

S Laville

February 2012

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

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SANDRA LAVILLE

I, Sandra Laville, of Guardian News and Media Limited ("GNM"), Kings Place, 90 York Way London, N1 9GU, WILL SAY as follows:

1. I make this statement in response to a Notice dated 3 January 2012 served on me under section 21(2) of the Inquiries Act 2005 and the Inquiry Rules 2006, by Lord Justice Leveson, as Chairman of the Inquiry. These require me to provide evidence to the Inquiry Panel in the form of a written statement and/or to provide documents as requested in the Notice. Unless stated otherwise, the facts stated in this witness statement are within my own knowledge and belief.
2. I do not waive privilege. Accordingly anything I say in this witness statement is not intended to waive privilege and should not be read as doing so. In this context I refer to paragraph 3 of Mr Rusbridger's witness statement.
3. I should make clear at the outset that I am not prepared to reveal the names of any confidential sources.
4. For convenience I have used below the term 'crime stories' for the journalism I write, but as I explain below the width of the public interest is wider than this term may suggest.
5. **Q (1) Who you are and a brief summary of your career history.**

I had formal journalistic training at Cardiff University, where I took the post graduate diploma in journalism. I have been a journalist for twenty-three years and have wide experience of covering both home and foreign news. I started my career on local papers in Northampton and then Plymouth, before moving to London where I worked for the Ham & High, and then moved to the Evening Standard. After four years at the Standard I joined the Daily Telegraph, covering major home and foreign news stories for six years. My work included covering some of the major conflicts of that period, investigative reporting, feature writing and working as a senior reporter on the home news team.

I also worked on the news desk from time to time, commissioning news stories, editing copy and dealing with reporters on a day-to-day basis. I moved to The Guardian seven years ago, where I have worked as a senior news correspondent and latterly as the crime correspondent. As the Observer does not have a dedicated crime correspondent and as GNM operates on a cross-platform basis, most GNM journalists are expected to write for both the Guardian and the Observer print titles as well as online, so this statement is also submitted on behalf of the Observer.

Throughout my career I have had experience of dealing with police officers. I have covered crime on the Evening Standard where I filled in for six months while the crime correspondent slot was vacant. And on the Telegraph I was involved in all the major crime stories; including the Harold Shipman case, where I spent many weeks investigating the murders and speaking to the police, the Damilola Taylor case and the wrongful convictions of Sally Clark and Angela Cannings for the killing their babies.

6. **Q (2) What have been your impressions, over the years, about the culture of relations between the Metropolitan Police Service and the media?**

For the last 20 years the relationship between the Met police and the media has swung back and forth between real attempts at openness and transparency, to clampdowns on the flow of information, and the imposition of much tighter controls on middle ranking police officers, and then back again to a policy of more openness.

Under Sir Paul Condon (1993-2000) there was a clampdown on the flow of information, and a policy of very tight controls on individual police officers; a requirement that they only spoke to a journalist with a press officer present, and a culture of mistrust in which officers were followed to see who they were meeting and had their pagers bugged for the same reason.

For the last ten years or so the media policy of the Met police has followed that introduced by Sir John Stevens (commissioner 2000-2005) in which middle ranking officers and above are allowed to talk to the press in a formal and informal way.

In his guidelines he positively encouraged officers to talk to the press to promote openness and accurate reporting.

As a crime correspondent working at the time of these guidelines being in place it has been accepted practice to build informal contacts with police officers whom I will meet at official press conferences and media launches, but also will meet regularly for coffee, drinks and sometimes meals.

These kind of relationships have been accepted and as I said, encouraged. In addition the Met police press office has obviously been in operation to provide information, as have the various specialist press offices; for terrorism, serious crime and every day policing.

Journalism, as is widely accepted, has a legitimate role in a democratic society to interrogate, challenge and question in the public interest, to be the peoples' eyes and ears. My job is therefore to make sure I can get information from the Met from a variety of sources, both official and unofficial, both on and off the record, to ensure that I can hold the police to account, question their version of events - for example during the recent riots - and make sure that the police - an enormously powerful organ of the state who have had a history of secrecy - are not abusing their powers.

I think the Met has tried to be open. But it is my impression that the powers that be within the Met are very concerned about protecting the force's corporate image and therefore the official outlets can be secretive and defensive.

Official outlets for information are driven by the need to make sure the "right" message gets across; the Met police is catching criminals, fighting crime, improving rape conviction rates etc.

