

FREE Press

No 196 November–December 2013 £1

The Journal of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

MURDOCH MAYHEM

Empire builder unmasked

AN unauthorised biography of Rupert Murdoch has been published in the United States – to coincide with the start of the hacking trials in the UK.

National Public Radio media correspondent David Folkenflik, pictured, has produced a forensic portrait of the man that starts with a dramatic account of Murdoch's meeting with the Dowler family once the extent of phone hacking became apparent.



Folkenflik also not only confirms previous reports about the operation of Fox News in the US, but adds to that with revelations about the station's PR approach.

"It's hard to look at Fox News' PR as something apart from Fox News," Folkenflik said in an interview with Media Matters for America, "it is so much a part of the DNA of who (Fox News supremo Roger) Ailes is and consistent to what Murdoch is like in the pages of his newspapers and at times his conversations behind closed doors.

"Fox News' PR department ... is kind of the, I guess, the unbridled id of Ailes and of the channel.

"Their aggressiveness, their willingness to punch or to reward is very much in keeping with the channel itself and the way Ailes operates. It's best understood ... as a political shop, like something on an exceptionally aggressive presidential or senatorial campaign."



Unsurprisingly, Fox News was initially quiet about the book and its revelations.

■ *Murdoch's World: The Last of the Old Media Empires*, by David Folkenflik, is published by Public Affairs Books. www.publicaffairsbooks.com

**Tory chairman fires
opening salvo in licence
fee battle - Page 6**



CHARTER MARKED?

Despite the royal seal, is regulation dealt with?

Pages 2-3



OWN GOAL

Football club owner faces
censure over ban

Pages 4-5



RECONCILIATION?

Spanish journalist leads
campaign to unearth truth

Page 7

**MORE CAMPAIGN
NEWS**
www.cpb.org.uk

Industry's proposal fails every test

Brian Cathcart

THE UK now has a Royal Charter on press self-regulation that will deliver the recommendations of the Leveson Inquiry. The Queen's formal nod in October mercifully ended 11 months of involvement by politicians. From now on, the Charter functions without serious possibility of political interference.

Nothing changes overnight. The painstaking procedures to ensure the independence of the chartered body will now take at least six months. Once this body, the Recognition Panel, is in place it will consider applications by self-regulators. The big newspaper firms would like us all to believe that no one will apply, but they are wrong.

Given the incentives to membership of a recognised self-regulator – public trust, cheap, quick arbitration in civil law cases, protection from grilling by rich litigants, a huge competitive advantage over non-members when it comes to court costs – it is inevitable that a charter-compliant self-regulator will be established. And it doesn't

have to be a big publisher or publishers to set it up. Then we will see how long newspaper proprietors are prepared to cut off their noses to spite their faces. The benefits of participating in the Charter system are already obvious – and in its absence new cases of press abuse are happening every week.

As for the regulator proposed by the big newspaper groups, it fails every test. Designed by those who oversaw the failed Press Complaints Commission, it is a perfect example of the “cosmetic reform” condemned in the Leveson Report. It falls short of the basic requirements of independence and effectiveness and will never command public trust. News publishers who make the mistake of joining the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) will pass up the opportunity to show the public that they have put a shameful past behind them. They will also put themselves at a competitive disadvantage and will suffer financial and reputational damage. For no good reason. Can news publishers afford that?

■ Brian Cathcart is director of Hacked Off.

Eye, eye, what's going on here?

POLICE understanding of media law has long been contentious, but officers' knowledge came under unfortunate scrutiny (if not ridicule) at the start of the hacking trial at the Old Bailey.

The confusion arose over that week's *Private Eye*.

Reports vary, but at least one officer told a vendor near London's Farringdon station that selling an issue of *Eye* (with defendant

Rebekah Brooks pictured for the cover in a “joke” that the judge described as being “in especially bad taste”) could represent contempt of court.

Index on Censorship quickly reacted – suggesting that the police's impression that magazine sales there should cease was “really problematic”.

