

The Leveson Inquiry

Witness Statement for Part 1, Module 1

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Witness statement of Charlotte Maria Church

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I, Charlotte Church, c/o Collyer Bristow LLP, 4 Bedford Row, London, WC1R 4DF will say as follows:

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1. I make this statement in connection with my role as a Core Participant in the Leveson Inquiry.
2. For the purposes of this statement, I refer to a small paginated bundle of documents marked "CC1" and "CC2". Where I refer to page numbers in this statement, I am referring to pages in "CC1" and "CC2".

**Background**

3. My name is Charlotte Maria Church. For the majority of my life I have featured in the tabloid industry in the UK. I started my professional life as a singer when I was an 11 year old girl. Through numerous TV and radio appearances, I became an internationally recognised musical success, going from a typical schoolgirl to a bankable commodity in less than a year. Marketed by an aggressive record company campaign I was branded "The Voice of an Angel" before my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. Little did I know as a 12 year old that this description would be used and distorted repeatedly to mock me in catchy tabloid headlines.
4. Since then, I have been under the media's scrutiny. Through my success as a singer, I grew up in front of cameras and reporters, and I was not allowed the time to learn and make mistakes in private as most children and teenagers do. Whilst I have been determined to not let the media change me, the coverage has been utterly horrifying at times and devastating to those around me.

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5. It will be easy to portray the fact that I am giving evidence to this Inquiry as me being a whingeing celebrity. I hope I can show that this is not the case and that the severity of the misconduct speaks for itself. I am well aware that there are many journalists who do not participate in unethical practices. I don't wish to sully their names. It should also be noted that I have always been extremely reluctant to engage media lawyers to take action. There are countless times I could have sued, but I did not. I have always thought that there was little point in fighting the press as it would only make matters worse, and the vast sums that can be incurred in these cases would be a waste of money. In any event, once in print the damage is already done. However, my position has changed since I have become a mother and I have been faced with the prospect that my children will grow up to read some of the false coverage of me. Their mother is portrayed as someone who is not me but a caricature of me: the girl with the "voice of an angel" that turned into a "fallen angel". Perhaps I am a little cynical, but since the age of 13 I have thought that the media were trying to apply the stereotypical narrative of "the child star who goes off the rails" to me, willing me to fulfil that narrative in the worst way. The reality is far more mundane and whilst I don't want to pretend to be something I am not, the fact is that my behaviour has followed a reasonably typical pattern for a teenage girl and then a young woman who would occasionally go out with her friends and enjoy herself. I am not and never have been the "promiscuous ladette" that I have been portrayed as but it is so easy for the tabloids to show the world what they want you to see rather than the real person.
6. It is often argued that as someone in the public eye, I need the media and that the intrusions into my private life and the negative coverage are, and have always been, a fair trade-off for success; that I need the press just as much as they need me. However, I cannot see how this is actually the case. As a singer, a newspaper, in particular, is a very bad medium for promoting my work. I know from record sales figures that newspapers have never helped me sell any significant number of records but I have interacted with the media on a number of occasions, as is required of any signed

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recording artist. I have on occasion also participated in photo shoots for which sums of money were paid to me and my partner at the time for doing so. I can say that I was a reluctant participant in this process but in any event I do not think that by agreeing to such things I have sacrificed my right to privacy or the privacy of my family.

7. When I was 13 I was asked to perform at Rupert Murdoch's wedding in New York. When it came to the payment for my work, my management at the time informed me that either there would be a £100,000 fee (which was the biggest fee I'd ever been offered) or if the fee for my performance was waived, I would be looked upon favourably by Mr. Murdoch's papers. Despite my teenage business head screaming "think how many tamogotchies you could buy!!", I was pressured into taking the latter option. This strategy failed... for me. In fact Mr Murdoch's newspapers have since been some of the worst offenders, so much so that I have sometimes felt that there has actually been a deliberate agenda. While newspapers such as Mr Murdoch's have not helped my career, they have certainly helped damage it, as I will explain below. I do of course accept that TV and Radio have been very significant contributors to my success and I have little complaint at the conduct of those media organisations or the people they employ.
8. I can summarise my motivation for giving this statement as follows:
  - I want to help the Inquiry by providing an account of some of the coverage related to me, my friends and my family as examples of press coverage and behaviour.
  - Having been a "child star" I hope that my example will serve to raise awareness to the need to protect young people and children who find themselves in the public eye because they have achieved success which the public recognises.
  - I want to protect my family's privacy for the future.
9. At the time no-one involved could have imagined that my family and I would be subject to a tabloid press industry that would use blackmail, illegal phone call interception, 24/7 surveillance and

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tracking, car chases, door stepping and blagging. All to report on a young girl singer.

