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**Citation:** Rodgers, J. (2015). The downfall of the News of the World: the decline of the English newspaper and the double-edged sword of technology. In: Brake, L., Kaul, C. & Turner, M. W. (Eds.), *The News of the World and the British Press, 1843-2011*. Palgrave Studies in the History of the Media. (pp. 266-279). Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 9781137392039

This is the accepted version of the paper.

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## **The downfall of the *News of the World*: the decline of the English newspaper and the double-edged sword of technology.**

James Rodgers

The effect was the same as the Saturday phone call before the splash hit the newsstands on Sunday: a shock. This time, though, it was the scandal-seeking scribes who were on the receiving end of the stunning blow. Like a wayward politician, bribe-taking official, or a footballer ‘playing away’, the *News of the World* only learnt too late the extent of the trouble in which it found itself. By then, there was no way back. The court of public opinion, on this occasion, offered only the briefest of rights of reply. In any case, nothing was going to change the sentence imposed by an under-pressure Rupert Murdoch: a lifetime ban. Just as the *News of the World* had made ending careers its stock-in-trade, so finally it found itself exposed, with no way back. Unlike a rock star shamed for a ‘drink and drugs hell’, though, there was no option of going through rehabilitation in the hope of relaunching a career some years later. This was closure in the sense of shutting down for good. Mr Murdoch’s expression of humility at a parliamentary hearing<sup>1</sup> had not, of itself, proved repentance enough. *The News of the World* had to go.

Its departure pleased its critics; dismayed its admirers. The back page of the final edition, on July 10<sup>th</sup> 2011, used George Orwell’s picture of pre-war Sunday afternoon peace – how, or why, should they have resisted it? – as if to remind those happy to see them done down of the place the paper had once occupied in public life, and, indeed, in letters. The effect of the whole was an attempt to create a feeling of nostalgia for a time when the *News of the World* was able to do what it was best at. Yet perhaps there was another nostalgia: deeper than that for pre-war snoozes on the sofa, or for Sundays which would never be the same again. It was

nostalgia for a time when the printed newspaper had only its counterparts for commercial rivals; a time when the internet, giving away for free scandals which had previously been saleable, did not exist. ‘Lots of mistakes were made 20 years ago, at the dawn of the web,’ Sly Bailey, then Chief Executive of Trinity Mirror, told the Media Society in 2010. ‘We can’t make the same mistakes we made 20 years ago – poorly thought-through assumptions based on what we thought was good for us as publishers, with virtually no consumer insight in to who would pay and for what.’<sup>2</sup> Bailey was talking about ways in which the mistakes could now be, if not corrected, then at least compensated for. Her suggested solution involved, “‘The Three Ps’ of portability, personalisation and payment mechanisms,’<sup>3</sup> various permutations of which have been tried, and are still being tried today, in an attempt to offset revenue lost from print sales which continue to fall. The challenge also lies in facing up to a world in which, as Bailey put it, ‘The multiplicity of news products online and the very nature of the online environment has seen the willingness of consumers to pay for content dissipate almost completely.’<sup>4</sup> It is, in other words, a world as far distant from the era of reliable print sales, as we now find ourselves from George Orwell’s pre-war Sunday afternoon.

‘Lots of mistakes’: the phrase could apply to many eras of press and broadcasting history. For surviving in a business which, in Britain at least, has often been highly competitive, has long required an ability to gaze into the future, and then make the right decisions based on what you see there. That is not to say that even those who proved to be successful survivors always got their predictions right. For example, Ralph D. Blumenfeld, later to become a legendary editor of the *Daily Express*, pronounced in 1887, ‘I doubt if type-setting by machinery will ever be as efficient or indispensable as hand-setting.’<sup>5</sup> Over at the *Daily Mail*, the great rival of the *Express*, Lord Northcliffe had sounder instincts about which forces might dominate the future. He would later come to appreciate correctly the significance of the advent of

broadcasting for news media. As Briggs and Burke put it, ‘Northcliffe had been keenly interested in exploiting the power of the press not only in politics, but in the advancement of new technology too.’<sup>6</sup> They even wonder, ‘If Northcliffe had not become mentally disturbed and died in 1922, the year of the foundation of the BBC, he might have played as important a part in the history of broadcasting as he had done in the history of the press.’<sup>7</sup>

