"Moral Decline of the British Press"

Transcript of the lecture held on Friday 13 October 2017, 4.00-6.00pm at the MECO Seminar Room S226, John Woolley Building A20, University of Sydney

Introduction

It is a very great honour to be here to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Macquarie University Centre for Media History, which has made a major international impact. I look forward to raising a glass after this session toasting its achievement.

And it is good also to speak here at Sydney University. The last time I was in Sydney I staggered off a plane to give a lecture at the Police Museum which was broadcast by the equivalent of BBC radio 4. A Sydney University professor – and a friend of mine – asked a pointed question at the end of the lecture, with a broadcast mike overhead: 'Do you know', he said, 'I don't think you know the difference between the internet and the web. What is it?' As sheer luck had it, I did know the answer but I might very easily not have done. So I have come here braced for the worst.

Culmination

The phone hacking scandal that engulfed the British press was the culmination of changes that occurred in Fleet Street during the 1980s. This is not to suggest that before the 1980s, there had been a golden age, a prelapsarian period followed by a fall from grace. There had always been pressure to get results, and this had sometimes led to the cutting of corners.

But editorial standards declined markedly in the 1980s, something that was commented upon at the time. Writing In 1983, Henry Porter listed numerous inaccurate or misleading stories that had been recently published, including the invention of an overnight love tryst between Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer on a lonely railway siding in the royal train (Sunday Mirror);(5) the fabrication of a fictitious interview with Mrs Marica McKay, the widow of a Falklands VC hero (Sun); the touching up of a photograph of 'Lady Di' to give a hint of nipples in a low-cut dress (Sun); and pillorying a child as the 'Worst Brat in Britain' without mentioning that he was ill as a consequence of meningitis (Sun).(6) These were all examples, he argued, of a 'low regard for truth' that was spreading across different sections of leading newspapers.(7) Two years later Tom Baistow, the veteran commentator on Fleet Street, lamented 'the drift towards the gutter and the subordination of news content to sensation, scandal, jazzy packaging and million-pound bingo in the scramble for sales' in what had become the 'fourth- rate estate'.(8) The following year, Britain's best-selling newspaper cleared its front page for a story that symbolised the new ethos. 'Freddie Starr Ate My Hamster', screamed the headline above a story claiming that the comic had devoured a live pet in a sandwich.(9) It subsequently transpired that Starr's publicist, Max Clifford, had colluded in the invention of this story in order to promote his client's forthcoming tour.(10) It was news reports like this which prompted the distinguished tabloid journalist, Geoffrey Goodman, to write in 1989 that the press has 'a crisis of standards, a crisis of credibility, a crisis of freedom itself'.(11)

Prominent proprietors set new ethical compass bearings in a way that is best illustrated by two telling incidents. In 1983, Murdoch's News International acquired Hitler's

unpublished diaries, authenticated by Britain's premier historian, Lord Dacre (Hugh Trevor-Roper). However, Dacre subsequently had second thoughts and rang to say that he now believed that the diaries were fraudulent. Panic ensued at the Sunday Times, prompting a senior executive, Brian MacArther, to ring Murdoch in America to ask what to do. 'Fuck Dacre', Murdoch replied. 'Publish'.(13)

What happened next was still more revealing. The diaries turned out to be a crude forgery, giving rise to dismay on the part of senior Sunday Times journalists who feared that the reputation of the paper had been irreparably damaged. But when they had a meeting to discuss the debacle with their visibly bored proprietor, he said: 'Look, I don't know why you are so worked up. We put on 60,000 in circulation last week, and there's every evidence we're hanging on to it'.(14) Subsequently he told a New York Times journalist enquiring into the fiasco: 'we are in the entertainment business'.(15)

The second telling incident is when Robert Maxwell, owner of the Mirror group, introduced a new competition in the Daily Mirror in 1990. Readers were offered £1 million if they could correctly identify from photos of football games where the out-of-shot ball was on the pitch. The competition ran for weeks offering the tantalising prospect of becoming a millionaire. But it was all an illusion. Maxwell had taken aside the promotions manager and the paper's editor [now a distinguished university professor] to ensure that the competition was rigged so that no one would win a £1 million prize.(16) Deceit was fostered by the boss.

