

Submission to the PRP's call for information about the effectiveness of the UK's system of press regulation in 2022

This is the submission of independent press regulator Impress to the Press Recognition Panel's call for information about the effectiveness of the UK's system of press regulation in 2022.

Following recommendations in the Leveson Report, and in accordance with the expressed and overwhelming view of Parliament, the PRP was established in 2014 to oversee "a wholly independent and effective system of self-regulation with politics playing no part in it". Eight years on, not a single one of the newspapers whose practices had given rise to Leveson has agreed to be accountable to an approved regulator.

Impress is the only regulator approved by the PRP and it effectively regulates a large number of local, regional and specialist news publications, in print and online, but the entirety of the British national press remains subject only to codes and to regulators they have themselves established and financed. Under pressure from the press, successive governments have declined to implement the incentives that Parliament had put in place to encourage membership of an approved regulator.

Through no fault of its own, the PRP therefore presides over a regulatory system which fails to give consumers the protections they need and which, in the absence of government action, will be ultimately unsustainable.

In light of further recent legal proceedings and allegations of intrusive journalistic practices, we would also like to invite people and organisations to share their views and experiences as to whether or not the issues identified in the Leveson Inquiry persist.

1.1 During the past year Impress has worked with the University of Derby and the University of Leeds to better understand contemporary public attitudes, beliefs and knowledge about press standards and regulation. A representative, random, stratified sample of the UK population (n 3040) was undertaken in June 2022, followed by five in depth focus groups. This has resulted in a number of research papers, including a [News Literacy Report](#), published by Impress in November 2022, which presented detailed analysis of attitudes to press regulation, journalism standards, values and trust.

1.2 The report found 78% of the public agree with the idea of press regulation that is independent of the industry and of government. By contrast, only 48% think that regulation by a body that is connected to the industry or government is acceptable.

1.3 Most of the public say they have a low level of understanding or awareness of press regulation and standards. A clear majority also believe (wrongly) that there is a single regulator that covers all media. 65% of the public believe that effective regulation of the press would improve the quality of journalism with only 6% disagreeing.

1.4 More than half (57%) do not trust journalists. Almost half (48%) do not trust the news media in general. 60% do not trust tabloid newspapers, 50% do not trust middle market newspapers, 35% do not trust broadsheet newspapers and 33% do not trust local newspapers. 48% do not trust online only news providers and 45% do not trust news aggregators or apps.

1.5 90% of the public identify accuracy as an important news value, but just 64% think news publishers deliver on that value. 80% say it is important for journalists to admit their mistakes openly, but only 44% say that they see this in practice.

1.7 In summary, there is compelling evidence to show that the issues identified by Leveson - low levels of trust in journalists and news publishers, the need for clear ethical standards and for genuinely independent and effective regulation - remain present today and as relevant as they were a decade or more ago. And this at a time when truthful, reliable, honest journalism is more important than ever as a counter to the misinformation, disinformation, and fake news readily available every day in every home and to every individual through the internet.

What do you believe needs to be done to encourage all sectors of the press to join a recognised self-regulator or establish a self-regulator fit for their purpose that can apply for recognition?

3.1 In our view the Royal Charter recognition system will not have the financial means to survive in the medium to long term unless all sections of the industry or government contribute to its core running costs. One way of ensuring its survival is to encourage all sections of the press to join or establish a recognised regulator, as Parliament envisaged would happen a decade ago. That would fund the PRP in accordance with the provisions of the Royal Charter that Leveson gave rise to. An alternative is for the PRP to seek continued public funding, but this would be to recognise that Parliament's original vision of a self-sustaining, fully independent, regulatory system for the press will never be achieved.

3.2 In a variety of different ways, journalists and news publishers are given special legal exemptions and benefits by the State. The Online Safety Bill envisages further blanket protections for news publishers regardless of whether they adhere to the provisions of an approved or even unapproved regulator. The Digital Markets Bill proposes a mechanism that may redirect funds from platforms to certain categories

of news producer. The State already provides subsidies to some sections of the press in the form of VAT relief, statutory notice advertising, privileged access to government advertising contracts and funding from the BBC. None of these benefits to the press are dependent upon them publishing or adhering to any recognised code of ethical conduct, nor to any independent complaints or arbitration system.

3.4 By contrast, news publishers who join a recognised regulator such as IMPRESS must voluntarily subject themselves to higher standards and greater public accountability. They are required to put systems and processes in place to comply with the terms of a recognised regulatory scheme, to subject themselves to the outcome of an independent complaints system and to abide by its findings. All of this incurs costs for the publisher. One consequence is that approved regulation by Impress has proved attractive to the niche, ethical end of the news publishing market, who are willing to bear the resultant costs because they believe in high ethical standards. But the State does little or nothing to recognise or reward their readiness to abide by approved regulation.

3.5 Parliament always intended to incentivise membership of a recognised regulatory body. Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act was designed specifically to provide such an incentive through a system of cost shifting in legal cases brought against a news publisher. But political pressure from the industry has persuaded successive Secretaries of State not to implement section 40. Unless the major news publishers can see clear financial or commercial advantage in signing up to a recognised press regulator there is little hope that Leveson's vision of the highest ethical standards in journalism, with a quick, clear method of redress for consumers, will ever become reality or that the regulatory system established by Parliament will survive in the long term.

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