On one level, the story of the downfall of the *News of the World* is the story of the end of a newspaper whose conduct, once exposed, proved so unacceptable, in the eyes of so many, that the owner decided to close it. Doing so – closing that rarest of British newspapers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a profitable one – seemed a sensible decision for the longer term. With the wayward member of the Murdoch newspaper stable out of the way, the rest could be allowed to continue. Mr Murdoch would be seen to have taken a difficult decision, and, in doing so, have experienced the ‘most humble day of his life’. Yet there is another way of seeing the end of the *News of the World*, too: as the downfall of a newspaper which was a victim of changes which it, like other newspapers – as Sly Bailey noted in the speech referred to above – did not fully understand. In the case of the *News of the World*, technological change – in the shape of relatively insecure mobile telephony – gave the newspaper and its hired agents the opportunity to hack into messages. It did so at a time when the pressure, always huge, on red-top tabloids to land exclusives was increasing to unprecedented levels precisely because of another aspect of technological change: online competition. Technological change gave the *News of the World* the chance to stay ahead of the game by hacking phones. The ultimate price was too high. The newspaper’s decision to use abuse new technology, in the way it did, led eventually to its downfall. Evidence given to the Leveson inquiry in 2012 offers some clues as to the effects which that bewilderingly rapid technological had on journalism. Aside from the closure of the *News of the World*, the setting up of the inquiry was the most visible consequence of the phone-hacking scandal. The inquiry’s brief was to consider the ‘Culture,

Practice, and Ethics of the Press.’<sup>8</sup> Yet the inquiry could not approach its task in anything like the required detail without also considering companies and organizations which were outside the press and which, in the age of the internet, were encroaching on what had once been indisputably press territory. For example, towards the end of January 2012, the inquiry was hearing evidence from three media firms which, if not always supplying material which would once have come only from newspapers, were at least making claims on time which might otherwise have been spent reading them. ‘Leveson inquiry: Facebook, Google, Popbitch executives appear. Full coverage as executives from the social network, search giant and gossip website appear at the media standards inquiry’<sup>9</sup>. *Facebook, Google, Popbitch*: the names would have been meaningless for most of the *News of the World*’s existence. In the years before its closure, they had become names without which the media world could not be understood.

The *Guardian* piece is instructive as to one part in particular of the challenges which printed and other media faced as they sought to confront the competition emerging online. Presented in the form of a live blog (itself something which a conventional newspaper would have been technically incapable of producing), the page reports an exchange between Lord Leveson, and Camilla Wright of *Popbitch* (which describes itself on its website as ‘a free weekly celebrity gossip email’<sup>10</sup>). ‘I’m not sure that there is a great difference between what you do and what newspapers do,’ Lord Leveson says to Camilla Wright at one point<sup>11</sup>. There was, however, a key difference in the way that *Popbitch* – and other websites – and newspapers were regulated. While newspapers published in the UK were subject not only to the Press Complaints Commission (the perceived inefficacy of which had led campaigners such as the group ‘Hacked Off’ to demand something different, something stronger), they were also subject to the law in a way that many websites could never be. This, in a way, was one of the challenges which the *News of the World* faced. Not only did it have to contend with new

competitors working in new media, it had to do so while bearing in mind laws of libel, and contempt of court. Blogs, social media, and even some gossip sites (if, unlike Popbitch, they were not UK-based) were not operating under the same constraints. This was a point made by those who did not agree with the purpose of the Leveson inquiry. Senior Conservative politicians were among them, as presumably, the *News of the World* itself would have been had it lived to see the day the inquiry opened. Referring then to the recent publication in France of topless photographs of the Duchess of Cambridge, Angie Bray, a Conservative Member of the British Parliament's Culture, Media and Sport Committee, advanced the following argument

Why should the mainstream press have its hands tied behind its back when everyone can say what they like on Twitter and the internet? It is illogical, unreasonable, and makes the whole thing pointless.

