

LEVESON INQUIRY SUBMISSION
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MERCURY PRESS AND MEDIA LIVERPOOL

Company Profile

Mercury Press is based in Liverpool, and employs a team of six reporters and photographers working mainly for national newspapers, but also supplying web sites and broadcast media.

Staff are paid wages and the source of fees comes from material published, negotiated fees for exclusive stories or pictures and for work that is done for clients on an ordered or commissioned basis.

Current staffing levels are well below their peak which was reached in the 1980s a 1990s. Factors included a reduced demand for “provincial news and pictures” and the reduced value of the fees, in real terms, paid by clients. Rates have seen little uplift in the last two decades and the actual rate has been reduced in some cases.

Role of the Freelance Journalist in the UK

UK newspapers have, for almost a century, benefited from the services of a network of independent press agencies in towns and cities across the land.

This was unlike other European countries or the USA. I think it is probably due largely to the extent of the railway and the size of the UK.

It gave publishers the ability to distribute papers nationwide in a matter of hours.

Newspapers wanted to carry news, sport and pictures from all over the UK. Many titles were heavily editorialised with Manchester a major printing centre. Northern editions were virtually separate newspapers and northern agencies had a close working relationship with the Manchester office staffs, just as southern

agencies had a rapport with London desks.

In the USA and Europe there were few, if any national daily newspapers. Instead dailies were regionally based: e.g The "Washington Post", the "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung".

This national circulation and the emergence of tabloid newspapers had made the UK newspaper market particularly competitive, and UK journalists believe has made UK newspapers the best in the world.

By the same token agencies are highly competitive – competing against staff writers and photographers and against each other for column inches.

Eddie Shah (of Today Newspaper fame) once asked at a NAPA conference for a map of the UK freelances with their "patches". The NAPA President Denis Cassidy coined the phrase "NAPA members are preditorial not territorial". That is the reality and has remained our byword.

How Mercury Press is organised

We operate like a typical newspaper or TV station newsroom. We have a news editor and reporters, a picture editor and photographers. These days – a relatively recent development – we have a number of "stringers" who are self-employed but who work for us on an ad hoc basis, either submitting material through us or on order from us.

We also have a newsroom manager to handle ancillary matters like accounts etc.

We are very flexible. Jobs we have done range from from collecting dog mess in Sefton Park for the Sunday Times to quizzing a Government minister on behalf of the The Daily Star.

I am the Editor, but if there was no-one else available it might be

me doing the likes of collecting dog muck or interviewing politicians.
News agency reporters/photographers.

Flexibility and passion for the job are essential for agency staff and “Fleet Street” is populated with journalists who spent some of their early career in an agency.

Traditionally agency work is not just a job... it is a way of life. We are on the alert for stories 24 hours a day, in that we can be woken at any hour for an urgent newsbreak.

We are always thinking and always looking for a story or picture... and the bigger the subject the better. One of my “claims to fame” is that I was the first journalist on the scene when the 1981 Toxteth Riots broke out.

We need to be highly flexible since we also work for TV and radio and the internet. So these days it is not unusual for our staff to be expected to do a video report as well as one in the written word and also to take photos.

The same goes for photographers, since the best exponents of the art can also get some quotes write a story when the need arises.

I always stress to new recruits that they must develop a “News Sense” so that they can recognise what is news and what is not. That sounds easy but in fact many find it hard.

Our of news are manifold. It may be from calls to the emergency services, press releases, weekly or evening newspapers, or national newspapers, radio or TV programmes, the internet, leads from sources, ring-ins or emails, courts, inquests, employment tribunals etc.

Speed and accuracy are vital and we need the ability to present the copy in a “page ready” format when possible – this is particularly true since the advent of the internet.

Agencies and their relationships with newspapers

Traditionally agencies were treated in a rather “paternalistic” way by newsdesk staff.

If there was an allegation of libel for example, there was never any suggestion that the agency would be enjoined and expected to pay damages. Providing it was an “innocent mistake” and there was an absence of malice, the newspapers would take responsibility and would protect the agency.

This was right. An all round story will pay between £25 and £150 (only more if it is the splash). How then can agencies be expected to indemnify a publisher? Yet it has started to happen.

This is particularly hard for agencies to take since much of our work is done on a “self-billing basis”.

We submit a story and publishers decide what they will pay for the material. This is also true for ordered or commissioned work – publishers decide the rate for the job and recently many have sought to incorporate millage and expenses into the global fee.

In the past NAPA has sought to engage with publishers to persuade them to increase their “rate cards” to take account of greater overheads.

This was beneficial and of course agencies who can afford to pay fair wages can attract excellent staff.

Sadly the self-billing system and near monopoly of the few publishers mean that fees have been kept artificially low.

Attempts to increase these fees have been resisted by most national newspapers and many agencies – including Mercury Press - now find themselves able to pay only the National Minimum Wage to junior staff.

Agencies have always been and remain the “leg men/women” who supply copy to national newspaper, often to be worked upon by staff writers.

However, de-manning in newsrooms and the advent of electronic communication means that agencies are now often writing “page ready” stories that may be filed and published on the internet within minutes.

This puts a tremendous fresh onus on agencies to be aware of the dangers of defamation and contempt etc. despite the fact that we are not paid any more for the work – in fact we get less in real terms and sometimes less in actual fees.

I think it is important to understand the working practices and ethics of freelance journalists, the pressures upon them and the reduced viability of many agency operations.

Today we see “fast publication” on the web, but this puts increased pressure on agencies to file quickly, in competition for example with Press Association or the syndication department of a local newspapers like the Liverpool Echo.

However, payments for internet use are much LOWER than on the printed page – despite the fact that stories go to a much wider audience and may be read by millions more people in numerous domains.

The Future and Regulation

Looking to the future and regulation it is important to note that Mercury Press and other members of NAPA observe the NAPA Code of Conduct, which embodies the PCC Code.

Many of the paparazzi and celebrity reporters are not trained. Some are “evening and weekend warriors” who live or die on the level of impact of the material that they gather.

Like other NAPA members we deprecate the changes in communication and newspaper practices that have led to significant “de-professionalisation” of the industry.

Ends