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Journalists, media experts seek way forward beyond BBC, Leveson

By [Annie Makoff](#) | [News & Politics](#)

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The journalists who broke the **Jimmy Savile** story are a 'shining example' of why tighter press regulations following the phone hacking scandal may not be the answer.

BBC reporters Liz Mackean and Meirion Jones took their story to ITV after their *Newsnight* programme — which revealed the full extent of sexual abuse allegations against Savile — was pulled at the last minute.

The scandal surrounding the BBC cover-up prompted the resignation of its director general George Entwistle. The broadcasting company's attempts to prevent the Savile story being told come at a time when public trust in the media is at an all-time low.

The phone hacking scandal — which prompted the Leveson Inquiry into press practices and ethics — resulted in the closure of the Sunday newspaper *News of the World* and the departure of several key journalists. It perhaps most notably saw a substantial increase in mistrust of the media.

A survey carried out earlier this year by communications consultancy 3 Monkeys Communications revealed that 63 percent of people believe that phone hacking is a widespread practice across UK media and more than half have less trust in the media in light of the scandal.

Despite anti-media feeling, experts such as Agnieszka Piotrowska, documentary filmmaker and senior lecturer in Media Arts at the University of Bedford, believe that cases like Savile's present opportunities for improving best practices and good ethics in the media.

Ms. Piotrowska praised the persistence of Ms. Mackean and Mr. Jones in ensuring that their exposé programme on Savile was aired to the public.

"The Jimmy Savile scandal is a flip side of the phone hacking scandal. People are calling for tighter press regulations, but these controls would gag journalists and documentary filmmakers from telling important stories that need to be told," Ms. Piotrowska told *The Positive*. "Liz Mackean and Meirion Jones had an important story to tell and they did not give up until their programme was aired. Their dogged determination and persistence is a credit to them. They are a shining example of good, investigative journalism."

Media experts and other prominent industry figures are divided on the best way forward following the two scandals. The phone hacking case in particular has caused great concern among many outside the industry who feel that the press have become above the law.

Jonathan Coad, specialist media lawyer and partner at Lewis Silkin told *The Positive* that the journalists and reporters engaged in phone hacking were not only carrying out illegal activities but were also in breach of the **Press Complaints Commission (PCC)** code of conduct, a strong reason, he says, to impose stricter regulations on the press.

"The PCC was set up by the press, funded by the press and appointed by the press. It is therefore blindingly obvious that the PCC needs to be fully independent, perhaps as a division of OFCOM, so we have consistency in regulation," he said. "It is likely that the Leveson Inquiry will recommend a form of regulation which includes an element of statutory underpinning."

The Leveson report into media ethics in response to the phone hacking scandal is not due to be published until the end of November, but leaked information obtained by *The Mail on Sunday* last week suggests that Lord Justice Leveson's recommendations would involve state regulation, as Mr. Coad predicted.

At this early stage, it isn't clear how the Leveson recommendations will be received, but Daniel Lee, journalist, media consultant and lecturer at City University London, told *The Positive* that stricter supervision wouldn't necessarily stop unscrupulous journalism practices.

"There does need to be a press regulator that is seen to be independent and effective, but it wouldn't prevent unethical stories spreading on social media or the internet. On top of this, much of the behaviour considered by the Leveson Inquiry is already criminal and involved the police and other public officials," he said. "There is a danger that regulation of social media, the internet and the press might become so draconian that it is likely to restrict important reporting which scrutinises big businesses and politicians. It might, for example, make it a lot harder to break stories like the Savile case, which was clearly an important story to be broken."

Ms. Piotrowska, who has produced documentaries for the BBC and other channels for over 20 years, insisted that tougher press regulation would be damaging to broadcasting and journalism and would ultimately encourage self-censorship among publishers and editors.

"Of course there needs to be some kind of regulation to prevent extreme cases like phone hacking, but it should not curtail the freedom of the media," she said. "Freedom of the press is the cornerstone of democracy and we should preserve it at all costs."

She added: "It was the determination of the two *Newsnight* journalists which led to the Jimmy Savile story to being exposed. Inquiries have been set up, people are speaking out and coming forward. It's this kind of journalism which we should be actively encouraging, not curbing."

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