10. Newspapers have justified various stories they have written about me as being in "the public interest". I find this argument absurd. How does it support the public interest if the tabloids simply focus on prurient stories, much of which are fabricated using quotes from anonymous sources, often named as "a pal" or "a close friend". It would be easy to laugh off some of these quotes and anecdotes as ridiculous and harmless if the falsities weren't reprinted by a whole bevy of other tabloids and weekly gossip magazines and quoted as being reported to be true, thus magnifying and lending credibility to the lie and the character that it creates. But it is not easy. And creates real personal problems and affects my ability to provide for my family.
11. I have attached to this statement some articles as examples but they are only a minute selection from the enormous number that have been published.
12. The effect of publication in a newspaper is further widened by endless online sites, blogs and social media. The lie becomes public 'fact' and in the age of the internet, it remains available for all to see using a simple Google search from anywhere in the world. It also remains archived for decades to come, for other writers to add to and comment upon and for family, friends and audiences to see and believe to be true.
13. As I have explained, I have rarely taken legal action against newspapers and have generally been advised against it for fear of upsetting the powerful media organisations. I am also concerned that there may be serious repercussions in giving evidence to the Inquiry but I strongly feel that I have to speak out about the injustice and bad practices that happen on a daily basis within the tabloid press.
14. Just a few days ago a defamatory and completely untrue article was published about me which I feel cannot go unmentioned. The People published a story about me drunkenly proposing to my partner whilst singing karaoke. It was a complete fabrication. It

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included a photo of me singing (which was in fact taken in 2007) and "quotes" from both me and my partner which were entirely made up. I was not in the pub mentioned (or any pub) on the night it was alleged this happened. At the time that I was alleged to be "proposing" I was in fact performing in a completely different town with a large public audience. My manager checked and there was not even karaoke at the pub I was supposed to have been at. It is yet another example of the tabloid press inventing a story to fit with the 'character' they seem to have given me. Within 36 hours of the reporting of this tale, it was picked up by 70 outlets around the world and presented as fact. It is upsetting to be constantly portrayed in this way. It is not who I am and the cumulative effect of the reporting is damaging to my reputation and my career. To me, it is simply unacceptable for a journalist to pluck a story out of thin air and for a newspaper to print something containing not one shred of truth. It is perhaps ironic that when the tale was first published I was working on this statement. The article is a perfect example of why the industry needs to change.

15. This is especially true given that there is a limit to how much an individual can commit financially to taking on these powerful media organisations. In my experience, getting a media solicitor to attempt to prevent an article from being published or retracted usually costs between £5,000 - £10,000. If the request is resisted, or you pursue a defamation claim the costs will escalate quickly to 10 or 20 times this figure. And with press defamation laws as they are you generally don't even recover all of your costs if you are successful. Often I am not given an opportunity to address a story before it is published. It gets printed and even if you can get the paper to take it off its website, any correction is buried in the small print somewhere deep in the publication after the information has been disseminated all over the internet. The damage is already done. The huge public headline that everyone read is never corrected with a similarly sized and positioned retraction or with an equally catchy headline demonstrating how they were wrong.
16. In addition to the viral internet dissemination, these stories remain in physical print archived without correction and are immediately picked up by other newspapers, weekly magazines, radio, and TV.

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All this incurs additional legal costs and management time. It's an immense drain of resources and emotional energy trying to tackle these problems and simply can't be done in every case.

17. I feel very strongly that there should be a system whereby these issues should be addressed without the immense cost burden placed upon the individual. The newspaper should be held accountable for the damage they cause and be responsible for the task of repairing it.
18. Unfavourable coverage has undoubtedly damaged my career. TV appearances dry up because of "public perception" problems following negative coverage. Sponsorship deals which were in motion evaporate.
19. Above all, what has hit hardest is the effect that the tabloid press has had on me, my family and friendships. The loss of trust because of leaked stories (some of which I now know to have derived from phone hacking) has had a massive effect upon my life and the lives of those who have become collateral damage because of their relationship with me.

