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New Pressures on Old Ethics: a question of confidentiality

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The seven years I have worked at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's political program *Insiders* have flown by. They've been marked by uncertainty about the evolving media landscape, a seemingly ever faster news cycle (or *cyclone* as others have taken to calling it) and unprecedented developments on the domestic political scene including four changes of prime minister. In those circumstances, it feels important to take time out now and again to think more deeply about the way we cover politics.

Such opportunities are rare but I am fortunate that the ABC considers they are worthwhile. So I thank the ABC and Tina Osman for this chance to study at the Reuters Institute under the fellowship arrangement established by the corporation's former Chairman, Donald McDonald.

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INTRODUCTION

Look, it is healthy that politicians and journalists speak to each other, know each other. To me, democracy is government by explanation and we need the media to explain what we are trying to do. But this is a wakeup call...and I am saying loud and clear that things have got to change.

- David Cameron
British Prime Minister
July 8, 2011¹

The relationships and rules of engagement between journalists and politicians have come under fresh scrutiny courtesy of Lord Justice Brian Leveson's recent inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press in the United Kingdom.

Lord Justice Leveson's "*most public and most concentrated look at the press that this country has seen*"² shone a light on newsgathering practices far beyond the deplorable acts of phone hacking that prompted his inquiry, providing an extraordinary – and, at times, embarrassing - insight into the current state of the relationship between MPs and the media, as details of their contacts with each other were publicly probed and story techniques were openly dissected and debated.

If "*few relationships are harder to penetrate than the elusive, off-the-record encounters and liaisons which can prove so mutually beneficial to the aspiring journalist and the up-and-coming politician,*"³ then the Leveson Inquiry provided a unique insight into the state of play between journalists and politicians in the UK media.

¹ David Cameron, Prime Minister's Press Conference, July 8, 2011 <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/prime-ministers-press-conference/>

² Lord Justice Brian Leveson, Press Conference, November 29, 2012 <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Remarks-by-Lord-Justice-Leveson-29-November-2012.pdf>

³ Nick Jones, *Sultans of Spin*, Orion Books Ltd, London, 1999, Preface

As Leveson was unfolding, a new round of debate was beginning on the other side of the world in Australia about off the record discussions and background briefings in the Canberra press gallery, prompted by continual reporting in 2011 of an 'imminent' Prime Ministerial leadership challenge.

Old hands, including ABC *Insiders* host Barrie Cassidy and former editor of *The Age* newspaper Michael Gawenda, suggested the rules of engagement were being abused, to the point where journalists and editors had "*allowed things to be said and reported that they know not to be true.*"⁴

While Australian press gallery heavyweight Laurie Oakes recently wrote of his concern about the emerging trend of "*DIY (do-it-yourself) journalism*"⁵ by politicians, at this stage the interdependency of politicians and journalists from the mainstream media remains. Or, as BBC presenter Andrew Marr told the Leveson Inquiry: "*politicians need journalists to help advance their ideas and careers. Journalists need politicians to help them get stories.*"⁶ Even officials from the administration of United States President Barack Obama, whose preference for by-passing traditional outlets has been repeatedly documented^{7 8}, have had to develop "*uneasy working relationships with the journalists who cover them.*"⁹

Given this mutual dependency, the coinciding events in the UK and Australia raise questions about how journalists in traditionally robust reporting cultures are dealing with politicians and political sources in a faster, increasingly fragmented and more competitive news environment.

This paper aims to examine the current state of the relationship between politicians and journalists in Britain and the impact - if any - that the Leveson Inquiry has had on political reporting. It will draw on evidence given to the inquiry, the post-Leveson commentary and interviews with media figures in Britain.

⁴ Michael Gawenda, '*It's time to let facts get in the way of the story*', *The Drum*, ABC Online, February 23, 2012 <http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/3847892.html>

⁵ Laurie Oakes, '*Political Journalists on the endangered list*', The Walkley Foundation, April 2, 2013 <http://www.walkleys.com/features/9531/>

⁶ Andrew Marr, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Witness-Statement-of-Andrew-Marr.pdf>

⁷ Dana Milbank, '*Obama's Disregard for Media Reaches New Heights at Nuclear Summit*', The Washington Post, April 14, 2010 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/13/AR2010041303067.html>

⁸ Steve Holland, '*News media relations with Obama hit low ebb over golf weekend*', Reuters.com, February 19, 2013 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/19/us-usa-obama-media-idUSBRE911BT20130219>

⁹ W Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion*, 9th Edition, Pearson Education Inc., US, 2012, p.144

The day-to-day dealings and experiences of the reporters and commentators who cover goings on at Westminster are the focus, not the relationships between MPs and those at the top of the media hierarchy that created such a spectacle during the inquiry's hearings, with the exception of acknowledging evidence where necessary about the trickle-down effect of politician-proprietor/editor dealings and preferences.

To have so many of a country's political reporters, commentators and editors grilled openly about their craft is rare and provides an opportunity for discussion, debate and perhaps enlightenment for journalists in comparable democracies, such as Australia.

This paper will ask if MPs and the media are now *"too close"*¹⁰ as British Prime Minister David Cameron and many other witnesses claimed in their evidence to the inquiry. And if the nature of dealings between journalists and politicians has become too intimate or inappropriate, has anything changed as a result of the exposure at Leveson or is it back to business as usual?

Finally, what of Leveson's own finding that the relationship between politicians and journalists are in *"robust good health"* and that *"close relationships, including personal friendships, are very much part and parcel of all of this and not in themselves any cause for surprise or concern."*¹¹

In an era where studies have shown time and time again that trust in media – and in politicians - is in a parlous state in both the UK and Australia, is there really no need for greater transparency?

¹⁰ David Cameron MP, Evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, June 14, 2012 <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Transcript-of-Morning-Hearing-14-June-2012.txt>

¹¹ Lord Justice Brian Leveson, Executive Summary, *An Inquiry into the Culture, Ethics and Practices of the Press*, November 29, 2012. Paragraph 111, p.25 <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc1213/hc07/0779/0779.pdf>

CHAPTER 1: THE ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR JOURNALISTS OF USING POLITICIANS AS SOURCES

Bored one evening, I counted up all the times I had met Tony Blair. And the result was astonishing really, or slightly shocking – depending on your viewpoint. I had 22 lunches, 6 dinners, 24 further one-to-one chats over tea and biscuits and numerous phone calls with him...It feels worryingly intoxicating to be on such matey terms with the new most powerful man in the country.

*- Piers Morgan
Former British newspaper editor¹²*

I. IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO

Political reporting is a constant balancing act. Without information from sources, the real reasons behind many government and other political decisions would go unknown. If the journalist's reason for being is to tell people what's really going on so they can make informed choices, particularly at the ballot box, then cultivating useful contacts and sometimes offering them protection through anonymity is essential.

Few journalists have the luxury of dealing with politicians in the manner outlined by Hunter S. Thompson 40-odd years ago while writing his acclaimed book *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*.

Thompson's modus operandi while covering the 1972 United States presidential race was that *"there was no such thing as 'off the record',"* because *"the most consistent and ultimately damaging failure of political journalism in America has its roots in the clubby/cocktail personal relationships that inevitably develop between politicians and*

¹² Piers Morgan, *The Insider: The Private Diaries of a Scandalous Decade*, Elbury Press, Great Britain, 2005, pp. 11 & 157

journalists – in Washington or anywhere else where they meet on a day-to-day basis.”

While Thompson could afford to “*burn all my bridges behind me*” because his was a one-year posting to Capitol Hill, even he conceded he was regarded as a “*walking bomb*” and his “*ball-busting approach*”¹³ wouldn’t be practical or conducive to a longer-term career in political reporting.

The relationship between journalists and politicians in western democracies has been the subject of much academic research – let alone commentary in the media - over many years and been characterised by scholars in various ways: the “*tango*”¹⁴ suggested by Herbert Gans generally being the standard bearer.

In Britain, American writer H.L. Mencken’s ‘*journalism is to politician as dog is to lamp-post*’ metaphor is often quoted. On the ground, the nature of relationships is as different as the individuals involved and the outlets they represent but journalists would generally argue the public is best served by a relationship that is adversarial. As ABC News Radio political reporter Marius Benson put it after a testy post-interview encounter with a politician:

*“The relationship between journalists and politicians varies. They talk, they socialise, they argue, they leak, they fight, they party, they couple, they wed. Professionally the relationship is sometimes symbiotic, at times parasitic, sometimes sycophantic - but the public is best served when it is antagonistic.”*¹⁵

Neveu, however, suggests that the intensity and regularity of contact between journalists and politicians creates an intimate relationship that has few equivalents, with the exception perhaps of sports reporting.¹⁶ In the modern media landscape where deadlines are continuous and competition intense, such a relationship poses risks to ethical values including autonomy, transparency and objectivity – not to mention accuracy.

