

of course, that newspapers can write exactly what they like. There are laws in Britain that everyone, including newspapers, have to obey: laws of libel, for example, or about state secrets. On the whole, however, the press has considerable freedom.

Interest in controlling the press at all did not really start until 1949, when a Royal Commission was appointed to look into public criticism of newspapers. The Commission decided firmly against state control, but did recommend that the newspaper industry itself should set up something called the Press Council as a kind of watchdog. In fact, it was to be a watchdog with two heads, for the Council was to deal with complaints from the public about newspapers, but at the time make sure that newspapers themselves did not lose their freedom.

The Press Council meets each month to judge complaints made against newspapers by the public; complaints that a newspaper story:

a) was inaccurate; b) intruded on someone's privacy; c) was obtained by subterfuge; d) was unfair and gave the subject no chance to reply. e) was racist; f) was tasteless; g) had 'other ethical faults easier to recognize than to 'define '.

When the Press council has decided on a case, it issues an adjudication summarizing the issues, giving its view^r, and upholding or rejecting the complaint. The newspaper which has been criticized is then expected, although there is no law which forces it to do so, to publish the Press Council's adjudication in full. They almost always do (ins).

There are calls from time to time for the Press Council to use **Stronger** sanctions, to be given stronger teeth. It is difficult to know, however, what those could be. Nobody wants state control. Fines have little effect. Newspapers are big business; they might simply begin to balance the likely cost of the fine against the interest of the story and decide if the story is a good one for them, to publish it anyway and pay the fine later.

Would it be better to have a license for newspapers, one that could be taken away if the paper behaved imethically? Or should journalists be registered so that they could lose their job, like a doctor or lawyer, if they broke the rules? Most people in Britain feel that the freedoms that we have at the moment no license and no registration, are unique and important, and want to keep them.

The only remaining sanction would be to send occasional editors to prison, as an example to others. But that would be a step back. Publicity and moral obligation seem to be the only sanctions if we want a free press. But it is a mutual agreement between public and the press and if newspapers become too irresponsible, new controls may have to be imposed by law.

(from *The Power to Inform*)

Exercise 47

Explain the following.

1. Why was the Press Council to be a watchdog with two heads?
2. Why do readers complain about a story obtained by subterfuge?
3. What is to be understood by ethical faults of journalists?
4. Which story is referred to as racist?
5. What does 'adjudication' imply?
6. What benefits can a license give to a newspaper?

Exercise 48

Read this extract of a letter from a member of Parliament to the editor of *The Times* and do the tasks that follow.

MELLOR: THE RIGHT TO KNOW AND THE RIGHT TO STAY IN OFFK1

Sir,

As might be expected from a Press Complaints Commission which includes tabloid editors, it has now stated that the public have the right to be informed about the private behaviour of politicians if it affects the conduct of public business.

Was it therefore in the public interest for the tabloid editors to pay an 'electronics-expert' who had bugged a bedroom then sold the tapes and photographs of it? Have we now reached the stage where it is easier for those who acquire other people's damaging personal secrets to sell them to the tabloids rather than risk jail over blackmail?

The statement amounts to a simple approval of the tabloids' use of paid informers, as, for example, did the KGB in Moscow or the Stasi in East Germany. Like them, the tabloid uses such information to destroy lives without trial, defence or jury. It endorses the practice of allowing a picket line of door-stepping journalists outside a house, to