Is the media having a 'seriously adverse' impact on public life?
Foreign Press Association, Wednesday 28th November 2007

Martin Moore: Good evening. Welcome to the first Media Standards Trust and Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism joint event about the media in public life. The Media Standards Trust is a new, non-profit independent organization devoted to high standards in the news. To list the basis of this eve, we are about to start a major project to promote transparency on the web. We have just launched a website called www.journa-list.com. This Friday we will be announcing a partnership with the Orwell Prize for political writing and journalism. The Reuters Institute, as so many of you know, launched last autumn, in the midst of a range of international research projects and it has hosted many debates and our speeches already.

Indeed, the Reuters Institute organized the speech in June, now known as the ‘feral beast’ speech by Tony Blair which really anchors this event. Because at that event, the then Prime Minister said the media was having a ‘seriously adverse effect’ on public life. And I quote, ‘Talk to any public service leader – especially in the NHS or the field of law and order – and they will tell you not that they mind the criticism, but they become totally demoralised by the completely unbalanced nature of it.’ His speech was drowned out by cries of "hypocrite" and accusations of the political pot calling the media kettle black. Many believe that his argument must be taken more seriously and it was picked up most notably Jeremy Paxman’s MacTaggart lecture in August.

In order to move the debate forward, we felt that it was necessary to remove some of the political distractions. In other words, to take the politicians out of the equation and to do what Tony Blair referred to, and go straight to the figures themselves in public life. And talk to four senior figures from public life and understand from them the impact the media has had, both positive and negative, constructive and destructive. And to find out whether the people in public life are indeed being demoralized by it.

To discuss these and other questions we are delighted to welcome once more Ms Sue Stapely, Lord...

[booming sounds]
Martin: Wow!
Michael White: General, can you identify that stuff?

[laughter, crowd talks]
Martin: After the preamble speeches...

I think it is the growl of a feral beast!
Martin: General Sir Rupert Smith and Tim Livesey, and chair of the event, is Michael White, assistant editor of The Guardian. Thank you very much indeed.

Michael: Well you broke the ice there, Martin, with the pyrotechnics. Good evening, everyone, thank you for coming. I don’t really need to introduce the others. Tim Livesey, is on my far right, I first knew as the Downing Street Press Officer, poor soul, and is now head of public affairs at Lambeth, poor soul, out of the frying pan into the fire. On his left, General Sir Rupert Smith, cerebral soldier, author of books and other dangerous pieces of ordinance. On my left Michael Jay, Lord Jay. Whose family has not been discouraged I was thinking, listening to Martin, from involvement in public affairs, since it has been for many generations. There’s a Jay in the news this morning. Enough said.

And Sue Stapely, aforementioned, former BBC programme maker, a solicitor here on behalf of Quiller Associates. What you may not know: she specializes in reputation and crisis and issue management counsel for business organizations and individuals of all kinds. Among the things she has done are running the campaign for Sally Clark, the solicitor, and support for the fiancée of Tom ap Rhys Price, the young lawyer who was murdered in Willesden, I think. She is the author of Media Relations for Lawyers, best selling text.

This being an event organized by high brows, nobody has told me how to proceed from here. [audience laughs] So I’ll proceed on my own account by inviting any volunteers to begin the proceedings with a brief outline of the case for the prosecution or possibly for the defence. Any volunteers to go first?

Sue Stapely: I think I will.

Lord Jay: We’ve been told it’s all about going in order.

Michael: Well it’s almost as good, you’ve been told. [laughs] Sue Stapely.

Sue: I’m not sure if I’m for the prosecution or the defense. If I talk, you’ll probably discover that I’m sitting rather uncomfortably astride the fence. This is obviously a tiny debate, there’s a certain individual who was revealed just this week to have used all kinds of intermediaries, four at the last count, to avoid being identified in the media as a supporter of the Labour Party.

My last ten years, as you’ve heard, has been in the field of public relations and the law. I’ve been described from time to time as a spin doctor, and most people seem to assume that my work is predominantly about getting my clients better known by the media, perhaps sometimes by tweaking stories or stretching the truth. Getting their stories, their businesses, their
organizations, their points of views publicized in the media and thereby raising their profile, making their arguments more visible and persuasive, and helping to grow their businesses or swing issues their way.

In truth, increasingly, every single day my work involves trying to keep the media away from my clients or my clients away from the media, keeping it out rather than getting it in. Not because my clients are doing nefarious things, behaving badly or are afraid of scrutiny; but very simply because increasingly, they are anxious about the accuracy of reportage. Fearful that mistruths may jeopardize their business interests, or unsolicited attention may subject their personal lives to scrutiny they don’t want and can’t stop. They’re concerned that the immediacy of the unregulated internet, as well as the scant controls on much of the traditional media, mean that once the genie is out of the bottle, and they are under the media spotlight, it will prove impossible to suck him back in and for them to ever retreat into the shadows again. For years after one media hit, a quick Google will bring the issue back to haunt them forever.

My professional work most days involves working alongside lawyers who are representing clients suing or being sued, bringing or defending employment law cases, merging or de-merging or acquiring businesses, acquiring or losing high profile executive staff or board members, facing accusations of fraud, regulatory or money laundering irregularities, or simply seeking to influence and persuade opinion formers that they’re entitled to do whatever it is that their business or individual court wants to do. The clients themselves come from every sector: household name businesses, financial institutions, regulatory bodies, charities, public bodies, private individuals or courts.

