



THE ROLE OF MEDIA SELF-REGULATION IN POST-LEVESON BRITAIN: BALANCING PRESS FREEDOM AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Raufova Ozoda Rafiq kizi

**Master's Student University of Journalism and Mass Communications of
Uzbekistan, Tashkent, Uzbekistan**

ORCID:<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5782-872X>

Email: ozodaraufova9@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the functioning of the media self-regulation system in the United Kingdom in the era following the publication of the Leveson Report and evaluates the effectiveness of contemporary regulatory institutions in balancing press independence and public accountability. The author analyzes the institutional shifts that occurred in the British media landscape, focusing specifically on the dissolution of the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), the creation of the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), and the emergence of the independent monitor IMPRESS. Utilizing a qualitative methodology that includes documentary content analysis and comparative analysis, a comprehensive body of academic literature, regulatory acts, and UK media policy documents was examined.

The research findings indicate that post-Leveson reforms strengthened ethical standards, increased media transparency, and optimized complaint-handling procedures. At the same time, risks of indirect constraints on journalistic autonomy remain, manifesting as excessive editorial caution and latent self-censorship. The article argues that the contemporary British model of self-regulation should be viewed not as a static restrictive or protective system, but as a dynamically evolving framework aimed at reconciling the democratic values of free speech with the professional duty of the media. This work contributes to theoretical debates on media ethics, press governance, and media accountability within a democratic state.

Keywords: media self-regulation, press freedom, public accountability, Leveson Inquiry, British journalism, media ethics, IPSO, IMPRESS, press regulation, post-Leveson Britain.



Introduction

The relationship between media independence and its accountability to society traditionally occupies a central place in the political and legal discourse of democratic countries. In the United Kingdom, debates regarding the ethical boundaries of journalism intensified sharply following a series of high-profile scandals involving privacy violations, illegal phone hacking, and other breaches of professional ethics by major tabloid newspapers. These crises culminated in 2011 with the establishment of a special public inquiry led by Lord Justice Brian Leveson, officially titled "The Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press." This process was triggered by undeniable evidence that journalists from several British publications had systematically intercepted the telephone messages of celebrities, political figures, and ordinary citizens (Leveson, 2012, pp. 3–7).

The work of the Leveson Inquiry became a turning point for British media, as it called into question the long-established paradigm of press autonomy. Historically, the British press relied on the principles of self-regulation, operating on the premise that the journalistic community was capable of maintaining ethical order independently without state dictate. However, opponents of this model argued that the pre-2011 institutions proved incapable of preventing widespread misconduct, allowing the industry to function in a legal and ethical vacuum (Frost, 2020, pp. 54–57).

Media self-regulation is understood as a framework in which professional standards, ethical codes, and dispute resolution mechanisms are developed by the industry players themselves, without the direct involvement of executive or legislative authorities. Advocates of this approach are convinced that it is critically important for protecting media autonomy, as it minimizes the risks of state censorship and political pressure. As Bertrand (2000, pp. 15–19) notes, such systems are indispensable in a democratic society because they stimulate the growth of professional responsibility without infringing upon freedom of expression. Nevertheless, critics point out that nominal or weak self-regulation undermines public trust, gives a free hand to unscrupulous publishers, and insulates influential media conglomerates from genuine accountability.

The Leveson Inquiry resulted in radical changes to the landscape of British media regulators, marked by the creation of the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) and the recognition of IMPRESS. These institutions were conceived as tools to modernize ethical oversight and restore public confidence in



the press without transitioning to rigid statutory regulation. However, consensus regarding the outcomes of these transformations remains elusive within academia. Some researchers believe that the updated system strengthened the ethical foundation and made journalism more mature (Tambini, 2015, pp. 11–14). Conversely, other experts express concern that new oversight mechanisms have created subtle levers of pressure that limit editorial independence (Freedman, 2016, pp. 88–92).

This study focuses on analyzing the specific nature of media self-regulation in the UK during the post-Leveson period to determine whether the new institutions have succeeded in achieving a compromise between freedom of expression and accountability. Within the framework of this article, the effectiveness of the established bodies, their impact on editorial autonomy, and the long-term consequences of these processes for a democratic media system are examined.