A spokesman added: “It is an example of a very blasé attitude towards the free press



on the part of these individual policemen. That is worrying.”

Officers also reportedly took away a form from another vendor, near St Paul's station, detailing an extra *Eye* order.

The Met admitted that one vendor was advised that the publication may be in contempt of court.

Rebekah Brooks, 46, and Andy Coulson, 45, deny the charges against them.

Join the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

THE Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom depends on its membership for day-to-day operating funds - including the production and distribution of *Free Press*.

Taking out - and maintaining - membership will allow the Campaign to maintain its work, strengthen its voice and enhance its profile at a time when the media industry is facing more repressive political and commercial constraints than for generations.

If you're interested in a media and journalism that contribute to an informed electorate, then please join the Campaign or renew your membership now.

MEMBERSHIP RATES PER YEAR

- a) Individual membership £15
- b) Unwaged £6
- c) Supporting membership £25 (includes CPBF publications)
- d) Institutions (eg libraries) £25 (includes 10 copies of *FREE Press*)

I/We want to join the CPBF and enclose a cheque/PO for £ _____

Name _____

Address _____

Postcode _____ Tel _____

Organisation (if applicable) _____

Please return to: CPBF, Second Floor, Vi and Gamer Smith House, 23 Orford Road, Walthamstow, London E17 9NL
Tel: 0 772 984 6146 E-mail: freepress@cpbf.org.uk

AFFILIATION BY ORGANISATION

- f) Fewer than 500 members £25
- g) 500 to 1,000 £30
- h) 1,000 to 10,000 £50
- i) 10,000 to 50,000 £115
- j) 50,000 to 100,000 £225
- k) More than 100,000 £450

Marking time



IN the battle between Murdoch and Dacre, Hugh Grant and the Dowlers, who has won? **Nicholas Jones** provides an assessment.

ONCE the Queen had placed her seal of approval on the politically-approved version of the royal charter for press regulation there must have been a collective sigh of relief among the three party leaders.

Almost by a whisker, they had ensured that radio and television reports of the opening of the prosecution's case in the phone hacking trial would be balanced by the news that the politicians had delivered on their promise to respond to the Leveson Inquiry.

But the Privy Council's rendezvous with Queen at Buckingham Palace was nothing more than an empty gesture dressed up in the guise of some pretty clumsy news management.

When it came to influencing the headlines – and that is what it was all about – the message from the leadership of the three main parties was pretty clear: "We've proved we can stand up to the press on behalf of the public. We've done our bit."

Yet in reality the political leaders know they are simply treading water. The ball remains very firmly in the hands of newspaper and magazine proprietors, who will carry on regardless in establishing their Leveson-style regulator, the Independent Press Standards Organisation.

My sense is that the party leaders will be happy to take a back seat as events unfold at the Old Bailey and the trial of Rebekah Brooks and Andy Coulson provides the public with a running commentary and constant reminder of the alleged excesses of tabloid abuses.

While they will be ready, if challenged, to go through the motions of reminding the newspaper and magazine industry that there is cross-party unity over

the need for IPSO to get official recognition as required under the royal charter, and then be subjected to periodic review by Parliament, there will be a rush to raise the stakes.

The closer we get to the general election in 2015, the less stomach the political parties will have for a renewed offensive against the press proprietors and

the conclusion of the Brooks-Coulson trial and other follow-on prosecutions will allow the politicians to keep their heads down.

In all probability the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) will let the party leaders off the hook. If a much toughened system of self regulation is up and running by early next year – well before the conclusion of the trial at the Old Bailey – then the industry has every chance to demonstrate that newspapers and magazines have put their own house in order.

If IPSO delivers on its manifesto, if upfront corrections do start appearing in a prominent position and if there are meaningful sanctions on systematic wrongdoing, the politicians will be sorely tempted to back off.

Like the party leaders, campaigners against press abuses will probably have no alternative but to play it long. To all intents and purpose self regulation has been given yet another second chance and perhaps the focus now should be seeing on whether IPSO is a credible and effective replacement for the Press Complaints Commission.

