

# Editorial: The Harlot Press

In one of its periodic fits of moralism the British public is luxuriating in revelations about malpractice in the press. As in much of the press itself, just to show that we are not really enjoying the drama unfolding before us, the titillation and scandal of the revelations is accompanied by stern-faced attitudes of disapproval from our custodians of public decency, many of whom are also, as it happens, members of the press.

No doubt many will be recalling the old adage about the press exercising power without responsibility, the privilege, it is said, of the harlot through the ages – particularly when it emerges that some of the barons who own the papers have a remarkable propensity not to remember what went on in the domains they so tightly control or not to have been told about it by their subordinates.

The press may indeed resemble a singularly indiscriminating harlot, in the sense that it sells itself to whoever will pay for it. There would be no press and, *a fortiori* no press barons, if this were not the case. But what tends to be overlooked in all of this is that it is the public *en masse* who pays for this particular harlot. If millions (literally) of upright citizens did not buy papers, and particularly the grandes horizontales being complained about, they simply would not have existed; ditto television, celebrity magazines, all the bread and circuses with which we as a nation divert ourselves.

Maybe a healthy democracy needs a press. But we should never underestimate the genius we have for cheapening any system and for covering our doings with rhetoric – as the great Greek poet George Seferis observed of his country in 1966 (nothing new there either). Another Greek poet, Demetrios Antoniou, wrote in his poem ‘The bad businessmen’: ‘Sir, we were simple men/who sold cloth/and our soul/was the cloth no one bought/...Now by the same rule we have measured with/measure us. Our business did not flourish/Sir, we are bad businessmen.’ Unfortunately.