

## Old-style/New-style Abuse of Press Freedom

### The Leveson Inquiry: Culture, Practice and Ethics of the Press

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It is the contention of this submission that the behaviour of the press relating to some of the great issues of the day not infrequently constitutes *gross professional misconduct*, by involving blatant distortion of the facts and demonstrating utter contempt for the responsibility to provide well informed and balanced treatment.

The potential damage to human welfare of such 'campaigns of misinformation' is several orders of magnitude greater than that involved in the abuses which led to the setting up of the Inquiry, however serious this may be, since, by undermining public support, they jeopardise the ability of governments to take the hard but necessary decisions which these issues demand.

The impetus for this submission was originally provided by recent articles on international aid in the *Daily Mail* and material relevant to that issue was included. However, I also cited two other examples, dealing with 'HIV Denial' and 'Climate Scepticism', to illustrate the fact that this serious problem is both long-standing and endemic within large sections of the press. The latter component is copied below.

### Climate Scepticism

The greatest concern relates to the treatment of climate change by large parts of the printed media. On 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2004, the science historian, Dr Naomi Oreskes, presented the results of a major survey<sup>4</sup>, in the leading scientific journal, *Science*, of the stance on climate change of *bona fide*, 'peer-reviewed' scientific papers. She concluded that "*Politicians, economists, journalists and others may have the impression of confusion, disagreement or discord among climate scientists, but that impression is incorrect*". That 'incorrect impression' is largely created by the media.

Presentation of this issue reached its nadir with a major article by Christopher Booker in the Sunday Telegraph, on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2008. Under the heading, "*So it appears that Arctic ice isn't vanishing after all*", Mr Booker ridiculed inferences drawn from reports that, in the previous Autumn, "*Sea ice cover had shrunk to the lowest level ever recorded*", by pointing out that the ice, having shrunk "*from 13 million sq km to just 4 million from the start of 2007 to October... is now almost back to 13 million sq km*".

But of course the arctic ice shrinks during the long days of summer and extends its boundaries during the winter when the region is plunged into constant darkness! It has done so since time immemorial and, indeed, it will continue to do so even if, as feared, the North Pole becomes ice-free during the summer within the space of a few decades. Concern is generated not by the fact of this annual cycle, but by the 30% reduction in the area of sea ice during the summer which has been observed over the past 40 years, and its dramatic reduction in thickness (nearly 50%).

Christopher Booker's only qualification to comment on such matters seems to be his history degree, and it beggars belief that a reputable publication, with a circulation in excess of half a million, should open its pages to someone so manifestly lacking in understanding, particularly after his earlier, unfortunate forays into scientific matters in the paper. [For example, "*there is still no proof that BSE causes CJD in humans*", 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2002.] It also beggars belief that intelligent people could attach the slightest significance to such absurdity, but although they may not 'take it as gospel', they do, as the author knows from personal experience, infer that the evidence for even the occurrence of global warming, let alone its causation, is evenly balanced.

**Cont'd**

In contrast, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change<sup>5</sup> has stated that, "*Warming of the climate system is unequivocal as is now evident from observations of increases in global air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising average global sea level.*" [My emphasis] In other words, the occurrence of global warming is, in popular parlance, 'beyond reasonable doubt'.

Similarly, in a paper in *Nature* in 2008, Cynthia Rosenzweig and her colleagues<sup>6</sup> reported the results of a survey of data sets between 1970 and 2004. Where significant changes were observed, "95% of the 829 physical changes have been in directions consistent with warming, such as glacier wastage and an earlier peak in river discharge." Similarly, "90% of the approximately 28,800 [28,800!] documented changes in plants and animals are responding consistently to temperature changes... for example by earlier blooming, geographical distribution, etc." "When we look at these impacts together, it is clear they are across continents and endemic. We're getting a sense that climate change is already changing the way the world works... It's real and it's happening now" (Cynthia Rosenzweig, Head of the Climate Impacts Group at Nasa's Goddard Institute for Space Studies in New York).

According to the 20 Nobel Prize winners – some of our finest scientific minds – who contributed to the St James's Palace Symposium<sup>7</sup> in 2009, "*Political leaders cannot possibly ask for a more robust, evidence-based call for action*". Similarly, the National Academy of Sciences USA, responsible for providing the American government with the best scientific advice available, has stated that (9<sup>th</sup> May, 2010), "*Some scientific conclusions or theories have been so thoroughly examined and tested, and supported by so many independent observations and results, that their likelihood of subsequently being found to be wrong is vanishingly small. Such conclusions and theories are then regarded as settled facts. This is the case for the conclusions that the Earth system is warming and that much of this warming is very likely due to human activities.*"

However, whilst the scientific evidence for man-made climate change, and for the unprecedented dangers it poses for humanity, has grown stronger by the year, large sections of the media continue to be governed by obdurate prejudice on this issue. In 1993, *Nature* was able to respond to the *Sunday Times'* misrepresentation of the evidence for HIV by planning "to monitor its future treatment of this issue," but if leading scientific publications were to adopt the same policy today with respect to the misrepresentation by the press of the evidence for climate change, they would have space for little else!

"Never before have we faced such a global threat. The longer we procrastinate, the more difficult the task becomes", stated Lord Robert May, President of the Royal Society. Similarly, Professor Ross Garnaut, the Australian government's advisor on climate change, stated that "*The failure of our generation on climate change mitigation would lead to consequences that would haunt humanity until the end of time.*" If our generation does indeed fail in this way, the widespread abuse of press freedom in this connection will bear a heavy responsibility for the ensuing catastrophe - "*a catastrophe that will exacerbate human suffering to a magnitude that perhaps the world has not yet seen*" (Archbishop Desmond Tutu).

4. Oreskes N. (2004) "The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change" *Science*, 306: 1686.

5. IPCC 2007: Summary for Policymakers. In: *Climate Change 2007: the Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Party 1 to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [Solomon S. et al. eds.]. Cambridge University Press. Page 4.

6. Rosenzweig C. et al. (13 of them!) (2008) "Attributing physical and biological impacts to anthropogenic climate change". *Nature* 453, 353-358.

7. "Action for a Low Carbon and Equitable Future", Manifesto, St James's Palace Nobel Laureate Symposium, 26<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> May 2009.