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South West Wales Media
Witness Statement of SPENCER FEENEY to the Leveson Inquiry

October 19, 2011.

1. Who you are and a brief summary of your career history in the media.

My name is Spencer Feeney. I am editor of the South Wales Evening Post, Wales's largest-selling daily newspaper, which is based in Swansea. I was appointed in September, 2002. I am also editor-in-chief of the Evening Post's publisher, South West Wales Media, with oversight responsibilities for its two paid-for weekly newspapers, the Carmarthen Journal and the Llanelli Star. This is my third editorship of a regional newspaper; previously I have been editor of The Citizen, a daily newspaper based in Gloucester, and the Llanelli Star, a weekly newspaper in South West Wales. I have also held senior editorial positions at regional daily newspapers in Stoke-on-Trent and Exeter. I am a previous member of the Press Complaints Commission, and have served as the external examiner for Cardiff University's school of journalism.

2. How you understand the system of corporate governance to work in practice at the newspaper where you were/are employed with particular emphasis on systems to ensure lawful, professional and ethical conduct.

All of South West Wales Media's journalists are instructed to work in accordance with the PCC's Code of Practice, as well as all aspects of the law relating to the media. SWWM news editors are explicitly instructed to ensure our journalists do nothing that would contravene the code or break the law in pursuit of a story or photograph.

My staff and I also have unlimited access to legal advice from solicitors who specialise in all aspects of the law relating to the media, and who have advised South West Wales Media, its predecessors, and its parent company, for the last 21 years.

3. What your role is/was in ensuring that the corporate governance documents and all relevant policies are adhered to in practice. If you do not consider yourself to have been/be responsible for this, please tell us who you consider to hold that responsibility.

As editor and editor-in-chief, I am ultimately responsible for everything that appears in the publisher's newspapers. My role is to explicitly instruct our news editors as above. They have clear instructions to raise with me any concerns they have about possible breaches of our policies on how stories and photographs are gathered, and either through me or directly, to take legal advice if it is deemed necessary to do so.

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- 4. Whether the documents and policies referred to above are adhered to in practice, to the best of you knowledge.**

I have no knowledge of any occasions when these policies have not been adhered to.

- 5. Whether these practices have changed , either recently as a result of the phone hacking media interest or prior to that point, and if so, what the reasons for the changes were.**

They have not.

- 6. Where the responsibility for checking sources of information (including the method by which the information was obtained) lies: from reporter to sub-editor to editor, and how this is done in practice (with some representative examples to add clarity).**

Reporters are instructed that, wherever possible, they must not rely on a single source for a story, but to seek corroborative sources. News editors are instructed to check all sources with reporters, and to raise any concerns they have about a source with me, or my deputy.

- 7. To what extent an editor is aware, and should be aware, of the sources of the information which make up the central stories featured in your newspaper each day (including the method by which the information was obtained).**

As explained above, I will be made aware of any concerns the news editors may have about a source. In addition, I regularly ask in our daily editorial conferences for information about the source of a story that makes allegations about somebody's conduct or behaviour.

- 8. The extent to which you consider that ethics can and should play a role in the print media, and what you consider 'ethics' to mean in this context.**

I believe 'ethics' in this context is covered by the PCC Code of Practice, and that all journalists should adhere to the code.

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9. The extent to which you, as an editor, felt any financial and/or commercial pressure from proprietors of your newspaper or anyone else, and whether any such pressure affected any of the decisions you made as editor (such evidence to be limited to matters covered by the Terms of Reference).

None.

10. The extent to which you, as an editor, had a financial incentive to print exclusive stories (NB. It is not necessary to state your precise earnings).

None.

11. Whether, to the best of your knowledge, your newspaper used, paid or had any connection with private investigators in order to source stories or information and/or paid or received payments in kind for such information from the police, public officials or others with access to the same: If so, please provide details of the numbers of occasions on which such investigators or other external providers of information were used and of the amounts paid to them (NB. You are not required to identify individuals, either within your newspaper or otherwise).

South West Wales Media newspapers have not used, paid or had any connection with private investigators since I was appointed editor in 2002. To the best of my knowledge, none of my predecessors used, paid or had any connection with private investigators.

12. If such investigators or other external providers of information were used, what policy/protocol, if any, was used to facilitate the use of such investigators or other external providers of information (for example, in relation to how they were identified, how they were chosen, how they were paid, their remit, how they were told to check sources, what methods they were told to or permitted to employ in order to obtain the information and so on).

Not applicable.

13. If there was such a policy/protocol, whether it was followed, and if not, what practice was followed in respect of all these matters.

Not applicable.

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14. Whether there are any situations in which neither the existing protocol/policy nor the practice were followed and what precisely happened/failed to happen in those situations. What factors were in play in deciding to depart from the protocol or practice?
Not applicable.

15. The extent to which you are aware of protocols or policies operating at your newspaper in relation to expenses or remuneration paid to other external sources of information (whether actually commissioned by your newspaper or not). There is no need for you to cover 'official' sources, such as the Press Association.