**Some selected examples of the coverage:**

20. One of the most professionally damaging articles published about me was published not by a tabloid but by the Times. The article concerned the 9/11 terrorist atrocity. I was 14 at the time and spending a great deal of time in New York City. Although I was only a young girl, like everyone, I was horrified and shaken by the events that occurred that day and felt so much sorrow for the families that had lost someone. My current manager, John Vernile, is a New Yorker and at the time he worked with me for the US record company. He knows the extent to which my experience of being in New York during the attacks deeply affected me and how keen I was to contribute to the local New York 9/11 benefit concerts and commemorations, which I did. I also visited ground-zero and several of the fire stations.
21. On my return from New York, my UK record company arranged for me to be interviewed by the Times. The journalist was Jasper

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Gerrard. Whilst it was usual for a record company adviser to attend these interviews with journalists, especially given my age, for some reason (possibly that they did not expect any hostility) there was no representative at this meeting. A central topic of his questioning turned to 9/11 and, notwithstanding my age, I answered Mr Gerrard's questions thoughtfully given my recent experiences. My answers were grotesquely distorted into a piece that portrayed me as being horribly insensitive to the tragedy and generally made me seem quite devoid of feelings or morals. The criticism I received remains on the internet, including my Wikipedia page.

22. I was furious when I saw the article. My answers and true feelings had not been fairly or accurately reported. One of the most denigrating claims was the comment I supposedly made about the celebrity of some of the 9/11 fire fighters. The comment I had actually made was not disparaging of them; it was the reverse. I recall referring to their appearance at the British Television Awards and explaining that I thought that it was in bad taste for the television producers to demean the fire fighters' heroism by making them present the award for "Best Soap". However, this was dressed up as me believing that these men did not deserve their recognition, and that they had only been doing their job. I understand that a request was made for the tape of the interview but the Times refused to release it. In any event, I was only 14 years old, and to be exposed by a newspaper of this type to ridicule and derision upon such a sensitive subject was a terrible experience. In particular the content of the article was then repeated in the New York Post, also owned by News Corp, describing my comments as the "voice of an angel" "spews venom". This provoked an enormous backlash against me in America. When I was touring America following this story, public reaction was such that the US record company found it necessary to hire armed, off-duty New York police detectives to protect me. The story also had a dramatic impact upon my record sales in the USA and my desire to continue my career there.
23. This is just one example of the treatment I was to receive as a young girl and the effect it had on me. As I went through my teens the tabloids increased their interest in me and whether it was

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smoking, going out, or putting on weight, their scrutiny was intense. One particularly distasteful feature was on The Sun website which featured a countdown clock to me turning 16, carrying with it sexually charged and predatory innuendo of a young girl passing the age of consent.

24. From the ages of 16 to 20 I had to endure the worst excesses of the press. I had at times photographers stationed 24/7 by my door. On one occasion my manager found that a reporter had cut holes in a shrub on my property and installed a secret camera near to the entrance to my home so as to track and document my movements. I've been repeatedly chased in my car and had photographers force open doors to try and photograph me. When attending public events I had to suffer the indignity of paparazzi trying to take photographs up my skirt and down my top. Photographs of my homes were printed so that the security of my family was compromised. On one occasion, a threat to kidnap me, was published in The News Of The World and despite my pleading with the publication, where I lived was revealed. It created fear in my family, a paranoia that the media then sought to highlight and publicise. If I'm honest, I generally felt quite hunted for that period of my life.

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25. When I became pregnant with my first child the Sun printed an article "Church 'Sober Shock'" headed as an "Exclusive". The article reported that I was not drinking or smoking and had "put on a bit of weight" and that this had caused "rumours that she is pregnant". At the time of the article I was in my first trimester, the most sensitive time in a pregnancy, and even my parents didn't know I was pregnant. (The source, never cited, was probably a hacked voice mail message from my doctor or via other surveillance). Surely it is the right of any woman to be able to tell her family herself that she is pregnant at a time that she deems appropriate. A complaint was made to the Press Complaints Commission which was upheld, but given that the article had already been published and the information had already been disclosed, it was no help whatsoever. The small correction that followed was hardly likely to deter another newspaper from doing the same thing to someone else.

