

LEVESON INQUIRY INTO THE CULTURE, PRACTICES AND ETHICS OF THE PRESS

WITNESS STATEMENT OF JON SNOW

I, JON SNOW, of Channel 4 News, 200 Grays Inn Road, London WC1X 8XZ WILL SAY as follows:

I have been sent a letter from Kim Brudenell of the Leveson Inquiry, dated 5 April 2012 and follow her numbering in responding to her questions.

1 I am the main presenter for Channel 4 News, a position I have held since 1989. (Channel 4 News is produced for Channel 4 Television under contract by ITN) I joined ITN in 1976 as a Reporter. In the public realm I have been a Trustee of the National Gallery 1999-2008, a Trustee of the Tate Gallery 1999-2008, I am a Member of the Tate Modern council, and Chair of Tate Members. I have served on the Board of Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford since 2010. I am the Deputy Chair of the Media Trust and Chair of News Horizon Youth Centre. I have written a book about my journey in journalism – 'Shooting History'. I have also written articles down the years for the broadsheets and a few times for the Daily Mail and the Mail on Sunday.

2 *General Questions about the Relationship between Politicians and the Media:*

2 a) From my perspective, as a television journalist the dynamic between the media and politicians has changed considerably over recent years. Television and radio have long been governed by a Regulator and that regulation has been rationalised and strengthened. The regime ensures that I am wary of conflicts of interest and constantly aware of the need for balance. The ownership aspects of the regulatory regime have not so far impacted upon my work.

But it appears to me that the relationship between politicians and the newspaper owners has become more tense with both sides aggressively pursuing their own interests. Opinion seems increasingly to have been in the ascendant over news for some time. As a consequence a disparity has opened up between the printed and electronic media. Politicians have developed a relationship with newspaper editors and proprietors that does not exist with the electronic media. This can produce a situation in which they make themselves more available to the written media than they do to the electronic. Politicians will be given a stage by newspapers that we refuse to offer, on the grounds of impartiality and balance. Indeed, gaining access to a politician for interview - particularly a serving Minister - is proving ever harder. We see our job

as both holding politicians to account and to exploring policies they wish to put before the electorate. I would point to the Channel 4 News Report which exposed the legal advice that took the country to war with Iraq as a good example of the media holding politicians to account.

At the same time viewers need to be assured that the regulatory system accords them a right to question whether we have done our job properly; and to provide for them to complain should they wish to or demand a wrong be put right. Ofcom has maintained a useful and balanced role in this regard. This is in stark contrast to the written press who have provided only a self serving mechanism for complaint, operated by themselves, and providing the aggrieved citizen very little in the way of remedy.

- 2 b) In my experience in recent years I am not aware of any inappropriate dealings between Channel 4 News (either the Channel, senior ITN executives or indeed my own editor) and politicians.
- 2 c) Over the years I have regularly intersected with politicians and public officials but I would guess that I have known fewer than half a dozen cabinet ministers socially and then on entirely appropriate terms. I have not been seeking any advantages for me or for my employers. I am unaware of hospitality provided by ITN/Channel 4 News that would go beyond what is considered normal and acceptable. Channel 4 News does not promote any politicians as I hope would be obvious to our regular viewers.
- 2 d) Having worked all my life in a regulated system, I have rarely felt any pressure with regard to ownership mergers etc. I can honestly say that I need regulating, I want to know that I am being held to high standards of objectivity and integrity. I want to know that my viewers have access to a mechanism for challenging our work. However, when a government changes, policy changes can have a bearing upon our well-being. For example the ownership structure of Channel 4 Television Corporation which is a public body with a commitment to provide a broad range of high quality and diverse programming. The issue of privatisation has surfaced from time to time. I can't imagine lobbying on the matter, but given the chance of a chat with a senior politician it is hard to imagine that the subject would not come up. After all, privatisation could directly affect the status and provision of news on the Channel.
- 2 e) I think the media in general can have a significant influence on public policy but this should not be overstated as it is only part of a mix that also includes available finances, opinion polls, research by the parties themselves, public sentiment as expressed online and so on. Some television current affairs programmes like the Andrew Marr Show on the BBC do from time to time provide an arena for agenda setting at the beginning of a week. But there is nothing particularly sinister about this - more a question of timing and audience catchment.
- 2 f) I have no perspective on this question.

- 2 g) The rise of 24-hour television news together with the development of the internet and the social network have undoubtedly impacted upon what we once understood as 'news'. News and 'comment' have become increasingly intertwined. This is most pronounced in newspapers and less obvious, but still evident, in the electronic field of radio and television.
- 2 h) In my experience of just under forty years, the relationship between No. 10 Downing Street, the Government, public bodies, and the media has become rather more stage managed. Access to Senior Ministers and public officials has become more tightly controlled. When we are able to interview politicians in the studio, for a report, or even on "a doorstep", their willingness to communicate with us (and therefore the public) tends to be because:-
- (i) The politician wishes to promote a new line;
 - (ii) The politician/their party is making a rapid effort to shut down or re-orientate a troublesome story.

The replacement of the IBA by the ITC and now Ofcom demonstrates the continuing desire of our Governments to regulate the electronic media and I believe that Ofcom has been a successful part of this evolution. I regarded the IBA as being somewhat lackluster and although I've had concerns that Ofcom could be a little draconian on compliance in news and current affairs, as a regulator it has worked surprisingly well and is respected and importantly is seen as balanced, fair and efficient within the industry and, so far as I can tell, by the public.