I look at France which has a regulated press and the pictures of the Duchess of Cambridge still came out. It is not the solution.<sup>12</sup>

The issue of the internet was also referred to in the exchange between Lord Leveson and Camilla Wright. Ms Wright had said in her statement

Some newspapers have tried to use Popbitch to post stories that they wouldn't do themselves so that they can quote them as being on the Internet and therefore they can publish as in the public domain. I have tried to avoid Popbitch being used for this purpose.<sup>13</sup>

In the months before the closure of the *News of the World*, there had been a number of instances of court injunctions, designed to prevent the publication of details of prominent

people's alleged extra-marital affairs, being rendered largely ineffective because the parties had been named on social media. The case of the Manchester United football player, Ryan Giggs, was one example<sup>14</sup>. There was a suspicion that Fleet Street journalists had employed the same 'post it on the internet' technique of getting scandalous stories in the public domain, only with more success than Camilla Wright suggested they had apparently enjoyed with Popbitch. This was the time when Twitter, in particular, was rapidly growing in importance as a means of gathering and distributing news. As the *Mail Online* said in a June 2011 headline, 'Twitter's British audience jumps by a third as millions log on to discover details about celebrity scandals'<sup>15</sup>. Despite concerns about the internet such as those raised by Angie Bray, the Leveson inquiry's remit remained clearly the 'Culture Practice and Ethics of the *Press*' (emphasis added). In July 2011, adding detail to his earlier announcement that the inquiry was to be set up, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, did tell parliament, 'We have also made it clear that the inquiry should look not just at the press, but at other media organisations, including broadcasters and social media if there is any evidence that they have been involved in criminal activities.'<sup>16</sup> The crucial phrase was 'if there is any evidence that they have been involved in criminal activities'. It was not Lord Leveson's remit necessarily to uncover such evidence; the inquiry was only intended to respond to it should it come to light.

So while posting material on the internet may have afforded some journalists some opportunities, conventional newspapers found themselves generally put at a great disadvantage. Social media had given their audience opportunities to disclose and to discover scandals for themselves: scandals which might not have met the editorial standards of newspapers, never mind the legal requirements of the courts. One consequence, perhaps the most alarming for newspapers trying to make enough money to remain in business, was endlessly tumbling circulations. This was such a serious problem that the closure of *The*

*News of the World* became a cloud with only the most short-lived of silver linings. Those of the *News of the World*'s rivals who were looking to take a share of its readers after its demise did not get all they probably hoped for. As *The Guardian* website reported on 13 January 2012, 'Nearly half of *News of the World*'s buyers give up on Sunday papers. Tabloid rivals of *News International*'s now-defunct Sunday red-top have collectively lost 542,247 copy sales since July'<sup>17</sup>. In other words, while the five titles – *Daily Star Sunday*, *Sunday Express*, *People*, *Sunday Mirror* and the *Mail on Sunday* – which might have seen themselves as alternative choices for *News of the World* readers did inherit some readers, their circulation figures nevertheless began to fall again: suggesting that the *News of the World*'s readers, like Jeanne Hobson, cited above from the paper's last edition, really could not imagine Sundays without it. Instead, it seemed, they were getting used to Sundays without a newspaper at all – as were many of the once-devoted readers of their rivals. The gossip and scandal which had once been the exclusive reserve of the Sunday tabloids was now also available on the internet. So was a lot of other material such as music videos, games, and chatting on social networks: all of them taking up the leisure time of the descendants of the newspaper reader whom George Orwell imagined nodding off on the sofa on 'Sunday afternoon, preferably before the war'<sup>18</sup>.

It is important to stress that that world did not end because news values changed. George Orwell may have regretted the 'decline' of the kind of murder which was meat and drink to the press as the Sunday roast was to his imaginary reader. He did not suggest that murders in general had lost their appeal. Around the same time – 'preferably before the war' – that Orwell's sated Sunday newspaper reader was settling on the sofa, a fictional journalist was outlining the secret of a great story. 'Look at it this way. News is what a chap who doesn't care much about anything wants to read. And it's only news until he's read it. After that it's dead.'<sup>19</sup> The explanation is offered by Coker, a news agency reporter trying to explain to

