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Power to the press [1]

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The Newspaper Society, representing a large wodge of UK newspapers, have rejected the Leveson Report plans to regulate them and are publishing their own proposals for self-regulation - backed by a Royal Charter. All power to them.

After the phone hacking scandal, which brought down the*News Of The World,* the government and the opposition in the UK came to endorse the idea of an official press regulator, set up by Royal Charter, with powers to fine newspapers and demand they print prominent apologies. Trouble was, these discussions deliberately excluded the newspaper industry.

They point out that phone hacking is a crime, and that there are perfectly good laws to deal with it, without having some lumbering press regulator. Indeed, we haven't had press regulation in the UK for three hundred years, and with good reason ? once government officials are put in charge of the press, there is very little hope left for free speech, as a number of international media bodies have already pointed out. It might take time, but gradually the press would become agents of the prevailing government. Indeed, it would not even take specific interventions to do so. All the regulator has to do is raise an eyebrow - and a press that could be fined very heavily, or told what to print, would quickly take the hint.

The Newspaper Society's proposals would deny Parliament free rein to change newspaper regulation as it pleased ? an important safeguard of free speech. Instead, the regulator and the media would have to agree. They also call for members of the regulation panel to be appointed by retired judges, with various interests (including the press) represented. Former editors could sit on the panel (the government's plan would ban them), which is important in order to have a proper discussion, after all. Media customers would have a say too ? and let's face it, this is all about them. And there would be limits on what the regulator could demand newspapers to print by way of apologies. Which is good. One can think of a point in the future where some newspaper exposes government wrongdoing and is then forced to publish a two-page endorsement of everything the government does.

If anything, the Newspaper Society should have been tougher with these proposals. Their proposals would still allow for fines of up to £1m, and strong investigative powers from the regulator. And let's face it, there are already plenty of laws out there to protect people's privacy (where this whole thing began) and who break the law should be punished. But our newspapers have a vital role in exposing the shortcomings of the establishment: they need to be free to do so. We don't need a new regulator to do these things. The trouble with regulation, in any case, is that it usually has the opposite effect of that intended. Competition between different media is probably a surer way to keep them clean.

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