And in my private life, I have always tried to help on a purely pro bono basis those I believe have a need for the help I can offer, but may not be in a position to pay professional fees. They have, as you’ve heard, included Sally Clark, the woman solicitor falsely imprisoned for murdering her two babies, whose media campaign to overturn one of the worst miscarriages of justice, I ran for many years until her tragic death earlier this year. Adele Eastman was another, the young woman solicitor whose lawyer fiancé was brutally stabbed to death in a quiet London street in January last year, and who was one of the first to make a victim impact statement in court when his assailants were convicted. And I also look after the Spink family, whose two severely disabled sons are still fighting their local authority for proper care packages, so their exhausted parents can return to work and help pay for the endless expenses their sons incur, rather than being full-time carers themselves for their sons, because the care package and disability benefit provisions are so inadequate.

In these cases, to support, defend and help my clients, I try to get the media on side. And so there is, I’m very well aware, a real contradiction in my professional and personal work. Some days, keeping the media away from my professional clients, and at other times when it suits my clients for my purposes, courting them to publicize an injustice or win support for a campaign.
And this really ambivalence in how I personally feel about the media, and about individual journalists, program makers, editors and proprietors. They are, after all, just people, and they behave differently as all people do. Many, a large number, are conscientious, honourable, interested, passionate about getting it right, telling it how it is, and working with them for me is a pleasure and a privilege. Many have become my friends.

But increasingly in the past few years I'm observing a very different tension that has come into their work. They are, so many of them now, under pressure to achieve scoops, to run sensational stories, to keep circulation up, to snatch photographs, to dramatize their stories, to get stories onto the internet ahead of everyone else, and to keep their job. But they, it seems to me, are daily required to compromise their instinctive integrity. Recently, one of the most highly regarded legal journalists resigned from a national newspaper and elected to go freelance because he could no longer tolerate the way that his stories were distorted and accuracy was shelved by sub-editors over whom he had no control.

I am often asked repeatedly, four or five times by email, phone call, couriered letter, having made quite clear that my clients are not prepared to comment or grant any interviews, to make an exception for one particular journalist, because they are personally under such pressure from their editors to secure the interview, instead of risking it going to their commercial competitor.

My clients and I are regularly offered money to do this. Some clients inevitably succumb when the sums offered are just irresistible. Sally Clark's nanny was offered £10,000 to tell her story; that was wealth beyond her wildest dreams.

Though I have never brokered the sale of a story, many others now have to. I've been door-stepped and harassed at my home in the hopes that I will reconsider and advise my clients to speak. My clients have been hounded for days, weeks or even months.

An example: Sally Clark was pilloried by her local Cheshire press some years ago when her second son died in unexplained circumstances. And there was clear evidence that the impression given by the local media and the phrases that they used, lingered with that jury that subsequently tried and wrongly convicted her. Then a few journalists began to listen, to research, and once convinced, to help me campaign for her conviction to be overturned. They became staunch allies, not enemies.

But on the day earlier this year, when Steve Clark learned that his wife had tragically died overnight – he was on business abroad at the time – his house was once again staked out by about twenty journalists and photographers. Photos were taken of it, and of his village, the neighbours were offered fees for comments, and no attention was paid to the fact that a court injunction was in force, supposedly to protect the anonymity of their very young son. He and his son had to run the gauntlet of the scrum of photographers and press just to get into their
own home, on the very day that this young mother was found dead.

I fielded more than a hundred phone calls that one day, and about the same number of emails. It took the Press Complaints Commission and the Essex police to remove the journalists and photographers, and most of my time on that Sunday was spent working to allow this damaged family to mourn in peace.

Now most people don’t have direct access to the PCC on a Sunday and can’t get through to a chief constable. What hope have they, ordinary members of the public, of avoiding a media feeding frenzy?

The story ran for days, with dreadfully inaccurate press comments recycled from old cuttings and from the web and cruelly unflattering photos of Sally being dug out of libraries and reprinted. Even the Telegraph’s obituary was fatally flawed. Everywhere this grieving family looked, they were reminded how some journalists had misreported Sally’s case, and how tragically the whole story had unfolded over the previous years.

The phones rang endlessly in my office, in my home, and in my handbag, with ever more desperate bids for interviews or comment, despite my making it crystal clear that there would be no further comment beyond the statement I put out for the family on the newswire and on the website we set up years earlier to campaign for her release. It was exhausting and deeply distressing for the family.

The world has certainly changed and Tony Blair has much to answer for. It was after all, the Blair Project which rose to victory on the back of the savviest media campaign any political party has every waged. And it’s interesting to see how Alastair Campbell’s book has been carefully edited to leave out much of the tactical media campaigning.

That old cliché about living by the sword and dying by the sword, now this week, has real resonance. But in my book, as a former parliamentary candidate and one-time very minor public figure in my campaigning days, I think there's a huge difference between those who knowingly enter the fray and take on media opportunities willingly and those who don't.

