EVENT NOTE
By Saanya Gulati

#LSEImpress: Walter Merricks on the Future of Press Regulation in the UK
Wednesday 20 January 2016

Following the [public lecture](#) given by the Chair of Impress, Walter Merricks, at LSE in January 2016, [Saanya Gulati](#), an MSc Politics and Communications student in the Department of Media and Communications, reflects on the speech, and summarises her take on the event.

On 20 January 2016, the LSE Media Policy Project hosted a lecture by the Chairman of the [IMPRESS Project](#), Walter Merricks, on the future of press regulation in the UK. The IMPRESS Project was born out of the wider policy debate on press regulation initiated by the Leveson Inquiry, following the watershed phone hacking scandal that led to the closure of the *News of the World*. That the debate about how the UK press ought to be regulated still remains pertinent speaks to the complexity of the issue, while the rapidly changing landscape of journalism itself poses further challenges to questions of regulation. It was against this backdrop that the evening's lecture and the subsequent Q&A session took place.

IMPRESS is setting itself up as an alternative press regulator to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) currently in existence, and in the lecture, revealed the names of 13 (mostly hyperlocal) publishers which have signed up to be members. Merricks also explained that Impress had applied for recognition by the [Press Recognition Panel](#).

Dr. Seeta Peña Gangadharan, Acting Director of the LSE Media Policy Project and Chair of the event, kicked off the Q&A session by asking Walter Merricks to think retrospectively about the role of IMPRESS Project. 50 years from now, what will the annals of history have to say about the IMPRESS Project and how will the organisation shape of the history of press regulation in the UK? Walter Merricks responded that forecasting the next 3-4 years is difficult enough, let alone the next five decades. On a more serious note, he expressed optimism about the approach towards accountable self-regulation that IMPRESS is adopting and asserted his belief that this model is the right one for at least the next 20 years.

Recurrent themes in the audience's questions pertained to the IMPRESS Project's funding, its decision to develop a new code of conduct for regulating publishers, and the overall credibility of IMPRESS given that no major UK newspaper or magazine publisher has opted to sign up to membership. One audience member asked about IMPRESS's revenue model, considering its relatively low membership fees of £50 per publisher, per annum. Walter Merricks acknowledged that although IMPRESS has decided to keep its membership fee nominal, it has plans to increase its fees over the next 6 months to a year in order to reduce the organisation's dependence on grant funding.

Another aspect that Walter Merricks reiterated with regards to funding was that of maintaining a buffer between IMPRESS and its funders. Although the project initially received funds directly from donors including JK Rowling and Max Mosley, this model has been restructured to route funds through the Independent Press Regulation Trust.

There were reasonable reservations about whether IMPRESS needs to develop a new code of conduct to serve as the basis for its complaint-handling work, considering that several editorial codes already exist. Dr. Damian Tambini from LSE's Media Department pointed out that the underlying reason for a code is to clarify and unify a set of standards that can be understood by the public. By this definition, he argued, a proliferation of codes may undermine the process of consensus building among the public. One audience member voiced similar concerns, and suggested that IMPRESS could consider adopting the code used by the National Union of Journalists.

Walter Merricks maintained that the changing landscape of journalism has created suitable conditions for a new code. He pointed to existing loopholes in the Editors' Code of Practice that is used by IPSO. Merricks emphasised that the process of creating a new code will be a collaborative effort, and that IMPRESS will be embarking on a public consultation to ensure that its members' interests are represented and that the public can have a say.

The audience took different approaches to addressing the challenge of establishing credibility for IMPRESS. The possibility of developing a kitemark was debated. While Walter Merricks remained optimistic about the possibility of establishing a kitemark for IMPRESS-recognised publishers to distinguish themselves from non IMPRESS-recognised publishers, he supported the idea of basing this decision on whether members ultimately derived value from this feature. Some audience members disputed the merits of this idea.

Administrative challenges such as the threat of being overloaded with complaints (as Ombudsman and complaint-handling services in other sectors can face) was another concern raised by the audience, and the associated risk to IMPRESS' credibility. According to Merricks, two factors could mitigate this risk: firstly, its plans to grow at a moderate pace; and secondly, the fact that its current membership comprises hyper-locals and smaller publishers, which for now means its workload is manageable.

Related to this, however, was the overarching concern that if IMPRESS only continues to represent small, online-only publishers, can the organisation establish legitimacy? In the context of Dr. Gangadharan's initial question, would this affect the ability of IMPRESS to be seen as a game-changer in the history of the UK press? The debate may be too complex to conclude in the course of an evening, but as the speaker points out, maybe it has already gone on for long enough. At this stage it is imperative to bring alive the Charter framework envisaged in the Leveson Report, and IMPRESS could be a step closer in that direction.

This note gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.