal charter. When the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats responded by sitting down to their own talks, Mr Cameron’s government then rejoined the process. On 18 March 2013 it was announced that the

three parties had struck a deal, although the discussions on this measure crucial for democracy remained opaque, and even the deal seemed at that point somewhat ambiguous: the BBC reported that “an independent regulator will be set up by royal charter, but views vary over whether it would be underpinned by law” – adding that “Labour leader Ed Miliband and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg said this would be the case, but the prime minister denied it.” As the underpinning of this body by statute was the clear point of contention in the first place, it seemed unclear what this deal represented and how it had been reached.

With the exception of *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, the national press did not react favourably to the news. On 19 March 2013 the BBC noted that “most papers are hostile and [...] claim they were not represented in a meeting [...] at which the three main parties struck a deal.” (One might ask why the newspapers should have been party to the formation of a political response to a report which had in part at least been commissioned to examine the unhealthy influence of those papers on the political process.) The *Metro* that day advanced claims from the libertarian group Index on Censorship that this was “a sad day for British democracy.” The group expressed particular concern at the way in which the main political parties had come together to agree this policy. The problem might however not be seen as the fact that the elected representatives of these parties had reached a consensus on this issue (this seems reasonably democratic albeit hardly libertarian), but the untransparent manner in which this consensus had been reached. This situation suggests two points: (1) that democracy does not always foster libertarian, liberal or even democratic consequences (we can vote for tyranny) and those who invoke democracy as an absolute value might acknowledge this inherent failing or paradox – or accept its results; and (2) democracy cannot prosper in a culture of secrecy – democracy must be seen to be done, in order to maintain the public trust which sustains it. It seems questionable whether this essential openness might be achieved by the opacity of the response to Lord Justice Leveson’s report, in terms both of that response’s process and of its substance.

On 23 March 2013 Chris Blackhurst, the editor of *The Independent*, published a piece in his own paper arguing that, although there seemed little alternative to the policy agreed between the three main political parties, the way in which it had been “concocted” by these parties, in collaboration with the campaign group Hacked Off, had provided “ammunition to those who are resistant to change at any price” – to those “screaming critics” who sought to continue to “defy consistent opinion poll findings, the recommendations of a judicial inquiry, and the wishes of

the three main political parties.” Those intransigent critics would include the author of *The Times* newspaper’s leader that day, which lamented the “late night deal cooked up by politicians and the lobby group Hacked Off.” The same paper also that day sought to cast doubt upon the integrity of the campaign group when, in another article, it suggested that, through private donations to Hacked Off, “anonymous wealthy individuals are exerting excessive political influence.” It seemed a little absurd that a newspaper controlled by Rupert Murdoch should complain that wealthy individuals might exert such excessive influence; especially as one of the key goals of that campaign group was to reduce the abuses perpetrated by such influence. Another one of Blackhurst’s “screaming critics” – none other than the *Daily Mail*’s redoubtable stalwart Simon Heffer – railed that same day against the plans for the “statutory control of the press” which he viewed as coming “straight from the pages of George Orwell’s terrifying novel *1984*.” (Fortunately, however, the imposition of rat-based methods of torture did not make it to the final draft of the proposed royal charter.) Once more, the reactionaries of the established press elite, unwilling to compromise an iota of their self-granted powers, reverted to that tendency for hyperbolic inaccuracy which has so often resulted in the diminishing of their reputation in the eyes of the public. It appears somewhat ironic that these institutions would be so rabid in their attempts to subvert measures designed to restore their public trust by diluting their capacity for such rabidity.

Jean Baudrillard (2005, 34) has suggested that we inhabit an uncontestedly hypermediated reality which is “absolutely true, in the sense that nothing any longer stands against it.” In that they have sought to diminish the absolute influence of the mass media upon social reality, and insofar as they have attempted to re-ground the news industry within structures of public accountability, the advocates of a general desire for press regulation have – albeit in an essentially pedestrian way – advanced an improbable bid to counteract the incontrovertibly monolithic truth of this hyperreality. The press have however responded with degrees of hubris and hyperbole (paedophile nightmares and Orwellian terrors) which are both symptomatic of, and at the same time further exacerbate, the original problem: their detachment from, and disproportionate influence upon, the public experience of reality. Nor has the manner in which the political classes resorted to late night wrangling behind closed doors done much to bring the debate back down to earth or to return it to an arena of public understanding, public scrutiny and public trust. The possibility, then, of a radical renaissance in the relationship between journalism and

democracy appears to have been scuppered by this apparent failure of the media-political elite to learn the lessons of Leveson.

