
LEVESON INQUIRY SUBMISSION – Suleman Nagdi MBE DL

27th January 2012

I am writing to express my views in relation to the Leveson Inquiry's module 4 on 'recommendations for a more effective policy and regulation that supports the integrity and freedom of the press while encouraging the highest ethical standards.'

I draw on my extensive experience within numerous roles in giving this opinion. These roles include an elected position as Public Relations Officer with the Federation of Muslim Organisations (FMO) which has been established for over 25 years, serving as the umbrella body for almost 200 organisations in the multi-faith environment of Leicester, the UK's most ethnically diverse city outside of London. I work on a range of issues including policing, education, youth, health, housing, bereavement and inter-faith work amongst others. The Federation is run by an executive committee which is democratically elected bi-annually by the Federation's affiliates and is bound to operate in accordance with the constitution of the Federation. Adopting a professional, diligent, pragmatic and diplomatic approach has ensured the trust of the local community in a unitary, collective effort. This has also led to us developing outstanding relations with our various faith and non-faith based partners. Indeed, such has been our successes that we have been used as a frame of reference by many other organisations nationally and at a European level, who have sought our consultation on a range of issues.

The Leveson Inquiry has come about due to a deeply disturbing chain of events surrounding the phone hacking scandal. The Inquiry that is currently underway should allow us to undergo a period of reflection; an opportune moment to critically analyse the media's duties and responsibilities in the process of delivering news to the great British public.

Reporting of Islam and Issues Concerning Muslims

The FMO as an organisation has for many years played a significant role in community relations both locally and nationally and is proud to have established a strong partnership with many media outlets; a partnership that has been borne out of consistent, transparent and progressive dialogue. As such, we are in a position to comment on the conditions required to facilitate a relationship built on trust between the media and the general public.

One of the main failings of the Leveson Inquiry thus far has been to give adequate thought to the issue of reporting on issues concerning Muslims and Islam. Irresponsible and sensational journalism has without doubt given rise to a *carte blanche* approach to issues concerning Muslims at many levels in society. I believe this all stems from the newspaper headlines Muslims have had to contend with over the past decade. Certain tabloid papers have reported on issues concerning Muslims with a lack of accountability which has resulted in a climate of hostility in both the reporters and the readership. This is clear when one peruses the 'comments' left beneath articles concerning Muslims.

The adverse effects of such irresponsible and often prejudiced reporting have been investigated by academics and most recently, by Lancaster University who produced a report titled 'The Representation of Muslims in the British Press 1998-2009'. The study found:

More common than the expressly negative representation of Muslims, was a more subtle set of implicitly negative representations, with Muslims often being 'collectivised' via homogenising terms like 'Muslim world' and written about predominantly in contexts to do with conflict, terrorism and extremism.

This trend, when coupled with the named journalists who were emphatically anti-Muslim in their writings, has led to a climate of intolerance against Muslims. This is deeply worrying in terms of its implications for Britain's Muslim communities, as well as community harmony and cohesion on the whole. Britain's Muslims are the country's second most populace faith group and this issue has a deep impact on their abilities to contribute in British society.

This is extremely concerning when one considers that the media is often the sole source of information on Muslims for many sections of society. If this irresponsible journalism is allowed to continue unchecked, it may only be a matter of time before negative public opinions leads to more worrying attacks on Muslims.

The only institution for recourse – the Press Complaints Commission – has failed to address these, and indeed many other issues. It seems high time that a new body which is fully independent and has powers of sanction be put in place to ensure that the public has confidence in our media.

Journalistic Integrity in General

The details which have emerged about journalistic reporting since the Leveson enquiry commenced have brought under question the integrity of some reporters who have failed to deliver news in a responsible way while not impinging upon civil liberties and maintaining a robust and balanced critique of issues. The phone hacking scandal was centred upon certain individuals in the media taking advantage of technological advancements to extract information from British citizens illegally.

In shaping the future of this profession, it is imperative that guidelines are imposed which ensure that people's privacies are maintained and that journalists face rigorous accountability in the case of substantiated complaints. This must begin with a restructuring of the training of journalists, so that a code of ethics is imposed which must be adhered to. Ideally, this code would encourage traditional methods of information gathering which relies primarily on a system of developing and cultivating relationships with individuals in society via transparent and balanced dialogue. By reverting to these traditional methods of acquiring and cultivating contacts, journalists will be able to deliver news without having to resort to measures that infringe civil liberties.