- 3 For any democracy to work there needs to be transparency and accountability for all to see. Whilst this is available within the Commons and Lords and on Parliament TV (and the BBC Parliament Channel), it is clear that the public looks to broadcasters of programmes such as Channel 4 News to give information in an accessible form. So I think that there is a need, an obligation indeed, for politicians to make themselves available for interview when appropriate as a form of public accountability and scrutiny. It is undesirable for this access to be geared solely to 'friendly' media.

The public needs not only to be informed of what the Government is trying to do but to understand what this means, particularly in terms of implications for individuals. I have a concern that there is a risk to this free flow of information from the degree of media training provided to politicians, and the general PR management available to them (or forced upon them). This can result in interviewees having an overcapacity to obfuscate rather than inform. It should be acceptable for interviewers such as myself to press firmly for answers to the questions the public would wish the politicians to answer. We could not hope to do that if news reporters were aware of or influenced by any lobbying by our Channel, or individuals, or broadcasters involved in lobbying or trying to manipulate politicians to achieve some specific outcome (and to my knowledge they never have been).

4 Naturally, just as a moth is drawn to a flame, for television journalists the hotter the flame the greater the broadcasting interest. So a senior politician in Government may have a more important role to play in a particular news development than his or her Opposition counterpart. But our obligations under Ofcom's guidelines ensure balance sustains, and that the Opposition gets a proportionate look in.

5 General elections and other national polls comprise one of the most significant and most carefully managed and regulated aspects of my job as a journalist. We seek to be scrupulous in the balance of how we report the political parties in the build up to elections. Our reports are affected not only by the law but also by the Ofcom Code and ITN's own Compliance Manual. In addition we all receive internal legal updates at election times.

In elections the public interest is very much engaged and I think it important that there remain channels for complaint to us by Parties and citizens alike during this crucial period. In fact to my knowledge Channel 4 News receives few such complaints which I hope suggests that we are doing this part of our job well.

6 The recent history of relations between politicians and the media, from the perspective of the public interest, suggests to me that as journalists in broadcasting, the lesson for us to learn is to be appreciative of the benefits as well as constraints of appropriate regulation. Like many others I have been astonished by what we have been learning about the relationships of some parts of the media with politicians and public officials.

7 As can be seen from the above I think there is a difference between the press and other media and regulation has contributed to that difference. I do not believe that an arguably fading medium, and one so critically dependent upon the 'market', can be subjected to Ofcom style regulation. With the growth of the internet the 'Ofcom-style' horse has bolted where imposing it upon the written press is concerned.

8 In the light of my experience as a broadcaster of regulation, and my general support for the way Ofcom oversees television news, I consider there to be profound differences between the news output of broadcasters and the self regulated press. Nevertheless, I think that a regulatory system requires to be seen to be impartial. It has proved a manifest conflict of interest that newspaper editors have been allowed to sit in judgment on other editors. I do not believe that regulation leads to a dull, un-enterprising media product - as I would argue Channel 4 News shows. Whilst the PCC (or its successor) can be funded by the newspaper industry, it should be seen to be completely independent of it. There have been significant improvements in recent years such as the emergence of "readers' editors" and daily corrections columns. But so far, material that has proved plain wrong has not been matched by a similarly sized apology and rectification.

9 *Particular Questions about the Influence of the Media on Public Policy*

- 9 a) Others are better placed to identify the influence of other media on government policies. As television journalists my colleagues and I at Channel 4 News are inevitably interested in matters such as a new Broadcasting Bill or the proposed takeover of BskyB but we do not have any influence over such issues, nor do we attempt to have.
- 9 b) In my opinion the license fee and BBC funding and expenditure is less contentious than some of the BBC's private sector enemies would have us believe, due to the sheer quality of some of the BBC's output. I do not resent the BBC despite its being a competitor. I believe that its very existence in our market hoists broadcasting standards to amongst the very best in the world.
- 9 c) The Freedom of Information Act, the debate over reforming the libel laws, Legal rights and issues in areas such as freedom of expression, data protection are all actively discussed and debated on Channel 4 News - largely because they are the stuff of current political debate.
- 9 d) - f) I have no comment to make.

- 10 I think a) – d) are matters for newspapers which can have "an editorial line". I'm not aware of any such editorial line in my time at Channel 4 News as it does not seek to influence policy. Although broadcasters operate in a different place it has been obvious to me - and no doubt others - that the popular newspapers from the bigger media conglomerates do have considerable sway on politics and journalism. I do not have a specific scientifically based complaint to make. But I would be doing less than my journalistic duty if I did not mention something that I think has been present for a considerable period of time and that has reflected a sort of compromise between proprietors, editors, and politicians. Too often I have heard politicians and their aides say something along the lines of "but what will the Daily Beast say?" when formulating and testing their policies.

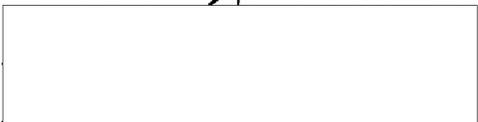
I think perhaps that politicians should be firmer in not allowing a given editorial line to have any disproportionate influence upon Government policy and should ensure that there is not a perception amongst the public that editors and proprietors have a disproportionate access to politicians. Politicians should proportionately make themselves available to all the media generally so that there can be proper scrutiny of the political process without favouritism.

I believe that in general the electronic media have less access to politicians precisely because we are seen by many of them as less malleable. I do criticise the 'popular' written press for the low regard with which people in public life are held and for the obsessional prying into the private lives of both ordinary and extraordinary citizens. Indeed I go further, I believe the constant undermining of people in public life may deter many from entering it.

11 I do not believe that I have any relevant emails of other documentary evidence that could assist the inquiry. I have been informed that ITN is not prepared to waive legal privilege and nothing in this Witness Statement should be read as having or intending that effect.

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed:



Jon Snow

Dated:

14th May 2012