Public figures promoting their public work are, I believe on the whole, fair game. I regularly agree to appear on Question Time, the Today programme, Any Questions. They give me a platform for my views and a visibility local campaigning would never give. And make no mistake, the media is enormously seductive and ego-boosting, and hard to resist at times. But the private lives of public figures should only be of any interest if they demonstrate incontrovertibly something which directly and materially impacts on that person's ability to do the public job to which they have been appointed, or for which they are seeking appointment.

Their sexuality, their personal finances, their bedmate or bedmates, their views expressed in
private situations, their homes, their families, should all, in my book, be off limits. But these are the things which seem to interest us, and the media who bring news of them to us, the most.

Do we get the news we deserve? I suspect we do. We are as a nation, nosey, prurient, sexually repressed, and fascinated by gossip and detail in a way that the more sophisticated French person finds completely incomprehensible. The papers sell – ‘The News of the Screws’ is our most read Sunday. The programmes sell – *Big Brother* and *I’m a Celebrity* have amazing viewing figures, despite the snide comments we all make about them.

It’s hard not to be voyeuristic when the networks make it so easy. And we’ve seen the wildfire growth of interest in totally insignificant minor characters who sometimes are thought of in some circles as ‘celebrities’. And as a result, the sight of all these can fill hour after hour of cheap television time in a way unheard of when I worked for BBC Television, and most programmes were made for, by and with experienced professionals. But these people are seeking media attention, in many cases trying to relaunch their careers on the back of it.

But it is, I believe, a totally different world now for those who find themselves inadvertently caught up in the media. They may have suffered a catastrophe, won a fortune, been involved in a scandal, are related to or dating someone in the public eye, been accused of a minor transgression. But they themselves are not seeking, nor do they want or relish media attention, and nor, more importantly, do their families.

The growth of the virtually unregulated internet probably concerns me the most. Most days now professionally and for my pro bono clients, I’m spending hours monitoring the lunatic allegations which appear in blogs, chat rooms and in comments after online versions of articles.

Anyone is able to say virtually anything about anyone else on the interweb these days. These mad ramblings, often defamatory, often deeply distressing, hurtful and ill-informed – often just downright lies – are then used as source material by traditional journalists against tight deadlines researching unfamiliar topics. So rumor, speculation, vicious gossip and lies find their way into print and onto the airwaves, sometimes prefaced with something like, ‘Some are saying that...’ And by so doing, they acquire credibility and a degree of veracity that they simply don’t deserve.

The McCanns’ case is one in point. I won’t dignify some of the allegations now filling the interweb by publicizing them further, but there are now people who clearly are spending many hours a day playing amateur detective, speculating and spreading their views to all who have the time and inclination to read them. It’s interesting that one of the first things Joe McCann did once their daughter disappeared was to start his own daily blog.

Taking down defamatory and untruthful allegations on the internet takes up many hours of lawyers’ and communications professionals’ time these days, if indeed they can be taken down.
This is almost always at the expense of the individual defamed or traduced, with no way of their recovering the costs involved. Ordinary members of the public don't know how to tackle this kind of misinformation. They don't know how to deal with the commercially competitive editor driving his journalists beyond their own comfort boundaries. They feel powerless, persecuted, frightened and alone.

I championed freedom of speech for decades and don't seek to bring in any more controls if they can possibly be avoided. I count many journalists and a couple of editors amongst my friends. But I despair of what is happening in the name of freedom to all those ill-equipped to defend themselves, and to the journalists whose standards seem to be eroded daily by commercial pressures. Let's hope the Media Standards Trust, newly created, can play some small part in reversing this tide.

**Michael White:**  Well, if that was sitting on the fence... [laughter] Well now, you obviously all know what's going to happen next, so who's going to happen next?

**Lord Jay:**  I think I'm happening next, and then Rupert. Well, that's quite a hard act to follow Sue, I must say. I'm going to say something from a rather different perspective, from a senior public servant having retired from the Foreign Office, as Permanent Secretary to the Foreign Office 18 months or so ago, and having therefore lived through four and a half years as head of the Foreign Office through wars, tsunamis, and quite a lot of events which caused quite a lot of press interest.

Now, I should say I should start with a confession, which was that yesterday I prepared a talk on the misapprehension that what we were going to be talking about was, ‘Are politicians right to be cowed by the press?’ But then I looked at John's email this morning and discovered it said, ‘Is the establishment cowered?’ So I've now got an alternative text on, ‘Is the establishment cowered?’ Now, I can't talk for the establishment as a whole, but I will talk on the basis of my own experience of the Foreign Office and in particular the last few years.

The key point, I think, about the relationship between government and media as far as foreign policy is concerned, is that it is, in fact, a symbiotic relationship. Each side really needs the other. The press needs information. It needs information about what's going on in the world, which the Foreign Office, Foreign Office ministers, our embassies have and can give it. It needs to know what's really happening on events day to day: what's really happening or really happened in Annapolis yesterday, what's really happening in Afghanistan, what's really happening in Iraq.

It needs to know what the state of the negotiations is at the moment. What's happening in negotiations on the European Reform Treaty? What is the government's position? What is the position of other governments? So there is a real need on the part of the press to have the kind of relationship with government which enables it to get the information it needs.
Government, and in the case of foreign policy, the Foreign Office, needs, too, a good relationship with the press. It needs, first of all, to ensure the press really does understand what's going on, because the more the press really does understand what's going on, the better the chances of good coverage, accurate coverage, but of course also the government and ministers will hope, favourable coverage.

