

**C Elliott**

November 2011

**LEVESON INQUIRY INTO THE CULTURE, PRACTICES AND ETHICS OF  
THE PRESS**

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WITNESS STATEMENT OF CHRIS ELLIOTT

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I, Chris Elliott, of Guardian News and Media Limited, Kings Place, 90 York Way  
London, N1 9GU, WILL SAY as follows:

1) My background

1. I am the Readers' editor of the Guardian, a role that covers both print and web. Unless stated otherwise, the facts stated in this witness statement are within my own knowledge and belief. In this witness statement I refer to documents that are attached to this statement in an appendix.
2. I make this statement in response to a Notice dated 17 October 2011 served on me under section 21(2) of the Inquiries Act 2005 and the Inquiry Rules 2006, by Lord Justice Leveson, as Chairman of the Inquiry. These require me to provide evidence to the Inquiry Panel in the form of a written statement and/or to provide documents as requested in the Notice.
3. I have been a journalist since September 1971, when I started my career as an indentured junior reporter on the Barking and Dagenham Post. After four years working in various parts of north east London I moved to the Cambridge Evening News in September 1975. Belatedly I decided that I would try for a job in Fleet Street and spent six months in the early part of 1983 working casual shifts at the Sun and the Sunday Telegraph after finishing my day job as the features editor of the CEN, and at weekends, a traditional route into national newspapers. In

September of that year I was given a staff job on the Sunday Telegraph as a reporter, where I became the home affairs correspondent two years later. I left the Telegraph for the Sunday Correspondent in 1989, where I became chief reporter before it closed, and returned to the Sunday Telegraph. In 1992 I left for The Times, where I ran an investigative unit for 19 months before that closed and I was made redundant. I then freelanced for a few months before starting casual shifts at the Guardian. The shifts turned into a contract, and in February 1995 I was given a staff job as a senior reporter and occasional news editor. After three years I joined editorial management as an executive editor, becoming managing editor of the Guardian in February 2000. In 2007 I also became a director of Guardian News and Media. I stepped down from the board last year when I also relinquished my role as managing editor of GNM when I successfully applied to the Scott Trust for the role of Readers' editor.

4. I am also a director of the Society of Editors, a director of the National Council for the Training of Journalists (chair of the accreditation committee), a member of the nominations committee of Thomson Reuters Founders Share Company Limited, Vice President of the International News Safety Institute, a trustee of Concern, a charity for the alleviation of poverty in the third world, and a member of the Organisation of News Ombudsmen.

## 2) My role as Readers' editor of the Guardian

5. My role is set out in the terms of reference that can be found on our website (see Appendix A). It is broadly to investigate and respond to readers' complaints and views about Guardian journalism in print and on the web. A complaint may be a simple allegation of inaccuracy or it may be more complex, such as an allegation that Guardian journalists have breached the principles of journalism promulgated by CP Scott. These principles are most clearly set out in the 1921 essay written by Scott to mark the centenary of the birth of the Manchester Guardian. This essay is attached as an appendix to the Guardian editorial code, which all Guardian journalists are expected to have read and abide by (see Appendix B). If readers are unhappy with the results of an investigation there is an external ombudsman, who may review my work and come to a conclusion as to whether I have acted fairly and reasonably. Beyond that

there is the Press Complaints Commission. The Guardian's editorial code complements the PCC code and our aim is to deal with issues swiftly and fairly. If the complainant disagrees he or she may be referred to the Guardian's external ombudsman or the complainant may choose to go the PCC.

6. Each week I write a column that runs at the foot of the letters' page in which I may report the investigation of a particular complaint or discuss an ethical issue that has emerged. The column is an important way to demonstrate that discussing the ethics of the way the journalists work is natural and to be encouraged.

3) 4) and 5) The day-to-day workings of the office of the Readers' editor (with appropriate historical evolution, if relevant). The type and number of complaints and queries dealt with. The process adopted to consider and resolve queries and complaints

7. There was a Guardian's readers' representative in the early 1990s, after the two Calcutt reports. The office lapsed within a few years and it was not restored until it came back in a completely different form in 1997, under the editorship of Alan Rusbridger, who had seen the positive effects of internal ombudsmen on American newspapers. He believed that for the Guardian to survive and thrive in increasingly uncertain times for newspapers, it was imperative that the Guardian should work hard not only to maintain a bond of trust with its readers, but also improve on it too. He knew that the newspaper made mistakes – all do – and instead of trying to gloss over or deny them he felt it was important to admit to the readers what was wrong and try to put it right. He appointed Ian Mayes, a highly experienced and rounded journalist, who had had a long regional newspaper career. He had also been a chief sub-editor of BBC news and worked for the BBC in Parliament before joining the Guardian, where he became successively the arts editor and obituaries editor. Mayes created the title Readers' editor to make clear that this was a journalist at the disposal of the readers. It was also a title that reflected the independence of the Readers' editor, who did not report to the paper's editor but to the Scott Trust.
8. The internet was not then the force in newspapers that it has become, and he received around 5,000 complaints and queries in the first year, all by telephone or letter. By the time Mayes

stepped down in 2007 that had grown to around 20,000 and largely emailed. Last year there were 26,000 complaints and queries of which only 200 or so came by post. At its best, the office of the Readers' editor provides a fast and open remedy for allegations of inaccuracy and unethical journalism.