■ Former BBC political correspondent Nicholas Jones presents the CPBF podcasts – available online at www.cpbf.org.uk – and blogs at www.nicholasjones.org.uk.



REVIEW

What's journalese by any other name?

IN 2003, former *Mirror* sub-editor Robert Hutton started playing a game, one that even got to involve ministers, to identify words that are (apparently) "journalese"; this small book is the result.

Journalese evolved because of the need for tight writing – as exemplified ironically by *The Mirror* in the 70s. Nowadays, four-letter words, even decent ones, have become the territory of tweets. Journalese was a form of speed-writing, one measure longer than that needed when telegrams were paid for by the word. A tabloid sub once

told me his task was to write "up" copy, using drama to engage readers. Perhaps these words reflect the broadsheet/tabloid divide and the differences between the Westminster village and local council chambers?

A friend who teaches teenagers says she tries to get them to read tabloid stories while taking out the adjectives. In deciphering the papers, that way may have more to commend it. AC

■ *Romps, Tots and Boffins ... the strange language of news* by Robert Hutton is published by Elliot & Thompson at £9.99.



WHAT
DO YOU
THINK?

Comment
on the
CPBF
website

www.cpbf.org.uk

Own goal

BLAMING the messenger when you don't like a message always appears the easy option. Done in secret, such bullying may have temporary effects. Done in public, the protests and the backlash can be loud and well-argued – as **Adam Christie** has discovered.

NEWCASTLE United FC chairman Mike Ashley has come under attack for his latest attempt to avoid public criticism – by withdrawing reporting facilities for journalists from the city's Trinity Mirror titles.

The reaction erupted after Mr Ashley banned reporters from the St James's Park ground in October after the papers had covered a supporters' protest march against the chairman and his running of the club.

The National Union of Journalists said: "This attack on media freedom and the ability of journalists to carry out their work on behalf of their readers and the local community is shameful and must be condemned."



David Baines, lecturer in journalism at nearby Newcastle University, pictured left, said: "Discussions about football are as much a part of the fabric of our society as discussions about life and politics, the state of the nation, the state of the world.

"When a club such as Newcastle tries to control and sanitise and censor those conversations they are attacking that fabric of society.

"Their clumsy ban on local journalists also demonstrates that they are missing an important truth about football. The clubs would be nothing if they did not arouse passion and devotion, love and anger, frustration (and at times utter joy) in their fans.

"Such passion is nourished by the discussions which analyse and probe and debate clubs' constantly fluctuating failings and fortunes. Without that flow of conversation, the 'beautiful game' would become a boring irrelevance.

"So to try to control those discussions, to punish dissent, stifle criticism, is also an attack on the game itself. It is also futile, because no club can stem the flow especially in a world swimming in social media.

"But they can make themselves look foolish, petulant and childish and, in that, Newcastle United been rather successful."

National Union of Journalists northern and midlands organiser Chris Morley also wrote to Mr Ashley, saying: "Irrespective of the merits or otherwise of the (protest march) coverage, in a democratic country with free media, there should be no issue about this if no laws were broken. Even if you felt the law was infringed, you would have potential remedy for that through the courts," he said.

"It ill behoves NUFC to take punitive action against the journalists who have helped over many years build your club's reputation in the eyes of the North East public and, indirectly, far wider afield too.

"The journalists involved are skilled workers who have a duty to report things as they see them, not how other people might want them to see. If they fail to do so, they cease to be independent and their worth in the eyes of the community – and in the longer term for your club – is diminished.

Is there, we might reasonably ask, now a price to be paid for a free press?"

"Journalists must not be impeded from carrying out their work as to do so can easily be viewed as petty and vindictive. When rich and powerful interests seek to ban those things they do not like, it will almost certainly be viewed as bullying and overbearing by the wider public."

Analyst Ian King, writing on the 200% website, was more critical, saying: "The relationship between football clubs and the local newspapers of the areas that they inhabit has long been assumed to be a mutually beneficial one.