So clearly there is a kind of neutral sense in which the government wants to get genuine information across, and there's a more subjective sense in which the government clearly wants to get across its view on what's going on, and individual ministers will want to get across a sense that they are the ones in control, managing it, and get some good press for them for their own reasons. It's a natural aspect of politics.

And from that basic relationship comes, at least as far as the Foreign Office is concerned, a whole range of different kinds of contacts, from confidential background briefings, privileged off the record briefings, press conferences, doorstep interviews, press parties going on planes, privileged briefings on aeroplanes, ambassadorial briefings to the press for other capitals, and so on.

And that really is the daily bread and butter of diplomacy and the relationship with the press. As you were saying, Michael, sorry, as the introducer was saying, it's good to get away from the pure politics and on to what actually happens day by day. That's what happens day by day by day, every day, several times a day, that kind of contact with the press.

Now there will of course be a certain wariness about that relationship. The press will suspect that there's more to what they're being told than meets the eye, and so there usually will be, either for genuine reasons like you can't reveal or shouldn't reveal exactly what's happening in a negotiation, unless of course you want to use the technique which many of us do use of using the press in order to advance your case in a negotiation, though to be honest I don't think we're quite as good at that as people like President Ahmadinejad of Iran, who's made it a kind of an art form, really.

You will want to do that to a certain extent. So the press will have a certain genuine concern that they are not being treated entirely fairly. The government on the other hand will suspect that the press have some line of their own that they want to peddle, some angle that they want to advance, and of course that also is true.

But going back to Tony Blair's speech last week, I wouldn't say that this is a relationship which is really a relationship of distrust or mistrust. I would have said that this is a relationship with acertain wariness and, to be honest, a certain mutual respect, borne of, as I say, of the sort of symbiotic relationship where each actually needs the other.
The other thing I think I’d say is that none of this seems to me to be spectacularly new. Now, of course the kind of relationship will vary depending on the kind of minister you’ve got, and Robin Cook and Jack Straw and Margaret Beckett, the three that I worked with, were very different ministers, had very different approaches to the press, in particular the last two.

Jack Straw, who wanted to be on the radio and the television every minute if he could to get his point across, and Margaret Beckett, who became quite quickly a sort of invisible Foreign Secretary because she didn’t talk to the press. She wasn’t doing any less, she just didn’t talk to the press. Therefore, she was invisible. So, different characteristics there.

But I’m not sure that any of that is qualitatively different from what I experienced, say, with Douglas Hurd in the 1990s. At the time, which was a very difficult time for foreign policy if you look back that far – there was a weak government, the Major government, the Balkans were disintegrating, there were the Maastricht negotiations which I was much involved – these were very very difficult times for foreign policy.

And the kind of relationships that we had then were very much the same as those that we’ve had for the last few years, though, and here I think I do agree with some bits of what Tony Blair was saying last year, the context is of course different. We might talk a bit about that.

Freedom of Information. The presumption, now, that there is a right of information, and the fact actually that there is a right of information unless there is a specific exemption which prevents it. I know from outside, that doesn't look like much. From inside, it is actually quite a revolutionary change in the way that governments operate, and that the presumption now is that any piece of information is releasable and unless there’s a specific reason not to release it. And that is a complete reversal of what it was before the freedom of information act came in. That is a different context, plus of course, the internet, the electronic media, the blogs that Sue was referring to.

So, the context is different. But on the whole, I would say that that kind of day-to-day relationship is relatively constructive, almost (relatively) benign and necessary to both sides. But, it is fragile, that relationship, and it is put to the test often in different ways. Now, I’ve kind of tried to think up in my mind just what are the circumstances in which that relatively constructive relationship breaks down. I think there are three or four.

One of them is if clearly the policy is in trouble – Iraq in particular, Afghanistan, the dossiers, the vanishing weapons of mass destruction. Now, if you’ve got a really difficult policy issue because, frankly, things have gone really seriously badly wrong, you are rightly going to have a very aggressive press, and that’s going to cause difficulties for the government. And so it should.

But in those circumstances, clearly, the relationship becomes a very difficult one and can break
down quite quickly. But it doesn’t do so on all big issues. It is quite interesting one of the biggest foreign policy issues of the last couple of years or so has been Iran. But that’s one in which actually the policy the government has adopted has been quite a successful one, both within the EU and with the United States and with the Iranians. It hasn’t become anything like the sort of difficult issue as, say, Iraq or Afghanistan.

Now, so that’s one circumstance in which things gets tough. The other – and this is where in a sense, I sympathize a huge amount with what Sue was saying – is if there’s a strong human interest story, then the rules of the game seem to change completely. A kidnap, a terrorist attack, a natural disaster, then it’s an entirely different story. And by the time I’d left the Foreign Office after four and a half years, I’d recognized the pattern and I recognized the scenarios.

Let’s say there’s been a terrorist attack on Britons overseas. Day one, shock horror. Day two, sympathize with the victims. Day three, blame the Foreign Office. And this is an extraordinary kind of pattern that you saw emerging and to the extent that we actually began to plan on the assumption that it was day three, you needed to have a defensive stuff in place. Day one, you’re OK. Day two, a little bit dodgy. Day three, day four, and day five... Watch out.