On 6 October 2009 David Cameron's Chancellor George Osborne had announced a series of major public spending cuts but had pledged that "we're all in this together." The following day Rebekah Brooks had texted to Cameron: "professionally we're definitely in this together!" As *The Guardian* argued on 4 June 2012 "the irony is that that phrase of Osborne's was meant to show off the Tories' fair-mindedness, their spirit of shared sacrifice. But this text from Rebekah Brooks skewers that notion, already dead, once more: it shows Cameron as exceptionally close to the top echelon of a corporate empire, permanently mindful of its concerns." So much then for the possibility that Lord Justice Leveson might restore trust in the relationship between the press and politicians and thus foster a renewal of democracy. The absurdity of this situation is almost hysterically risible. LOL, Mr Cameron, LOL. Or, to be frank, WTF...?

Democracy and the Press

Democracy can only surely prosper in a climate of information. The incompetence of misinformation and the wilful deceit of disinformation cannot provide the conditions most fundamentally required to permit a situation in which individual members of society can make informed democratic choices. Democracy therefore requires a set of media institutions (and specifically though not exclusively a set of news media institutions) which are sufficiently funded to generate competent (i.e. accurate and rigorously researched) news product, and which are sufficiently free of state and commercial imperatives and interests to speak the truth to power, or to interrogate power rather than to serve as the mouthpiece or manifestation of unelected and unaccountable power. The prospering of democracy therefore requires a pluralistic journalism which follows neither the agendas of its political or corporate masters nor the prejudices, assumptions or stereotypes propagated by its own industry.

Newspapers need to sell newspapers. The *Daily Mail* website is, for example, a global leader (the internet analytics company ComScore has repeatedly reported it scoring more hits than its closest rival the *New York Times*) precisely because it is able not only to give its readers what it thinks they want but also to know what they want pretty much of the time: an ideologically conservative formulaic narrative – characterized as the voice of Middle England (or indeed of Little England). Its readers do not want to hear about the triumphs of multiculturalism experienced by

diverse inner city communities, any more than they want to discover that the Queen of England is a foreigner or a radical, or that Gordon Brown has a PhD. They want their world views comfortingly reinforced (who doesn't?) and the *Mail* – founded, as it was, by Alfred Harmsworth in 1896 – has been reinforcing and accenting such positions for such a long time that in many ways it has become their originator.

Mick Temple (2010, 195-198) has suggested that press prejudice may merely articulate a broader culture of prejudice ingrained within the British populace. Yet, whether or not media prejudice is responsible for originating public prejudice, it clearly plays a key role in perpetuating and escalating that prejudice. It is in the media's power to naturalize ideology – to make ideology appear unideological – that the press might be seen as at their most influential, insofar as ideologies are most insidious when they are least visible. The *Mail* is extremely good at making assumptions appear as truths; but this is, again, not necessarily the result of a conscious conspiracy of disinformation and ideological manipulation. The press as a whole subscribes to its own most successful narratives; those newspapers which survive best are those which are most closely aligned with the most popular stories, structures and perspectives. As Michel Foucault (1991, 26) points out, “power is exercised rather than possessed.” Power structurations are self-performing and self-perpetuating; societal systematization is determined not by the conspiracies of sharp-suited men in smoke-filled rooms but by the evolution of institutional, economic and ideological conditions. These structurations are, in Bourdieu's terms (1977; 1986), collectively and objectively orchestrated by institutional systems rather than by individuals. In these terms, we are no more than the vehicles, vessels or tools of Marx's ideologies or of Richard Dawkins's memes. As Marshall McLuhan (2001, 51) supposed, humanity becomes no more than “the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate.” The press's readers, journalists, editors and even proprietors may be seen to function in this role.

But when newspapers only serve themselves – or when they merely parrot received wisdom (which is at best unwitting misinformation, and at worst ill-informed prejudice), then to what extent can the average news-consumer or reader (or – to resurrect a rather old-fashioned term – *citizen*) attain the levels of well-informed, balanced and unprejudiced critical thinking – free thinking – which might be considered a prerequisite for democracy? If freedom of individual thought is necessary for freedom of expression, and if freedom of public expression is a prerequisite for the flourishing of a pluralist democracy, then one might argue that a pluralist news industry has a key role (and therefore a responsibility, a public

accountability) in the propagation of freedom of thought essential to this process.