The new direction at the top was in part a response to the changing economic environment in Fleet Street. A circulation war broke out in the early 1980s, reminiscent of the interwar period, leading to extravagant competitions and prizes. 'KILL AN ARGIE AND WIN A METRO' [car] mocked Private Eye in a spoof Sun headline.(15) By 1984, most papers (including the Times) were running some kind of game, with an estimated £30 million available from press competitions.(16)

In the mid-1980s, new national papers mushroomed on a scale not seen since the late Victorian era. While most of these new papers were short-lived, they intensified competitive pressures. This was followed by a development that was to profoundly influence the press for the next thirty years: collapsing sales.

National newspapers had temporarily arrested their decline during the 1980s. However, the total circulation of national dailies decreased sharply in the 1990s, and this trend accelerated in the subsequent period. By 2015, total national daily circulation was less half of what it had been in 1980. The fall of national Sunday newspaper circulation was still more vertiginous. Total national Sunday circulation in 2015 was little more than a third of its level in 1980.

Falling circulation was partly offset by the launch of 'online editions' after 1999. But these latter proved to be poor earners since many online editions were offered free to users. In addition, the press's financial problems were confounded by their precipitate loss of advertising. 'Newsbrands''s share of UK advertising more than halved between 2007 and 2016.(19) Within this category, even strong national papers' advertising revenue plummeted.(20)

This haemorrhaging of sales and advertising caused some senior journalists to become ever more reckless - and indeed lawless. The ethos of the Wild West, which began to take root in 1980s Fleet Street, became unbridled.

Institutional bullying

Intensified commercial pressures led to the browbeating of journalists to deliver results. An autocratic regime was established in the Sun under its authoritarian editor, Kelvin Mackenzie (1981-1994). He would put his face close to an underperforming journalist and say: 'You still 'ere, then, eh? Haven't you gone yet?', causing them to fear for their jobs.(21) He would berate, on a regular basis, journalists in front of their colleagues in order to galvanise and motivate. When a reporter, Stuart Higgins, responded to his bollocking with a calm smile, Mackenzie roared: 'You smarmy cunt, Higgy, you take it all, don't you.... '. Mackenzie then ordered a mugshot of Higgins, holding a telephone, to appear in the next issue of the paper, with the strapline: 'Want someone to yell at? Scream at? Fume at? RING HIGGY THE HUMAN SPONGE.....' Printed in large type was the number of Higgins's direct line. The journalist had to endure insulting phone calls from the public in Mackenzie's version of the medieval stocks.(22)

A tyrannical regime was also established at the News of the World. An official tribunal investigating a case of unfair dismissal at the paper concluded that the paper had a 'culture of bullying'.(23) Testimony from journalists to the Leveson Inquiry corroborated this claim.(24) The favourite method for getting results was again a 'bollocking', the ritualised humiliation of journalists in front of their peers. Journalist bylines were also monitored as performance indicators. As one senior executive explained, 'if your byline count was low, then obviously your job would be in jeopardy'.(25)

Similar pressures were exerted across the popular national press. The long-serving editor of the Daily Mail, Paul Dacre, was notoriously bullying. His intemperate railing at subordinates, beginning with his pet phrase 'You cunt', became the stuff of legend, being nicknamed – after a well-known play – as his 'Vagina Monologues'.(26)

However, top-down pressure was greatest in red top newspapers because this was where economic insecurity was greatest.(27) The lowest of the low at red top papers were the 'shifters': journalists who did not know whether they will be working the next day. A winnowing process took place in which only some shifters were asked back, thus creating a strong incentive for young, ambitious journalists to get stories by, if necessary, bending the rules. A natural career progression beckoned: short term contract, well paid staff job, and subsequent promotion. Meanwhile some middle aged staffers saw energetic, young journalists climbing the ladder and felt threatened, at a time when declining circulations and advertising were leading to successive waves of redundancy. Senior journalists were expensive: it made economic sense to let them go if they lost their youthful edge.