Hurricane Katrina was a very good example of that. One couple got out of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and blamed the Foreign Office for not looking after them. There were hundreds or thousands of others all around who were writing to us and saying what fantastic help they got. None of that ever appeared in the media at all. The one story got the press, it spread throughout the media, it spread to Parliament, I was attacked by the Foreign Affairs Committee, about it all. And then, it turned out to be false and then it all faded away. The Foreign Affairs Committee apologized, but, in a sense, the damage was done. The people who were trying to help felt terribly demoralized and it was quite difficult then as a manager to get them to realize that they had done a good job, don’t believe everything you read in the press, we’re behind you and get on with the job. That was quite difficult.

And there, I think, in those sorts of circumstances, there is distrust which creeps in because there is a sense that the objective is not in any way a sort of dispassionate reporting. It is the story and there’s no sense that the truth and objectivity matter. And there’s no right of reply, that was the other thing which I found odd in those circumstances, you write to the newspapers and they won’t print, even the ministerial replies are not printed. It gets in the way of the story.

So, I think there again, I have a slight sympathy with what Tony Blair was saying. In the sense, that a huge amount of energy in those circumstances which might actually have gone into saving people, or helping them, goes into the handling of the press. I think there is an issue of there that has an echo or two of what he was saying.

The other time I think it can go wrong in this relationship is when the story gets caught up in
some bigger political storm. My guess just now is that pretty well every government department is putting down their shutters and saying, ‘For God’s sake, don’t talk to the press’. because any kind of misdemeanor is going to be part of a broader context of government incompetence, even if it’s only something pretty tiny. So I should think there’s a certain reticence just now.

Clearly, if something goes wrong and it involves the Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister’s going through one of his troughs as he his now, then again that becomes a huge story. Tony Blair in Tokyo when the Kelly story erupted. That dominates everything.

In a sense, I can understand that, but there you get quite a difficult Number 10 departmental relationship, because Number 10 is involved... The Prime Minister is involved, then that impacts on the relationship with the department.

I just want to say one final word about Europe and the European angle. This is a slightly different point, really, but it’s one I just wanted to mention.

Now clearly, there is a deep Euro skepticism in a good part of the British press. This is a long and honorable tradition, and we’ve all struggled with the square tomatoes and the straight bananas. I had to explain in the Birmingham European Council in 1992 to one of Delors’ senior officials what The Sun meant by ‘Up Yours, Delors’. I explained that this was kind of a term of endearment well known to readers of The Sun. [laughter]

And this goes on today. I don’t know whether you’ve seen The Sun today has a story called ‘Eco Warriors’ that Eurocrats are going to force all of our tanks to close down because of the emissions that they’re... You probably know about that one, Rupert.

So there is quite a well-established Euro-skepticism, and you can argue about whether that is a reflection of or infects public opinion. But actually, I don’t take either of those views. I think the reason why the press is Euro-skeptic and people are Euro-skeptic is because no government since Edward Heath’s has actually tried to advance the argument as to why it’s actually quite good for Britain to be part of the European Union.

And if there had been a sustained campaign over time, then I suspect that both the press would be a bit different and public opinion would be different. And I think in that context it's extremely interesting that Gordon Brown has not succumbed to the, as far as I can understand it, the Murdoch blandishments of ‘we want a referendum’.

He said, "No. We're not going to have a referendum". Let's see what happens now, and whether that really is going to make a huge difference. Or whether, if I can broaden it out a little bit, whether the feral beasts are going to turn out to be paper tigers. I think there’s quite an interesting issue there.
So, my own experience, it’s a complex relationship between the press and the government. The government needs the media, and vice versa. There are lots of examples of that, but on the whole I would say that it’s a constructive relationship, but one which is fragile and breaks down fairly regularly. I’m really quite worried, as I say, about the lack of objectivity which crops up when human interest is involved, and when all sense of objective news coverage seems to disappear.

One final word which picks up Sue’s final point is a really interesting issue for discussion. Can we have a free and a responsible press? I have lived in all sorts of countries around the world. I’ve travelled in 70 or 80 countries around the world. I’ve seen what happens when you don’t have a free press. Corruption of the governmental process creeps in very, very, very quickly, even if it’s only to a degree constrained.

Free press is fundamental for our democracy. But is a free and a responsible press a chimera, or is that achievable? I don’t know, but what I certainly wouldn’t want to do is to compromise the freedom.

Michael: Thank you. That was a generous conclusion. Now tell me, who’s next? Rupert?

General Sir Rupert Smith: I am.

Michael: I’m beginning to pick up the pattern now. [laughter] Thank you so much.

Rupert: Most of my sandwiches have been eaten, by the previous speakers. I shall be brief.

What follows is an ex-soldier’s point of view, out of date by some years, but when I was in date – I am speaking to you as an agent on the interface between politics and the military. I was accountable for military outcomes if you like, both national and international, and yet I was a national asset. I could be accountable to both national and international organizations, but I was owned by a nation. That gives you quite an interesting relationship with the media, generally.