¹³ Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, Harper Perennial, Hammersmith, London, 1973, pp. 14-15

¹⁴ Herbert J Gans, *Deciding what's news: A study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time*, Constable and Company Ltd, London, 1980, p.116

¹⁵ Marius Benson, ‘*An Antagonistic Relationship*’, The Drum, ABC Online, April 12, 2011
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-04-12/an-antagonistic-relationship/2620328>

¹⁶ Erik Neveu, ‘*Four Generations of Political Journalism*’ in *Political Journalism: new challenges, new practices*, edited by Raymond Kuhn and Erik Neveu, Routledge, London, 2002, p.24

For instance, the arrival of the Blair Government and implementation of its unprecedented media management strategy aimed at controlling the so-called “*feral beast*”¹⁷ prompted the suggestion that perhaps the journalists and politicians were now the dogs, with the public assuming the unenviable mantle of the lamp-post.¹⁸

To demonstrate the downside of an ‘intimate’ relationship for political journalism, several commentators and researchers cite the biggest British political story in recent years, the MPs expenses scandal - which came to light primarily due to the efforts of a Freedom of information campaigner - as a glaring example of the failure of Westminster’s Lobby system of reporting.

*“The MPs expenses scandal has provided a timely reminder of what this cloying closeness can lead to and how out-of-touch MPs, and the journalists who report on them, have become.”*¹⁹

The expenses row reopened the debate about whether journalists are making too many compromises in their dealings with politicians to keep the information flowing, allowing the adversarial relationship to give way too often to a collaborative one and creating a situation where “*the vital function of an independent and critical political reporting is being progressively undermined to the ultimate benefit of those in power.*”²⁰

Gaber points to the *mea culpa* of Ben Leapman, a journalist who had actually begun investigating MPs expenses in 2004 – five years before *The Telegraph’s* explosive revelations - as coming “perilously close” to an admission of inappropriate intimacy:

“I knew that there were plenty of scandals locked away in the expenses files, and that their publication would end a few careers. But having spent five years in the ‘Westminster village’ as a Lobby correspondent, I feel an instinctive

¹⁷ Tony Blair, *Lecture by the Prime Minister on Public Life*, Reuters, Canary Wharf, London, June 12, 2007 <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Politics/documents/2007/06/12/BlairReustersSpeech.pdf>

¹⁸ Ivor Gaber, ‘*The New World of dogs and lamp-posts*’, *British Journalism Review*, 1998, Volume 9, pp. 59-65

¹⁹ Ivor Gaber, Presentation to London School of Economics, January 2010, <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/events/MeCCSA/pdf/papers/Gaber%20Ivor.pdf>

²⁰ Steven Barnett and Ivor Gaber, *Westminster Tales: the twenty-first-century crisis in political journalism*, Continuum, New York, 2001, p.1

*sympathy with politicians, and I underestimated the level of public anger the revelations would unleash.*²¹

Leapman's admission appears to be a case of what Bennett dubs *Insider Syndrome*, where reporters are still human and, to that end, regular contact under stressful conditions can sometimes lead them to identify and sympathise with the newsmakers they cover.²²

To an outsider, it's not behaviour news consumers would necessarily expect or condone. But as Jacob Weisberg said in his summary of the White House Press Corps during the Clinton years for *Vanity Fair*: *"Welcome to the largest gap between perception and reality in journalism: the White House beat."*²³

Weisberg's description of the country's journalistic elite painted an unflattering portrait of the way competing reporters colluded to form a pack and suffered from "clientitis" accepting, for example, that questioning on particular topics was off limits in return for stories and flattery. That was, until just a few months into his presidency, Clinton started changing the rules of the game.

*"What happened? In essence, the president ran smack into a large animal, 'The Beast,' as adviser George Stephanopoulos liked to call it before it chewed his leg off. The Beast is a creature with many heads but a single mind, which lurks in a cage 100 feet from the Oval Office. Clinton thought he could tame The Beast, as his predecessors seemed to have done so effortlessly. He did not understand that it is ruled by its appetites and hereditary instincts. He neglected to feed it, and ignored its long-established patterns of behaviour. As a result, The Beast charged through the White House, upsetting lamps and knocking over furniture."*²⁴

While the Lobby chairman at the time of the expenses story, David Hencke, blamed the clubby, social atmosphere of the Lobby for the incredible oversight, he also

²¹ Ben Leapman, 'When will MPs come clean about their expenses', The Telegraph, June 18, 2009
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/mps-expenses/5571738/When-will-MPs-come-clean-about-their-expenses.html>

²² W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion*, Ninth Edition, Pearson Education Inc., US, p.168

²³ Jacob Weisberg, 'The White House Beast', *Vanity Fair*, September 1993,
<http://www.vanityfair.com/magazine/archive/1993/09/presscorps199309>

²⁴ Jacob Weisberg, 'The White House Beast', *Vanity Fair*, September 1993,
<http://www.vanityfair.com/magazine/archive/1993/09/presscorps199309>

pointed to the fact that technical innovation had outstripped traditional news gathering practices, leaving journalists with no time to dig and essentially reliant on their political contacts for stories:

“Normally this is the deal: the minister gives one popular and one serious tale for use by the journalist hosts, often in advance of a government announcement, in return for two or three courses and a shared bottle of wine. So it is no wonder that a mutual dependency between the hack and the minister grows – with the hack aware that if the minister is seriously damaged, he or she will lose a key source...In the worst-case scenario it can even lead to the hack compromising a story to protect the minister.”²⁵

Through the factor of intensified time constraints, Hencke reinforces the notion of a client relationship, where journalists and politicians trade stories (or more realistically, half-stories) for anonymity and more, although Hencke doesn't tell us how often his worst-case scenario occurs, whereby politicians seem to be inappropriately protected.

As Andrew Marr pointed out to the Leveson Inquiry, however:

“Non-journalists often fail to appreciate the intense competition for stories, Reporters rise or sink; prosper or are shown the door, based on their ability to deliver fresh information others cannot.”²⁶

Australian political journalist, Barrie Cassidy, charts a further worrying aspect to the notion of a trading relationship, brought about by increased media competition and the heightened demand for exclusives.

“Consider this scenario. A prime minister asks an editor-in-chief for a ‘fair go’ in their media coverage. The editor says he'll give the prime minister and the government ‘a fair go’ if the government gives the paper exclusive stories. That's the trade off. A ‘fair go’ for leaks. The public would surely be horrified to

²⁵ David Hencke, 'Westminster's lobby is too clubby', The Guardian, September 7, 2009

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/organgrinder/2009/sep/07/david-hencke-westminster-lobby>

²⁶ Andrew Marr, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Witness-Statement-of-Andrew-Marr.pdf>

know that sometimes that is how it works. Yet to many journalists, and to many editors, such deal making is unremarkable.”²⁷

Those ideas appear to support Barnett and Gaber’s suggestion that “...*the pendulum has moved (and is still moving) away from the model of journalists as free professional agents towards a model of journalists increasingly beset and hemmed in by an array of different structural demands...over which (they) have little control.*”²⁸

That’s not to dismiss or downplay the idea that growing competition in the media industry has intensified the essential adversarial nature of the relationship, to the point where the tone of political coverage is now overly critical, negative and intrusive.

While politicians complaining about journalists who ‘bite the hand the feeds them,’ don’t engender sympathy, the observation is often made that declining newspaper circulations, the arrival of rolling television news channels and the proliferation of internet outlets have changed the nature of political reporting to real time, speculative rather than reflective, as well as more populist, sensationalist and scandal-driven.

As Tony Blair suggested: “*Impact is what matters. It is all that can distinguish, can rise above the clamour, can get noticed. Impact gives competitive edge.*”²⁹ Quinn believes “*if the scandal or crisis afflicts a given party, that party will find it difficult to make itself heard on other issues.*”³⁰ The leadership issues that engulfed the Australian and British Prime Ministers in early to mid-2013 are certainly testament to that. That’s despite the fact that political journalists could be seen to be competing for “*what generally amounts to a pretty homogenous result - with the notable exception of the recent trend to market political content to partisan audiences.*”³¹

²⁷ Barrie Cassidy, ‘*Media, polities play “the game”. Public loses out.*’ The Drum, ABC Online March 9, 2012 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-03-09/cassidy-rules-of-engagement/3877924>

²⁸ Steven Barnett and Ivor Gaber, *Westminster Tales: the twenty-first-century crisis in political journalism*, Continuum, New York, 2001, p.2

²⁹ Tony Blair, *Lecture by the Prime Minister on Public Life*, Reuters, Canary Wharf, London, June 12, 2007 <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Politics/documents/2007/06/12/BlairReustersSpeech.pdf>

³⁰ Thomas Quinn, ‘*Spin doctors and political news management: A rational-choice ‘exchange’ analysis*’, British Politics, 2012, Volume 7, 3, p. 272-300

³¹ W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion*, Ninth Edition, Pearson Education Inc., US, p.156

But the relationship between journalists and politicians will continue “*as long as it is mutually beneficial for all involved.*”³² And, as the BBC’s Political Editor Nick Robinson wrote of this troubled marriage: “*divorce is not an option. Neither is easy contentment. We are doomed to live together. Let’s work at it and stop whingeing each about the other.*”³³

II: JUST ADD SOURCE

“The media argues that politics is run by spin doctors and that politicians, when they can get to them, stick rigidly to a rehearsed script, speak in meaningless sound bites and will only tell the truth when they are safely off the record.”