9. The Readers' editor's office now comprises an associate editor who deals with the daily corrections and clarifications column, two administrators (one part time) and myself. I tend to take the more serious complaints – especially those that need a lot of time – while my colleague handles the daily corrections and clarifications column. This appears on our website as a rolling column of corrections (see Appendix C) updated during the day, and a version is published in the paper six days a week. At least once a week I deal with the daily list of corrections and clarifications. The office is open five days a week and calls are taken from readers between 10am and 1pm. The team is in the office from around 9am to 7pm.
10. It is not surprising that the paper occasionally makes mistakes. There were two errors in connection with this inquiry, both of which were prominently corrected. The Guardian, in print and online, is a complex news organisation that produces between 60,000 and 70,000 words a day in print, Monday to Friday. All those words are reproduced online on the Guardian's website as well as a further 60,000 to 70,000 original words for the sites each day. On Saturdays, the Guardian newspaper and its nine supplements produce around 250,000 words. Then there are the images and graphics, about 140 a day. All of these can be the subject of complaint and concern. For example the recent killing of Muammar Gaddafi and the subsequent use of the pictures of his corpse on the front of the website and newspaper brought forth 60 complaints from readers and some concerns expressed by staff, which I covered in my Open door column of 31 October (see Appendix D).
11. We do not take primary responsibility for comments posted on the website; that is a job for the nine moderators operating across the site. I do, however, have the right to become involved if an allegation about a comment is particularly serious.
12. In addition there are complaints about historic issues on the Guardian's archive. A growing problem is the number of requests for deletions, sometimes of a name or an entire story

from the archive because an individual believes its continued existence is disadvantageous.

13. Because we receive around 100 emails a day we can only commit to dealing with "significant errors". On arrival at our desks each morning there may well be between 20 and 40 emails overnight. In the course of 24 hours we receive on average around 80 to 120; from general queries that can be passed to an administrator for resolution, to the most serious complaint.
14. My colleague on the daily corrections column assesses whether any one complaint or a cluster around a particular issue should come to me. We both work in a similar way. Once we have accepted that a complaint merits investigation - whether it is organised by a lobby group or one individual - the complaint is passed to the journalist or section for a response. It is important that the responsible journalist is fully engaged with the need to find a resolution to the complaint.
15. It is worth bearing in mind that only half of the Guardian's output is produced by staff journalists; the rest comes from freelance journalists and agencies as well as contributors from other professional fields, and content originated by other websites and publications but hosted by the Guardian. All Guardian journalists are expected to co-operate with the Readers' editor's office, from the youngest trainee to the Editor in Chief. It is not in their contracts - although abiding by the PCC code is part of their contract - but it is part of the culture that Guardian journalists should abide by a set of ethical principles, and addressing complaints through the Readers' editor's office is part of that ethos. I have rarely ever had to labour that point.
16. The journalist often swiftly admits an error and we can amend the article online, carefully footnoting the change and posting a correction or clarification in the rolling online column. On the whole, mistakes that have only appeared in print are corrected or clarified in print as well as online. This is largely an issue of space, as the printed Corrections and clarifications column can only carry three or four items in its slot on the leaders page. The printed column has always appeared there, and is now well established at the heart of the paper as the page where we admit and correct our mistakes.

17. If the journalist challenges the complaint, I expect a detailed defence, citing sources. I then check the sources and set about independently verifying them as far as I am able. If I feel the journalist is right, based on what he or she has told me and what I have been able to find out myself, I will go back to the complainant, put my findings to him and see how he responds. If the complainant comes back with further evidence that the journalist was wrong we work through it until we reach a resolution. This can take time but it is important to be fair to the journalist as well as to the complainant. The Readers' editor is not a prosecutor but an investigator and adjudicator.
18. If I find that the journalist is wrong I explain to him or her why I have come to that conclusion. The correction or clarification is printed and the story amended online. In serious or complicated cases the Readers' editor can also devote an Open door column to the complaint.
19. More often than not the process is an amicable one. Complainants dealt with fairly and quickly rarely stay angry. That doesn't happen every time and there are a small number of complainants which I will either refer to the external ombudsman, or the complainant may go to the PCC and in some extreme cases to a lawyer.
20. Each day my colleagues and I respond to at least 30 or 40 of the 100 or so emails that we receive. All will have received an automated response and minor queries - such as a lost supplement - are merely forwarded to the right department at the Guardian to deal with. On some occasions a dozen or so readers will point out a simple but important error such as a picture caption that wrongly identifies an individual or a place. If we have time we will reply to all of them, but fixing the mistake online is our priority, followed by a published correction. The key is to identify the significant errors and avoid exacerbating distress by delay.