There are no such protocols because we do not pay external sources other than the Press Association and bona fide news agencies.

16. The practice of your newspaper in relation to payment of expenses and/or remuneration paid to other external sources of information (whether actually commissioned by your newspaper or not). There is no need to cover 'official' sources such as the Press Association.

Not applicable.

17. In respect of editorial decisions you have made to publish stories, the factors you have taken into account in balancing the private interests of individuals (including the fact that information may have been obtained from paid sources in the circumstances outlined under paragraph 11 above) against the public interest in a free Press. You should provide a number of examples of these, and explain how you have interpreted and applied the foregoing public interest.

Given that SWWM does not obtain information from paid sources in such circumstances, I cannot give specific examples. Most commonly, this issue arises when we are asked by somebody who is due to appear in court as a defendant not to publish the story because they have hidden their prosecution from their family. Our response always is that there is a public interest in the court system being open to public scrutiny. Conversely, our policy is not to report any details from inquests, even though such publication is lawful, out of respect for the private interests of the families, unless there is an over-riding public interest (e.g. exposing poor practice in a care home).

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18. Anything else which you consider will assist the Chairman to arrive at considered conclusions on any aspect of the Terms of Reference, set out above.

I note that Part 1 of the inquiry's Terms of Reference consist of two questions, each of which is sub-divided into four specific issues.

Using the same paragraph numbers, I make the following observations and comments:

1a. Not applicable.

1b. My staff have good relations with our local police, both with their press office and with individual officers directly. I expect my crime reporters to develop and maintain good relations with officers of all ranks, as on an almost daily basis events occur in respect of which comment and information will be sought. The police also regularly provide us with information for publication to assist them with their enquiries.

I must stress, however, that my journalists are prohibited from acting in any way which is unethical, improper, or unlawful. None of my journalists make payments to police officers for information; they do not bribe officers or provide any kind of indirect financial incentive; and they do not try to obtain information other than by legal and ethical means. If any of my journalists attempted to operate in this way, they would be dismissed summarily. None of my journalists has ever tried to suborn a police officer.

1c. I am aware of the principles concerning data protection, although whenever I have needed to have more detailed information, I have sought legal advice. In our capacity as processors of personal data, my staff and I comply with the Data Protection Act. We have never knowingly contravened the Act.

On occasion, we process personal data for the purposes of journalism. On these occasions, we rely on the provisions of S.32 of the Act to ensure that we process that data lawfully.

The premise underlying this paragraph is that there has been a failure of both the law and the regulatory framework to ensure compliance with the law by the press, when it comes to data protection. My experience is that the regional press respects the law concerning data protection, and always endeavours to comply with it. I am not aware of any newspaper, either where I have worked or for which I have (or had) responsibility, ignoring or failing to comply with data protection law. It is simply not part of the culture of the regional press to do anything other than to abide by the law.

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1d. To the best of my knowledge, it has never been alleged that any regional newspaper, and certainly none at which I have worked or for which I have (or had) responsibility, has ever engaged in "misconduct". Similarly, I am not aware that anyone has ever given "warnings" concerning such behaviour. Therefore, I do not accept the underlying premise that any of the newspapers with which I have been connected throughout my career (of more than 40 years) have ever engaged in "misconduct" or have been the subject of "previous warnings".

2a. As a former member of the Press Complaints Commission, I have (unlike many of its critics) witnessed at first-hand, and participated in, its work resolving complaints by the public. I remain strongly in support of the PCC's role and of self-regulation of the press. As with any organisation, I recognise that there is always room for improvement and reform. I reject, however, the proposition that the PCC has fundamentally failed or that self-regulation is a failed concept. Neither is true.

I know that these were issues addressed by Paul Dacre in his presentation to the inquiry on October 12, 2011. Rather than repeat his analysis, I hope it is sufficient to say that I agree with his comments and support his proposals.

2b. See above with regard to the issues of press behaviour and regulation.

2c. Although we have a Parliamentary correspondent who reports on both national and local issues for us, our relations with our politicians tend to be direct with our MPs and Welsh Assembly Members. These relations are important both to us and the MPs and AMs concerned, and apart from the occasional fallings-out, work well. Indeed, the MPs and AMs are regular contributors to South West Wales Media newspapers, which is ultimately of benefit to our readers, the public whom we all serve.

So far as I am concerned, therefore, no recommendations need to be made concerning the future conduct of these relations.

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2d. My position concerning relations with the police is described above. My view is that the law as currently formulated is satisfactory. It defines the behaviour that is expected of the police, prevents members of the public (including journalists) from trying to encourage improper or unlawful behaviour, prevents corruption amongst officers, and as history shows, if there is any improper or unlawful behaviour by anyone, the legal and regulatory mechanisms exist to protect the public and enforce the law.

My experience is that in the context of the regional press, there is no need for any new legislation. The present system works.

19. If you cannot answer these questions, or take the view that they could be more fully answered by someone else, you must nonetheless provide answers to the extent that you can, and to the extent that you cannot you must provide the Inquiry as soon as possible with names of those who would be able to assist us further.

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