When a national scandal involving the sexual abuse of minors by a deceased celebrity is exploited by the nation's most popular newspapers (newspapers which themselves repeatedly sexualize youth and establish cults of celebrity) to bash the competition (in this case, the public broadcaster who employed the late celebrity), to increase the sales of those newspapers and to offer a distraction from allegations of their own misconduct – when it is only for legal reasons that newspapers will disdain from naming and shaming individuals against whom they have no evidence whatsoever save for the gossip of the internet – then we are perhaps beginning to witness the overt collapse of the notion of the public moral and ethical accountability of the journalistic profession and industry. We would then be beginning to witness what Keen (2008, 54) has dubbed “the degeneration of democracy into the rule of the mob and the rumor mill.”

When newspapers no longer check facts because they do not have time to (as a result of escalating economic constraints and contemporary workplace practices) or because they do not see the need to (why mistrust – why question – the narrative of hatred?) or because they do not want to (newspapers aren't in the business of facts, they are in the business of entertainment – the business of selling newspapers), then it might perhaps seem increasingly unlikely that this industry will ever again, in the UK at least, do much for the furtherance of the ideals of democracy. How many righteous tears were shed across the nation when on 10 July 2012 *The News of the World* said its final ‘thank you & goodbye’? Why then should we care about the fate of its counterparts? And, when the vast majority of the press have railed against the injustice of a public report and public policy that might seek to hold them to public account, have the broadsheet or ‘quality’ newspapers really demonstrated significantly greater value (in other words, a greater right to an inalienable and unaccountable freedom of the press) than their tabloid or populist rivals?

The Rite of Spring

Natalie Fenton (2012) has advanced strong arguments in favour of the regulation of the UK press in order to meet the modes of moral obligation and public accountability suggested by Lord Justice Leveson's report. Indeed Curran, Fenton and Freedman (2012, 184) have gone on to argue that a similar style of regulatory framework also seems appropriate for the internet: ‘the time has come to demand an internet that is run for the

benefit of the public.’ In the pursuit of this goal, they have called ‘for measures – for public control of a key utility – that have been applied to other key sections of the economy and society.’

It might at this juncture usefully be noted that we should not speak of the Internet. We should instead, says James Curran, call it the internet. Curran’s point is rather less flippant than it sounds. He observes that nineteenth century liberals had once believed that popular journalism would become an “autonomous agency of rational and moral instruction” and had therefore capitalized the “Newspaper Press”. How wrong, it now seems, they were. Curran suggests that we have applied the same idealizing or fetishizing attitude to the internet, arguing that it is now time to drop the awestruck capitals and see what this medium is really all about (Curran et al. 2012, 60). The first stage of that process might be to lose the capitalization.

Curran argues that the capitalization of ‘Internet’ stems from a period in which the discourse reflecting upon that medium was dominated by the notion that “utopian dreams, mutual reciprocity and pragmatic flexibility led to the building of a transformative technology that built a better world” (Curran et al. 2012, 34). Curran, by contrast, asserts that, while the internet might indeed one day assist in the construction of a better world, “the mainspring of change will come from society, not the microchip” (Curran et al. 2012, 12) and that therefore those who maintain faith in the idea that the internet’s impact will “follow a single direction dictated by its technology” fail to understand that this impact is in fact “filtered through the structures and processes of society” (Curran et al. 2012, 9). Curran explodes the technologically determinist fantasies of the internet and, in doing so, usefully counters some of the resurgent utopian cant which has, for example, arisen in connection with the uses of new media technologies by the activists who led the Arab Spring uprisings. He argues against the analyses of those events which have emphasized “the enabling role of communications technology, while paying little attention to the past or to the wider context of society” (Curran et al. 2012, 51) and supposes instead that “the Arab uprisings were the product not of Twitter and Facebook but of dissent fermented over decades” (Curran et al. 2012, 52).

The suggestion, however, that media do not in themselves deliver democracy does not mean that such media have no role or responsibility in the furtherance of democracy. Their role can be crucial, but only insofar as they are deployed towards a democratic effect; such media are not democratic in themselves, nor do they in themselves necessarily move a society in the direction of democratization; they may therefore be measured not in terms of their inalienable rights to absolute freedoms but

in terms of their public responsibilities (and the processes by which they may be held to account for their adherence to those responsibilities). Media are morally neutral tools; they are not inherently good or bad – which is to challenge any position which suggests that their powers should go unquestioned or their rights considered sacrosanct.