Senior managements pressed for results, and journalists had to find ways of delivering. This was the institutional context that gave rise to the phone hacking scandal. Intercepting voice mail was an easy way to get good stories, like picking low lying fruit. It gave young journalists a leg-up; it offered beleaguered, middle-aged journalists a chance to save their careers;(28) and it provided a way for section heads to manage a manic system that demanded great stories.(29) [reminiscence]

However, the rise of phone hacking was not just the culmination of increased institutional bullying and economic insecurity. It also reflected the wider culture of the industry.

Trade identity

Phone hacking took place in a sector of the press where truth-stretching and veiled blackmail had become increasingly acceptable. Tabloids found that a good way of generating copy was for a journalist to talk to a PR who wanted publicity for a client, and jointly come up with a story that might be fictitious but worked well for both client and paper.(30) Fabrication could also be instigated from the news desk. Sharon Marshall (who worked for the Daily Star, Sun and News of the World in the late 1990s and early 2000s) recalls that 'sometimes the quotes were written before we even left the office. Before we even knew who we were interviewing'. Thus, at the time when the Steps song '5,6.7,8' was a hit, she was told to get a story that fitted the headline 'My 5, 6, 7, 8 Times Every Night with Steps Girl'. Being resourceful, she found a man who was willing to say, for a fee, all the right things about his ex-girlfriend, Lisa, a member of the Steps group.(31)

At the tougher end of the news trade, journalists sometimes coerced their sources. This could take the form of horse-trading: for example, saying to a celebrity 'We'll take out the cocaine bit if you cough to the shagging'.(32) If well managed, the victim would be positively grateful while providing the right quotes. Alternatively, an informant would be offered the choice of co-operation or humiliation. As one witness to the Leveson Inquiry explained: 'you say to the girl, "we're going to make you look tawdry and awful and sluttish, but if you talk to us, ... we'll make you lovely and we'll give you some money as well"'(33). The informant was rarely paid what was offered before publication: this merely became the starting point for subsequent negotiation.(34) The most extreme form of coercion, described by Graham Johnson, a seasoned investigative tabloid journalist (who worked for the News of the World and Sunday Mirror) was to stage a 'swarm'. Colleagues and helpful paparazzi banged on the door, and hosed down the property with flashlights. A friendly journalist then offered the victim protection on signing an exclusive agreement.(35)

Cynicism is built into the DNA of tabloid journalism. The shocked tone with which red top journalists reveal transgressions is often not their true voice, and bears little relationship to how these journalists actually lead their lives. The married editors of the News of the World and Sun, Andy Coulson and Rebekah Brooks, were having an adulterous affair, starting in 2008, when their papers were running regular stories about 'love cheats', 'love rats', 'torrid romps' and 'lust-fuelled sessions'.(31) Similarly, a significant number of tabloid journalists took drugs(32) while they or their colleagues wrote horrified articles about the 'drug shame' of celebrities.

The view that journalism is 'all a game' is part of the tradition of Fleet Street. Most British national newspaper journalists see themselves as belonging to a trade rather than a profession. They associate a trade identity with *not* being part of the Establishment, but of belonging to a rumbustious, competitive, irreverent, rule-breaking, untameable *industry*. Unlike their professionally oriented American peers, British tabloid journalists are inclined to stress craft skills, to see themselves as having one foot in the entertainment industry, and even to relish the outrageous things that some of their colleagues get up to.