The Met officially is very bad at answering questions when things have gone wrong, or at giving out information on incompetent investigations that effect the public, or have put the public at risk. They are also bad at promoting the good work of some of their rank and file officers. The official channels - the press bureau - are too slow to respond to requests on many occasions. For example during the August riots I was researching a piece on what the police had been through night after night, any violence they suffered, the length of shifts they were having to work etc.

The official media channels of the Met police did not seem able to provide me access to officers, they were slow to react and therefore quite useless to me - who was writing to a deadline and needed to access the voices of ordinary officers working on the frontline.

As such I have always sought and built contacts with police officers, who in their nature tend not to be corporate beings, rather than press officers. Those police officers who maintain contact with me, in what are now difficult times, are people of integrity, whose desire is to keep an open flow of information in order to highlight abuses of power, to highlight the brilliant work of a team member, to provide context and an intelligent analysis of - for example - the tensions between the Met currently and certain sections of society in London, to correct any mistakes I might be about to make, to flesh out important public

interest stories about - for example stop and search, the reaction to the riots, the Met's gang policy.

There is a constant conflict between the need for the Met to protect its corporate image and reputation and my need to find out information, to inform the public, to challenge the official story in an attempt to find the facts and establish the truth.

Tensions arise when the Met does not want to talk openly. If information is restricted to formal briefings in which the flow of information is tightly controlled, it is very difficult for a journalist to interrogate the truth. What is vital and goes to the heart of a journalist's role in a democracy is for me to have this ongoing and informal dialogue with police officers with whom I have built a relationship of trust, to help me do my job as the eyes and ears of the wider public and hold the police to account.

Until the phone hacking scandal these kind of informal contacts were accepted - and as I said above encouraged - by the Met police. As a journalist I am bound by the law - it is illegal to pay a police officer, to access the PNC, to prejudice a forthcoming trial, and to aid misconduct in a public office.

Thus any informal contacts I maintain have always been bound by this.

Officers too are bound by the law in their dealings with journalists and I always accepted that they would know the boundaries.

What appears to be changing now, however, is the culture in which these kinds of contacts can be maintained. What was a scandal involving senior officers and senior executives from a tabloid newspaper, has led to a reaction by the police in which the desire is to "control the flow of information" - as one very senior officer told me.

This in turn has led to a re-examination of the kind of informal contacts I am talking about above, and a clampdown on them - outlined in the Filkin report - which means that any officer meeting a journalist to make them aware of a pressing issue within the police, inform them that the truth behind a set of crime figures is not as it has been presented, highlight racism, corruption or incompetence, is at risk of a criminal investigation and a disciplinary hearing.

Thus the tensions between the media and the Met at this time are great.

- 7. Q (3) Describe the personal contact which you had with the Metropolitan Police at the various stages of your career. The Inquiry would like an overall picture of the type, frequency, duration and content of your contact with the Metropolitan Police.**

I have had contacts with the Metropolitan police for many years, both on local and national newspapers. On local newspapers I would make weekly contact with a sergeant at the police station, who had been given the job of talking to the press to inform them about crimes that had happened, which might be of interest to a local paper, for it to inform its readers about crime trends, interesting criminal investigations, successful investigations, murders, and crime waves.

What is important in a democratic society is for the public to see that the police do their job - for them to see that criminals are caught, that if someone breaks into a shop in their town, something is done about it, that if they are attacked and assaulted, the police will be there, find the perpetrator and bring them to justice.

Without that assurance trust in the police breaks down. So on that level the sergeant at the division got something out of his meetings with me - ensuring this message got across to local people - and I got something out of him - finding interesting stories to put in the paper.

There is an enduring and sometimes insatiable interest from the public in crime stories. Often they show human beings in extremis, they show the best and worst of humanity - this is perhaps why there is a constant demand for these kind of stories.

Throughout my career on national papers I have built and increased contacts with police officers; sometimes to write stories about policing and policy, sometimes to write deeply human stories in which people have suffered, lost loved ones, gone through the worst that one can imagine.

Police officers can give you access to these stories by informing you about forthcoming court cases, highlighting particularly moving or difficult crimes, highlighting cases the police are trying to solve but for which they need the public's help. In my experience this has never involved a police officer breaking the law or giving out private details of a victim without the prior approval of the family involved or the victim themselves.

If dealt with sensitively with agreement of the parties involved, these kind of stories can go to the heart of reporting in the public interest.

