

THE LEVESON INQUIRY INTO THE CULTURE, PRACTICES
AND ETHICS OF THE PRESS

WITNESS STATEMENT OF PAUL PEACHEY

I, PAUL PEACHEY of Independent Print Limited, 2 Derry Street, London W8 5HF, WILL SAY:

1. I have been the crime correspondent of The Independent since November 2011. I held the same post at the Press Association from January 1999 to April 2000. I have been a journalist since 1994. In Britain I have been a member of staff at a regional newspaper (The Worcester Evening News), for domestic news wires (UK News, the Press Association) and as an editor for an international news agency (The Associated Press). I also worked in Asia in a variety of roles for Agence-France Presse, another international news agency. I have worked as a researcher/assistant producer for two television documentaries and as a producer for two radio documentaries. I am currently on my second stint at the Independent, having worked as a general reporter and as assistant foreign editor.

2. Based on the short period that I have worked as a crime reporter, I take the view, which I believe is generally shared by colleagues, that a good working relationship between police and media can be mutually beneficial. However, while relations are often good on an individual basis there is a view among some of my fellow crime correspondents that a lack of openness on the part of some forces has led to a worsening of the relationship overall in recent times. I do not believe that a fractious relationship benefits the police, the media or the justice system as a whole.

3. My contacts have been limited to the short periods I have worked as a crime reporter. They have included contact with both press officers and police officers. The nature of the meetings would include press conferences and briefings at Scotland Yard, discussions at crime scenes and outside court hearings, informal meetings and Crime Reporters Association briefings/receptions. At formal meetings, discussion is generally around specific, ongoing cases with which the police are dealing.

4.
a) In 1999/2000, I interviewed the Commissioner at New Scotland Yard. (I do not recall the interview but know it took place because it is recorded in the Commissioner's published diary.) Otherwise, I have attended regular briefings with other crime reporters and occasional press conferences. Since 2011, I have had brief communications with the Commissioner during organised briefings at New Scotland

Yard, and at an event held by the Crime Reporters' Association. I have not had one-to-one meetings.

b) The Deputy Commissioner has been recently appointed. I spoke with the Acting Deputy on several occasions in December 2011 either at briefings at New Scotland Yard or outside court during a high profile trial. All conversations were on the record and related to ongoing cases. I cannot recall the extent of my conversations in 1999/2000.

c) I have had a couple of conversations with Assistant Commissioners during background briefings and at a Met Police-organised media event. Conversations related to particular cases or security issues. I cannot recall the extent of my conversations in 1999/2000.

d) I have not had any substantive contact with DACs since taking on my current position. I cannot recall the extent of any conversations in 1999/2000.

e) I have not spoken to the Head of Public Affairs since starting the crime correspondent job at The Independent, owing to him being on leave while under investigation over links to a former News International Executive. I have spoken to the Acting Head of Public Affairs but have not had one-to-one conversations of substance. In 1999/2000, I met the Head of Public Affairs at meetings and briefings and had conversations by telephone about particular cases.

Most contacts are at briefings, where it might be said there is no initiating party as such. Contacts outside court hearings, for instance, have been initiated by me.

5. I have had phone and home numbers for the Head of Public Affairs and some DACs and ACs – but all those numbers have been provided by the individuals in question as standard contact numbers, usually on business cards. It would not be possible for either side to do their jobs without having such contact details.

6. In general terms, I have had contact with the police as part of my journalistic aim to hold them to account for their actions and to seek information on crime stories of public interest.

7. Speaking from my relatively limited experience I think there is no doubt that the Met's intention in its contacts with me – as with other reporters – has been to seek to control the information available to the press, to publicise police successes and to mitigate the reputational damage of critical stories. In short, it wishes to encourage positive media portrayals of the police and its work. My job, as the Met knows, is to report matters accurately and fairly, which means almost always that I will seek other avenues of information as well as the police.

8 & 9. I accept very moderate hospitality – such as tea and biscuits during briefings at New Scotland Yard or drinks during an informal meeting.

10 & 11. I would offer reasonable hospitality as part of a meeting where I was seeking to discuss relevant issues. This kind of very low-level hospitality is a normal part of any working relationship. I have occasionally bought lunch or a drink for an officer with whom I was meeting.

12. I have attended a number of formal press conferences. Some have been useful in providing detailed information and giving me – and other reporters – the opportunity to question officers on current crime news stories. Reporters, however, may be limited in the number of the questions they can ask and their ability to examine an issue. Such events are by their nature, public, and with a competitive press any interesting new line is shared by all. They are held with television in mind with the simple responses required. They do not generally provide a great many insights.

13. My contacts since November 2011 have largely been with the Metropolitan Police. At the moment I am just starting to touch base with forces elsewhere in the country, with a view to building relationships that I hope will be valuable in the future course of my work. From my time with PA, I don't recall any striking differences between the relationships that the media had with the Met, when set against their relationships with other forces.

14. I have not as yet had contact at Chief Constable, DCC or ACC level since starting my current job. I can't recall specific examples of such contact during my time with PA.

15. As noted above, I have had few contacts so far with outside forces since starting my new job a couple of months ago. I cannot particularly recall the extent of them when I last did the job more than a decade ago, although I know that I regularly rang police press offices around the country for information about ongoing cases.

16. Just as with my contact with the Met, the reason for contact with other forces is primarily to obtain information about crime stories I wish to write about. On occasion, I may be seeking information in order to seek to hold the police to account for their actions, for instance when presented with allegations that a force has acted wrongfully.