I will not cover the points about the individual. I have some knowledge of what was said, and would agree with it, and I will agree with much of what Michael has said.

I came to view the media not as something to fear. Certainly one had to work at establishing one’s relationship, which I agree is symbiotic. I understood the media as having three broad characteristics.

First of all, it was a medium. Exactly what it said it was, a medium of communications with other people. It was a medium within which I operated, like the weather or the city or the countryside.
Secondly, it was a platform. It connected me. It took things, a message, information, to an audience, but I had to understand the audience this particular medium's communicating with. And like other characteristics of a platform is it packages the information, and you needed to understand which bit of the media you were talking to because it would do things to the information and the message you wish to transmit through this communication system.

And finally, it's a business. This, in its current circumstances, demands an enormous volume of information to fill space. You can't have an empty page or just a carrier wave, or you've failed. You've got to fill the space, and this leads to repetition to achieve volume. It demands instant response – speed – and it encourages a demand for shock and controversy.

And if you put those three characteristics together, you get my understanding of this thing, the media, which I have this relationship with. This all leads to fact and comment being inextricably mixed and often repeated, so that people are reporting other people's comment as fact, and in loops, and it gets worse the more international you go. It creates simplification of complexity where no simplification is going to help an understanding.

It creates an effect where all information is of equal value. The corporal on the street saying 'this is happening' is given exactly the same weight as the Prime Minister. There is this flattening. Now, I'm all for flattening higher up offices, but this has an effect. It confuses the understanding of the actual situation.

There is a constant search for personal and emotional content. There is a constant search for controversy. Ideally, if you can achieve personal and emotional content and controversy, you've got a long term winner. And there is an endless misuse of language to sensationalize.

All of this tends away from explanation and balance and a very simple example of what I am talking about (and it is simple): I published a book sometime ago in this country and then a year later in America. Events in Iraq and Afghanistan had moved on, but were essentially the same. It was very instructive in the nature to contrast the questioning by the media in the two constituencies, if you like, the two audiences.

Essentially, on this side of the Atlantic, in this country, no one was remotely interested in what I had written, except and insofar as to whether I would say something that they could use to make the next story. I was constantly being asked questions in order to prompt me to say, 'Mr. Blair or whosoever is wrong', and now there was the next story. We had achieved controversy. It was very remarkable.

And I very quickly learned to ask my questioner, 'Have you read my book?' The honest ones said no, and the others stuttered and would start shuffling bits of paper to find the two reviews that were in their briefing pack. Mostly they were honest, but the point was that their briefing
pack and their run sheet as it were, for this interview, was all about finding controversy so that they could create a story for the next one. Keep this constant demand for volume.

Cross the Atlantic and the contrast was very different. People had read the book. The questions were not, ‘Is Mr. Blair wrong?’; it isn’t ‘Is Mr. Bush wrong?’; it’s ‘what do we do to get it right?’ There was a genuine interest in understanding what had been said and how it would help America. It was very different; quite why that is I don’t know.

I gave you that story simply to show the contrast of the controversy, etc, but also the contrast between the media in one country and another. But I operate, my business, is adversarial. there is no second place. There is no niche market. It isn’t a competition. I win or I lose. I am operating as a commander (and I am now talking about a senior officer than a chap having a fight in some village in Afghanistan). I am the commander of a theatre of operations.

It's like being in a Roman circus all those centuries ago and you are a producer of some gladiatorial contest. The difference is that there is at least one other producer with another bunch of gladiators in the pit there with you. And mixed up in the dirt and the sand and the dust is all the people that were late for their seats, the ice cream sellers, the ticket types, and the idiots who can’t find the car park. And all around you in the stands is a highly factional audience who pays attention to what is going on in that pit by peering through the drinking straw of their Coca-Cola pack at where it's noisiest. Your business as that theatre commander, as that producer, is to write, and tell, and act the most compelling narrative in the minds and the view of the people in the stands.

Your problem is the media through which you communicate is a highly unreliable communications system, and you have to understand it to achieve your purpose.

To that end, I operated in an understanding that I had this symbiotic relationship, but it was not a symmetrical one. It was highly asymmetric.

I never set out to deceive, but that doesn't mean to say I have to tell everybody everything. I was quite prepared to practice illusions. A conjurer. You know he’s a conjurer. You pay good money to come and see the conjurer. You know he’s got a rabbit up his leg, but what you don’t know is when and where, and in what circumstances you’re going to produce it.

I'm very pleased that when I successfully carry out an illusion that I never lied about being a conjurer or that I’ve got a rabbit. I provide volumes of as accurate data as I can, beside a tap that from hot copy flows with good communications. And most journalists are idle, frightened people and they will go to my tap and get all the valid information they want.

I will provide a spokesman with the language for the audience in question, who I will brief daily, whose business is to explain, as much as to stand in front of a camera — explain to the
And I will seek to produce the narrative, the script, so that when you're faced with the inevitable disasters, because your enemy is setting out to defeat you, there is a line of logic on which you can comment. You can explain. You can, to some extent, prevent these disasters being seen in isolation and to be understood as part of the drama that is being carried out in that adversarial situation in the pit.

If you don’t do that, the enemy doesn’t appear in the story. And yet, their people have killed your soldiers, or captured the hill, or sunk the ship.