For example I interviewed the parents of the schoolboy Damilola Taylor - who was murdered aged 10 by a gang of boys not much older than him. They had many issues to highlight in the public interest - about the police inquiry, the society we live in, the violence meted out by young people. These human stories are what the police deal with every day. As a journalist and a crime correspondent highlighting these stories goes to the heart of my job - as long as the are done with the

approval of the parties involved, without intrusion or harassment and with sensitivity.

It is part of my job therefore - in pursuing human interest stories as above, stories about policing, stories investigating miscarriages of justice, or abuses of police powers - to keep an ongoing dialogue with the police.

I do this as I said above in Q2 by talking to individual officer contacts, and by regularly dealing - by regularly probably on a daily basis - with the Met police through their press bureau, at Scotland Yard, and through their various regional press offices and specialist press officers.

In my opinion none of this contact involved any of the officers engaging in any activity that could be said to amount to committing a crime or any disciplinary offence.

8. **Q (4) Without prejudice to the generality of question (3) above, please set out the contact which you have had with the person occupying at any given time the following posts giving, as best you can remember, the dates and summarising the gist of the communications which you had with:**

- a. **The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.**
- b. **The Deputy Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.**
- c. **Assistant Commissioners of Police of the Metropolis.**
- d. **Deputy Assistant Commissioners of Police of the Metropolis.**
- e. **Head of Public Affairs.**

In each case, who initiated the contact, and why?

I am afraid I cannot supply dates, as I do not have them.

a) I meet the commissioner at regularly monthly briefings for crime correspondents and at social events. These social events include a Christmas party every year put on by the Crime Reporters Association, organised social events put on by Scotland Yard, which might organise a briefing with senior officers over coffee, at lunches which have in the past been held by The Guardian for senior officers, and at events held at conferences, for example the Association of Chief Police officers conference.

I also meet the commissioner at press conferences and briefings which he might attend.

b) As above except there are no fixed monthly media briefings for the deputy commissioner.

c) As above.

d) As above.

e) At press conferences, at briefings for crime correspondents, at social events.

The contact is initiated sometimes by myself and sometimes by the Met Police. If initiated by myself it is to maintain contact with that officer or press officer - as I have said in Q2 and Q3 above, to find out any forthcoming criminal trials which might be of interest to The Guardian, to provide context and or background to a story I am writing and to ask specific questions if a story I am writing concerns them directly.

9. **Q (5) Did you ever have the personal mobile telephone number or home telephone number of the people listed a-e above?**

Yes, but in the light of my duty to protect the identity of my sources I would rather not specify.

10. **Q (6) Describe what you were seeking to gain from the Metropolitan Police through your personal contacts with MPS personnel.**

As I have highlighted in Q2 and Q3, as a specialist reporter covering crime I am obviously seeking to find out information about the areas I have referred to in these answers.

I am also looking for detail, context and background regarding stories I am writing. Building up contacts in certain areas allows me to gain an understanding of my specialism, to ensure that what I write is in the public interest, is accurate, fair and not sensational and helps inform the public and illuminate and broaden public debate. Of course both the paper and I have to bear in mind and work within the laws of contempt, privacy and defamation. If I have information that I have gained myself, I would be seeking an official confirmation that it was correct, or certainly a warning that it was not correct if that was the case. I am obviously seeking to find out about any interesting crime stories, either criminal trials or operations which are going on. Sometimes I might want to ask if I could get involved in an operation and write an inside piece to highlight or example what the Met police are doing about the rising levels of serious youth violence or gun crime.

It is important for me to maintain regular contact, so I will often meet with an officer without having any particular agenda. This can provide an important avenue for alerting the media about significant operations / developments or crimes. I may be trying to find out what is going on, he or she might mention things that I am not interested in and then mention something that is interesting to me for a story and we will discuss it further. These are often middle ranking and senior officers, who are allowed to talk to the media under what I understand is still the current media guidance - see Q2 - provided by Scotland Yard.

- 11. Q (7) Describe in general terms and using illustrative examples what you consider the Metropolitan Police has been seeking from you in personal dealings with them during your career.**

I think the Metropolitan Police like to be able to talk to a reporter who has experience covering crime and the criminal justice system. I think they welcome the fact that I will give them a fair hearing, and will try to report in a balanced way covering all the grey as well as the black and white. I think in an atmosphere where there is a great deal of anti police sentiment, they welcome the fact that they can talk to me openly about certain issues in the knowledge that I will endeavour to report them fairly and accurately and try to ensure they are properly explained. There are also occasions when the Met needs to make a crime appeal for witnesses and in those cases they seek media coverage of the crime and the ongoing investigation. The Met is obviously concerned about its image, and it seeks to publicise good news about itself. So the Met will put out press releases about major operations to crack down on uninsured cars, drugs, knife crime etc. These are areas where there is likely to be less conflict and more of a shared agenda. They will want journalists to publicise these in order to promote the work they are doing, to mobilise and engage the public and raise consciousness; which may help improve crime prevention and public awareness.