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26. Whilst the coverage about me could be hurtful, it has been the coverage about my parents that has been particularly painful to deal with. The events I am about to describe include: blackmail, bribery, phone interception, innuendo and most importantly, the invasion of the privacy of private, non-public people. To my mind it reveals the tabloids at their very worst. On 11 December 2005 the News of the World reported that my father was having an affair. The article contained a prurient and detailed interview with Anna Goddard, with whom my father had had an affair. The front page headline read, "Church's 3-in-a-bed Cocaine shock" with my picture beside it. The first line of the article was "Superstar Charlotte Church's Mum tried to kill herself because her husband is a love-rat hooked on cocaine and three-in-a-bed orgies." Obviously this exposé was devastating for my family and particularly for my mother Maria. Whether this story was entirely or partially true, I cannot think of any justification for it. My mother is a vulnerable person and shortly before the publication of this story she had been admitted to hospital after an attempted suicide. At the very least this was in part due to the fact that she was aware that this story was coming out. Newspapers often try to justify such stories by saying that families have a right to know about the facts. The story about my father is an acute example of the falsity of this argument – the tabloids could not care less for the families. In fact, the only so-called justification for such stories is the newspaper's desire to sell more copies of their paper. It is one thing for my parents to be able to deal with such a problem between themselves, as ordinary people have to do; it is entirely different and far more damaging when the world at large knows everything about it.

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27. In this case, the News of the World was well aware of my mother's vulnerable state because on 27 November 2005 before the expose on 11 December 2005 they reported upon (what we now think were) illicitly obtained private details of her hospital treatment. Then, not content with their coverage on 11 December, the News of the World put a proposal to my mother. The proposal was that News of the World wanted an exclusive story of her breakdown, self-harming, and attempted suicide, in exchange for **not** printing a follow-up story about my father's infidelity. My mother gave them the exclusive

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interview which was published on 18 December 2005. She felt she had no choice other than to play by their rules. The follow-up story of my father's sex-life was then published in The People the next week anyway. This sequence of events drove my mother to additional self-harming and had a dramatic impact on her mental health. The havoc that the press have created within my family has been devastating. Whilst I have learnt to cope, to some extent, with the scrutiny of being in the public eye, they have not and it is unforgivable that they have been deemed appropriate targets for such intrusive scrutiny. They should be allowed to live their private lives as they see fit and without media intrusion.

28. It has recently been revealed to me that the police have substantial information demonstrating that my phone messages and those close to me were intercepted and monitored by Glenn Mulcaire who I understand was contracted to the News of the World. The information I have seen relates to 2003, 2005 and 2006 and contains many pages of names, numbers, notes, addresses, pin numbers and the fact that my mother and I were each a "project", which I take to mean that we were specifically targeted. The earliest of the information reveals that I was hacked when I was just 17. It is clear that we were targeted in particular during the period in which the stories concerning my father's affair and my mother's illness were published. It is utterly sickening to read the information and to know that the police have been sitting on this for five years. How can someone have thought it right to listen to private messages at a time like this – or indeed at any time? I have often felt that information about me was being leaked to the press and have shunned friends suspecting them of being the source. I recently had a discussion with someone I was very close to who told me how upset she was that I had cut her out from my circle of friends, but I felt at the time that I had no choice but to reduce the number of people I spent time with and as such limit the risk of further leaks to the press. I have seen articles that have made me very suspicious about where they had come from.

29. The meeting with Operation Weeting is not the only experience I have of being contacted by Scotland Yard in relation to a private detective. When I was 19, I was contacted by the police in relation

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to Operation Motorman. I am aware that this was the investigation into the private detective Steve Whittamore who was employed by a very large number of newspapers to obtain personal data. In the meeting I was shown an enormous book which included transcripts of telephone calls as well as addresses, car registration details, and information from criminal records. There was a huge amount of information, and I am not sure what became of it. I hope that this Inquiry will help find out what happened to this material and that those responsible for commissioning it can be held to account.