*-An Independent Review of (UK) Government Communications 2004*³⁴

A critical part of the relationship between journalists and politicians is the cultivation of MPs as sources and, as a result, the rules of engagement relating to the treatment of the information they provide.

Former Australian journalist and academic Sally White describes the journalist’s decision to grant anonymity to a source as “*one of the most vexed areas of news gathering.*”³⁵

White credits US journalist Jerald terHorst as providing the most useful guide to handling information when he worked briefly as press secretary to President Gerald Ford in 1974. J.F. terHorst, she writes, outlined four categories of information to White House reporters: *on the record*, *on background*, *on deep background* (more familiar to British and Australian journalists as the ‘*Chatham House Rule*’³⁶) and *off the record*.

³² Thomas Quinn, ‘*Spin doctors and political news management: A rational-choice ‘exchange’ analysis*’, British Politics, 2012, Volume 7, 3, p. 293

³³ Nick Robinson, ‘Marital Problems’, Nick Robinson’s Newslog, BBC Website, January 30, 2006

http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/nickrobinson/2006/01/marital_problem.html

³⁴ Bob Phillis, Chairman: *An Independent Review of Government Communications*, London, 2004 p.27

http://www.ppa.co.uk/legal-and-public-affairs/ppa-responses-and-evidence/~media/Documents/Legal/Consultations/Lords%20Communications%20Committee/final_report.as hx

³⁵ Sally White, *Reporting in Australia*, Melbourne, Macmillan, 1996, p.52

³⁶ The Royal Institute for International Affairs, *Chatham House Rule*, revised 2002

<http://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chathamhouse-rule>

The interpretation and treatment of the rules of engagement can vary between individual reporters and media outlets, as can the editorial standards applied to using information gathered in that manner.

But at its core agreeing to anonymity involves “two competing principles: the duty to inform the public versus the duty to do so truthfully and transparently. In order for journalists to make the best decision, they must weigh the competing interests within an ethical framework.”³⁷ These are highly complex value judgments, made more difficult by the pressures of a media environment of continual deadlines and increased competition.

Carlson argues protecting sources by granting anonymity “alters the underlying relationship between news sources, journalists and audiences,” and pits journalism’s authority and autonomy against transparency, creating the potential for both promise and peril: “a set of extremes as unnamed sources contribute to journalism’s greatest triumphs and its most shameful episodes.”³⁸

Few would dispute the importance and usefulness of anonymous sources in political reporting, Watergate’s *Deep Throat* providing the best international example and the high water mark against which political scoops are measured.

But for the purposes of this exercise, the range of reasons why a source provides, or leaks, information on the condition of some form of anonymity is worth cataloguing. In *News and Newsmaking*, the Brookings Institute’s Stephen Hess provides a handy guide to the motivations of political leakers in Washington.

The list – while not exhaustive - includes the “*Ego Leak*” or providing information “primarily to satisfy a sense of self-importance,” the “*Goodwill Leak*” which acts a down payment on a future favour from a journalist, the “*Policy Leak*” which aims to create more attention for or against a proposal than would otherwise be justified, the “*Animus Leak*” to settle grudges, the “*Trial-Balloon Leak*” to “assess the assets

³⁷ Matt J. Duffy and Carrie P. Freeman, ‘*Unnamed sources: A Utilitarian Exploration of their Justification and Guidelines for Limited Use*’, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality*, Routledge, London, 2011, Volume 26, Issue 4, p.300

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08900523.2011.606006#.UbMtNmddC1c>

³⁸ Matt Carlson, *On the condition of anonymity: unnamed sources and the battle for journalism*, First Illinois paperback, USA, 2012 p.2

and liabilities” of a proposal under consideration and the “*Whistle-Blower Leak*” which Hess believes is different to other leaks in that it usually stems from frustrated civil servants, rather than politicians and their staffers.³⁹

While not as prevalent in political as opposed to other forms of reporting, one could add the *Chequebook Leak* – or payment for information - to the list.

Despite its merits as primarily an act by whistle-blowers, *The Telegraph* newspaper’s eventual exposure of the MPs expenses scandal sits partly in that category with some money⁴⁰ – albeit not the much larger sums offered by other newspapers – changing hands for access to the disc of damaging documents that revealed the innovative, outrageous, amusing and, in some cases, criminal ways in which British MPs were managing to claim and spend public money.

But as with the expenses case, Hess notes that leaks are not always mutually exclusive⁴¹, while Carlson makes the point that the “*spectrum between unauthorised disclosures (planted items devoid of attribution) and uncontrolled revelations (whistle-blowers taking risks) continues to mark the complexity of unnamed sources.*”⁴²

But in a faster and more competitive environment, are journalists trading anonymity for information too easily, compromising their duty to hold politicians to account and – in doing so - denying audiences the ability to critically assess the stories with which they’re presented?

Nowhere, it seems, are the risks of using unidentified sources in political journalism more apparent than in the area of leadership speculation: an important topic for debate in Australia following three Labor Party leadership ballots in 18 months. It was after the first of these in February 2012 that Gawenda argued that the rules of engagement “*encourage dishonesty from politicians and timidity from journalists.*”⁴³

³⁹ Stephen Hess, *News and Newsmaking*, The Brookings Institution, Washington, 1996, pp. 70-71

⁴⁰ Robert Winnett and Gordon Rayner, *No Expenses Spared*, Bantam Press, 2009, p. 83

⁴¹ Stephen Hess, *News and Newsmaking*, The Brookings Institution, Washington, 1996, pp. 70-71

⁴² Matt Carlson, *On the condition of anonymity: unnamed sources and the battle for journalism*, First Illinois paperback, USA, 2012 p.8

⁴³ Michael Gawenda, *Nameless Dread*, The Spectator, March 3, 2012
<http://www.spectator.co.uk/australia/7685778/nameless-dread/>

When a second ballot in March 2013 resulted in the farcical situation in which no challenger came forward for the first time in Labor's history, award-winning political journalist Lenore Taylor explained how this was "*deeply treacherous territory*" for reporters:

*"It is impossible to do it without resorting to anonymous sources and such sources - used very judiciously - can help to expose the truth in a situation where the rules of the game dictate that most of the politicians involved will lie. (A minister who has decided to vote for a challenger must nonetheless profess loyalty to the incumbent until there is a challenge - an incumbent who knows plotting is afoot must claim the exact opposite - an MP who thinks their side of politics has run completely off the rails must mutter platitudes about 'difficult times' in which the party is nonetheless delivering important things for Australia etc, etc, etc). But anonymous sources have to be carefully cross-checked and treated with extreme caution, because of the obvious dangers of being drawn into the process in order to build momentum towards a result, and of being perceived to be playing that role."*⁴⁴

Also of concern was coverage of speculation ahead of the earlier 2012 ballot, where former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was alleged to have privately briefed journalists on an unreportable basis about his planned course of action, only to deny that in public when his actions became a critical factor. Writing about this, Gawenda suggested there were circumstances when the promise of anonymity should be broken:

*"If the consequence of this is that journalists are forced to retail lies, how can this be ethical? When politicians make on the record statements which contradict what they have told journalists on the basis of anonymity, I believe journalists are no longer bound to protect sources. This needs to be made clear publicly by journalists."*⁴⁵

The bottom line when using anonymous sources is the impact on audiences as readers, listeners and viewers are unable to apply their own value judgments to

⁴⁴ Lenore Taylor, '*Media tread fine line when tribes go to war*', Sydney Morning Herald, March 23, 2013 <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/media-tread-fine-line-when-tribes-go-to-war-20130322-2gl96.html#ixzz2UUksqpbD>

⁴⁵ Michael Gawenda, '*Nameless Dread*', The Spectator, March 3, 2012 <http://www.spectator.co.uk/australia/7685778/nameless-dread/>

stories. Or, as Cassidy asks: *“how would you get an accurate steer from a hopelessly compromised system?”*⁴⁶