- 12. Q (8) To what extent do you accept, and have you accepted, hospitality from the Metropolitan Police?**

I have on occasion accepted hospitality; drinks, lunches and evening meals from the Metropolitan police over many years. I have been invited to social events organised by the Met, by individual directorates, for example the serious crime directorate, and by the press bureau. I have also accepted drinks from individual officers, and have had meals with them in restaurants.

- 13. Q (9) Insofar as you accept, or have accepted, hospitality from the MPS, what is, or was, the nature of the hospitality that you accept, or have accepted?**

I have accepted meals and drinks, I have accepted buffet lunches. I have been to summer drinks parties held by the commissioner for his senior officers, press officers and crime journalists.

14. Q (10) To what extent do you, or have you, provided hospitality for the Metropolitan Police?

I have bought meals and drinks for officers and press officers. As a member of the Crime Reporters Association I have helped to pay for an annual Christmas Party for officers from the Met Police, members of the Crown Prosecution Service, and press officers from the police and CPS. On some months I could take different police officers out for a drink three to four times, some months the occasions might be fewer.

When I meet an officer who has finished his shift but has taken time out of his own life to come and see me, I feel it is the least I can do to buy him or her a drink/coffee whatever. Building contacts is all about building mutual trust. As I have said in Q2 and Q3, building contacts is essential for me to interrogate and question in the public interest, and as such buying a drink for a police officer who has made the effort to come and meet me after he or she has finished work, is part of a normal, human social interaction.

Whenever I have paid for drinks or meals, then I would reclaim these through the GNM Travel and Expenses Policy. There are guidelines on what is a reasonable amount to claim.

15. Q (11) Insofar as you provide, or have provided hospitality to the Metropolitan Police, what is, or was, the nature of the hospitality that you provide, or have provided?

As above. But with senior officers of Association of Chief Police officer ranks there were, until the last year, occasions when I would take the officer for lunch, with up to two other crime correspondents from other organisations, something akin to the Parliamentary lunches in which MPs are taken out by Lobby correspondents. At these lunches a press officer was always present. These lunches were intended to provide me and others with an ongoing dialogue with senior officers, to understand their patch – be it serious crime, terrorism etc and to be informed about anything that might be coming up. But they are primarily informal, a chance to have a chat over issues and build up a trusting relationship.

16. Q (12) Have you ever attended a formal press conference called by the MPS? If so, for what purpose was it called and do you think that it was valuable?

Regularly. Too frequently to detail dates and times. Often these are very helpful. When the Met police held a press briefing in advance of the

sentencing of Robert Napper for the murder of Rachel Nickell, the briefing was excellent. The senior officers involved were open, honest and gave detailed information about the history of one of the most notorious unsolved murders of recent times, and the mistakes made by officers in the past.

This made for informed, accurate and balanced reporting. It showed the Met police at its best - willing to admit their mistakes, make amends and go on to solve the crime many years later. It was a fine example in openness and transparency.

Briefings over the riots last summer were also a good example of how the Met can be open. They provided a good update to the situation on the ground, quickly releasing facts and figures on arrests, victim numbers, prosecutions and giving details about the number of officers on the streets, why they failed to put enough police in place, and highlighting key decisions that were made as the rioting unfolded.

Other press briefings are not so helpful. Often the information released is narrow, and raises more questions than it answers. Often the press briefing is all about promoting the Met and its reputation.

17. Q (13) What have been your impressions, over the years, about the culture of relations between police forces other than the MPS and the media?

Some police forces are more secretive than the Met. Some, like Devon and Cornwall and Merseyside are very helpful.

Most forces, however, tend to take their lead from the Metropolitan Police so when the Met decides to close down contact with journalists - this example is often noted and followed by other forces. Often smaller forces find themselves overwhelmed when an event takes place in their area, which leads to national crime correspondents, and national reporters descending on the patch.

Some forces can be quite defensive, and react to the reporting by closing down contact - but there are other examples, where smaller forces run incredibly competent, professional and informative media operations during high profile criminal investigations. One clear example of this was the way Suffolk Police handled the media during the murder hunt for the man responsible for killing five prostitutes. The media descended en masse to Ipswich, and the force, during a killing spree which was taking place as they spoke, managed to keep reporters informed and also portrayed as human beings the scale of what they were facing. It was a very powerful and deeply impressive media operation.