17. As I have already explained, the aim of the police is generally to achieve coverage of their positive work and to mitigate negative press coverage. This is just as true for other forces as it is for the Met. Contact with journalists provides the police with an opportunity to attempt to mould coverage in a way that will reflect well on the force in question. My job, as with any source of information, is to examine whether it stands up to scrutiny.

18 - 21. I have not accepted any hospitality from other forces as yet in my current role. It is quite conceivable that I did when I worked for PA but I do not have any particular recollection of it. I certainly do not think I accepted anything more than a drink or snack, for instance. I may well have offered a drink in return but I don't recall doing so specifically.

22. I have occasionally been given prior warning of a raid, although not in my current role. I cannot recall the particular circumstances and feel confident that I did not, in fact, attend raids about which I was forewarned since they were not regarded as sufficiently newsworthy or another reporter was sent.

23. I have certainly been given background briefings by officers, usually with other journalists in attendance. Their purpose has been to contextualise a story, to give advance warnings of impending events, or to allow a more open discussion of events. Without such briefings, reporting of crime stories would be considerably less well-informed than it is and the possibility of erroneous material appearing would be increased. In cases where background briefings have not been made available -- perhaps because the police are not keen for a story to be publicised -- I have tended to seek information from other sources, such as lawyers or civil rights groups.

24. All expenses I may incur when buying, for example, a coffee or lunch for a contact can only be reimbursed following scrutiny by the managing editor's office. If the managing editor or the deputy managing editor has any concerns about monies I am expending, he will request an explanation. While there are no formal mechanisms for monitoring hospitality I may be offered, the Independent is a small newsroom and I believe it would fairly obvious if I was regularly being wined and dined by police officers. Moreover, I am obviously expected to explain any absences from the newsroom. It is also made clear in our Internal Code of Conduct that I must uphold high standards of integrity at all times -- I take that obligation seriously.

25. The Independent has an internal Code of Conduct, which includes policies on bribery and hospitality. Journalists here regularly receive updates and briefings on legal and regulatory issues. If ever I require guidance on specific matters relating to my contact with police I can -- and do -- seek it from the news desk, the managing editor's office and the legal department.

26. As I have noted in 24 above, The Independent is produced by a small team. One consequence of this is that there is very regular contact between reporters and the news desk as well as between reporters and the editor and his deputy. To this extent, therefore, there is very real editorial oversight of my communications with police officers. However, it is the nature of my role that I often have contact with police representatives many times every day -- it would not be practicable for me to inform the news editor or the editor on every occasion. If my reporting showed any consistent bias in any direction or an over-reliance on a particular source I am sure it would be noticed very swiftly during the editing process.

27. A journalist who deals with the police in the course of his job has all the same ethical considerations in mind as other journalists do -- taking care not produce misleading stories, questions of privacy, concern about inadvertently identifying sources. It is obviously important that those who come into contact with the police take care to remain impartial and not necessarily rely on information they have received from police contacts -- but that is true of every source.

28. I cannot conceive of any situation where I would pay money to a police officer.

29. The DPA – like the press offices of other forces – puts out details of stories and answers queries from journalists. It usually provides only information it has been authorised to do so by relevant officers.

30. I generally get access to the police at organised briefings, via press offices or by talking to officers at court or at scenes of crime. I occasionally meet officers who I know are involved in a particular issue to discuss background matters.

31 - 34. The Head of Public Affairs at the Met and Communications Directors at other forces absolutely act as gatekeepers. They are, after all, communications professionals and their job is to control – as much as possible – police forces' media messages. As in all industries and businesses, when such individuals' instinct is to be open and helpful, they can be valuable and can assist good journalism. When their instinct is to limit information the opposite is true and can lead to considerable frustration. Heads of press offices tend to influence the atmosphere of their offices. I believe that it is entirely necessary for police forces to have press offices (particularly for the demands of a 24/7 media) and I am sure many press officers are diligent and effective (it is hard for me to provide more details, given my limited recent experience). But the impression I have from colleagues is that there is a wide degree of variation.

35-38. As far as I am aware, it is indeed quite common for police press officers to have a background in the media - but probably not more so than is the case for press offices in other sectors. I really don't know what proportion have media experience, nor do I get the impression that a particular form of media experience predominates. An educated guess is that the most likely background for those who do have media experience is the regional print media. There is not, as far as I know, any discernible pattern in the movement of personnel between media and police press officers. I can't recall ever coming across a journalist who had worked in a police press office but that may be coincidence.

39. In an environment that increasingly distances journalists and police officers, it is disturbing that the HMIc report proposes to put further barriers to prevent the exchange of views and stories. One recommendation calls for the closer monitoring of "inappropriate relationships" and leaks to the media. Surrey police, for example, has no doubt been embarrassed by the role it has played over their handling of the Milly Dowler inquiry, but that was never going to be willingly released by them. It ought to be obvious that the media will not - and should not – rely unthinkingly on the official releases of a corporate press office. Yet the report seems to suggest that seeking alternative voices and opinions is somehow undesirable. ("This may create an incentive for journalists to seek out more informal sources.") It may well be for the force. The suggestion for note filling and monitoring would inevitably restrict those contacts and the auditing of those records will inevitably discourage already hard pressed officers from taking further steps.

40. It is quite clear that payments for information from officers are wrong. There are laws in place to prevent this. They need to be acted upon.

More generally, I think that relationships between the press and police are - at least as far as I have been able to tell during the last few months - above board. Provided that media organisations and police forces remain vigilant I believe that situation will continue, especially given the recent, renewed scrutiny of the relationships. It is hard to see how strict monitoring of all contacts between the two parties could be achieved in practice - and I believe it would be undesirable in any case.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

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

Signed ...



PAUL PEACHEY

Dated 31/1/2012