"On one side of the equation, in an era during which the print media is undergoing a period of trauma that has destabilised the entire industry, one guaranteed source of income is likely to be football supporters who want the level of detail that a local newspaper with a journalist dedicated to covering their club can offer.

"On the other, meanwhile, the coverage that a local newspaper can offer a football club is difficult to ignore and might well be considered to be something approaching free advertising for what is ultimately a business which, especially below the Premier League, most likely needs all the advertising that it can get."

Of Newcastle and Mr Ashley, he added: "Such a Pyongyang-esque attitude towards the nature of a 'free press' is indefensible, but this doesn't mean that it isn't becoming increasingly commonplace."

Elsewhere, in the West Midlands, the *Stoke Sentinel* was banned by Port Vale after a reporter challenged the chairman over delays in supplying replica shirts to supporters.



STANDING FIRM: The gates of Newcastle United's St James's Park ground have been closed to some journalists after reporters covered a protest against club chairman Mike Ashley.

The club also excluded a photographer, and then demanded £10,000 for access – claiming that radio and television stations pay for broadcasting rights.

The *Sentinel* ran a scathing editorial, targeting club chairman Norman Smurthwaite. “We make absolutely no apology,” it said, “for asking what Mr Smurthwaite perceives as negative questions. That, occasionally, is the job of a local newspaper and something the Vale chairman has been told many times by many different people.”

Online writer Ian King was also wondered whether Port Vale had thought about the impact that their decision would have.

“Speculating upon this would be something of a fool’s errand,” he wrote, “but the demand for an annual payment of £10,000 not only breaks all protocol in terms of how clubs interact with the press, but is also likely to raise questions over the small question of why the *Sentinel* would be allowed back into Vale Park in return for paying a £10,000 fee if the crime that it has committed has been so heinous as to warrant a ban in the first place. Is, we might reasonably ask, there now a price to be paid for a free press?”

He added: “The sledgehammer that the club has taken to the *Sentinel* over this matter hardly fills us with great confidence.” It was, he concluded, the club’s supporters “who will suffer the most as a result of having this highly experienced and independent eye excluded from the club.”

AC

Union council probes hidden pressures

FEARS that pressures on reporters either to provide favourable coverage as a result of “freebies” or having their work curtailed by denials of access are being investigated by the NUJ’s ethics council.

They hope to discover whether NUJ members have been offered freebies by either commercial concerns or anyone with political or government interests and whether they have been pressured by editors into taking freebies as a cost-saving measure.

The council is also wanting to hear from journalists who may have been denied the opportunity to talk to public figures or cover public events.

Council chairman Professor Chris Frost said: “We are concerned at the growing pressures on journalists to toe the line laid down by corporations or sports clubs that prevent free speech and limit the opportunity to

investigate. Many journalists feel they can’t any longer ask difficult questions or challenge those in authority or positions of power for fear of losing the access that is vital to their working lives. We are attempting to find out what kind of difficulties journalists face these days in terms of pressure to run a story certain way.”

Film critics and other showbiz reporters have long complained of restrictions put on access to stars and other “constraints” while effectively providing free additional coverage for the latest mega-buck blockbuster productions.

Now, as pressures grow on red reporting staffs at many papers, others may think they can imitate such approaches – without appreciating the consequences in terms of embarrassment or the political or commercial backlash.

Tories put BBC under political pressure while defending press

Tom O'Malley

IN October the Conservative Party chairman, Grant Shapps launched a well-timed attack on the BBC.

In *The Sunday Telegraph* on October 26, Shapps complained of bias in BBC reporting, particularly over its coverage of government welfare policy. The underlying message was clear enough; take care how you cover the Tory party in the run up to the election ... or consequences may follow.