At the start of the twenty-first century internet entrepreneurs, governments and academics alike were making much of the revolutionarily democratic potential of Web 2.0 as the foundation for a new public sphere which might foster civic participation, dialogical citizenship and consensus politics. A decade into the century, more cautious voices had begun to exert a powerful influence over the academic discourse relating to this subject: many studies had shown that internet use in itself did not appear to affect levels of political participation (see, for example, Gibson et al. 2004, 3). Indeed the growth of the internet appeared to coincide with a period of increasing disaffection with politics in western nations. Other studies raised concerns as to the reinforcement and centralization of political and corporate power afforded by the internet (see Bynum and Rogerson 2004, 6). Such writers as Zizi Papacharissi (2010) and Evgeny Morozov (2011a) have influentially questioned an unbridled cyber-utopianism; and even emerging from out of the world of the internet industry itself, such figures as Andrew Keen (2008) have challenged their peers' continuing claims as to the communitarian, egalitarian and democratizing power of their medium.

The events which started in Tunisia in December 2010 and which spread across the Arab region began, however, to foster some measure of a renaissance in cyber-utopianism. Such luminaries as Stuart Allan (2011) and John Downing (2012) have reiterated an optimism for the democratic potential of new media in response to the uses of such technologies by the democratic revolutionaries in this region for the mobilization of popular action. Khamis and Vaughn (2011), for example, argued the increasingly popular notion that “the success of the Egyptian revolution, and the effective role that new media played in it, has broad implications [...] throughout the world.”

Yet it has become increasingly clear in these post-revolutionary nations that Web 2.0 has not established a dialogical political consensus, and that the public sphere, such as it is, remains a violent, turbulent and resoundingly material space. Within this context, it seems that new media technologies may not have represented a primary cause of democratic agitation (as a site for the development of political consciousness, debate and consensual strategy) so much as a practical catalyst, a useful tool for the mobilization of flash demonstrations and for the dissemination of

information and images to international news organizations (and indeed one which could be replaced by more traditional, low-tech tools when the internet was not available: as was seen, for example, in the case of the Egyptian uprising).

The Libyan author Hisham Matar has, for example, argued that the role of social media in the Arab Spring has been overstated by media commentators (Singh 2011). Matar has suggested that “the Egyptian uprising didn’t happen on Facebook or Twitter because it couldn’t have happened without the working classes, and they don’t have access to those things. But it allowed the agile, internationalist elite to mobilise and play to the international media.” Matar has added: “Social change takes a very long time. The internet is one of very many different tools and I don’t think it’s always going to make or break an uprising.”

As Chehib and Sohail (2011, 155) have suggested, “social media itself cannot be termed as a trigger for the revolutions.” They stress that in the Egyptian uprising of 2011 “social media’s main role was as a facilitator and an accelerating agent.” Courtney Radsch (2011, 80-81) points out that in the months leading up to Egypt’s uprising the Egyptian blogosphere, while reflecting a political situation that was clearly “combustible”, lacked a revolutionary spark – and that this spark was provided by the Tunisian uprising – despite that fact that such combustibility was not particularly evidenced in Tunisia’s own blogosphere. We may infer, therefore, that it was not the blogosphere itself which set the region alight. Indeed Morozov (2011b) has added that while “it’s been extremely entertaining to watch cyber-utopians [...] trip over one another in an effort to put another nail in the coffin of cyber-realism” those cyber-utopians who think the Arab Spring was ignited by activities on social networking websites are ignoring “the real-world activism underpinning them.”

In September 2011 BBC journalist Mishal Hussain presented a two-part documentary about the Arab Spring entitled *How Facebook Changed the World*. What is notable about Hussain’s documentary is how (despite its title) it demonstrated that social networking sites were perhaps most significant not in fomenting revolution internally but in their capacity “to show the outside world what was happening.” Hussain also repeatedly emphasized the limitations of the virtual revolution. She pointed out that in Egypt only 20 per cent of the population had internet access, and explained how, when net access was prevented, calls for protests had been sent not through the electronic ether but via taxi drivers. As Hussain stressed, when the Egyptian authorities had blocked the internet, “the activists already had their plan and technology was no part of it.” She added that when the Libyan government had made a similar move, Libyan