The risk – and in some cases, the reality - is the creation of *“a disconnect between consumers of political news and those who are paid to provide the content,”* if journalists write stories that the public neither believe nor, for that matter, are interested in.⁴⁷ Or, as the ABC’s *Media Watch* program host Jonathon Holmes summarised:

*“What’s left to be said? Simply this: that in their heavy reliance on anonymous sources, gallery reporters are asking us to trust them that they’re not being used by their sources. And trust - in politicians and journalists – is in short supply these days.”*⁴⁸

⁴⁶ “Barrie Cassidy, *‘Media, polities play “the game”. Public loses out.’* The Drum, ABC Online March 9, 2012 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-03-09/cassidy-rules-of-engagement/3877924>

⁴⁷ Barrie Cassidy, *‘Media, polities play “the game”. Public loses out.’* The Drum, ABC Online March 9, 2012 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-03-09/cassidy-rules-of-engagement/3877924>

⁴⁸ *‘Sources Spills and Strategies’*, Media Watch, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Episode 8, March 25, 2013 <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s3723517.htm>

CHAPTER 2: THE MEDIA AND MPs IN BRITAIN: WHAT WE LEARNED FROM LEVESON

“My aim...is first to recognise that there are entirely appropriate social relationships between politicians and journalists, doubtless borne of friendship and equally entirely appropriate professional relationships between politicians and journalists as the former seek to promote their policies and their message while the latter seek to ensure that politicians and their policies are held fully and properly to account.”

- Lord Justice Brian Leveson
June 11, 2012⁴⁹

When Lord Justice Leveson began his examination of the relationship between politicians and the press, he gave journalists – not just the public - a unique window of opportunity to gauge the state of play between MPs and their colleagues.

A procession of MPs from all political persuasions as well as proprietors, executives, editors and political reporters from a diverse range of outlets provided written statements and appeared in person to testify as to the nature of their dealings.

This chapter catalogues some of the views expressed at the inquiry as to the state of the relationship and how it works in practice, particularly regarding the use of anonymity. A range of interesting contributions were lost amid stories of pyjama parties at Chequers, country suppers, horse swaps and David Cameron’s unfamiliarity with the language of text messages. Themes that emerge will then be explored in the next chapter, which is based on post-inquiry commentary and interviews.

⁴⁹ Lord Justice Brian Leveson, the Leveson Inquiry, Morning Hearing, June 11, 2012, p.4.
<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Transcript-of-Morning-Hearing-11-June-2012.pdf>

Many sentiments reinforced the view that the relationship between politicians and journalists was symbiotic, but that it had become less deferential or increasingly aggressive.

The former Political Editor of *The Times* newspaper, Philip Webster, observed that:

“it seems to me after nearly 40 years working for The Times that the relationship between politicians and the press has always been one of mutual dependency, mistrust, suspicion and occasional bitterness, and it probably always will be...But in those four decades the embrace into which both sides are locked has become far more confrontational and the deference that once characterised the journalist’s attitude towards senior politicians has gone completely.”⁵⁰

A central theme, however, quickly became apparent: this was the claim mainly by politicians, including the incumbent Prime Minister David Cameron, that relationships with the press were now “too close” from the top of the food chain - the proprietors - all the way down to the coalface - the journalists.

While conceding that the relationship between MPs and the media had never been perfect, Cameron told the inquiry that:

“...it's also not a particularly trusting relationship at the moment. I think a lot of politicians think the press always get it wrong and the rest of it, and a lot of the press think politicians are in it for themselves, aren't in it for the right reasons, and it's become a bad relationship... In the last 20 years, I think the relationship has not been right. I think it has been too close...and I think we need to try and get it on a better footing.”⁵¹

As former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, explained:

“It is the media’s job to hold politicians to account. It is in politicians’ nature to be sensitive to criticism. The media are obviously going to be a powerful part of

⁵⁰ Philip Webster, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, April 23, 2012, p.1

<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Witness-Statement-of-Phillip-Webster.pdf>

⁵¹ David Cameron, Evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, June 14, 2012, Morning Hearing

<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Transcript-of-Morning-Hearing-14-June-2012.pdf>

*society and in particular a powerful influence on political debate. Politicians will therefore interact with them closely. Disentangling what is inevitable from what is wrong is a profound challenge.*⁵²

To illustrate where closeness was wrong, current and former political leaders told the inquiry that they were so focussed on getting a positive run in the media that they had sometimes failed to deal with issues related to media policy - including regulation and ownership – to avoid confrontation with powerful proprietors.

As former Blair government special advisor Lance Price once wrote: *“At times when I worked at Downing Street Mr Murdoch, who I never met, seemed like the 24th member of the Cabinet. His voice was rarely heard...but his presence was always felt.”*⁵³ The current Labour leader Ed Miliband said this was even though *“there should be absolutely no question of support by the media in return for favours from politicians.”*⁵⁴

Without dismissing the significance of relationships at very senior levels and the filtering-down effect, this paper is, however, concerned with the concept of closeness as it relates to dealings between political reporters and their subjects and any compromises that situation entails.

Former Prime Minister, John Major, who chose not to engage with the news media in the way his successors have, told the inquiry that the ideal relationship between journalists and politicians:

*“In terms of democratic accountability...is one of constructive tension. It should be neither too cosy nor too hostile, but this happy medium is rarely achieved.”*⁵⁵

Major’s lack of interaction with the media is well documented and had its drawbacks. He said he suspected his decision not to pursue a close relationship with the press

⁵² Tony Blair, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Witness-Statement-of-Tony-Blair1.pdf>

⁵³ Lance Price, *The Spin Doctor’s Diary: Inside No. 10 with New Labour*, Hodder and Stoughton, Great Britain, 2005, p. xii

⁵⁴ Ed Miliband, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Witness-Statement-of-Ed-Miliband.pdf>

⁵⁵ Sir John Major, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, May 14, 2012 <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Witness-Statement-of-Sir-John-Major.pdf>

had contributed to hostility towards his government and mistaken judgments about it:

“...the press to me at the time was a source of wonder. I woke up each morning and I opened the morning papers and I learned what I thought that I didn't think, what I said that I hadn't said, what I was about to do that I wasn't about to do.”⁵⁶

Major also said he believed his experiences were among the reasons why his successors had chosen to seek closer ties. Tony Blair, for his part, has spoken in depth about the reasons for his decision to proactively try to manage news coverage by *courting, assuaging* and *persuading* the media.⁵⁷ Or as BBC *Daily Politics* presenter Andrew Neil more bluntly put it: *“It was time, the Blairites believed, to see if the Labour lamb could really lie down with the Murdoch lion - and not be eaten.”⁵⁸*

Blair's time in office also coincided with much of the development of the 24-hour news cycle, amid the proliferation of rolling broadcast news services and the internet.

ITV Business Editor and former BBC political reporter, Laura Kuenssberg, outlined how speedier communications had changed the daily dynamic of the relationship between journalists and politicians:

“This has placed extra demands on politicians who, like journalists, are expected to be pretty well permanently accessible. This has meant that there has been more communication in recent years between journalists such as myself and politicians.”

The *Independent's* Political Editor, Andrew Grice, suggested the result of that was:

“...the game played out between the media and politicians is getting faster and faster...I have an image of the two groups constantly chasing each other's tail

⁵⁶ Sir John Major, Evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, Morning Hearing, June 12, 2012 p.8.

<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Transcript-of-Morning-Hearing-12-June-2012.pdf>

⁵⁷ Tony Blair, *Lecture by the Prime Minister on Public Life*, Reuters, Canary Wharf, London, June 12, 2007
<http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Politics/documents/2007/06/12/BlairReustersSpeech.pdf>

⁵⁸ Andrew Neil, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, May 8, 2012 <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Witness-statement-of-Andrew-Neil.pdf>

*in an increasingly mad dance that must sometimes leave the public bemused.*⁵⁹

But should an increase in the amount of contact between journalists and politicians in a rolling news cycle be a cause for concern? Does spending more time together go hand in hand with impropriety?