30. Both the phone hacking and Operation Motorman material also contained information about previous boyfriends of mine. Like most women I have had relationships that have not worked out. Although my relationships have been characterised in a way that make me seem promiscuous, at the age of almost 26, I have in fact only ever had four boyfriends in my life. Sadly I have been unable to experience the highs and lows of relationships without unwanted attention and, it seems, illegal surveillance. Such was the coverage I was made to feel like a criminal simply because I had a boyfriend when I was 16. Two of my former boyfriends have sold their stories at the end of our relationship. I understand that one was paid £100,000 for his account of our private relationship and sex life. This is obviously a huge amount of money, particularly for an unemployed teenager from Cardiff. It is wrong for newspapers to offer money and tempt people to reveal private information and intimate aspects of your relationships. The accounts are embellished and exaggerated to make it all the more sensational. It is acutely embarrassing for me and for those around me to read. In particular I feel for my grandmother who has to deal with the ignominy of her granddaughter's reported antics being read by the whole community. People believe that if it's in the papers, it must be true, that they could not print if it wasn't. And that is the crux of the problem. There is an assumption by the public that a mechanism is in place and a set of proper standards of reporting are adhered to but sadly this is not the case.

31. As I have explained, my circle of friends diminished at a time as I was concerned about the leaking of information. My friends have also had to endure the publicity that is often around us when we see

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each other. One example of the coverage is when I went on holiday in June 2004 with five of my friends, to celebrate my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. The Daily Mail's double page spread read "Vice of an Angel" and set out a detailed, disparaging and distorted account of our movements and behaviour. It stated that one of my friends was given a nickname by us, a pun on her name that cruelly made fun of her weight. I have never referred to my friend in this way nor have I ever heard anyone else refer to her using that name. The journalist simply decided it was ok to make fun of a 17 year old girl. It was deeply embarrassing for her to be portrayed in this way by a national newspaper particularly given that until then she was not in the public eye at all. It should not be a condition for friends of mine to have to endure this brand of cruelty.

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32. A benefit of being well known is the ability to help charitable causes.

In my time I have worked with a number of charities such as The Noah's Ark Appeal, NSPCC, Children in Need, Topsy and the Hollies School and I have been happy for these charities to try and use my support to draw attention to the work they are doing. It has been frustrating to find that when I do engage with the media in relation to a charity, the journalists are rarely interested in the important work they do and would rather focus on me and my private life.

33. Just as a very recent example; I was asked to participate in an event by Literature Wales to encourage young people in Wales to read and enjoy good books. The motive behind the scheme was to help reverse the trend of falling literacy rates among the young people of Britain. I gave several interviews and spoke about my own love of reading. I agreed to these interviews under the proviso that I was only answering questions related to that topic. The majority of the resulting tabloid press coverage and use of photographs taken that day, focused on a matter that did not relate to it. For example the Daily Mail used the event and pictures to publish an article including fabricated quote from a close "friend," (whose identity is a mystery to me) commenting on my relationship with my former partner, which was then picked up by other tabloids. The whole focus of the event and the important goal of Literature Wales was relegated to the very end of the Daily Mail article and the

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other publications entirely ignored the Literature Waives event and just regurgitated the misinformation. No facts checked; no sources cited.

**Conclusion**

- 34. We have all heard the recent tabloid claims that they have changed and have learned from mistakes such as phone hacking and other use of private detectives. But my recent experiences make it clear to me that these newspapers will not change unless they are forced to do so by proper regulation which contains effective protection for privacy rights and serious financial and legal sanctions for wrongdoing.
- 35. The free press is a fundamental and vital part of our society. Its role is crucial to our daily lives. I hope that this inquiry can find the balance between protecting the freedom of speech that journalists need to do their jobs whilst protecting the human rights of individuals.
- 36. My particular hope is that we can protect our children and young people from the vicious, unhealthy and damaging practices of a tabloid industry that hides behind the essential principle of free speech. To sanction lies and stories that are so beyond what falls within the true public interest makes a mockery of the principle.
- 37. I feel extremely strongly, having experienced what I have, that children, and their families --that people -- need to be protected from the exploitative, unethical, and financially driven practices of the soul-less corporations who control the tabloid industry.

**Statement of Truth**

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

DATED the 10<sup>th</sup> day of November 2011

SIGNED

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