This celebration of transgression became institutionalised in the Shafta awards, launched in 1987, which honoured the best of the worst in journalism in an ironic but indulgent and affectionate way. By the early 2000s, the era of phone hacking, the Shafta awards ceremony was a well-attended annual event held in locations like London's Café de Paris. The Wing Commander award went to the biggest 'flyer' in print – that is, the most obviously invented story that was brought safely to land with no legal comeback. The 'Princess Margaret' award (commemorating a report that Princess Margaret was about to appear in

the TV series, Crossroads) was given to the most ludicrous story printed that year. Lifetime awards went to top chancers, like the former Daily Mirror editor, Piers Morgan.

Cynicism was combined with hubris. Senior journalists regularly sang their own praises. According to Daily Mirror editor Richard Wallace, the British press is 'the envy of the world'.(33) Numerous politicians also paid homage to the press. In a speech to the Society of Editors in 2014, Sajid Javid, Minster for Culture, Media and Sport, lauded 'the hardworking, highly skilled' journalists who, 'time and again, help to change the world for the better'. He concluded by saying that 'Britain's newspapers remain the best in the world'.(34) Mazher Mahmood, the maestro of sting journalism, told a court with great pride that his work had been 'praised by two Home Secretaries'.(35) In 2016, he was jailed for perverting the course of justice when he was caught out in suppressing evidence – in court – in his stitch-up of the pop star Tulisa Contostavlos.

The combination of collective self-regard, praise from government ministers and also a cosy relationship to the police encouraged a sense of impunity among journalists. As a tabloid journalist recalls in relation to blagging:

'I never stopped to think whether any of this was illegal. To tell you the truth, I didn't care. There was definitely a feeling that we, the News of the World, were above the law, and we could do anything we wanted. Who was going to turn us over? No one. Why? Because that was our job. We turned people over. Not the other way round. Anyway, the police looked upon us as the good guys .....'(36)

There were counter-currents opposed to this vainglorious sense of tabloid righteousness. One was a professionalising shift that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s, when journalists on some newspapers gained greater autonomy. The flagship of this 'professional' approach was the much admired Sunday Times under Harold Evans' editorship (1967-81). This tradition shrivelled with the renewal of press partisanship in the 1980s, although its legacy was perpetuated for a time by the now defunct (in print form) Independent.

Another counter-current came from the National Union of Journalists (NUJ). In the 1970s, the union was a powerful force. It had a long history of attacking press controllers for lowering editorial standards, and of criticising the Press Council as inadequate.(42) It even set up in 1985 its own Ethics Council which took action against members who behaved unethically - something that proved to be deeply controversial within the union. However, the NUJ lost members and influence during the later 1980s and early 1990s, when a large number of newspaper groups de-recognised the union and imposed personal contracts on staff. The NUJ's Ethics Council became increasingly ineffectual.

In brief, economic failure – reflected in falling sales - led managements to exert greater pressure on journalists to get results. This pressure was intensified by competition with social media in the last decade. Fear of falling down on the job at a time of increasing economic insecurity, and sometimes driving ambition, led some journalists to engage in unethical, and even criminal, activity. The absence of a professional culture among British journalists made them especially vulnerable to managerial pressure. Collective self-regard and courtship by politicians encouraged the development of a reckless, hubristic culture, which an inadequate self-regulatory system weakened critical voices in the industry did little to constrain.(43) This resulted in popular newspapers becoming increasingly heedless of the harm they inflicted on innocent members of the public.