So in summary, I’m not frightened of the media. I recognize they exist, which is something in which I’ve had to operate, but I don’t trust the relationship unless I work at it. Unless I manage it. I don’t expect it to work to my advantage all the time at all.

So, was that quick enough?

**Michael:** That will serve. I'm wondering if we've left any sandwiches for Tim Livesey. We've heard from the military, we've heard from the lawyer, we've heard from the Lords Temporal, and now we'll hear from the spokesman for the Lords Spiritual.

**Tim Livesey:** Thank you, Michael. I have to start with a quote.

‘His voice is gentle; one strains to hear him. It creates an atmosphere of silence, of contemplation, as you have to still yourself in order to absorb his words. There is no booming personality, no highs and lows of punchy rhetoric, no sound bites or, as he says, ‘rent-a-quote’, but rather a series of profound views expressed in serene tranquillity.’

That was the beginning of an interview given by the Archbishop of Canterbury which actually some of you may have read about in the *Sunday Times*, ‘a rant about US imperial foreign policy’. I brought 70 copies with me, if anybody is interested in actually reading the interview. As you can tell, it’s rather more interesting than that.

But I want to buck the trend, actually. The trend of the panel, in some sense, and even the trend of the media, by beginning with the good news. I actually think we've got a fantastic media. It's world class. It's diverse. It's very creative. It's extremely challenging. It's dynamic. It's developing. It's ahead of most curves, not all, technologically. It's great fun. It's iconoclastic. It's incredibly intelligent, for the most part. The journalists who I've met, and I've met plenty, are usually fantastic fun to be with.

There is a lot of rubbish, of course, on television. There is an awful lot of really outstanding quality, and I think we really must recognize that. That doesn't come out of nowhere, it comes
out of a lot of hard work and creativity. It’s also the reason why, given that a lot of people in
the media are asking themselves, ‘How, nevertheless, did we get to the state that we’re
currently in?’

I have to say I agree with Jeremy Paxman wholeheartedly: I thought his speech was brilliant,
particularly the challenges that he laid down to his profession. But I think we’ve got to
recognize what we’ve got, in case we throw the baby out with the bathwater. I think - if not
madness – it’s certainly foolish.

The not-so-good news is that our media is fragmenting. It’s highly competitive. It’s very
commercially driven. It does tend to the sensationalist, as we all know. It’s increasingly
personalized with more and more, as we know, journalist as commentator, in the mainstream
media. And indeed on the web, anybody can be a journalist. The blogger is journalist, that’s
commonplace. The cult of the personality, of celebrity, which is largely, if not exclusively, media
driven. I don’t actually think that’s what people want, but they’ll take it if it's there. It sells, but,
it is corrosive. It’s also, if you disagree with somebody, more fashionable today than once,
simply to attack them, rather than their argument.

As Jeremy Paxman says, or implies, television in particular (and it’s important to remember
that's what he's talking about) is losing its soul and its sense of purpose. There is a feeling of
panic setting in with some of the scandals around voting, on the quiz programmes, and so on. I
think we've got to take that very seriously, as he suggests. I also agree with the Prime Minister
that public figures are being forced to focus, more and more, on the presentation, rather than
on the substance of what they are about, from whatever walk of life they're in.

I disagree with him that the answer to that, in his lecture, is to have a damn good press office. I
actually think that the answer is to know who you are, and to get on with it.

To quote Jonathan Sacks... in The Home We Build Together – it’s a very, very provoking book,
and I recommend it to you. As Jonathan Sacks says, "Is much of this about the pursuit of truth,
or the will to power?"

I think the trouble is the media has become terribly powerful. That means that if you have the
opportunity to enter the media yourself, you could become personally powerful, influential, and
I think you may have to question your motives.

So, what's it like for the church and other religious groups, for example, working in this kind of
atmosphere? I mean, frankly, it's quite tough. It's quite difficult to get air time, which is a relief.
Often religious leaders, people of that kind of persuasion, are dealing with really quite difficult
issues. Difficult issues, complex issues, issues that everybody asks themselves, whether or not,
whatever answers they come to, they ask themselves. So it's not as if they're inhabiting another
planet. They are actually asking issues that most people are, deep down, terribly interested in.
But in order to answer them, you need time. You need a bit of space. You need a bit of empathy. You can’t do it with sound bites. Again, it’s what Jonathan Sacks rather precisely calls our time "the end of argument" in your context. He says the age of subtlety is dead. Again, I don’t entirely agree with him but I think he’s right to be provocative.

There are fantastic programmes, if you take for example, John Humphrys, his program recently on Radio Four, which he invited three people, one of them was the Archbishop of Canterbury, another was Jonathan Sacks and the third was Tariq Ramadan. To engage in a discussion with him about the existence of God. It won awards. It gave rise, he said, to more correspondence than he had ever received about anything. When you consider John Humphrys, it’s saying something.

And what it underlines is that people are interested, he's interested, he explored it. And there are people there who are willing to explore it with you, given the right context.