The phone hacking scandal is arguably the culmination of many years of an unsavoury culture in sections of the media where the pressure to deliver exclusive and often, sensationalist headlines is both brutal and intense. At every level of the media hierarchy, pressure is filtered down to ensure that sales are increased in the face of increased and fierce competition by giving the public exclusive news first. Unfortunately this desire to acquire sensational news has resulted in methods of 'by any means necessary' developing. This relentless pursuit may be a reason why those engaged in the phone hacking scandal chose to continue their actions and it may be reasonably argued that had the pressure not been so overwhelming and had management emphasised more traditional methods of investigative journalism, then this wholly unsavoury culture may not have developed.

Management in the media, undoubtedly, had a massive part to play in the development of this culture. Therefore, it is of overwhelming, absolute and fundamental importance that management adopts a course of action that enables ethical reporting. The only way to do this is by effective editorial scrutiny through the implementation of a system of checks and balances which scrutinises the sources used to compile news reports to ensure that the research methods employed are in no way infringing on civil liberties. Such an implementation of checks and balances must be thorough and consistent, as to enable the embedding of journalistic integrity across the board in the media sector. In the first instance, a system of auditing may be necessary in order to ensure that all stories are sources in an ethical way.

In relation to the Muslim community, some of the reporting of the faith of Islam has had many consequences. Several reports have proved that when matters Islamic or Muslim is reported, nearly always they are negative stories which offer a single line of balance, if any. We are extremely concerned that the media is often the sole source of information for many sections of society. Yet a continuous and sustained barrage of headlines we believe incites people to act in a discriminatory or criminal way. Examples include the bus driver who allegedly told his passengers to leave the bus whilst he observed his prayers or even the schoolchildren who were forced to eat Halal food. Both incidents have much deeper narratives but the simplistic way in which these stories are reported has played into the hands of those who want to divide our nation. I am fully of the opinion that the Press Complaints Commission has had its day. Instead a new body which is fully independent and has powers of sanction be put in place to ensure that the public has confidence in our media.

Contributing to the Leveson Inquiry

Thus far, the Leveson Inquiry has provided a forum for recourse for celebrity figures that have had their privacy invaded in untenable ways. Highly reported cases such as the disappearance and murder Milly Dowler have also attracted necessary attention. However, a major issue of reporting on Britain's Muslim communities has been overlooked.

In order for this to be adequately explored, it is imperative that those who work within the community and have access to the opinions and stories which count, are able to contribute to the Inquiry. If this is not possible, then I would be obliged if you could reference this submission in your final report. As an individual who has previous experience of providing evidence on matters of public concern, most notably in 2010 for the House of Commons Select Committee on the Preventing Violent Extremism agenda, I am fully aware of the importance of engaging in this process.

I wish you well in what is an extremely difficult challenge and I also look forward to hearing from you soon.

Suleman Nagdi MBE DL



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Steps before publication

1. If you are happy for the Inquiry to publish your submission please add and sign the following statement of truth to the end of your submission/statement:

Statement of Truth

I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed

Date ... 27/Jan/2012

Please be aware that by signing the statement of truth you are confirming that you agree that the contents of the submission/statement are true. Please take extra time to ensure that you are completely happy with your submission/statement before you sign it.

If you have provided a submission/statement in your private capacity you should state your full name in the submission/statement but should provide in a separate document personal details (e.g. address, contact address, mobile telephone number and e-mail address), which will not be published.

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If you have provided the submission/statement on behalf of an organisation, please state this clearly in the first line of the submission/statement.

2. Your signed submission/statement, in its entirety, should be returned to us by email.
3. Returning your signed submission/statement will confirm that you are content for the Inquiry to publish it on its website in the form you have provided. If this is not the case and you have any concerns or wish for certain sections to be withheld please make this clear in any response.
4. Your signed submission, once received, will initially be provided to those groups who have been designated as Core Participants to the Inquiry (a full list is available on our website: www.levesoninquiry.org.uk).
5. If the Core Participants do not raise any matters your statement will then be referred to in open session and at that point it will be published, along with your name, on the Inquiry's website.

The Inquiry intends to begin publishing submissions/statements on the website shortly and would therefore be grateful for your response by return.