6) Factors contributing to the success and those limiting the effectiveness of the role of a Readers' editor.

21. The key to success for a Readers' editor is the ability to demonstrate independence, to make decisions that are based on the available evidence and not the wishes of individual

colleagues or the paper as a whole. The independence of the Readers' editor is guaranteed at the Guardian because he or she answers to the Scott Trust rather than the Editor in Chief.

22. This does not mean that I am locked in a permanent battle with every journalist on the paper. It is important that an ombudsman – and I use that as a generic term that includes my role – believes broadly in the principles of the organisation. I believe that one or two ombudsmen in the USA were appointed to the job having failed to secure an alternative senior editorial appointment. These appointments tend to end badly, as they start from a position of disgruntlement. By the same token, the editorial staff have to believe that the role is worthwhile. I am fortunate that the overwhelming majority of the Guardian's staff believe in open journalism, a need for which is much more pressing in an era when readers online expect greater responsiveness and are no longer willing to be mere recipients of news. They want to challenge and interact.
23. Access to staff, due prominence for the Corrections and clarifications columns both online and in print, and support from the proprietor – in my case the Scott Trust – are also major factors in setting a framework for success.
24. A lack of time and sheer volume of email are the biggest problems that limit the effectiveness of the office.
25. The large number of queries we receive is not a reflection of the number of errors in the paper. It is largely because the office is now well established in the minds of readers who wish to discuss content as the appropriate place to do so. The readers are intelligent and passionate and expect to engage in dialogue over a whole range of issues, not just major ones. I can't pretend that we leave them all satisfied, but we aim to ensure they feel they have been treated with respect, that their views are taken seriously and – where appropriate – action taken. The Guardian is a vigorous paper of the centre left and runs many contentious articles in print and online. Some major issues that produce complaints are around our coverage of: climate change and the environment generally; the middle east – these often bring allegations of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia; the Guardian's politics – particularly its support of the Lib Dems at the last election; the health service; and gender issues.

26. Many of these issues are covered by very organised groups. These lobby groups can skew a debate and create an email storm of complaint from people who are not regular Guardian readers, but have merely acted in response to receiving a line from an article and an exhortation to "cut and paste" a general complaint to the Guardian.
27. Readers often complain about an "inaccuracy" when it is more a matter of opinion based on interpretation. These complaints are often complex and hard to resolve.
28. The growth in the use of social media by Guardian journalists as part of their job brings another dimension to the role of the Readers' editor and adds further pressure. If a journalist links to another article how much responsibility should we bear for that article?
29. If a reader finds a Readers' editor's adjudication unfavourable, the reader will sometimes go to the Press Complaints Commission. I estimate that this happens fewer than a dozen times a year, but that still feels like too many. Complaints that come to the Readers' editor's office rarely end in a threat of legal action. In fact we estimate that legal costs are down by around 25 per cent a year since the inception of the office because we are able to offer prominent redress more quickly.

7) Scope for improvement, change or augmentation.

30. More staff to cover queries would be an easy request but that is not realistic at such a time of flux in the newspaper industry. We are increasing our in-house training on legal matters and it would be good to extend this to ethical issues. The legal training augments the training that most journalists receive on an approved NCTJ course, during the law module. The Guardian organised four training sessions for staff on the PCC code in 2010 and one on reporting mental health issues in 2011.
31. Ethical journalism is currently taught by all NCTJ centres. The NCTJ is putting together case studies that demonstrate how ethical journalism is currently taught at all their centres. It is central to the training of the NCTJ's core values of truth, accuracy and objectivity in all modules, not just media law and

regulation. The NCTJ will be discussing the teaching of ethics at its conference on 30 November. Suggestions have been made for a separate taught and examined ethics module and continuing professional development courses.

32. I would like more time to discuss with colleagues some of the issues that come across my desk daily. I intend to introduce a brief weekly bulletin of the most egregious problems that will go out to all staff in a bid to cut down on the repetitive errors.

8 and 9) My assessment of the value of the Readers' editor in relation to the accountability (perceived or real) of the press. My view on the role of an internal ombudsman and what factors will contribute to their success.