What might they be? Well, the BBC's Royal Charter is due for renewal in 2016. That means that negotiations with the Con-Dem government will be well under way before the 2015 General Election. There has been considerable disquiet about the way the Corporation has handled the Savile affair and the scandal of excessive pay-outs for top employees. Shapps built on this to argue that the Corporation was "in danger of frittering away ... public trust", thereby implying a need for major change.

He was then reported as suggesting that the Party would consider whether the BBC should be allowed to keep all the £3.6bn raised by the licence fee.

Below the surface of this predictable pre-election, pre-Charter renewal attack, is a deeper motive. The aim is to siphon off public funds to the private sector, just as has happened in local authorities, education and the NHS where creeping privatisation has been pressed forward by handing more and more money over to private firms.

There are those around the Tory Party who dislike the BBC because it is a public service and would rather see as much broadcasting as possible handed over to the market. Equally, there are those in the industry, who want a weakened BBC, one that does not attract audiences which would otherwise go to their product. The

public service remit of ITV has been eroded over the years, for these reasons. Just as the Tories, and New Labour, have never said they are privatising the NHS by bringing more and more private firms into the system, so the Tories will never openly say they are going to privatise the BBC.

But as with the NHS, unless the direction and intention of their thinking is made clear and the case for public service in communications pressed home at every opportunity, the position of the BBC as public service broadcaster will be eroded more by stealth than by a one-off dramatic policy initiative.

This is why as the Charter Renewal process kicks in we need to make the case that broadcasting, like the NHS and education, has to be at the heart of the public sector, with market forces kept well away from how the organisation is run. The BBC needs to be reformed – like any public institution – but it doesn't need the "reforms" trumpeted by Shapps and his like whose track record of principled support for public services is, to put it mildly, questionable.

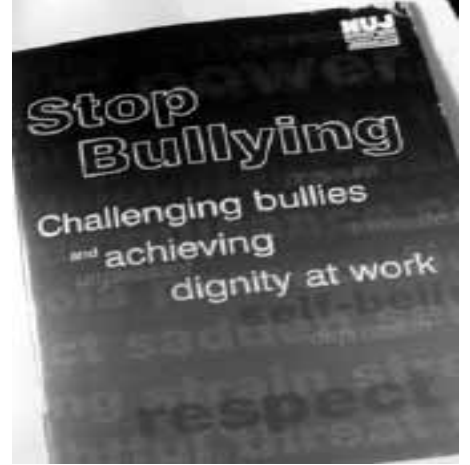
■ *Tom O'Malley is professor of media studies at Aberystwyth University.*

■ DID Grant Shapps score an own goal with this opening salvo against the BBC just as the Tories' apparent friends in national newspapers were crying foul over political "interference" in the Royal Charter regulation row?

Mr Shapps gave *The Sunday Telegraph*, which is owned by the reclusive and beknighted Barclay Brothers, a front page story. His criticism of pay-offs for managers came just a few days before revelations that some NHS executives had received redundancy settlements several times larger, only to be re-employed by other (successor) NHS bodies within months.

■ *Add your thoughts ... by commenting on the CPBF website – at www.cpbf.org.uk*

Entertainment unions tackle bullying together



IN the light of evidence presented by the National Union of Journalists to last year's Leveson Inquiry and revelations of widespread harassment at the BBC, the Federation of Entertainment Unions (FEU) has started campaigning to try to challenge such a culture in the media industry.

The FEU hopes to raise awareness of the issues among union members while working with employers to promote policies and procedures to protect both staff and freelancers.

The organisers also want members to learn how to challenge this culture and report incidents of bullying and harassment without fear of reprisals.

Already, an online survey has taken place across entertainment unions, including Bectu, the MU, Writers' Guild of Great Britain, Equity and the NUJ.

Members of those unions are due to meet in London for a conference on Tuesday November 19 to discuss future actions.

The Creating Without Conflict campaign has already received coverage in union journals and more widely.

Bectu said they feared that job insecurity increased bullying and harassment while the BBC's Dinah Rose inquiry confirmed an "undercurrent of fear" at many Corporation premises in London.

