

Where are the NOW whistleblowers?

I cannot help but feel sympathy for all the workers at the NOW. James Murdoch in his address to NOW workers stated "Wrongdoers turned a good newsroom bad and this was not fully understood or adequately pursued". Whatever form the future inquiry into the NOW takes, one important question that will need to be answered: how was such a poor culture allowed to persist, stopping NOW staff from blowing the whistle early and effectively?

As the shocking list of NOW phone hacking victims grows longer, people are starting to ask questions about why was the culture at the NOW so bad? Why did no-one speak up earlier? Murdoch's comment about it being a few wrongdoers misses the point as it can be workplace culture and incentives which can encourage staff to turn a blind eye. Nowhere was this so apparent than in the financial crisis and the disintegration of our banks. What may mark the NOW staff apart from the staff working in companies where there were massive corporate collapses such as Enron, WorldCom and Lehmans, is that they are working in the media. Those working in the media are vital in ensuring wider accountability, particularly at a time where there are spin doctors or PR types ready to massage a story, making the lack of whistleblowers all the more worrying.

The Inquiry hopefully will consider the culture that was allowed to persist in the NOW. I am sure one of the conclusions likely to be drawn is that those at the top focussed on profit and sales, not journalistic integrity. For lessons to be learned the Inquiry will need to go one step further and positively find ways to help those in the newsroom to speak up. The lack of whistleblowing in the media stretches wider than NOW, as in recent years there have been the phone-in competition scandals, and faked footage rows that have not only resulted in loss of public confidence and regulatory backlash. While in the UK we have a law to protect whistleblowers (the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998) but this is only part of the picture. For whistleblowing to be encouraged, media employers and regulators will need to be offering clear guidance on principles and practices to be expected of their staff, that they will not be victimised or dismissed for raising public interest concerns. The Committee on Standards in Public Life has identified 6 principles on whistleblowing:

1. The organisation takes malpractice seriously, giving examples of the type of concerns to be raised, so distinguishing a whistleblowing concern from a grievance.
2. Staff have the option to raise concerns outside of line management.
3. Staff are enabled to access confidential advice from an independent body.
4. The organisation will, when requested, respect the confidentiality of a member of staff raising a concern.
5. When and how concerns may properly be raised outside the organisation (e.g. with a regulator).
6. It is a disciplinary matter both to victimise a bona fide whistleblower and for someone to maliciously make a false allegation.

I sincerely hope that the Inquiry considers how those principles can also be used to empower those working in the media.