The answers to these questions depend on the precise nature of the individual relationships involved and, therefore, are difficult to know with any certainty. The evidence to Leveson suggests, at least publicly, political journalists reject his view that there can be *“entirely appropriate social relationships...borne of friendship.”*

Many expressed a similar view to *The Mail on Sunday’s* Political Editor Simon Walters, that while they regularly dined with MPs at company expense, they still sought to maintain a professional distance, not foster friendships:

*“With very rare exceptions, I do not socialise with politicians or officials outside work hours or accept hospitality from them. That way the risks are minimised and managed and it makes it easier to retain a proper degree of professionalism. No politician has ever asked me to do anything improper as a result of such a relationship.”*⁶⁰

Professor Aeron Davis from Goldsmiths College in London has surveyed many politicians, civil servants, political journalists and bloggers at Westminster for his research. He gave a different view of how the relationship operates in practice, describing how Lobby journalists in particular were:

“...very much integrated into Parliament, both professionally and socially. Relations between reporters and politicians can be extremely close with ‘alliances’ and ‘coalitions’ forming. At times journalists may even act as unofficial advisors to MPs... Such close and institutionalised relations mean that journalists have multiple, ‘insider’ roles in Westminster politics that go far beyond simply reporting events. They are a source of information to MPs and

⁵⁹ Andrew Grice, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, April 19, 2012
<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Witness-Statement-of-Andrew-Grice.pdf>

⁶⁰ Simon Walters, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, April 20, 2012
<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Witness-Statement-of-Simon-Walters.pdf>

ministers about insider politics and are used to circulate front-bench opinions, set political agendas, attack rivals, and influence political debates.”⁶¹

Like the earlier criticism of the White House Press Corps, Paul Staines, from the popular *Guido Fawkes* website, added that the Lobby system was unhealthy, lacking transparency and encouraged a trade in favours.

“A client media has developed whereby journalists who recycle the party line are encouraged and rewarded with titbits and exclusives, with interviews granted to journalists who please party spin doctors. The Lobby system is effectively an obedience school where the political class brings journalists to heel.”⁶²

Former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, gave a similar view, saying of his time in office:

“...we accepted too easily a closed culture where it was possible for stories about political events to be told to a few people rather than openly by Parliamentary announcement or by speech, and we should have reformed that system earlier, and the system, I’m afraid, is still waiting to be reformed...It is too closed a system. It relies on too small a number of people. Of course, it has its heart in the lobby system, but it is actually the exclusivity for some people within the lobby that people rightly, I think, resent.”⁶³

Andrew Grice noted that it would be pointless to try to:

“...stop politicians handing out stories and interviews like sweeties to favoured newspapers or to trusted journalists...But the new culture of spin involved much more pressure on journalists to toe the spin doctors’ line; more rewards

⁶¹ Professor Aeron Davis, Submission to the Leveson Inquiry, <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Submission-by-Professor-Aeron-Davis.pdf>

⁶² Paul Staines, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Witness-Statement-of-Paul-Staines.pdf>

⁶³ Gordon Brown, Evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, Morning Hearing, June 11, 2012 <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Transcript-of-Morning-Hearing-11-June-2012.pdf>

and punishment and complaints to editors over the heads of independent-minded journalists.”⁶⁴

New Labour’s carrot and stick approach was nominated by Sky News Political Editor, Adam Boulton, as creating the turning point where relationships between journalists and politicians had “*broken down*” and had not yet recovered.

“The Blair Administration had not just been at fault for courting the media; over the decade it had also taught many journalists tricks when it came to misrepresenting, dissembling, stonewalling, cultivating and bullying. To begin with, New Labour carried all before it. But over time most journalists became embittered by the cynical and contemptuous way they were being treated. Some journalists responded in kind, others were cowed for too long.”⁶⁵

The media management style of the Blair era, the eventual copying of the New Labour playbook by David Cameron (primarily by hiring his own Alistair Campbell in the form of Andy Coulson and in courting the tabloids) and the faster media environment where politicians (wanting favourable coverage) and journalists (wanting exclusive stories) competed for dominance were often cited as key reasons for the development of an unhealthy relationship between the media and MPs, which at times appeared too cosy and at other times appeared too cynical.

But while acknowledging the main aim of politicians was to secure good coverage, journalists such as Andrew Grice maintained that confidentiality in their dealings and stories was still critical, because:

“People involved in any walk of life will invariably say more to journalists if they know they will not be quoted by name. Such conversations are mutually beneficial and could not be regulated away. Although some observers criticise the use of anonymous sources, I am sure it helps the press and therefore the public to get closer to the truth.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Andrew Grice, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, April 19, 2012

<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Witness-Statement-of-Andrew-Grice.pdf>

⁶⁵ Adam Boulton, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, April 25, 2012

<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Witness-Statement-of-Adam-Boulton.pdf>

⁶⁶ Andrew Grice, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, April 19, 2012

<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Witness-Statement-of-Andrew-Grice.pdf>

Andrew Marr gave this specific example of the politician-as-source relationship:

“One of my best sources was the late Alan Clark MP who would slip me confidential documents from time to time and pass on gossip. Beyond buying him lunch - and at that time I probably lunched an MP three times a week or more - all I provided in return was gossip about other Tory Ministers, I never wrote articles predicting his promotion or declaring his genius; nor did he seem to expect me to. At one lunch in about 1987 he gleefully described how, as trade minister, he was circumventing an official ban on arms exports to Iraq - he being broadly in favour of Saddam Hussein in his fight with Iran. Had I reported the contents of the lunch it would have been an early exposure of what became known as the ‘arms for Iraq scandal’ and certainly a public service. However it was a long day, and I confess I missed that story till later.”⁶⁷

Many journalists defended confidential dealings with MPs on the grounds that a political reporter without sources is not very useful and, when necessary, they were prepared to cut them loose. The latter point was something politicians such as Work and Pensions Secretary, Iain Duncan Smith, found less than impressive:

“The truth is journalists are out for one thing: a story. You know, they may be your friend, appear to be your friend today but tomorrow they may be cutting your throat because you happen to be the subject of a good story ... This isn’t really a relationship with obligations, it’s a relationship with mutual usability.”⁶⁸

Lance Price warned that while the public interest was served by “a properly conducted” relationship, it was at risk of abuse by both sides:

“In the case of politicians that is most likely to be through off-the-record briefings that use the cloak of anonymity to disseminate inaccurate information, attempts to malign others within their own party or elsewhere including the civil service, or the release of information that should properly be withheld...The public interest is also put at risk when journalists abuse a relationship to help further the interests of an individual politician or political

⁶⁷ Andrew Marr, Witness Statement to Leveson Inquiry, <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Witness-Statement-of-Andrew-Marr.pdf>

⁶⁸ Iain Duncan Smith MP, interview with Professor Aeron Davis, Submission to the Leveson Inquiry, <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Submission-by-Professor-Aeron-Davis.pdf>

party or collude in the publication of information they know to be false or unreliable in order to compete with their rivals or pursue an agenda that is not public.”⁶⁹

Tony Blair’s former Communications Chief, Alistair Campbell, claimed that while many political journalists still strive to be accurate, refuse to report something they know to be wrong and lose sleep if they make a mistake, he no longer believed that was the case for the majority.

“In coverage of politics and many other areas, there has been a growing reliance on anonymous quotes, which on examining stories are often found to justify the screaming headline. We have no way of knowing how many of these quotes are real, and how many invented, but I am in no doubt whatever that many of them are invented...I strongly believe now that the invention of quotations by ‘senior sources’, ‘insiders’, ‘senior ministers’, ‘close friends’, etc is widespread. As Michael White (The Guardian) has pointed out, quotes are never attributed to ‘junior backbench MPs who don’t see the Prime Minister very often.’ It is also noticeable that most of the people quoted anonymously speak in the house-style of the medium in which they are quoted. Short sentences in the tabloids, longer in the broadsheets, pithy homilies on TV.”⁷⁰

But several journalists expressed confidence in ‘self-correction’ or the ability of other journalists and editors to pressure or ‘out’ colleagues who fabricated material, regularly reported ‘spin’ or used poor sources. Simon Walters extended the idea to the relationship in general:

“To some extent the relationship between (politician and journalists) is self-regulating. It is less about codes of conduct and more about personal conduct, if a political journalist betrays a trust or files inaccurate reports, word will soon get out among MPs, ministers and officials. Similarly, political journalists learn which politicians can be trusted to tell the truth. Journalists soon learn when they are being used to spread false information.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ Lance Price, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, April 12, 2012
<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Witness-statement-of-Lance-Price-signed-12.04.12.pdf>

⁷⁰ Alistair Campbell, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Witness-Statement-of-Alastair-Campbell.pdf>

⁷¹ Simon Walters, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, April 20, 2012
<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Witness-Statement-of-Simon-Walters.pdf>

Many journalists argued that high levels of contact, or “closeness”, was the fault of politicians obsessed with the media. As Andrew Marr noted:

“Politicians today think, far too much about the media; and too constantly. We are ubiquitous and beyond mere deadlines now. And headlines can be deadly, and media storms appear from a clear blue sky, but the amount of energy spent on presentation has surely become self-defeating. Politicians who try to solve problems and worry less about how they’re seen – it would be invidious to name names - tend to do: at least as well, or better in the end.”⁷²