To achieve this objective, the authors seek to answer the following research questions:

1. How did the press self-regulation system transform under the influence of the Leveson Inquiry's findings?
2. To what extent do post-Leveson regulatory structures guarantee the protection of press freedom?
3. Do contemporary forms of control contribute to strengthening quality journalism, or do they impose covert restrictions on press autonomy?

Literature Review

The relationship between information space regulation and the development of democratic freedoms is a subject of long-term debate in mass communication theory. Most scholars recognize freedom of expression as an inviolable value; however, opinions diverge radically when it comes to the boundaries of control necessary to prevent abuses. The British case arouses particular scholarly interest due to its historical combination of a fierce commitment to press freedom alongside periodically erupting systemic crises within the media environment.

Prior to the launch of the Leveson Inquiry, the primary ethical arbiter in the country was the Press Complaints Commission (PCC). However, this structure was regularly subjected to harsh criticism due to its lack of genuine sanctioning powers and its institutional dependence on the industry itself. According to Frost (2020, pp. 61–63), the PCC was unable to hold violators genuinely accountable, which led to a degradation of public trust in the media. McNair (2017, pp. 102–104) similarly



indicates that the collapse of the PCC exposed fundamental systemic flaws in the old model of media governance.

The phone-hacking scandal completely remapped theoretical approaches to ethics in British journalism. This crisis exposed deep distortions within the editorial culture of mass media and generated demands for the creation of rigid institutional frameworks (Leveson, 2012, pp. 22–30). Against this backdrop, researchers began to actively question whether purely voluntary self-regulation could function effectively in an environment of intense commercialization and aggressive market competition.

The core vector of contemporary discussions revolves around distinguishing between the concepts of "public accountability" and "the limitation of freedom." Defenders of strengthened oversight argue that quality journalism is impossible without authoritative oversight bodies capable of protecting the interests of citizens. Tambini (2015, pp. 16–21) suggests that the post-reform period brought greater transparency to the media system and stimulated a responsible approach to gathering and presenting information. A number of experts also point out that IPSO surpassed the former PCC in the quality of handling public complaints due to the modernization of its code of practice and the expansion of its powers to conduct internal investigations.

At the same time, critics of the reforms warn of the risks of control systems morphing into instruments of covert dictate. Freedman (2016, pp. 93–98) notes that increased external pressure forces newsrooms to adopt an overly defensive stance, leading to self-censorship, particularly in the realm of investigative journalism. From this perspective, excessive control undermines the "fourth estate" function of the press and prevents journalists from effectively criticizing political and economic elites.

Another important theoretical direction explores the role of independent regulation in maintaining the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Bertrand (2000, pp. 37–42) emphasizes that media regulators must remain equidistant from the state while maintaining fidelity to ethical guidelines. This position aligns with liberal-democratic theories, which view press independence as the primary barrier against authoritarianism.

Despite the abundance of scholarly works dedicated to the post-Leveson period, lacunae remain in the literature. Most studies focus either on the purely legal aspects of the reform or on the analysis of organizational structures, whereas a



comprehensive evaluation of the balance between press freedom and accountability is rarely conducted. This article aims to fill this gap by offering a critical analysis of the strengths and vulnerabilities of the contemporary British model.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to analyze the transformation of media regulation in the UK and evaluate its impact on press freedom. The choice of a qualitative methodology is dictated by the fact that the research aims to interpret institutional processes, conceptual documents, and scholarly paradigms rather than to record quantitative metrics. In media studies, such an approach is traditionally considered the most productive, as it allows for a profound understanding of changes in policy, professional ethics, and institutional behavior within the context of broader socio-political transformations (Creswell, 2014, pp. 185–188).

Documentary content analysis and comparative analysis served as the foundational research methods. Document analysis covered official reports, professional codes of ethics, regulatory charters, expert evaluations, and regulatory acts in the sphere of British media policy. The multi-volume Leveson Report, official materials from IPSO and IMPRESS, and relevant publications by media researchers were utilized as key sources (Leveson, 2012, pp. 45–53).