33. When I became a reporter it was made absolutely clear that you should do your very best to get the facts right, but also an unspoken acknowledgement that you would do all you could not to admit that you might have got something wrong. This wasn't just obduracy. It is second nature for a journalist to believe that the better and more important the story, the more likely it is that someone won't want you to tell it. Reporters expect to be told that he or she had got something wrong by an interested party wanting to keep something out of the newspaper. The knee jerk denial of error grew into a more bullying, aggressive culture where reporters and newspapers in were in fierce competition; journalists simply felt it was not good policy to admit error.

34. The value of the Readers' editor at the Guardian is that the role reverses that position. The starting point is: "Please tell us if you think we have made an error. We will investigate, if we are wrong we will amend the story online, explaining why and print a correction as soon as possible." An inbox and postbag that receives 26,000 approaches a year shows that people want to believe sufficiently in the system to try it.

35. If news organisations begin to recognise their readers' demands to admit their faults it would:
1. Improve the levels of trust in news organisations that wish to believe they are a vital part of democratic society.
  2. Allow individual journalists to feel much freer to admit that they are flawed and capable of mistakes, because their newspaper and websites have made it a policy to admit as

much.

At the Guardian, reporters regularly contact the Readers' editor's office to admit to and correct an error made in good faith. They no longer feel it is a stain on their professional reputation or that they will suffer disciplinary action by admitting an honest mistake: quite the reverse. A willingness to admit error enhances their stature; equivocation and obfuscation is much more likely to lead to bigger problems for the journalist. As John F Kennedy said in 1961 to a group of journalists: "An error does not become a mistake until you refuse to correct it." In a digital world where an expert is only a byte away, our errors seek us out.

36. It is not the role of an independent ombudsman to act as an enforcer for editorial management. If a breach of professional standards is so serious that I believe it may warrant disciplinary action the complaint is handed over to the relevant managing editor. If a journalist has made a mistake, an appearance in the Corrections and clarifications column is enough to ensure that he or she doesn't make the same mistake twice in most circumstances.
37. The role of the Readers' editor is to hold the journalism to account on behalf of the readers. It is a job that requires an individual to know that they are of the paper but not on it; it requires experience and judgement, and inevitably, as Readers' editor, I make mistakes and occasionally have to print a correction to a correction. I hate that.

10) My view of the role of the Readers' editor in the context of the wider regulation of the press and providing redress.

38. I have tried to give a broad outline of how the role works post publication, but I would like to emphasise that an effective ombudsmen can be an important pre-emptive force, not only for reporters but also for desk practice.
39. I am not suggesting that a Readers' editor could have prevented the practice of phone hacking at the News of the World. It is not easy for aspiring journalists to stand up to a news desk or an editor in a highly competitive environment. However, the presence of an independent ombudsman within a news room, who is constitutionally able to challenge bad practice

and bad journalism, would be a powerful influence for good and encourage reporters to resist unethical practice. A regular column by the Readers' editor discussing ethical and other issues arising from the paper's journalism has a beneficial effect on the internal culture of the paper; and if the post of Readers' editor were more widespread and the brief extended beyond daily corrections to a weekly column of this kind, then it might have a positive effect on the general culture within news organisations.

40. The role of the journalist and the newspaper was already being questioned before phone hacking was exposed. For some years social, cultural and technological changes have undermined 150-year-old certainties in a way that the industry – with notable exceptions – was slow to grasp. If journalists are going to rebuild the public’s faith that they are a force for good and a vital part of a healthy democracy they will have to become more democratic themselves. They will have to listen more and declaim less. If each news organisation made a public statement recognising that they make mistakes and that there is someone in the shape of the Readers' editor who will not only listen but act upon reader complaints, that would be a very public statement of change. The newspapers would have to explain publicly how their systems work and why the public should have confidence that the readers’ editor or ombudsman is a genuinely independent figure within their organisation. They would have to abide by it. Such regulatory systems couldn’t – and probably wouldn’t in this more questioning age – be allowed to lapse as they were 20 years ago post Calcutt.

41. It would be humbling for newspapers, but if they instigated such systems and ensured they endured, the public would have good reason to believe in them again. And that would be an important part of a healthy civic society.

I believe that the contents of this witness statement are true.

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Chris Elliott

Date

Appendix A	Readers' editor's Terms of Reference
Appendix B	Editorial guidelines
Appendix C	Page pdfs of the Corrections and clarifications column, Monday to Saturday, w/c 31 October, and print-outs of the website Corrections column for that week
Appendix D	Open door columns on Gaddafi images, Ahdaf Soueif on the tunnels under Jerusalem, Weekend magazine feature on airline glamour, and "Child porn"
Appendix E	Complaints analysis sheet
Appendix F	Analysis of email received on Tuesday 1 November