For his part, John Major conceded this was the case: *“It’s certainly true. I was much too sensitive from time to time about what the press wrote. God knows, in retrospect, why I was, but I was.”⁷³* Tony Blair also has previously noted that: *“If you are a backbench MP today, you learn to give a press release first and a good Parliamentary speech second.”⁷⁴*

The inquiry canvassed ways to improve transparency in the relationship, such as making politicians publish details of their meetings with journalists, not just editors and proprietors. *The Telegraph’s* Deputy Editor, Benedict Brogan, summed up the case against that move:

“The point to consider about formal structures that might be put in place to monitor contacts between politicians and journalists is the likelihood that informal parallel structures will spring up. A requirement for example for ministers to publish their diaries may mean that they will decide to keep contacts with journalists out of their diaries...If we accept that holding Government, politicians and public servants to account is necessary in a democracy, then we must accept that both sides need to be able to speak, openly and frankly, away from the public eye.”⁷⁵

⁷² Andrew Marr, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Witness-Statement-of-Andrew-Marr.pdf>

⁷³ Sir John Major, Evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, Morning Hearing, June 12, 2012 p.8. <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Transcript-of-Morning-Hearing-12-June-2012.pdf>

⁷⁴ Tony Blair, *Lecture by the Prime Minister on Public Life*, Reuters, Canary Wharf, London, June 12, 2007 <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Politics/documents/2007/06/12/BlairReustersSpeech.pdf>

⁷⁵ Benedict Brogan, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, April 24, 2012 <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Witness-statement-of-Benedict-Brogan-signed-24.04.12.pdf>

Brogan argued – as others had - that there was no reason that contacts between journalists and politicians should not be frequent or extensive, providing the relationship did not become a personal – or social – one. That, he said, was where the relationship could become detrimental to the responsibilities politicians owed to their constituents and newspapers to their readers.

But it seems politicians will have to make the first move if anything is to change in the relationship. As Philip Webster noted:

“The only risk I can see from such relationships is if they become too close and decisions are taken in the interests of one side or the other and not for the public good...The politicians themselves obviously have to judge how close that relationship should be, and we have seen signs recently that perhaps both main leaderships may have felt they got too close.”⁷⁶

David Cameron spoke again, as he did before the 2010 election, of the need for politicians to step back from a constant media presence, to focus on the job that they are elected to do.

“When I say distance, partly what I mean is that the politicians, and particularly prime ministers and Cabinet ministers, have to get out of the 24-hour news cycle, not try and fight every hourly battle, and focus on long-term issues and be prepared sometimes to take a hit on a story they don't respond to so quickly.”

For all the debate, discussion and dissection of the relationship between journalists and MPs and the state of modern political reporting, when Lord Justice Leveson handed down his final report on November 29, 2012 he made no recommendations, finding simply that the relationship between politicians and the press:

“...does not operate so as to give rise to any legitimate public concern. On the contrary, relations between politicians and the press on a day to day basis are in robust good health and performing the vital public interest functions of a

⁷⁶ Philip Webster, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, April 23, 2012, p.1
<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Witness-Statement-of-Phillip-Webster.pdf>

democracy, providing an open forum for public debate, enabling a free flow of information and challenge and holding power to account. In these circumstances, close relationships, including personal friendships, are very much part and parcel of all of this and not in themselves any cause for surprise or concern.”⁷⁷

CHAPTER 3: MOOD SWING: THE POST-LEVESON ENVIRONMENT

“On Thursday night MPs and political reporters muttered in Westminster's dark corners as usual.”

-Michael White

The Guardian, November 29, 2012⁷⁸

At the time of writing, almost seven months have passed since Lord Justice Leveson handed down his final report, in which relations between politicians and the press became – quite correctly, as some have observed - a primary focus on relationships between MPs and those at the top of the newspaper hierarchy and where they may have not been transparent or in the public interest.

But while Leveson chose not to make specific recommendations about the “*routine interactions*”⁷⁹ of journalists and politicians, aspects of his findings continue to attract debate. Opinions also differ as to whether the exposure provided by the inquiry may have served to alter the nature of the relationship: has sunlight really been the best disinfectant? Or, like the recommendations for future press regulation in his report, have the lessons that could be drawn from Leveson about the conduct of those relationships simply been kicked into the long grass?

But firstly, contention – and confusion – still surrounds Leveson’s finding that “*close relationships, including personal friendships are...not in themselves any cause for*

⁷⁷ Lord Justice Brian Leveson, Executive Summary, *An Inquiry into the Culture, Ethics and Practices of the Press*, November 29, 2012. Paragraph 111, p.25 <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc1213/hc07/0779/0779.pdf>

⁷⁸ Michael White, ‘*Press and Politicians? Leveson’s report will not change these uneasy bedfellows*’, The Guardian, November 29, 2012 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2012/nov/29/leveson-report-press-politicians-uneasy-bedfellows>

⁷⁹ Lord Justice Brian Leveson, Executive Summary, *An Inquiry into the Culture, Ethics and Practices of the Press*, November 29, 2012. Paragraph 111, p.25 <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc1213/hc07/0779/0779.pdf>

*surprise or concern.*⁸⁰ The post-inquiry commentary and those interviewed for this paper could be said to be themselves surprised and concerned by that remark.

The BBC's Nick Robinson and *The Telegraph's* Peter Osborne reject the idea that political news reporters can have a personal friendship with a politician. Osborne has written extensively about his view that political reporting has become client journalism and the idea of adversarial or hostile reporting is a myth. He told the inquiry:

*"One of the duties of a journalist is to get a story, and how better than to become a great friend of somebody who is in a position to supply information? But it's not a desirable thing... of course there must be a business relationship between politicians and press, but the mistake is turning it into a social relationship."*⁸¹

Robinson says attending social functions with politicians shouldn't result in the sacrifice of professional distance:

"I do see politicians of course all the time, I have to do it. But it's dinner in Westminster and we know the terms: we're having a conversation about politics."

Robinson says an exception to the 'no friendships' rule is columnists, many of whom are expected to be partisan or who are employed because of their close links with particular politicians or politicians.

"Danny Finkelstein (The Times) is constantly referring to the fact that he used to work as an advisor to a leader of the Conservative Party. It's not exactly a secret, it's in fact part of the power of his journalism. He says 'this is who I am and where I came from' and to that extent I don't think it's particularly surprising where you get a blurring of the lines."

Osborne suggests that:

⁸⁰ Lord Justice Brian Leveson, Executive Summary, *An Inquiry into the Culture, Ethics and Practices of the Press*, November 29, 2012. Paragraph 111, p.25 <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc1213/hc07/0779/0779.pdf>

⁸¹ Peter Osborne, Evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, May 17, 2012 <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Transcript-of-Morning-Hearing-17-May-2012.pdf>

“Meetings between journalists and politicians should be viewed as a potential conspiracy against the public, even more so meetings between ministers and editors and proprietors. It would be better if political journalists paid more attention to speeches, white papers, public hustings, parliamentary debates etcetera and less to informal contacts. The House of Commons used to enforce a system of social apartheid between reporters and politicians. It is a great pity this no longer exists.”⁸²

Describing how MPs and political journalists “muttered in Westminster’s dark corners as usual” immediately after Leveson delivered his report, *The Guardian’s* Michael White noted:

“Leveson made no proposal that such activities should be monitored, let alone regulated. The day-to-day relationship between the politicians and the hacks is in ‘robust good health and performing the vital public interest functions in a vigorous democracy,’ the judge concluded. A touch complacently perhaps because producer capture is as much a problem in political journalism as it is in sports, financial or showbiz reporting – and many other walks of life too.”⁸³

Others believe while Leveson was right to focus on relationships between politicians and senior press figures, rather than reporters on the ground, he had little choice.

The Sun’s Associate Editor and former Political Editor, Trevor Kavanagh, says it would simply be impossible to stop politicians and journalists talking to each other because:

“There’s always a way. When you’re in a building of a few thousand people in Westminster people talk, that’s why they’re there...whatever barriers you put up you can never stop the flow. So the process continues but perhaps by other means and with more suspicion and caution (on the part of politicians).”

Whether the revelations at Leveson provide the impetus for journalists also to think more deeply about the use of information provided to them by politicians remains to be seen but seems highly unlikely.

⁸² Peter Osborne, Witness Statement to the Leveson Inquiry, April 23, 2012
<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Witness-Statement-of-Peter-Oborne.pdf>

⁸³ Michael White, ‘Press and Politicians? Leveson’s report will not change these uneasy bedfellows’, *The Guardian*, November 29, 2012 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2012/nov/29/leveson-report-press-politicians-uneasy-bedfellows>

Nick Robinson describes British political reporting as one of the toughest journalistic environments in the world but points to an “*addiction*” to anonymity as a less healthy aspect of the system.