William Boot, the naive main character of Evelyn Waugh's novel, *Scoop*, what he needs 'to learn about journalism'<sup>20</sup>. Coker's definition of news has survived pretty well into the present century. A class of journalism students today might only be able to guess the era in which it was written because of the word 'chap' – a little old-fashioned now, and sexist in its assumption that the putative reader is inevitably male. That aside, it serves pretty well today: news is still something which will shake the casual observer out of their indifference, even if only for the time it takes to satisfy that mild curiosity. What has changed beyond all recognition is the way in which news can now be gathered and distributed. There are countless examples which might be given here: the emergence of user-generated content (UGC) as a vital source of material during the suicide bomb attacks on the London public transport system on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2005; the amount of footage both sent and received by smart phones during the Japanese earthquake in February 2011; the videos distributed via the internet around the world during the war in Syria from 2011 onwards. Charlie Beckett, though, summarizes the effect especially well when he recalls in his book *Supermedia* (2008) the realization he had when working as an editor at Channel 4 News in 2005. The story in question was the controversy, and eventually rioting, which followed the publication by the Danish newspaper *Politiken* of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed. Beckett describes the Channel 4 News team thinking long and hard about whether they should show the drawings on air. Most interpretations of Islam forbid the depiction of Mohammed; some of these cartoons were considered especially offensive because they portrayed Mohammed as a terrorist. In the end, Beckett realizes that the lengthy discussion of editorial ethics has, to some extent, missed the point.

The lesson of the Cartoons...is that journalism cannot pretend to operate in a vacuum. If news journalists are not conscious of their audiences then other people will be. If we do not find a way of connecting people then other people will.<sup>21</sup>

Beckett was writing some years before the closure of the *News of the World*, but he describes very well the dilemma that all news media, not just newspapers, were facing as a result of technological change. As the falling sales mentioned above suggest, their long-established economic model, based on revenue from both sales and advertising was under threat. That was especially true for newspapers – although more recent data, discussed at the end of this chapter, suggest that there may be the possibility of improvement in the future. It was not, however, only the existing economic models which were under threat. Editorial ones were, too. This is what I take Beckett to mean when he writes, ‘If news journalists are not conscious of their audiences, then other people will be.’ In other words, if an established news organization decides not to publish something on the grounds of impartiality, taste, fairness to those involved, or decency, such a decision is no longer enough to keep the content in question out of the public domain. No amount of lengthy discussion of editorial ethics can alter that. The only exception would be if the news organization in question had the material exclusively. Even then, there is no guarantee it would stay that way. Journalists themselves, just like non-journalists, now have unprecedented opportunities to publish – perhaps ‘leak’ might be a better word here – material which would not otherwise see the light of day. Where once, for Fleet Street reporters at least, that might have meant finding a sympathetic colleague at the satirical magazine *Private Eye*, the possibilities have now greatly multiplied. There is a good example of this in action in a story related to Rupert Murdoch, and, indirectly, to the *News of the World*. In December 2010, the British Government’s Business Secretary, Vince Cable, was secretly recorded by undercover reporters saying that he had ‘declared war’ on Mr Murdoch, specifically in relation to the latter’s ambition to take a controlling share in BskyB, the satellite broadcaster in which Mr Murdoch held a substantial minority stake. As Business Secretary, Mr Cable was due to oversee the process which would decide whether or not a successful bid by Mr Murdoch

would be in the public interest. Once the remarks came to light, Mr Cable's role was passed to another cabinet minister on the grounds that he could no longer be considered impartial. The story was broken by the BBC's Business Editor, Robert Peston. Yet it was not he who had got the scoop. The undercover reporters were from *The Daily Telegraph*. In order to get their story, they had posed as constituents of Mr Cable. Having got the story, though, they did not run it – not immediately, at least. As the BBC News website put it, 'The BBC's Robert Peston said the Telegraph chose not to publish the "most explosive" part of its investigation. But a transcript was passed to him by a whistleblower.'<sup>22</sup> Speculation followed about the identity of the 'whistleblower' (itself an interesting choice of word – one more usually associated with someone passing information to a news organization, rather than a source within a news organization), with *The Guardian's* Media Section<sup>23</sup>, following up a Reuters story suggesting that a former *Telegraph* senior executive, by then working for Mr Murdoch, had been Robert Peston's source<sup>24</sup>. The conclusion which might be drawn here is that a source sympathetic to Mr Murdoch, perhaps one of his employees, as the Reuters report suggested, leaked the story in order to discredit Mr Cable as an disinterested party. It might also be concluded that the *Telegraph* had originally decided to keep quiet about what the BBC called the 'most explosive' part of the story because it was content for Mr Cable's 'war' on Mr Murdoch to be prosecuted successfully. In any case, some seven months later, and just days after the closure of the *News of the World*, Mr Cable told a London newspaper, the *Evening Standard* he was, 'delighted to discover that everyone in Britain and the House of Commons now agree(d) with (him)'<sup>25</sup>. Mr Murdoch's fortunes had suffered a major reverse in the intervening period. The seriousness with which the *Telegraph* took the leak is reflected in the fact that, as the Reuters story cited above reports, they hired 'a leading private investigations firm', Kroll, to try to identify its source. From the point of view of understanding this as a moment in media history, perhaps the most interesting element (aside