And one of the problems, another problem that we face, frequently, as I think you’ve shown, is that in this day and age, naturally, and one simply has to take account of it and you’re clearly going to fall foul of it occasionally, is that you think you’re addressing one audience. But obviously, in this day and age with the globalised media, you’re actually addressing every audience potentially. In that case it’s interesting, because, and I think it’s naive, on the part of the magazine. They wanted to bring people’s attention to the interview, and they didn’t actually tell us that they were sending things out in advance. And so everyone was caught on the hop, and the attention that was brought to bear on the interview was not what they expected. But anyway, hopefully more people will read it, and with a bit of luck at least 20 more will read it this evening.

But frankly, that is a complexity. I don’t regard these things as problems as such as complexities of which we have to find a way over. Another problem, is that I think, very often, if you’re of a religious disposition, if you’re philosophically minded, it can be quite difficult not only to find the time and space within the immediate context to express what you want to because of the complexity therein. But actually, very often you’re speaking into a context where there’s already a meta-narrative, and the meta-narrative is, you know, whatever, ‘X’, ‘they want to return us to the Stone Age’, ‘they’re all illiberal’, and so on and so forth. But frankly, if that’s the context, and if that’s the environment, you just have to get on with it.

There’s always the easy accusation of hypocrisy, which has been mentioned already, in respect to the politicians... So, what do we do about it? Well, I think that we have to adapt, is what we do. I don’t think that anybody can expect special treatment. I think that if they’re in the public, if we’re talking about people in public life. I’m not talking about the vulnerable people, and a lot of what Sue was talking about, I have immense respect, because she was talking about vulnerable people who are not in the public life, people who have been thrust into the public limelight, which is quite different.
We shouldn't get special treatment. We're not victims. We shouldn't pretend that we're victims. We have to cope with the media environment that we find [inaudible]. Within the media we need to find ways to improve the things that we don't approve of or which we wish to see developed. The church, for example, mustn't sell its soul. It has to engage, but it mustn't sell its soul, and it doesn't exist to entertain.

So, what we do, what I do, is I look for other media, building broadcast partnerships, working with those people in broadcast media who actually do want to explore some of these issues. It can be very difficult, but they do exist. One of the problems, actually, is the distributors, are much more difficult. I can find independent producers to work with, what it's much more difficult to do is persuade the BBC, for example. The window is bigger than it was, but as people in the BBC will know, it's quite hard, because very often, scheduling is booked 18 months in advance.

Once a distributor wants – will always have deadlines and that again is something we have to deal with. We like to communicate direct, so we’re not mediated through the media, and I think that's reasonable through the website, broadcast, video cast, and so on. Essentially, you have to find ways to address the audiences you wish to address, directly. And not always through media, not always through somebody else's mediation. So, we have to adapt. We have to be creative.

So, if that's what we can do, what can the media do? I assume that a lot of you are in the media and that's really a question for you need to answer. But again I have to say, I tend to agree more with Jeremy Paxman than with Tony Blair, because I think that the Prime Minister didn't actually give any solutions to this other than saying, 'We need a better Press Office.'

I think that the temptation is to come up with what I call technical solutions. Whereas actually (i.e. better, faster… more powerful, more economical, etc, we’re all familiar with that), actually I think what we need to do is we need to rethink our values. And that's not just something the media needs to do. I need to do it. We all need to do it. But I agree with Jeremy, that the television in particular needs a… it needs a statement, but seriously here, BBC radio, commercial radio, newspapers, everybody, we are all failing in this together. It's a common project, a project about our social, cultural quality.

So that's what I think we should do. We need to get back to square one and rethink what it is we're here for. I think that in doing that, I'd like to suggest a few benchmarks. I'm not a big believer in competencies. I think there is a tremendous incompetence in… institutions. I'm a much bigger believer in values.

Here's a few. A checklist. I'll go rapidly through. The sort of questions that we, as individuals, if I'm within the media, and organizations within the media, ought to be asking ourselves.
First of all, what is our clear sense of purpose? What am I – we – here for? We've got to recognize that we're a moral agency. Everything we do has moral value, it is not morally neutral, let’s not kid ourselves. What is my, our, contribution to the common good? What is our code of ethics? What does behaving ethically look like, to everyone in the organization? Do I, going about my business, whether I'm a journalist, producer, whatever, respect the integrity of the other?

In the pages of media the 'other' is very often the person about whom I'm writing, the person with whom I'm connecting in order to write, whatever. The other. [inaudible] Do I value honesty above sensationalism? Because if I do… when you say to people, ‘What makes a good journalist?’. And they usually say, ‘a really good nose for the story’, I tend to think it's a really good nose but I'm not in the story. It will mean self denial. If you can't write it, produce it, with integrity, then don't.

The ultimate test, and I'm sorry, this is a bit cheesy, but I hope you'll know what I mean. Does my behaviour humanize, or dehumanize? And that's me, and the other. Or, would my [inaudible] be proud of this?

In conclusion, I do think that the media is having a serious impact on public life. I don't think it is necessarily seriously adverse. I think it's seriously challenging. I think if you want good (underlined) people not to walk away from public life, or, bad people not to engage in it for reasons purely to do with celebrity. Or not to walk away from you, the media, close down, walk away, refuse to engage. I think it is essential to rediscover the value of integrity, trust, and the value of honesty, and the real purpose of playing the media part in this common project. In which we all have to play our part.

And finally, rediscover what it means to treat each other with civility. I'll leave it there.