“It’s an addiction for both sides. Politicians know that they can produce potent, engaging, attractive quotes that won’t come back and hurt them. There’s no accountability at all. Journalists can generate dramatic stories and in the end they’re not verifiable.”

Robinson says part of the problem is that while once “*if something wasn’t on camera, in some ways it didn’t happen*”, the faster news cycle and “*the rise of the two-way*” to become a staple part of television and radio political reporting has seen broadcast journalists adopting the same techniques as their print counterparts and expand their use of anonymous sources.

Former BBC political correspondent and *Sultans of Spin* author, Nicholas Jones, says with political reporting now a “*live conversation*” the reliance on anonymous sources has increased to the point where “*everyone in 10 Downing Street from the press secretary to the Downing Street cat*” has become a useful government source.

“If I look back on my career, 80 to 90 per cent of what I said on air was scripted. I would have to carefully think about what I said...When I left I would have thought that 80 to 90 per cent of what I said on air was conversational. And of course you’re in a much more free and easy mood and you know you’re saying ‘government ministers have told me, hang on a minute Nick, you said government ministers who have you spoken to? Oh well, I might have spoken to a few junior spokespeople for ministers but I certainly haven’t spoken to ministers.’ But in the way that journalists talk now, it’s almost as if one journalist is saying his contacts are better than his or her opponent’s contacts. We are boasting now about our sources...that is one of the things they now parade, rather than a more considered approach.”

Robinson himself says that “*there are sources and sources,*” and that lower standards are placed on “*sources for colour*” compared to “*sources as the source of a story.*”

“Routinely, including at the BBC, there are unsourced comments which are very kind of ‘Tory MPs are angry that,’ ‘Labour MPs increasingly feel that,’ you

know, in other words, generic descriptions of the mood in political parties or even the cabinet. And in truth that has a lower burden placed on it than when your entire story, your top line, entirely depends on an anonymous source. Now in that circumstance...there is clearly now much greater pressure to say 'who is your source, what is their motivation, have you got a second source, etcetera,'."

But without pretending there's a golden age of political journalism to return to or a perfect scenario able to be achieved in the future, has the exposure of less than ideal reporting practices and relationships between journalists and politicians at the Leveson Inquiry changed anything?

Trevor Kavanagh believes quite a lot has changed since Leveson in the relationship between politicians and journalists, although less on the surface than the changes to the relationship between police and journalists where information-gathering has become extremely difficult. Kavanagh describes an environment of increased animosity between the press and politicians as a result of Leveson's recommendations for media regulation.

"We ended up with a portrayal of the media that has caused enormous resentment within the media towards the political class, that sort of jumped at the opportunity to get their own back...for the investigation into their personal lives, private lives, domestic lives or political operations or, indeed, the expenses scandal most particularly."

Robinson, meanwhile, says he doesn't detect much change in the nature of political reporting post-Leveson, with the exception of a more media-cautious Prime Minister and:

"...an incredibly aggressive response to David Cameron personally from the papers that oppose the Leveson regulation. One change has been the papers who object to Leveson, particularly the Mail Group, News International and The Telegraph have turned on Cameron personally because they can't forgive him for triggering what they regard as unnecessarily destructive process."

While Robinson and Kavanagh caution against forcing greater transparency in the relationship as counter-productive (such as requiring politicians to publish lists of meetings with journalists), others believe the inquiry has at least served to further

alert the public to the nature of their dealings. Nick Jones says *“there are more people now fully aware of the tricks of the trade and what’s going on.”*

Media Standards Trust Director, Martin Moore, says while he believed the Leveson Inquiry showed *“certainly from what I saw, evidence of far too close a relationship between certain politicians and certain journalists,”* the curtain has been pulled back *“and we will get somewhere, to a better place .”*⁸⁴

Peter Osborne believes the Leveson Inquiry had too many shortcomings to be of any use. He nominates, however, the exposure of phone hacking in Britain as a significant turning point in relationships between politicians and the press:

“The grand bargains that used to be struck between newspapers and politicians, I don’t think they happen so much. So newspapers are telling the truth about what they see to be happening rather than forming rather grotesque and dishonourable alliances with particular political parties or particular political figures...My observation is that it’s a much more level playing field.”

⁸⁴ Martin Moore, *Leveson, the Hacked Off campaign and the case for press regulation*, seminar, Nuffield College, University of Oxford, April 26, 2013 (permission to quote)

CONCLUSION

Although there were no recommendations to change either relationships or reporting practices, Lord Justice Leveson's inquiry and report provided a valuable snapshot of the current state of political journalism in Britain across print and broadcast, even though – significantly - they operate under different codes. *Press Gazette* Editor, Dominic Ponsford, suggested:

“British journalists must learn the lessons of Leveson, not to stave off the threat of statutory control – but because if they are to survive in a digital world where they must compete for readers’ attention with everyone who has a Twitter or Facebook account, they must hold themselves to a much higher ethical standard than the mob.”⁸⁵

But how do political journalists and their news organisations achieve that “*higher ethical standard*” in the modern media environment? As Australian academic Rodney Tiffin pointed out in the inquiry's wake, concerns about *closeness* are:

“...not necessarily a helpful way of describing the problem. If there is an unprofessional or improper element to a relationship then this should be specified in precise terms. It's hard to see how worries about ‘closeness’ can lead to any enforceable regulation; no regulator can measure degrees of intimacy.”⁸⁶

With Leveson's recommendations for press regulation watered down to competing Royal Charters and now at a stalemate, it would be easy to forget the many issues canvassed by political journalists and MPs at the inquiry.

⁸⁵ Dominic Ponsford, ‘*Sunlight really is the best disinfectant! Even I was shocked!*’, in *After Leveson: the future for British journalism*, Abramis Academic Publishing, United Kingdom, 2013, pp.3-4.

⁸⁶ Rodney Tiffin, ‘*From scandal to reform: Leveson’s way forward*’, Inside Story, December 6, 2012 <http://inside.org.au/from-scandal-to-reform/>

For political reporters in comparable democracies that includes a need for them to maintain a business-type relationship with MPs as sources, as opposed to a personal one.

Former Washington bureau chief with the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Steve Goldstein, once suggested it would be wise to impose term limits on political reporters as a way of maintaining perspective in their relationships and, consequently, their coverage.

*"I've been here less than eighteen months," Goldstein wrote "and already I feel my Beltway Bullshit Detector losing power." He argued term limits might also "counteract the potential for disconnection, whereby the correspondent suffers a loss of understanding of issues that Americans really care about."*⁸⁷

While some would consider Goldstein's suggestion of rotation harsh as it would *"throw the good reporters out with those who have gone to seed,"*⁸⁸ Andrew Marr offered a less drastic but common sense proposal:

*"The best way for a journalist to square the circle of contact and corruption, is to be determined to publish any real story, even if this loses a contact. Most will do so because stories, and career, come first. Anyway, the best reporters will be cultivating back-ups all the time."*⁸⁹

Nick Robinson maintains that anonymity remains a valuable tool for journalists, citing the deteriorating relationship between former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his then Chancellor Gordon Brown as a case in point.

"Sometimes there are things that you can only know anonymously. If a minister is falling out with the prime minister, they're extraordinarily unlikely to want to go on the record but it is important to report. When Gordon Brown was really at war with Tony Blair, we were attacked by the likes of Alistair Campbell for speculation, for making it up, for tittle tattle, for gossip. It turned out when the memoirs of the ministers involved were published it was much,

⁸⁷ Steve Goldstein, 'How about term limits for the unelected elite', Columbia Journalism Review, May 1994, Volume 33, p.34

⁸⁸ Steve Goldstein, 'How about term limits for the unelected elite', Columbia Journalism Review, May 1994, Volume 33, p.34

⁸⁹ Andrew Marr, Witness Statement to Leveson Inquiry, <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Witness-Statement-of-Andrew-Marr.pdf>

much worse than we'd ever really reported. If we'd have relied on on-the-record quotes we wouldn't have covered the story at all."

But through the use of anonymity, journalists have the ability to illuminate as well as to deceive their audiences. One of the most widely discussed incidences of the latter concerns reporting in the lead-up to the post-9/11 invasion of Iraq, where many journalists on both sides of the Atlantic ran with untrue information from anonymous sources about Saddam Hussein's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. An Editor's Note – or rather, editor's apology - in the *New York Times* in 2004 illustrated the problem:

"The problematic articles...depended at least in part on information from a circle of Iraqi informants, defectors and exiles bent on 'regime change' in Iraq, people whose credibility has come under increasing public debate in recent weeks...Complicating matters for journalists, the accounts of these exiles were often eagerly confirmed by United States officials convinced of the need to intervene in Iraq...Some critics of our coverage during that time have focused blame on individual reporters. Our examination, however, indicates that the problem was more complicated. Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more scepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper. Accounts of Iraqi defectors were not always weighed against their strong desire to have Saddam Hussein ousted. Articles based on dire claims about Iraq tended to get prominent display, while follow-up articles that called the original ones into question were sometimes buried. In some cases, there was no follow-up at all."⁹⁰

The correlation between anonymity versus credibility has been made time and time again and there is evidence to suggest audiences don't like being kept in the dark about the sources of their news. One comprehensive recent American study of television news, for example, found that stories based on unnamed sources – rather than identifiable on-camera ones - turned viewers off.