Wrecking lives

Madeleine McCann, a three year old girl, was abducted from an apartment in Portugal on 3 May 2007 where the McCann family were staying on holiday. At first, press coverage was deeply sympathetic to the parents. But intense public interest persisted, and journalists had to find new ways to report the same story. On 7 September 2007 the Portuguese police gave the McCanns the status of 'arguidos' (persons of interest for the investigation, not a synonym for an accused), and this provided the cue for the construction of a new narrative. A series of seemingly authoritative reports suggested that the McCanns were responsible for the death of their daughter, and were involved in covering up the crime. 'Police believe Mother killed Maddy' reported the Evening Standard.(39) 'Blood found in McCanns' hire car "DID come from Madeleine"', reported the Daily Mail.(40) The story was untrue(41) – indeed the car was hired after the abduction - but it had the ring of truth. These damning reports were made more persuasive by newspaper accounts that blackened the character of the McCanns. The most damning was the Daily Star's headline 'Maddie "sold" by hard-up McCanns' above a story alleging that they had sold their child into white slavery.(42) On another occasion, the inventive Daily Star reported that the McCanns were involved in a 'sleazy wife-swapping ring'.(43)

The McCanns had to cope both with the heartbreak of their child's abduction, and also the accusation in newspapers that they were involved in her killing. Their suffering was exacerbated by regular harassment. Journalists and photographers camped close to their house for almost four months. Photographers banged on the windows of their car or jumped out from behind a hedge to catch a 'startled' look. Several times their daughter, Amelie, said: 'Mummy, I'm scared'.(44) In addition, the News of the World published excerpts from her private diary – which even her husband had not seen – which the paper acquired for a substantial payment indirectly through the Portuguese police.(45)

The McCanns were lied about, vilified and their wellbeing utterly disregarded in order to boost flagging newspaper sales. Yet, what happened to them was mild compared to the crucifixion of Christopher Jefferies, following the murder of Joanna Yates in 2010. The popular press's first response was to speculate about who the murderer was, with police help. Was the killer someone Joanna Yates had cooked for since she had bought a large, ready-made meal enough for two people, just before her murder?(46) Did a Facebook friend kill her?(47) Was she the victim of an obsessed prowler?(48) Was it the work of a 'rogue cop'?(49) Comparisons were made with the murder of another blonde (Melanie Road) in Bath, and another woman (Glenis Carruthers) strangled in Bristol in 1974, with the suggestion that somehow the murders were connected.(50) Or maybe there was an accomplice, which meant that more than one sexual predator was on the loose?(51) Like writers of crime fiction, journalists were looking for a story line.

They found it in Christopher Jefferies, a retired school teacher who lived in the same building as Joanna Yates and was her landlord. When he was detained and questioned by the police for three days, there was a feeding frenzy. According to the Sun, Express and Mail respectively, Jefferies was 'a creepy oddball', 'a sort of Nutty Professor' and 'an eccentric loner'.(52) Journalists questioned acquaintances, dug for dirt and fictionalised his life. Jefferies allegedly bought a flat from a paedophile (in fact there had been two other intervening purchasers);(53) he had an unhealthy interest in blonde women;(54) and he was obsessed by death.(55) A strong impression was conveyed that the police had found the murderer. But in fact Christopher Jefferies was entirely innocent. Vincent Tabak, a neighbour of Joanna Yates, had strangled her, and was convicted in October 2011.

There were other victims of the press's increasingly desperate drive to win attention at a time of growing competition from social media. For example, press reporting of murders at the Stepping Hill Hospital, Stockport in 2011 had a strong resemblance to the reporting of Joanna Yates' murder.(56) As before, the press speculated about the identity of the murderer, with help from the police. Was the killer who injected saline bags with insulin 'a warped mercy killer'?(57) Or a cruel psycho who got a kick out of playing Russian roulette with peoples' lives?(58) Or perhaps someone similar to the 'Angel of Death' Beverley Allitt who had murdered four children in 1991?(59) Once again, journalists were story tellers casting around for a plot.