18. **Q (14) Have you had personal contact at Chief Constable, Deputy Chief Constable, or Assistant Chief Constable level? If so, as best you can remember, please state the dates and summarise the gist of such communications.**

In some cases yes. I cannot remember dates. I meet such officers at conferences held by the Association of Chief Police officers, where I might talk to them after they have attended a talk, or meet them for a meal after the conference day is over. I sometimes meet them at press conferences when crime stories take place in their force area, also.

19. **Q (15) Describe the personal contact which you had with other police forces at the various stages of your career. The Inquiry would like an overall picture of the type, frequency, duration and content of your contact with other police forces.**

I have had contact with Devon and Cornwall Police and Northamptonshire police and City Police. I have also had infrequent contact with several other major forces including Greater Manchester Police, Merseyside, West Midlands, Thames Valley, Surrey, South Wales police.

20. **Q (16) Describe what you were seeking to gain from these contacts with other police forces.**

As with the Met police, see question (6) (7) (10)

21. **Q (17) Describe in general terms and using illustrative examples what you consider that other police forces have been seeking from you in personal dealings with them during your career.**

As with the Met above.

22. **Q (18) To what extent do you accept, and have you accepted, hospitality from other police forces?**

I have accepted drinks at organised social events.

23. **Q (19) Insofar as you accept, or have accepted, hospitality from the other police forces, what is, or was, the nature of the hospitality that you accept, or have accepted?**

As with the Met above but not so frequently.

24. **Q (20) To what extent do you, or have you, provided hospitality for other police forces or any of their personnel?**

I have offered and bought drinks for police officers and press officers from other forces. I have met senior officers from other forces at Association of Chief Police Officer conferences and paid for meals with them and or had drinks with them.

25. **Q (21) Insofar as you provide, or have provided hospitality to other police forces, or any of their personnel, what is, or was, the nature of the hospitality that you provide, or have provided?**

As above.

26. **Q (22) Have the police either formally or informally ever given you prior notification about proposed arrests, raids or other action? If so, please elaborate.**

If I have requested to be allowed into a particular operation and this has been approved, then I would be able to join the police team on the operation and might be given notice of an arrest, under a strict embargo that I could not publish it until it happened. I do not think I have ever been given prior notification of an arrest outside of those circumstances from any police force.

27. **Q (23) Have you ever been offered "off the record" briefings by the police? If so, please elaborate.**

Yes. I have been offered off the record briefings on some occasions, although there are fewer now than in past years. Off the record briefings are a useful way of the police being able to provide context and understanding on a particular issue, so as to inform the reporting of it at some point.

For example, there were regular off the record briefings from the Met Police at the height of the terrorist threat in London in 2005. Most of these were unreportable, but they did provide a background on what the police were facing. They enabled correspondents to understand the threat a little more, to have a deeper knowledge and to report more accurately.

These briefings are not about "secrets" being passed out. They are about journalists and police officers being able to have an open conversation about an issue. As a crime correspondent I regularly ask, during off the record briefings whether any of the information can be put into the public domain on the record. Sometimes they agree, sometimes they do not.

Sometimes the police might give off the record guidance on something in order to make sure that a mistake is not made in the reporting of a subject, or to correct inaccuracies.

For example if a series of arrests are made and journalists - through their own investigations in the local area identify the names of those arrested, the police press bureau sometimes guides a journalist away from using a name if it is wrong, to avoid individuals who have not been arrested being wrongly named. This guidance is in the interests of accuracy, and correcting inaccuracies. They do NOT then replace that name with the correct one, in my experience.

28. **Q (24) What mechanisms, if any, are in place in your workplace to monitor and record hospitality as between the police on the one hand and you, or your fellow journalists on the other?**

The Guardian has an Anti-corruption and Bribery Policy and a Gifts and Hospitality Policy. It also has, as set out in Alan Rusbridger's first witness statement, an expenses policy.

29. **Q (25) What training, guidance, policies and/or practices are in place in your workplace governing contact between you and your fellow journalists on the one hand and the police on the other?**

I follow the PCC code of conduct and GNM's own editorial code. As referred to in my answer to Q (24), the Guardian has an Anti-corruption and Bribery Policy and a Gifts and Hospitality Policy. The legal department have been running regular training sessions on the Bribery Act 2010. As a member of the NUJ I also follow their code of conduct.

