

Why new regulator could be a game-changing moment for journalism

Written by The Conversation USA

You are unlikely to read about it about in the mainstream press, but this week saw a major step forward for genuinely independent press regulation in the UK. The new press regulator [IMPRESS](#) (Independent Monitor for the Press) has announced that it has not only signed up a dozen publishers but that it has submitted an application for formal recognition. This will now be assessed by the [Press Recognition Panel \(PRP\)](#), the wholly independent body established by [cross-party agreement](#).

The dozen [founding members of IMPRESS](#) include local newspapers, online hyperlocal sites, New Internationalist Magazine and investigative journalism outfits Byline and The Ferret. None of the big beasts of Fleet Street, but that was never expected at this stage. IMPRESS says it is in discussion with another 30 or so publishers.

Given the levels of misinformation about press regulation in most national newspapers, this story is worth a quick recap. In the wake of the [phone-hacking scandal](#) and other unsavoury Fleet Street practices which came to light, [Lord Justice Leveson](#) recommended a new framework for press self-regulation.

The industry, he said, should set up its own self-regulator, but within strict rules to ensure that it was wholly independent of both politicians and the industry. Among other things, it should incorporate a low-cost arbitration scheme, an easy and effective complaints mechanism, a whistleblowing service for journalists, and the ability to demand apologies and corrections from offending publications.

These criteria were incorporated into a Royal Charter which established the PRP, and will be used by the panel to assess any application for recognition. Publishers who belong to a recognised self-regulator will, under certain circumstances, be entitled to protection from heavy court costs or damages. IMPRESS is the first such self-regulator to apply for recognition.

Meanwhile, the country's main newspaper publishers – with the exception of the Guardian,

Independent and Financial Times – have set up their [own regulator IPSO](#) (Independent Press Standards Organisation), in defiance of both Leveson and parliament. But IPSO has made it clear that it has [no intention of applying for recognition](#) under the Royal Charter.

IMPRESS: Leveson-compliant

The brainchild of free-speech campaigner [Jonathan Heawood](#), IMPRESS was designed to be Leveson-compliant. Its chairman, [Walter Merricks](#) – a former finance sector ombudsman – was appointed by an independent appointments board with no links to any political party after an open recruitment process.

He was keen to emphasise that IMPRESS will handle complaints in a “fair, impartial, authoritative and transparent” manner. It will provide an affordable arbitration scheme in partnership with the [Chartered Institute of Arbitrators](#), allowing both publishers and ordinary members of the public to resolve disputes without the cost and stress of going to court. And it has established a confidential whistleblowing advice hotline, run by the whistleblowing charity [Public Concern at Work](#), which guarantees that names will not be passed on to employers.

Its initial funding comes through the charitable [Independent Press Regulation Trust](#), which in turn has received a substantial donation from the [Mosley Charitable Trust](#), set up by former F1 motor racing boss Max Mosley in memory of his late son. The charitable nature of both organisations ensures that Mosley himself can have no influence over how IMPRESS operates.

While none of the named publishers are well known, the principle has now been established of a press regulator which is demonstrably free from industry control and political influence. The raison d’être for IMPRESS is trusted journalism, which every [survey of public opinion tells us](#) – certainly for the printed press – is in very short supply. But it’s also about supporting great journalism, in particular providing protection for the kind of watchdog reporting which is increasingly vulnerable to the chilling effect of wealthy litigants threatening bankruptcy through the courts.

For that reason, IMPRESS is supported not only by one of Britain's greatest newspaper editors, Sir Harry Evans, but by the National Union of Journalists and free speech campaigners [Article 19](#).

IPSO: watchdog? Or industry lapdog

By contrast, IPSO is the newspaper industry's creature. It is funded by the [same combination of powerful publishers](#) which bankrolled and controlled its predecessor, the discredited [Press Complaints Commission](#). As the Media Standards Trust revealed two years ago, these publishers – through a shadowy body called the [Regulatory Funding Company \(RFC\)](#) – control IPSO's rules, code, investigations and sanctions. [IPSO's independence is an illusion](#).

Certainly IPSO's chairman Sir Alan Moses and its chief executive Matt Tee believe that they run an independent operation and point to a streamlined complaints process as well as a few (small print) corrections in newspapers as [indicators of success](#). There is plenty of evidence, however, to demonstrate that [little has changed](#), and their cri de coeur is identical to that of their predecessors. Meanwhile ordinary journalists, then as now, had nowhere confidential to go when they were being bullied or harassed into acting unethically.

Finally, a game-changer

Those newspapers which fund IPSO will do their best to undermine IMPRESS and derail the whole system. But there is no question that the framework recommended by Leveson, endorsed by parliament and supported by a great majority of the public, finally has momentum. It's hardly a radical framework, following well-established principles for upholding standards in many other industries: self-regulation, but with an oversight body recognised in law.

It is likely to be several months before the PRP makes a final decision on recognition and the whole process has taken far longer than anyone – no doubt including Sir Brian Leveson – thought. In addition, under huge pressure from the powerful battalions of Fleet Street, culture secretary John Whittingdale is [dragging his feet](#) on implementing the court cost incentives which are an integral element of the benefits of recognition.

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But it looks increasingly likely that the last bastion of unaccountable power in Britain, our national press, might finally face some genuine competition from a body committed to the kind of independent scrutiny which our newspapers routinely advocate for others.

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