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Don't let newspapers become the lapdogs of the political class [1]

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My old friend John Whittingdale MP, Chairman of the House of Commons Media Committee, says that if the press become regulated in the same way that the broadcast media are, our newspapers will turn out just as bland and boring. Mind you, it is interesting no note that even all the regulation that we do have on broadcast media does not stop it messing up big time ? I cite the Newsnight Savile and McAlpine fiascos in evidence.

Three sorts of people in particular would like to see press regulation in Britain. The first is innocent members of the public who have been humiliated or distressed by press stories. They include people who have had their phones hacked. And people who may have a (greater or lesser) public persona but still believe their personal affairs should remain private.

The second group who would like to see press regulation are the Left. That is because most print newspapers take a right-of-centre stance. Some are indeed owned by people of overtly right-of-centre views and make no bones about promoting such views. Inconveniencing these papers and their owners would make certain folk on the Left quiver with delight.

The third group is of course the politicians of all parties. What you have to remember is that politicians think themselves honourable people with good ideas that will improve the way we live (even though these ideas conflict with the ideas of other politicians). The last thing they want is that beneficial process thwarted by self-opinionated journalists who can say what they like without having to face an election every five years. Or to have their authority undermined by campaigns such as exposing just what they claim on expenses, pursued by journalists who are not worthy to lick the shoes of them and their honourable colleagues.

Regarding the first group, I'm not sure if phone hacking is actually against the law, but there is a simple remedy, which is to make it so explicitly. And the limits on press intrusion into people's privacy, while it is always going to be debatable, is something that we already have rules on, that work tolerably well.

On the second, is it acceptable that rich folks can buy newspapers and use them to promote whatever views they want? Well yes, pretty much. We are supposed to believe in free speech, and if we don't agree with what our newspapers are trying to push on us, we don't have to buy them. I resent much more the BBC, which (if you want to own a TV at all), you have to pay for even if you hate it.

As for the third group, I wouldn't let them touch the press with mint surgical tweezers. Editors have been telling us what an impossible position they will be in if they have to check with some quango before they can print a story. But that is not how it works. Everybody knows that a statutory regulator has the power to close a paper down with fines, inquiries and judgements. Gradually, over the years, editors will get used to reining themselves in here or there, to stay on the regulator's good side. And over the years, the regulator's staff will find more and more jobs for themselves to do, and intrude themselves more and more into the affairs of the papers. We have seen the same thing in other industries. Soon, the papers will become mere lapdogs of the political class. And we have seen from other countries where that leads to.

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