30. **Q (26) What editorial or management oversight, or control, if any, is there over communications between journalists and police at your media outlet?**

I am accountable to the News Editor and through him to the editor-in-chief Alan Rusbridger and I refer to his witness statement in that regard. I would not expect management to interfere with the day to day contact between myself and police officers. I would expect my management to trust my experience and integrity. In any case where I was unsure, or where I felt it appropriate, I would consult my senior editor and/or seek legal advice.

31. **Q (27) What ethical issues do you consider arise, or need to be held in mind, by a journalist communicating in the course of his or her employment with the police, or anyone serving with, or employed by, a police force?**

Most importantly if I am communicating with police sources, my primary duty is to protect those sources. As a journalist this above all has primacy for me. I see it as my duty not to lead anyone to my

sources in the way I write a story, or in the frequency with which I might use a particular source. I am very conscious that an officer could risk either disciplinary sanctions or dismissal or even prosecution if it is felt that his or her contact with me was inappropriate. I am however really reliant on them to be aware of where the danger lines are and to not transgress them – unless they feel there is a very good reason for doing so – for example they are acting as a whistleblower.

I will use methods within a story to hide who the source might be - in order to protect them.

In addition it is always important to remember that you as a journalist have your agenda - of seeking out information - to call the police to account, and they have their agenda. I am always aware that as a specialist you might be in danger of getting too close, or going native as some put it. I have a constant checks and balances going on in my head when dealing with the police, in order to try and avoid this.

32. **Q (28) What payments (if any) are considered to be legitimate financial transactions between persons serving with or employed by a police force and journalists at your media outlet? Please explain.**

None

33. **Q (29) What role do you consider that the Metropolitan Police Service Directorate of Public Affairs (especially its Press Bureau) and corresponding parts of other police forces fulfill? What, in practice, do they do?**

I think they handle all the organised media press releases, answer factual questions on stories, provide facts and figures, give out statements either to everyone or if asked. A lot of officers, however, prefer to talk directly to a journalist they trust because in the interests of accuracy and a fuller understanding of the issues involved.

So that is why many police officers might talk to a journalist about a case which they are seeking publicity for or about a background to a trial going on, providing information for publication after the verdict.

Adding another layer between a journalist and the police officer who has the information to convey, leads to delays, some inaccuracies and a lack of depth often to the information provided. This is partly why Sir John Stevens - see Q 2 - introduced the policy of allowing middle ranking officers and above to talk openly to journalists in the interests of accuracy, context and a wider understanding of the issues.

34. **Q (30) How, in practice, do you get access to the police?**

Either via the press bureau, or by contacting an individual officer directly.

35. **Q (31) Does the Head of Public Affairs at the Metropolitan Service and/or corresponding persons in other police forces act, or seek to act as gatekeepers controlling access by the media to other police personnel?**

I think the head of public affairs is ultimately responsible for the media coverage and as such gatekeeper, especially to senior officers. They are responsible for protecting the corporate image of the force and as such might want to play down failure. In past regimes - when Sir Paul Condon was commissioner - senior press officers were less forthcoming and more controlling of the access to police officers; it seemed to make for a defensive, paranoid police force.

36. **Q (32) If so, what is your attitude to this state of affairs?**

I think if the head of public affairs is the gatekeeper to senior officers - for example - and acts in the same way to all crime journalists that is one thing. But if that head of public affairs is seen to favour certain news organisations, or certain journalists, then that is unhealthy and raises questions about why that is taking place.

I think it is inevitable that the head of press seeks to protect the corporate image of the police force he works for. That is why it is essential for journalists attempting to interrogate the truth, search out the facts, and seek to highlight issues in the public interest, to have other avenues of informal contacts which they trust.

37. **Q (33) To what extent, in your opinion, does the MPS' Press Bureau, and corresponding parts of other police forces, exist to manage the relevant police force's corporate image in the media?**

To a large extent. But it would be unfair to say that of every press officer. There are press officers who are very concerned and passionate about the area they are working in - whether it is gangs, child abuse, organised crime, serious crime whatever. They are more concerned with promoting the good work an officer might be doing, a successful case etc than the corporate image of the Met above all else.

38. **Q (34) Is it necessary for police forces to have a press office, and what is your view as to the utility and role of police press offices?**

I would rather deal with officers directly but I can see with the vast amount of media requests police forces get, that press offices are essential.

39. **Q (35) Is it common for persons working for police press offices to have a background in the media?**

I do not know.