from the many issues raised about how ownership, and business interests, shape content) is this:

Because so many people, including people outside the Telegraph group, had access to the section of the Cable audio which discussed Murdoch, Kroll advised the Telegraph that while it could eliminate several categories of potential leakers as suspects, the circle of people with possible access was too large to enable them to pinpoint the leakers for certain.<sup>26</sup>

For this is a defining characteristic of the media environment in which the *News of the World* met its end: the world in which, as Beckett notes above, ‘other people will’ find a way of connecting people. Whatever the *Telegraph*’s reason for not initially publishing the Mr Cable’s ‘declaration of war’, because ‘so many people...had access’, it was to prove impossible to keep the recording out of the public domain. Details of the discussions, the decision-making process, at the Telegraph may not have become public, but the content which was the subject of those discussions could not be kept secret. Writing some years before the phone-hacking scandal came to light, and in a work published only after his death in 2006, Roger Silverstone neatly summarized the way this lack of privacy, even the lack of the possibility of privacy, was affecting so many aspects of human activity

The pursuit of political life, the management (or mismanagement) of markets, the conduct of diplomacy and the fighting of wars, as well as the construction of lifestyles and the capacity to get through the day, significant each in their own terms and perfectly capable in principle (once upon a time) of being conducted in exclusively unmediated or private contexts, are no longer free to be so.<sup>27</sup>

It was perhaps not Mr Cable's kind of 'war' which Professor Silverstone had in mind when he mentioned the 'fighting of wars', but certainly the exposure of Mr Cable's remarks in the news media fall under the 'pursuit of political life' category. It is important to note that undercover reporting, and secret recordings, are journalistic techniques which are almost as old as journalism itself (even if electronic recordings came only later, once the technology was available). What places this incident so firmly in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century is the subject – Mr Murdoch's bid to take control of BskyB – and the technological and financial factors which prevent even crack private investigators from identifying the leakers. Computer systems, and business models which rely on contracting out services – with the consequence that 'many people, including people outside the Telegraph group, had access' – ensured that. In its own way, the decline of *The News of the World* also represented a new departure from the older, established, techniques of stings and secret recordings. These are legitimate strategies of the press as the 'Fourth Estate', an idea, as Francis Williams noted in *A Dangerous Estate*, first published in 1957, which has its roots as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

The press has been seen as a weapon of freedom, a sword in the hands of those fighting old or new tyrannies, the one indispensable piece of ordnance in the armoury of democracy. It has been called by Macaulay in honour and by Burke in despair, 'The Fourth Estate of the Realm,' ranking only just, if at all, behind the Lords Temporal, the Lords Spiritual, and the Commons.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the most striking example of the *News of the World's* investigative journalism serving the public interest in the paper's later years was its exposure in August 2010 of a match-fixing scandal in Test cricket.<sup>29</sup> The match-fixing scandal, headlined simply 'Caught!' led to a police investigation, and, eventually, jail sentences. It was a strong piece of