Bectu assistant general secretary Luke Crawley said: "Bullying makes it impossible for us to do our jobs well and it is not acceptable for workers across the industry to be subject to this type of behaviour."

Earlier this year, MPs Austin Mitchell and John McDonnell tabled an early day motion supporting the FEU initiative.

Broadcaster brings call for reconciliation to London

TRUTH and reconciliation have become by-words where nations once riven with hostilities find (relative) peace.

While such efforts have been accepted and acclaimed in Bosnia, South Africa and Northern Ireland, one country in Europe remains remarkably slow off the mark in trying to heal the wounds of old - Spain.

Journalist Rafael Guerrero, pictured right, has been revealing the stories of those affected for his radio programme *La Memoria* broadcast weekly for the last eight years by Canal Sur Radio in Andalucia.

The programme has provided the only outlet for the raw emotions of those affected as Sr Guerrero has been doing journalistically what "cold case" police investigators do. He has been seeking out those whose parents suddenly vanished, who became political prisoners, whose children and new-born babies were removed without explanation.

Despite the restoration of democracy, nothing official has been done in Spain to identify and inform those who were removed about their true parentage.

No investigations of other disappearances, no inquests or reunions have taken place. The youngest of those removed from "politically undesirable" parents are now aged about 25.

La Memoria was first broadcast on October 20, 2006 and, since then, more than 200 editions of the programme have been aired. Among the interviewees were more than 160 of the survivors of the excesses of the Franco regime, many in their 80s and 90s. Their

testimony has cast a sharp light on the dark years of the modern dictatorship which survived and even flourished in Spain after the Second World War.

La Memoria opened the public debate about those who had no voice, who could not speak for themselves and those relatives who survived: the mothers, wives, husbands and children who were silenced.

"Those ordinary people are seeking the reconciliation and the resolution of thousands of human rights injustices," says Sr Guerrero. "To do that in Spain, we need to end the conspiracy of silence.

"The programme has brought together many people who were directly, or indirectly, affected by Franco's dictatorship and what has happened since. At least their knowledge has passed into the public domain."

Now, momentum is gathering to bring together more of those affected more formally, to organise a concerted campaign for a Commission that will bring some justice to the affected after so many years.

■ *Rafael Guerrero will be speaking at a meeting in the Palace of Westminster at 10.30 on Tuesday December 3. He will also be addressing students at London universities during his visit to the UK.*



Plurality petition now backed by coalition

THE ambitious pan-European initiative to tackle media concentration has been relaunched following software problems earlier in the year - but the target, of 1 million signatures by August next year - remains the same.

In the UK, the initiative is being backed by a new Coalition for Media Pluralism that will bring together organisations such as the CPBF, Media Reform Coalition, trades unions, civil society



groups and academics to try to strengthen arguments about concentration when media plurality appears on the political and public agenda.

Additional funding is being sought so the Initiative can be promoted more strongly next year.

More information has, in the meantime, gone online.

■ www.mediainitiative.eu

FREE Press

Free Press is published by the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom,
2nd Floor, Vi and Garner Smith House, 23 Orford Road, Walthamstow,
London E17 9NL

E-mail: freepress@cpbf.org.uk

Editor: Adam Christie: editor.ac@btinternet.com

Editorial address: PO Box HP346, Leeds LS6 1UL

Views expressed in *Free Press* are those of the contributors and should not be regarded as formal CPBF policy.

Ideas, comments, letters, articles are all welcomed. Please contact the editor.

© 2013 Copyright in the words and images in *Free Press* remains with the originators. All rights reserved.

Printed by Swallowmax Ltd, 43 Aden Road, Enfield EN3 7SY

This edition went to press on November 5 2013.

The deadline for the next edition is Friday December 27, 2013.

Toxic debt

Frustrated by more early-morning radio and late-night television interviews, **Chris Aspinall** goes out to try to buy a local paper.

PAY any attention to the Londonistas dominating national outlets and you could easily believe that no one – anywhere – is buying newspapers any more.