40. **Q (36) What proportion of personnel working in police press offices do you estimate have a media background?**

I do not know.

41. **Q (37) Is any particular form of media background predominantly found amongst police press officers (e.g. tabloid, broadsheet, television)?**

I do not know.

42. **Q (38) To the best of your knowledge is there any discernible patterns in the movement of personnel from the media into police press offices and vice versa?**

I do not know.

43. **Q (39) What is your view of the recommendations contained in the HMIC's recent report "*Without Fear or Favour*" insofar as they concern relations between the media and the police?**

I think the HMIC report highlights some very sensible broad principles for police forces, and acknowledges that the media are there to challenge and hold the police to account.

"The overarching principle of police relationships with the media is that the Police Service should not seek to constrain the media but allow them to accurately report news from which the principal beneficiary is the public. However, forces should take account of the level and intensity of these relationships – and not least, how they will be perceived by the public."

I also applaud its emphasis on the fact that the heart of the matter is integrity - both personal and organisational. If police forces can instill integrity and a strong moral compass into its police officers this is far more effective for tackling corruption than any amount of top down rules and regulations.

From my perspective, as a crime correspondent wanting to ensure that I and my fellows can properly report and inform the public about matters that there is a proper public interest in them knowing about, I think the recommendation that every police officer should record, via a

note, every conversation he or she has with a journalist is impractical. I note that the report does not recommend against informal contacts.

As part of our democracy, as part of the checks and balances the media provides on the activities of the police - a powerful and secretive force in British life - there needs to be an open dialogue between police officers - who are public servants - and journalists. That will be obstructed by the constant need to write things down and by the threat of an audit from senior officers of everything in that officer's notebook. That will not encourage the release of information which might be in the public interest, it is somewhat of a threat hanging over every officer.

44. **Q (40) Do you consider that there are further or different steps which could and/or should be taken to ensure that relationships between the police and the media are and remain appropriate? Please explain when answering this question what you consider to be appropriate contact between the police and journalists in a democratic society.**

The starting point must be what is in the public good for them to be informed about. The press must be free to seek out information, to question and to challenge state organisations.

There are dangers if the relationship between the police and the press becomes too close, and if that relationship itself becomes secretive and lacks transparency. I do not dispute that while media access is an important consideration, it is not the only one. There is always a need for a proper balance in this.

But it is vital in a democratic society, that the police, as a powerful and historically secretive organisation and an arm of the state, are held to account.

Anything that obstructs a journalist being able to hold the police to account, is in my view, damaging to the public and to society.

This is especially so when there are instances of failures, racism, corruption and incompetence. As an example the Metropolitan Police fought for years against the accusations of incompetence and racism over the investigations into the Stephen Lawrence murder. It was only when the Macpherson Inquiry took place that they apologised, and began to make the changes.

Inquiring and challenging journalism is therefore essential in a democracy to ensure the police are held to account.

Laws already exist which define appropriate relationships between the police and the media - it is illegal to pay a police officer, to provide

hospitality which could be perceived as bribery, to access the PNC, to prejudice a forthcoming criminal case etc.

The process of gathering information is often a battle. It is not even possible in this country to download a transcript of a criminal court case which has been held openly. Accessing even this is tortuously difficult, expensive - you have to pay hundreds of pounds for transcripts per day - and time consuming. The unwieldy and slow process of the Freedom of information Act does not work as it should.

Thus it is essential to maintain an open and informal dialogue with police officers. I fear that further restrictive rules on these informal contacts will see them dry up completely. This is not just a blow for a journalist, but it is potentially damaging to the public and to democracy. As I have tried to show in this statement, these informal contacts are essential as a specialist journalist, for me to have a grasp of what really goes on within Scotland Yard. Not for gossip or tittle tattle stories about celebrities who have been arrested, but in order to do my job to act as the eyes and ears of the public, to highlight wrongdoing, incompetence, corruption.

Whilst I applaud the Filkin report's call for the Met to be more open and transparent, I fear that some of her recommendations could have the opposite effect.

She says for example that whistleblowing within the Met should be a rarity. Should it be a rarity if there is internal evidence available to an honest police officer of endemic corruption and incompetence? I would hope that confident organisation would welcome and encourage whistleblowing to ensure that corrupt practices are brought to light.

There are some categories of information where I would suggest, while the police may not like it, there is generally going to be more good done in terms of public scrutiny and transparency than in secrecy, for example, information about crime and policing, about police malpractice or incompetence, and where I would argue the balance favours greater openness - whether from formal or informal sources - and others, for example, information which may prejudice an investigation, where the balance might be expected to go the other way.