The comparative analysis method was employed to contrast the pre-Leveson and contemporary models of control. Primary attention was devoted to the institutional transition caused by the dissolution of the PCC and the launch of IPSO. Based on this comparison, it was evaluated whether the new structures succeeded in increasing press accountability without compromising its editorial freedom.

The research process consisted of three consecutive phases:

1. Systematization of theoretical material on media ethics, freedom of expression, and forms of self-regulation.
2. Analysis of the organizational models and complaint-handling practices of key British regulators.
3. Examination of polarized academic assessments of the reform to identify the balance between free speech and regulatory barriers.

The empirical basis of the study comprised the secondary analysis of data (peer-reviewed monographs, journal articles, and regulatory reports). Because the research is theoretical and analytical in nature, no surveys, interviews, or other forms of direct human interaction were conducted.



A limitation of this study is its reliance on the existing corpus of academic texts and documents. Given that media policy issues are always highly idealized and politicized, some author assessments may bear the imprint of institutional or ideological preferences. To mitigate this factor, the method of triangulating various theoretical sources was used, ensuring the objectivity of the conclusions.

Results

The analysis demonstrates that following the Leveson Report, the British system of press self-regulation underwent deep modernization designed to strengthen ethical discipline without transitioning to state censorship. The most significant vector of these changes was the disbandment of the Press Complaints Commission and the 2014 launch of the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). This body received fundamentally different mechanisms for handling disputes, an updated code of conduct, and expanded powers to conduct investigations (Frost, 2020, pp. 64–67).

The creation of IPSO was viewed as a key step toward restoring public confidence after the prolonged ethical crisis of the tabloids. Unlike its predecessor (the PCC), IPSO provided a more open process for reviewing citizens' complaints. The analysis shows that the organization substantially eased the complaint-submission procedure for the public and tightened responses to instances of undocumented professional misconduct, particularly in cases of privacy intrusion, inaccurate data publication, and harassment (Tambini, 2015, pp. 22–24).

In parallel with this milestone, the emergence of the regulator IMPRESS occurred, functioning within the framework of the Royal Charter established based on Leveson's recommendations. This structure positioned itself as a benchmark for absolute independent control, aiming to prove the compatibility of rigorous ethical oversight with journalistic autonomy. However, the collected data indicate that the real influence of IMPRESS turned out to be incomparably smaller than that of IPSO. The vast majority of national titles refused to join IMPRESS, citing the threat of undermining press independence through the mechanisms of the Royal Charter.

Furthermore, the study revealed ambivalent consequences of the reform for press freedom. On one hand, new control tools raised the ethical bar across the media industry. Many newsrooms revised their internal guidelines and strengthened quality control over content, seeking to avoid reputational damage and regulatory sanctions (McNair, 2017, pp. 106–108).

On the other hand, risks of indirect pressure on journalistic autonomy clearly



emerged. A number of researchers argue that stringent control generates a so-called "chilling effect," blocking the development of investigative journalism due to publishers' fear of becoming entangled in costly legal proceedings or receiving fines (Freedman, 2016, pp. 95–98). Despite the absence of direct state censorship, the phenomenon of covert self-censorship has become a subject of serious concern within the professional community.

Thus, post-Leveson self-regulation has led neither to the suffocation of the British press nor to its complete irresponsibility. The reforms have shaped a complex, contradictory environment where a rise in ethical demands is accompanied by permanent anxiety regarding freedom of expression.

Discussion

The results of the study vividly illustrate the duality of the position in which media self-regulation finds itself in contemporary Britain. On one hand, the new institutions succeeded in building barriers against gross ethical violations, which helped to partially restore public trust after the gravest crisis in the modern history of British media. The launch of IPSO and the appearance of IMPRESS were appropriate responses by the industry to public dissatisfaction and demands for governance modernization.

The principal merit of the post-reform model lies in the fact that it preserved press autonomy from direct intervention by executive and legislative branches of government. Unlike statutory regulation, this framework allows the media community to operate within its own professional sphere, avoiding political pressure. As Bertrand (2000, pp. 40–42) rightly observes, stable democratic media systems require accountability mechanisms that reinforce moral standards without destroying freedom of expression. In this context, the steps taken after the Leveson Report look like an attempt at systemic sanitation rather than the suppression of the press.