In many parts of the UK, they couldn't be further from the truth. Even that most beleaguered of regional publishers, Johnston Press, reported a pre-tax profit last year.

Admittedly, the profit was not great, but it was a profit nevertheless. Many of JP's papers are far from broke (in both senses of the word) but the company is – because the debt-ridden business model has proved a total failure.

Interestingly too, JP's latest figures show that less than 10 per cent of its revenues came from the firm's digital operations.

So, what does tell us about the newspaper business?

Let's start from rule one of capitalism or commerce: that the first objective of a business is to make money. Therefore, giving a product away does not make sense.

OK, I hear you say, they're not "giving" away what's on the web or e-devices; it makes money from the ads around it. With less than 10 per cent of JP's revenue coming from digital operation, that clearly doesn't add up.

Secondly, JP like all the other regional publishers rushing to publish digitally, has overlooked another natural home of any commercial entity – the monopoly.

Whatever guff may be spouted about percentages of the "market" in national terms, probably more than 90 per cent of local print sales in the UK take place in "mini-monopolies", a situation that existed for smaller proprietors before consolidation took place.

Not only do regional papers have local monopolies for readers, they have local monopolies for advertising sales – an essential commercial dimension that just about every highly-paid executive in the newspaper business seems to have overlooked. A business looking for customers in, say, Leicester, is unlikely to advertise in

the *Nottingham (Evening) Post* when most of its potential sales could be to those buying the *Leicester Mercury*.

Those doing their utmost to try to sell more newspapers locally are having their efforts undermined by bosses who are cutting their budgets and wastefully diverting energies that should be spent developing products which themselves generate cash – from their cover price sales.

The budgets are being cut to service debt. The Bank of England base rate is still less than one per cent, but the (largely state-owned) banks that are owed £300m by JP are charging the company at least 10 per cent of that.



SHUT OUT: Banks seem unaware of the squeeze they're putting on profitable firms.

Chancellor George Osborne may want RBS and Lloyds to do better themselves – so that they can be "returned to the private sector" – but that approach is strangling other profitable businesses and threatening thousands of (income tax paying) livelihoods around the country.

So, what are the answers?

Firstly, the best commercial decisions regional publishers could make is to abandon the internet other than as a marketing tool. Promote stories online by all means, but

then tell people that, if they want to read more, they have to buy the paper. (So much of the "national" news on regional websites is exactly the same PA copy that that too undermines the attractiveness of such titles' web presence.)

Secondly, go back to selling local advertising to local businesses. Online, regional papers are competing with Google for every pound – when Google doesn't have the resources to have ad sales reps pounding the streets. (Even their intrusive cameras don't go on patrol that often.)

Thirdly, the debt-ridden publishers should be eschewing greed; regional papers were sustainable with profit levels one or two percentage points above inflation for decades; they can return to that. (Why is it that city investors seem to believe that geese lay golden eggs forever?)

Lastly, should it really be the National Union of Journalists that is advocating a commercial realism to protect these companies and their shareholders? Shouldn't the highly-paid executives be doing it for themselves?

Last year, the NUJ suggested – at a meeting in the Palace of Westminster – that JP and others should be granted a "debt holiday". That would come from the banks with large state holdings and not wipe out the debt but defer interest payments (against salaries of more than about £150,000 year paid to board members).

The proposal was shot down so quickly and so aggressively by the Labour frontbench, it gave the impression that having friends in the City was more important than jobs or positive reporting.

The idea is by no means new. It is tried and tested and has allowed long-standing "legacy" organisations (such as major long-haul airlines) to survive through rapid evolution and financial pressures. It's enshrined in the US concept of Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

That is a lesson that the media commentators and analysts holed up inside the M25 would do as much to remember as would the politicians, the City and the regional newspaper proprietors themselves.

The Treasury has found antidotes to toxic debts elsewhere through clever manoeuvring; why can't they do the same?

CAN YOU ADD TO THIS DEBATE?

Comment on the CPBF website

www.cpb.org.uk