"We found that as stories scored better on our scale of sourcing, they also got better ratings. This was true regardless of the subject...The results show that

⁹⁰ New York Times, *Editor's Note*, May 26, 2004

http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/26/international/middleeast/26FTE_NOTE.html?pagewanted=print

*when stations air stories with experts, they are rewarded with higher ratings.*⁹¹

The use of anonymous sources permeates political reporting even though many news organisations have tightened editorial policies on the use of anonymous sources in recent years, the BBC's response to the Hutton Inquiry being a notable example. The news agency *Reuters* reminds journalists in its editorial handbook that *"anonymous sources are the weakest sources"*⁹², while some organisations even go so far as to require journalists to explain in their stories why a source has been granted anonymity, possibly to deter the practice and not simply to justify their use to audiences.

Despite this, Carlson suggests that *"...transparency has become a buzzword for news organisations in recent years...Yet for the most part, journalistic authority is built around a lack of transparency into news practices."*

It seems strange then that the internet, which has been a major driver of both increased deadline and competitive pressures on journalists making them more reliant on anonymous sources, may actually offer the greatest salvation in terms of transparency.

Journalists who use unnamed sources can be immediately, directly or openly challenged by a broader range of voices in more forums than ever before such as email, reader comments on their stories, on social media or via specialist sites such as *spinwatch.org* and *technocracywatch.org* in the UK. As the ABC's Online Political Reporter, Annabel Crabb, has pointed out:

"For such a long time now, the critique of journalism has been a closed shop... Arguments about journalism were only open to practitioners and journalism academics - a cosy circle of reinforcement. Now, they're open to everybody...Otto von Bismarck gave us the warning about the advisability of watching sausages or laws being made. We have traditionally been protective about letting people into our methods. But I think that's yesterday's caution. Why shouldn't people watch how journalists work? Why shouldn't they see

⁹¹ Todd L. Belt and Marion R. Just, *'The Magic Formula:how to make TV that viewers will watch'*, in *We Interrupt this newscast: how to improve local news and win ratings too*, Tom Rosenthal et al, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2007, pp.110-111

⁹² Reuters, Handbook of Journalism, <http://handbook.reuters.com/?title=Accuracy#Sourcing>

how a story develops? Why shouldn't they be permitted a view on whether our methods are reasonable or not?"⁹³

Another idea for political journalists to consider is Carlson's concept of *anonymity as a conditional agreement* which may "*shift the balance of power away from the source and closer to the journalist*"⁹⁴ by giving reporters the ability to reveal their source when problems arise.

Gawenda canvassed such a scenario earlier in this paper:

"When politicians make on the record statements which contradict what they have told journalists on the basis of anonymity, I believe journalists are no longer bound to protect sources. This needs to be made clear publicly by journalists."⁹⁵

Such a move in thinking may ease the conflict between both the duty to protect sources and to disclose all essential information, by releasing journalists from the added responsibility of protecting a political source in situations where they should be held accountable, for instance, through the provision of deliberately false and malicious information.

At the same time, it would also protect the credibility of individual journalists and news organisations from the "*slippery slope (that) threatens to undermine the journalist when it becomes obvious that a source can no longer be supported.*"⁹⁶ An editorial in *The Australian* newspaper in June 2013 indicated the frustration that continued protection can cause:

"We take very seriously the obligation to ensure such backgrounding is not used to peddle falsehoods. But few obligations flow the other way; although in generations of exchanges between politicians and journalists the convention is that sources would aim not to publicly deny or criticise the stories they have

⁹³ Annabel Crabb, *A.N. Smith Lecture in Journalism*, University of Melbourne, October 27, 2010

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2010-10-27/the-end-of-journalism-as-we-know-it-and-other-good/2314020>

⁹⁴ Matt Carlson, *On the condition of anonymity: unnamed sources and the battle for journalism*, First Illinois paperback, USA, 2012 p.154

⁹⁵ Michael Gawenda, *Nameless Dread*, *The Spectator*, March 3, 2012
<http://www.spectator.co.uk/australia/7685778/nameless-dread/>

⁹⁶ Matt Carlson, *On the condition of anonymity: unnamed sources and the battle for journalism*, First Illinois paperback, USA, 2012 p.11

briefed...Yet now denigration of our reporting comes from - and sometimes is led by - people who had no objections before it went to print.”⁹⁷

As Barrie Cassidy suggests, conditional – rather than absolute - anonymity could be achieved as simply as:

“If a politician, troubled by recent events, asks a journalist whether they can have a confidential conversation, the answer has to be: Sure. As long as you don't lie to me.”⁹⁸

Nick Jones believes the idea has merits and could provide protection for journalists as well as a safeguard for the public if a source is found to have deliberately lied. He cautions though, that while it could be a *“useful tool that could be included in the political journalist’s tool box,”* it could also be a *“minefield.”*

Carlson acknowledges the limitations in that sources, particularly whistle-blowers, may not offer information fearing ramifications if they are exposed later.⁹⁹ It might also not help to stop the pervasive work of political spin doctors, who tend to deal in omission and half-truths, rather than outright lies. As Lance Price suggested:

“Get caught out lying as a spin doctor and your reputation is dead in the water. But most spin doctors would stand uneasily in the dock with a Bible in their hands. They might just about manage ‘the truth and nothing but the truth’. The bit about ‘the whole truth’ would be more of a problem.”¹⁰⁰

In the modern media environment, news is a matter of time and money, neither of which is in plentiful supply. Unfortunately those two elements – more time and more resources to dig deeper - are probably what political reporters need most to break free from smaller circles of reliance on sources, to reassert what autonomy they can and rebuild trust with audiences.

Much will also depend on the future communications strategies of politicians. While they are not the focus of this paper, Nick Jones provides examples in the UK of

⁹⁷ The Australian, *‘Serious plots or wanton tales; Labor must decide’*, Editorial, June 22, 2013
<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/editorials/serious-plots-or-wanton-tales-labor-must-decide/story-e6frg71x-1226667802485>

⁹⁸ Barrie Cassidy, *‘Media, pollies play “the game”. Public loses out.’* The Drum, ABC Online March 9, 2012
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-03-09/cassidy-rules-of-engagement/3877924>

⁹⁹ Matt Carlson, *On the condition of anonymity: unnamed sources and the battle for journalism*, First Illinois paperback, USA, 2012 p.155

¹⁰⁰ Lance Price, *The Spin Doctor’s Diary: Inside No. 10 with New Labour*, Hodder and Stoughton, Great Britain, 2005, p. xiii

politicians choosing to limit interpretations of their message on significant stories (such as during the global financial crisis) by giving them to just one senior journalist – rather than a wider audience - whom others are then forced to follow. It's a trend identified by former *Financial Times* journalist-turned-public relations practitioner, Tim Burt, who calls it a focus on “AAA media” to the exclusion of a wider media pack seen as increasingly hostile.¹⁰¹

This paper has not been an attempt to rewrite the rules on relationships and dealings with political sources or an attempt to undermine the valuable work that many political journalists in western democracies such as Australia and the UK do every day. It is simply a snapshot in time of some of the shortcomings in political journalism brought to the fore by the Leveson Inquiry that have affected, or can affect others in similar environments. The system is not perfect but nor are the solutions. So while political journalism is always evolving, for now the status quo – as summed up by *The Guardian's* Michael White - remains:

“As mocking novelists have made plain for centuries, politicians and the press have always been locked in a love/hate relationship. It is one of cheerful loathing, mitigated by drink, grudging respect and the shackles of mutual dependency: information traded overtly and covertly for publicity. Nothing in Lord Justice Leveson's report will change that.”¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Tim Burt, *A walk on the dark side: the changing face of corporate communications*, RISJ seminar, Green Templeton College, University of Oxford, May 1, 2013

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/about/news/item/article/a-walk-on-the-dark-side-the-chang.html>

¹⁰² Michael White, 'Press and Politicians? Leveson's report will not change these uneasy bedfellows', *The Guardian*, November 29, 2012 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2012/nov/29/leveson-report-press-politicians-uneasy-bedfellows>

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Nick Robinson, BBC Political Editor, May 21, 2013

(All quotes in Chapter 3 and Conclusions are from these interviews unless otherwise attributed)

COVER ART

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