

'More carrot, less stick' needed to regulate the press

May 1 2012

A new report published by Oxford University's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) argues that a 'carrot rather than stick' approach might be recommended in the framing of any future press regulation.

The report is the first comparative study of international press councils designed to inform the Leveson Inquiry and stimulate wider debate on UK press reform. It highlights the case of Richard Desmond, co-owner of The Irish Daily Star, who famously pulled his titles out of the Press Complaints Commission, the UK's self-regulatory body, yet joined the Irish Press Council.

The report suggests that Desmond's decision stemmed from the fact that membership of the Irish Press Council offered tangible benefits in contrast to the UK's Press Complaints Commission. Publications that join the Irish Press Council are legally recognised if they maintain a record of compliance. It also highlights the fact that this statutory recognition helps members to defend themselves in any future defamation proceedings, and suggests that this encourages news outlets to comply with the standards set by the Irish Press Council.

Report author Lara Fielden is a Visiting Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and was formerly a BBC journalist before working for the regulator Ofcom. Her report, 'Regulating the Press: a comparative study of international press councils', suggests that more emphasis should be placed on the commercial incentives which

encourage greater compliance with a voluntary code of press regulation. She argues that this approach has considerable advantages over what she calls a 'narrow focus on penalties and enforcement'.

She said: 'After comparing a range of press regulatory frameworks, I have concluded that the UK would do well to build on the Irish model where voluntary ethical incentives are intertwined with legal and therefore commercial advantages. This could transform those sections of the UK's newsroom culture which have regarded regulation as a bit of an irrelevance.

'I believe this historic view of regulation has gone hand in hand with phone-hacking in the UK. We need to move towards a model where there are robust incentives to ensure that ethical compliance is viewed as a commercial selling point.'

The study argues that the ultimate sanction for those newspapers that fail to comply with a voluntary code of press regulation should be suspension or expulsion from the regulatory body. This would also mean that such news outlets would have to give up the advantages and privileges associated with being members.

The study analyses different degrees of press regulation, from mandatory statutory regulation through to voluntary frameworks, across a range of countries. In Denmark, press council membership is required by law and is accompanied by the threat of a fine or prison sentence for editors that fail to publish a press council decision when required. Yet despite this 'strong-arm approach', the study points out that a parliamentary scrutiny has just been set up in Denmark to address a lack of active compliance.

At the other end of the regulatory scale, there are codes that are entirely voluntary: the report reveals that where news outlets are able to withdraw

their membership of a regulatory body without suffering any consequences, press councils in those countries have experienced a haemorrhaging of members. The study highlights Canada as a country where the voluntary approach is clearly not working. Meanwhile in Germany, publications have been challenging the press council and refusing to publish adjudications.

Lara Fielden said: 'The merits of an incentivised middle way should not be underestimated. Too often the history of press councils overseas and in the UK reveals cycles of threats of state intervention, followed by expedient industry accommodation, with the public left out of the conversation. The public's interest must be at the heart of the conversation about better press regulation.'

Overseas, the report notes, press councils have started to launch kite-marking and membership badge requirements. This is so the public can recognise news outlets that are ethically regulated as opposed to those that are unregulated.

Lara Fielden concluded: 'It is currently impossible for the public to differentiate in any meaningful way between titles that are members of the UK's [Press Complaints Commission](#) and those that are not, whether in print or online.'

'A system that required members to display a standards mark would give consumers a clearer idea about the practices of different news outlets. It would also give members the opportunity to promote their credentials as an ethical operator, which should give them a competitive edge over those outlets that did not carry the standards mark of compliance.'

Provided by Oxford University

Citation: 'More carrot, less stick' needed to regulate the press (2012, May 1) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-05-carrot.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.