And then they got a clear and compelling narrative when Nurse Rebecca Leighton was taken into questioning (and subsequently charged). Some newspapers reported her arrest in a way that clearly implied that she was guilty. The Daily Star proclaimed 'Hero Nurse Nabs "Angel of Death"', with an inset photo of Rebecca Leighton looking less than an angel.(60) The Daily Mail asked 'How many more poison victims? .....', with an inset picture of Rebecca Leighton dressed as a cowboy with a suggestive toy gun in her mouth.(61) Leighton's character was blackened in a way that seemingly corroborated her guilt (though not to the same degree as Jefferies).(62) Articles, some drawing on Rebecca Leighton's Facebook profile, portrayed the nurse as dissolute, averse to work, and fond of booze.(63) Perhaps she had acted out of revenge, it was also suggested, because she had been rejected for promotion.(64) Pictures of her partying 'days' after a poisoned patient had died were published to reveal her supposed heartlessness.(65) But once again, the person fitted up by the press as the killer was innocent. The true murderer turned out to be the male nurse Victorino Chua, who was convicted in 2015.

Leighton was collateral damage in the bid to staunch falling sales. So was the Dowler family who attracted public sympathy when their private lives were picked over, and their murdered daughter's phone was hacked. However, the plight of the Watson family – which attracted little public attention - was even worse. When the press published derogatory articles about their murdered daughter, their 15 year old son killed himself. He died, clutching the attack articles in his hands.(66)

Of course, words can have unintended consequences, and mistakes inevitably occur when working under the pressure of time. Yet, during the Leveson Inquiry, senior journalists in charge of papers which traduced innocent people displayed– apart from the occasional piety – little real concern for their victims. Instead what came through most strongly was their righteous libertarianism, their desire to secure an exclusive story, their determination not to be left behind their rivals, and their overriding concern with what was legal rather than ethical.(67)

Perhaps the most revealing testimony came from Richard Desmond. He went through the motions by declaring that 'we would not run a story if we thought that it would damage that [our paper's reputation] or seriously affect someone's life'.(68) This was not entirely convincing from a proprietor of a paper which suggested, as we have seen, that the McCanns sold their child into white slavery. But he expressed with greater candour his underlying approach:

'I think that we are in a business to give readers/viewers what they want to read and watch and as long as it is legal that is what we aim to do. We do not talk about ethics or morals because it is a very fine line and everybody's ethics are different'.(69)

Nothing could make clearer the moral vacuum in his press group, unless it was his earlier response: 'Ethical – I don't know what the word means……'(70) To be fair to Richard Desmond, he was only expressing what had become almost a mainstream view. As the much admired Press Association journalist, Chris Moncrieff, put it sardonically:

'For myself I have never yet been able to locate a conscience even if I had wanted to struggle with it. If a story is on offer it seems to me it doesn't matter how it is imparted so long as it is within the law.'(71)

Threat to public health

If one sales strategy was to embellish crime reports, another was to make readers fearful. That was why the press published a growing volume of medical scare stories.(72) The irresponsibility of some of this reporting is best illustrated by press coverage of the one-in-three, mumps, measles and rubella (MMR) vaccine. To summarise, the press gave enormous prominence to maverick medical opinion, and to the anguish of parents who believed that the MMR vaccine had caused their children to become autistic, for the best part of a decade. At the height of the panic, in January 2001, the Sun ran a scare story about the vaccine on average every other day for an entire month. This scare was entirely unjustified: the scientific evidence was overwhelming in showing that the vaccine did not induce autism. However, this long running scare story did not just sell newspapers. It led to a sharp reduction in the take-up of the vaccine, and an epidemic of both mumps and measles.

Mumps and measles are significant illnesses which can give rise to serious complications. Measles can lead to encephalitis, brain damage and even death (with one British child dying in 2005), while mumps can lead to meningitis and hearing loss. A number of newspapers carry a heavy responsibility for what happened. Their drive to reverse circulations in free fall, at whatever cost, led to the revival of avoidable diseases.

Indignation

'We must make the readers cross', instructed an internal memo at the Sunday Express in 2003.(89) One way of doing this was to find stories about migrants behaving badly, posing a public threat, or receiving favourable treatment from the authorities. This led popular papers (with the notable exception of papers in the Mirror group) to look for stories that fitted this pre-set news agenda.