However, the arguments of critics regarding latent threats to press freedom are also validated. The presence of rigid control frameworks inevitably makes newsrooms more timid, particularly when dealing with complex, high-profile, or politically sensitive topics. Freedman (2016, pp. 97–101) warns that heightened regulatory attention combined with public pressure pushes journalists toward conformity, reducing the critical edge of publications.

The discussion also exposes a fundamental contradiction embedded in the nature of contemporary media systems. A democratic structure requires the press to



simultaneously manifest maximum freedom and maximum accountability, but holding these two vectors in equilibrium is extremely difficult in practice. Unbounded freedom easily degenerates into a cynical disregard for ethical norms, while hypertrophied accountability paralyzes the investigative function of the press.

Moreover, the experience of the United Kingdom proves that self-regulation cannot be evaluated solely by its organizational structure. Its effectiveness is powerfully influenced by external factors: the level of public trust, the entrenched culture of newsrooms, market competition, and the nature of political discourse. Accordingly, media accountability must be perceived as a flexible social process rather than a permanently fixed institutional blueprint.

On the whole, it can be stated that the post-Leveson model of self-regulation has only partially resolved the task of reconciling freedom and accountability, leaving the field open to ongoing debate and professional tension.

Conclusion

This paper conducted a detailed analysis of the media self-regulation system in the United Kingdom in the era following the publication of the Leveson Report. The study confirms that the 2011–2012 inquiry became a critical crossroads for British media, exposing the institutional impotence of previous control mechanisms and triggering a profound reform of media policy.

It was established that the key outcome of the reforms comprised structural changes, manifested in the elimination of the ineffective Press Complaints Commission (PCC), the creation of the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), and the attempted deployment of the alternative platform IMPRESS. These steps allowed for a noticeable raising of the bar for professional responsibility, made the public complaint review process transparent, and partially restored citizen trust. Newspapers and magazines began to treat issues of confidentiality, factual accuracy, and correct information-gathering techniques with greater care.

Nevertheless, an excessive emphasis on accountability has generated covert threats to media independence. Although the reforms did not lead to the creation of censorship bureaus, tendencies toward excessive editorial caution and conformity intensified within the industry under the influence of reputational and legal fears. This confirms the thesis that freedom of expression and accountability exist in a dialectical contradiction, where the tightening of control inevitably generates costs for creative autonomy.

Thus, the author of the article concludes that the contemporary British system



of self-regulation cannot be evaluated in unambiguously positive or negative terms. It represents a complex compromise between two basic needs of democracy: the public's right to free expression and the public's right to protection against media irresponsibility.

Future research in this field could focus on studying how practicing reporters themselves evaluate the impact of the new regulators on their daily work. Furthermore, comparative studies of the experiences of the UK and other democratic nations hold significant potential, which will allow for a better understanding of the evolutionary mechanisms of media regulation in a global context.



References

- Bertrand, C.-J. (2000). *Media ethics and accountability systems*. Transaction Publishers.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Freedman, D. (2016). Media policy, regulatory reform and the future of press freedom in the United Kingdom. In J. Steel (Ed.), *Media and ethics in the digital age* (pp. 88–101). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frost, C. (2020). *Journalism ethics and regulation* (5th ed.). Routledge.
- Leveson, B. (2012). *An inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press* (Vols. 1–4). The Stationery Office.
- McNair, B. (2017). *An introduction to political communication* (6th ed.). Routledge.
- Tambini, D. (2015). *Media accountability and post-Leveson press regulation*. London School of Economics Press.
- Ward, S. J. A. (2018). *Disrupting journalism ethics: Radical change on the frontier of digital media*. Routledge.
- Couldry, N. (2012). *Media, society, world: Social theory and digital media practice*. Polity Press.
- Mair, J., Clark, T., & Fowler-Watt, K. (2012). *The phone hacking scandal: Journalism on trial*. Abramis Academic Publishing.