investigative reporting which told readers, and those in authority, of wrong-doing which might otherwise have continued. It was included in the collection of front page scoops which were reprinted in the farewell edition of July 10, 2011. Also there were various tales of adulterous footballers, and cocaine sniffing stars – some of them stories which might fall into the category of worthwhile activity for the Fourth Estate, others which might struggle to do so. As time went on, there a more sinister side to this kind of journalism emerged. Journalists have always been of interest to security services of governments of all political persuasions. They often have access to information which is beyond the reach of diplomats or secret policemen. As Curran notes<sup>30</sup>, the political connections of newspapers in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century often meant revenue in the form of political subsidies – a system which continued well into the next century ‘the last English newspaper to receive a clandestine government grant was the *Observer* in 1840’<sup>31</sup>. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, relations have been less cosy. A BBC journalist working in the North Caucasus in 1999 found himself, in a very overcrowded cafe, sharing a table with a man whom the press corps suspected of being a Russian secret policeman. ‘I am X,’ said the BBC journalist, giving his first name as he introduced himself to his co-diner. ‘I know,’ came the reply. In the early 2000’s, a tale circulated in the foreign press corps in Jerusalem of one of their number who told an allegedly anti-Israeli joke at a private dinner party. The reporter later received a voicemail message which contained only a recording of his telling the joke. In other words, the security forces of whichever country keep a close eye on journalists, especially those who may know things they would like to find out, or whose reporting may not please them. Journalists falling into those categories find themselves the object of close surveillance, or worse. In the case of the later years of the *News of the World*, the newspaper seemed on occasion to abandon the role of the press ‘as a weapon of freedom, a sword in the hands of those fighting old or new tyrannies’, defined by Francis Williams, above, as central to any idea of the press as a Fourth Estate. Instead, the

*News of the World* seemed occasionally to adapt the techniques of oppressive regimes to use in their newsgathering. Consider this description, taken from written evidence given to the Leveson Inquiry by the actress Sienna Miller.

...journalists and photographers would often turn up in meeting places that I had arranged on the phone and that no one else knew about. I also had men in cars sitting outside my house and I was convinced that they could somehow listen to my conversations. My paranoia and suspicion naturally spread to those around me.<sup>32</sup>

The detail of ‘men in cars sitting outside my house’ is especially chilling. While the stakeout, as it would be known in journalistic (and perhaps police?) slang can be seen as a legitimate technique – especially for tracking down suspected criminals who have refused all opportunity to give their side of the story – no responsible news organization would use it just as a matter of course, as seems to have happened here. In the case of phone-hacking, the ‘weapon of freedom’ was not used against tyrannies, but used to behave almost like one. This transformation took place against the background of bigger ones. As noted above, technological change in the shape of the internet, and the news sites to which it gave a home, provided new competition for the *Sundays* and other printed media. At the time the *News of the World*’s methods were being exposed and discussed at the Leveson inquiry, journalists, and any involved in political communication were becoming increasingly aware of the way this change was not only a ‘weapon of freedom’, but also a double-edged sword. ‘There is no longer “off the record”,’ Jamie Shea, NATO’s Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges, told a conference at Royal Holloway, University of London on 11 April 2013<sup>33</sup>. From one point of view, this might seem a positive development: the end was perhaps in sight for poisonous briefings from faceless spin doctors. From another point of view, it means that journalists’ sources were less likely to be frank. ‘Off the record’,

whatever its shortcomings, can be an important channel of communication for reporting any sensitive issue. It is hard to imagine British political reporting, especially in print, without recourse to ‘senior Labour figures’ or ‘Cabinet sources’. New technologies, especially smart phones and social media, have given journalists countless possibilities for both the gathering and distribution of news material. The actions of Wikileaks and Edward Snowden would have been impossible, in scale at least, in an earlier age. As with many ages of transformation, though, there are negatives side, too. One of those is that, with material so easy to share, it is also difficult to keep secrets, which presents particular problems for journalists trying to protect information given to them by their contacts. Writing on the subject for the BBC Academy’s Journalism blog, in February 2012, the BBC World Affairs producer, Stuart Hughes, asked, ‘with so much potentially sensitive information sitting on laptops and smartphones, and being shared through phone calls, emails and text messages, how can a journalist ensure the safety of their sources without acting like an amateur James Bond?’<sup>34</sup>. Hughes’ article, headlined, ‘Be paranoid - protecting sources in the digital age’, went on to outline a series of measures which journalists should take in order to prevent their material falling into the wrong hands. As he noted, ‘For journalists covering stories involving repressive regimes, however, the main concern isn’t that our sources could end up in court - it’s that they could be exposed or even killed for sharing information the authorities would rather keep secret.’<sup>35</sup> Suggested techniques included encrypting especially sensitive information, or concealing documents in misleadingly-titled folders. In the matter of a couple of decades, the world of journalism had moved from one in which some reporters listened in to voice messages on insecure mobile phone networks, to one where the ‘Fourth Estate’ itself might struggle to keep its secrets safe.