However, demand for these stories outstripped their supply. Some journalists responded to this shortfall by stretching the truth. There were an enormous number of these spun stories. To take one example, almost at random, the Daily Express reported that, in Lubeck, 'children as young as 13 have been told to cook and clean for migrants' as part of their work experience programme. A 'furious mother' was quoted as saying that it represented a new form of 'servitude', while the UKIP deputy leader Paul Nuttall expressed concern about the children's safety. This story was headlined 'Children Told to Cook and Clean for Migrants', with the sub-head 'No Wonder Germans are Fed up with the EU'.(102)

What the paper omitted to mention was that the idea of cooking and cleaning came from the pupils themselves, after migrant children had sat in on a class. The authorities did not compel children to do this. On the contrary, parents had to give permission in a written form of consent, issued by the Kiel Ministry of Education, before their children were

allowed to participate in the scheme.(103) Volunteering to be nice to migrants was not a Daily Express story, so it was given a twist to fit the paper's news agenda.

In a similar vein, the Daily Star ran in 2010 a front page story reporting that Rochdale Council 'wastes YOUR money' by funding 'Muslim-only Public Loos'.(100) In fact these loos were not funded by the local council but by a developer who was building a new shopping centre. And they were not 'Muslim-only': the squat-down loos that so riled the paper are widely used in Asian countries regardless of a person's religion.(101)

There were numerous other angry-making stories, not least a regular supply of fabulous anti-EU stories designed to raise blood pressure. Their central theme was that European bureaucrats are intent on bossing British people about in pettifogging and absurd ways. Many of these stories were fables. Thus, leading national papers reported that the EU was banning barmaids from wearing low cut tops ('Hands off our barmaids' boobs'), forbidding 'Britain's historical imperial measurements' ('After 800 years, the acre is history'),(181) and telling 'women to hand in worn-out sex toys'.(182) In addition, the EU was said to be planning to outlaw corgis ('the Queen's favourite dog'),(183) to stop the weekday sale of booze by off-licences,(184) end life sentences for murderers in Britain,(185) insist on the relabelling of yoghurt as 'fermented milk pudding',(186) 'rename Trafalgar Square and Waterloo Station'(187) and impose a quota of gypsy MPS on the UK (188). Not one of these stories was true.(189)

Their publication reflected falling levels of accuracy. This was highlighted when a documentary film maker, Chris Atkins in 2009, made up seven irresistible stories typified by the spoof that Pixie Geldof, the model and singer, padded her bra with sweets. Six out of the seven were published in leading popular national papers including the Sun and Daily Mirror. The cavalier attitude towards checking stories that this project revealed shows how bad things had got by the new millennium.

Epilogue

A standard defence of the tabloid press is that it is popular: and to criticise its content is to criticise its readers. More generally, it is argued, the press has a proud history of serving the public, and should be cherished as a consequence.

Since the British public is always spoken for in this self-regarding discourse, it is worth examining what surveys of public attitudes reveal. In 2016, only 18% of British adults said that they trusted national newspaper journalists to tell the truth.(118) This was a fall from 37 % in 2006, registering growing public distrust.(119) Yet, this sharp decrease was merely the culmination of a trend that had begun in the 1980s. Those believing that journalists tell the truth nearly halved between 1983 and 1993, making journalists in 1993 the most distrusted group – out of 15 – in Britain.(120)

Even these figures do not fully convey just how low the British public's estimation of its press had sunk. In 2015, distrust of the press was greater in Britain than in 31 other European countries. The British press was an outlier, commanding *much* less credibility among its national population than the press elsewhere in Europe. The British press's net trust rating was -51%: lower even than the Serbian press with a net trust rating of -39%.(121) The low comparative ranking of the British press in 2015 was consistent with previous Eurobarometer surveys extending back to 2002.(122)

This is what the British public really thinks about 'the finest press in the world'.