Against that background, I do not believe the recommendation in the Filkin report that all leaks to journalists should automatically be the subject of a criminal investigation, does anything to breed openness and transparency.

Taken at its strongest, this recommendation could be seen as criminalising informal contacts between the police and journalists -

which as I have stated I believe are vitally important for holding the police to account.

This will not serve the public and the process of democracy.

The police force as I have stated, is a very secretive organisation. But they are public servants, who hold a great deal of power; power of arrest, power to stop and search young men, powers to hold individuals in custody for days without charge.

As such it is not enough that the flow of information from a police force is controlled by senior officers and their management board - who are driven by the need to protect the corporate image of the police force.

There are many examples in the Met police where the official sources of information have remained silent about corruption, incompetence, racism. These cases were only highlighted by officers through informal contacts to journalists.

One example is the corruption going on in the Enfield Crime Squad - that was not highlighted by the Met police officially, it emerged from information passed to a crime journalist. This was a serious issue regarding allegedly corrupt police officers, and alleged brutality against the individuals they were arresting, but it was not the official Met voice that shed light on it, instead it was an unofficial, informal source to a trusted journalist. It was entirely in the public interest for this story to come to light.

Another example of the failure of official Met channels to be open and transparent emerged in the story of Kirk Reid.

Reid - a serial rapist and sexual abuser - was finally brought to justice after years of incompetence and failings by the Met police.

His case was taking place in one of London's outer courts. No one was aware of it - because that court is not routinely covered by news agencies. His case was taking place very shortly after that of another serial rapist - John Worboys - whom the Met had also failed to apprehend for years because they did not believe the string of young women who claimed he had raped them.

Despite the experience of the Worboys case, the Met did not through official channels make journalists - and therefore more importantly the public - aware of the case of Reid. It was through informal contacts with a police officer that I found out about the case.

It was only when I and others examined the case, understood the horrific way in which scores of women had been failed by the

Metropolitan Police and started to demand answers, that the Met opened up and talked in detail about it. These cases of Reid and Worboys went to the heart of the trust in which the public holds the police- but it took crime journalists through their contacts to bring them into the public domain, not the official channels of the Met police.

Under the Filkin recommendations - which I understand are being adopted by the Met police - I worry that the officer who alerted me to the Reid case - who was not a whistleblower under the law - but was acting as a source providing information in the public interest - could be liable to a criminal investigation and a disciplinary procedure.

What he was doing, however, was, in my view, in the public interest. This officer and others, however, are already becoming reticent, refusing to talk to journalists - because there is now a growing culture of fear within Scotland Yard that if they do so they will be subjected to a criminal investigation, and or sacked.

The Met - as I have stated - can be defensive and secretive. Unlike other professions which are there to serve the public - they do not hold their disciplinary hearings in public. Doctors do through the General Medical Council, nurses and midwives do etc But the police does not.

The Independent police complaints commission has the power to hold a disciplinary hearing in public - but to date it has done this once.

The Met releases narrow details of disciplinary hearings, mostly after the event. Again it is via informal contacts that I am able to probe these a little further, to see if there is a pattern emerging of corruption in the force - reflected by these disciplinary proceedings - to see if there is a pattern of racism, and or sexism emerging - reflected by the number of disciplinaries of ethnic minority officers or women, for example.

My argument is that following a scandal involving the allegedly overly cosy relationships between senior officers and senior executives from a tabloid newspaper, a response which involves handing not less but more control to very senior officers and managers, who, as I have suggested in this statement, release information through the prism of their own corporate agenda, does not seem to address the issue.

It was not ordinary middle ranking officers who were found to have been engaging in hospitality at too great a level with media executives, and therefore allegedly creating a culture in which one tabloid newspaper was favoured over other newspapers. It was the most senior officers and most senior press officer who was examined over this.

Thus my argument would be the Met needs to empower, support and encourage its middle ranking officers and above to talk to the media, to

keep an open dialogue and ensure that nothing like this ever happens again.


One time Met commissioner, Sir Robert Mark, when he faced a huge corruption scandal in the 1970s, took this view.

He told his rank and file officers to go out and speak in order to shine a light on corruption.

"Officers who act and speak in good faith may be assured of my support even if they make errors of judgment when deciding what information to disclose and what to withhold," he said.

I think that his words strike the right balance.

I believe that the contents of this witness statement are true.



Sandra Laville

8/02/2012

Date

S Laville

February 2012

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

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