George Orwell ends his essay ‘Decline of the English Murder’ with an account of the ‘Cleft Chin murder’, killings committed ‘by an eighteen-year-old ex waitress named Elizabeth

Jones, and an American army deserter, posing as an officer, named Karl Hulten.<sup>36</sup> He points to what he sees as the ‘lack of feeling’<sup>37</sup> in the murders for which they are eventually tried and convicted. He concludes,

Perhaps it is significant that the most talked-of English murder of recent years should have been committed by an American and an English girl who had become partly americanized. But it is difficult to believe that this case will be so long remembered as the old domestic poisoning dramas, product of a stable society where the all-prevailing hypocrisy did at least ensure that crimes as serious as murder should have strong emotions behind them.<sup>38</sup>

Orwell’s concern over the decline in the quality of the English murder – from those provoked by ‘strong emotions’ to those committed with a ‘lack of feeling’ – was a product in part, perhaps, of the time in which he was writing. His essay was published in 1946, and the ‘Cleft Chin’ case was from the years of the Second World War. The weariness of war had perhaps led to a callousness, a disregard for human life, which might have been less prevalent in peacetime. Orwell might have been cheered had he lived to read of cases such as the ‘Lady in the Lake’, in the 1970s, when Peter Hogg, a ‘personable Air Europe holiday pilot flying Boeing 757s’<sup>39</sup> dropped ‘the weighted body of his strangled wife from an inflatable rowing boat into the watery grave of England’s deepest lake’ and ‘was sure he had got away with it.’<sup>40</sup> There may be a similar lesson here for those who are convinced that phone-hacking at the *News of the World*, and the huge disruption to journalism as a job and as a business in the technological changes of the last two decades, mean that journalism itself is in decline.

For all the damage done to journalism’s reputation by the scandal, it is worth remembering that it was journalists, principally, in the first place, from the *Guardian* and the *New York*

*Times*, who exposed that scandal. While some *News of the World* reporters might have used criminal methods to pursue celebrity stories, it did not mean that journalism itself had become rotten. As Orwell regretted the passing of, ‘Our great period in murder, our Elizabethan period, so to speak....between roughly 1850 and 1925’<sup>41</sup>, so others have expressed concern over the consequences of the ‘collapse in newspaper readership and the spread of social media’, where ““everyone gets little snippets of information, and never fully understands the implications”” as the respected author and journalist Misha Glenny put it in a 2013 interview with Alison Smale of the *New York Times*<sup>42</sup>. Mr Glenny and others are right to worry at the prospect of a world where no one reads in depth. The consequences for journalism, and for society, would be dire.

Yet in a time when the *News of the World* exists only in the memories of readers such as Jeanne Hobson, and in the pages of histories of journalism, there may be hints of a way through this age of uncertainty for the news media. Despite introducing a paywall for their websites in 2010, the *Times* and *Sunday Times* reported in October 2013 an increase in subscriptions for both their print and digital editions.<sup>43</sup> In other words, they seemed to have found a business model which might spell future profits for the newspaper industry – the traditional economics no longer reliably made money. Writing in 2011 on what was seen by some as the decline of newspapers’ news agendas, Conboy persuasively placed it in a broader historical context when he suggested that, ‘A longer view of lifestyle features and the popularization of mainstream journalism, for instance, culminating in the contemporary concentration on celebrity, confirms that these are threads emanating from the nineteenth century.’<sup>44</sup>

While the closure of the *News of the World* was a result of pragmatic decisions taken as a response to its criminal activity, it occurred at a time when newspapers were facing challenges they had never before encountered: challenges to which they were unsure how to respond. In order for us to understand fully the reasons for the *News of the World*'s downfall, we need to consider too the point in the history of journalism at which it happened.

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