Can the hydra change its spots?

The tabloid media and the Royal family

They are almost forgotten now, but in the mid-1930s, the Mollisons were huge celebrities.

A.J. Mollison and his wife Amy (nee Johnson) were British long distance aviators, a group which had tennis-star status at the time. Their romance, wedding and married life attracted extraordinary publicity. Partly as a result of this pressure their marriage quickly dissolved.

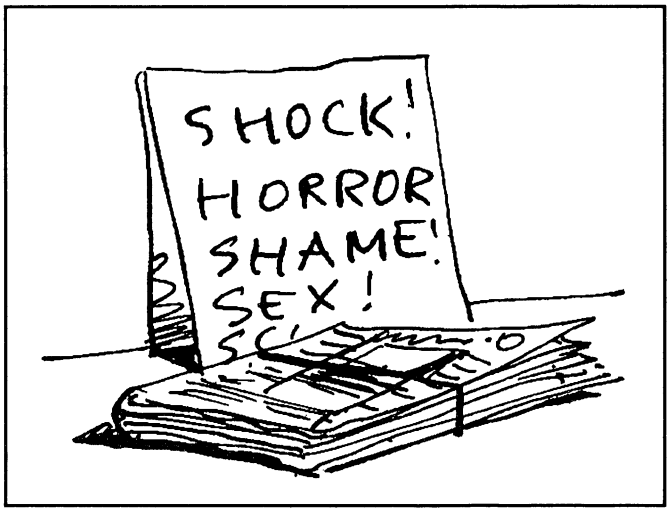
A few years later, Robert Graves and Alan Hodge wrote of this episode that it typified an unwelcome development in British life.

'The price that had to be paid, not only by the Mollisons but by all who came the under general category of "public entertainers", was constant publicization of their private lives', they said in their social history of Britain between the wars, *The Long Weekend.*

'"Newshawks" in the American style were a new feature of British social life: they were trained to be completely unscrupulous in the matter of getting their news - bribing, lying, breaking confidences. Their loyalty was to their paper, and the paper's loyalty was to its news hungry public. . .

'Newspapermen devoted to their job had an entirely different set of values from other people. They had to be without hearts. What gave the news-editor the keenest satisfaction was the breaking of a big news story at the exact right time for publication. Whether its human significance was alarming or cheerful made no odds to him at all.'

There was a glaring exception to the general rule, however. The media was still very gentle in its handling of the monarchy: so much so that it completely failed to report on one of the biggest stories of the decade. In 1936 the newly-crowned King Edward VIII decided to marry Mrs Wallis Simpson, a woman regarded by the government as utterly unsuitable as she was American and divorced.



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As Graves and Hodge wrote: 'The press now chose to impose a censorship upon itself... the Cabinet was so embarrassed that it refused the Press official directions as to what line to take . . . British subscribers to American magazines and readers of the Communist edited *The Week*, a postally distributed newsletter, were learning of [Mrs Simpson's] friendship with the King, of the King's intention to marry her, and of the constitutional crisis that was brewing . . . The public at large knew nothing.'

As late as the 1890s, a popular sporting paper headed its news column one week with the statement that there was 'nothing whatever between the Prince of Wales and Lily Langtry'. The next week the column was headed with the apparently unrelated remark 'not even a sheet'.

It was partly in reaction to the uproar this caused that the convention evolved that the media would never attack Royalty or draw attention to its foibles - even when, as in the case of Edward VIII, there was a legitimate public interest.

Which brings us to the big question of recent weeks: will the remorse expressed by the British press following the death of the Princess of Wales actually lead to a change in its methods of what might generously be described as news gathering?

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Even before that Stephen Glover, writing in the *Telegraph,* had pointed a bone at Rupert Murdoch, saying: 'Mr Murdoch, whose titles the *News of the World* and the *Sun* have provided the most destructive coverage of the Princess of Wales over the years, raising her up and casting her down in rapid succession, has most to answer for. If Mr Murdoch is a man

with a conscience, his will be the most troubled and searching contemplation.'

Perhaps so, for the *Sun* on 8 September said in its editorial: 'The *Sun*, for its part, has no intention of carrying photographs which invade the privacy of Princes William and Harry'.

Arch-rival the *Mirror* was like minded: 'The *Mirror* will work swiftly with the Press Complaints Commission to protect the boys from intrusive paparazzi photography.'

The *Daily Mail* joined the chorus: 'This newspaper for one, as its proprietor made clear yesterday, will henceforth buy no pictures from the paparazzi.'

Even the more refined papers voiced their thoughts in similar style. The *Guardian* expressed itself in rather mealy-mouthed terms: 'We have ourselves within the past week renewed our guidelines over the use of pictures which have clearly been obtained in intrusive circumstances and which are clearly not in the public interest.'

The *Independent* put it this way: 'From here on in, this paper has had enough. We will never publish pictures of the young Princes William and Harry in private situations again.'

The other paper singled out by Glover, the *News of the World*, was forced by the timing to wait until the following Sunday, 14 September, to express its contrition. Again, the sentiment and language are eerily similar to what appeared elsewhere: 'Today the *News of the World* calls a halt. We pledge not to publish any photograph unless it has been taken under the strict guidelines of the newspaper Code of Practice.'

'We've listened and we've acted. This new code will be the toughest set of industry regulations anywhere in Europe. It is doing far more than legislation ever could.'

Again, old rivalries were forgotten. Bridget Rowe, the editor of the *Sunday Mirror* wrote: 'As far as the *Sunday Mirror* is concerned I can give a firm and absolute assurance that we will respect the privacy of the young Princes. We will work closely with the Press Complaints Commission to ensure that our newspaper, together with all the others, think carefully before we act.'

Emergency meetings of the Press Complaints Comission followed, and on Thursday 25 September its chairman, Lord Wakeham announced reforms of the rules governing privacy and harassment.

'We've listened and we've acted,' he was reported as saying. 'This new code will be the toughest set of industry regulations anywhere in Europe. It is doing far more than legislation ever could.'

Among the changes which Lord Wakeham announced were bans on:

- photographs obtained by 'persistent pursuit'
- motorbike chases
- paying juveniles for stories
- invading the privacy of public figures in places such as restaurants, churches and 'secluded beaches'.

New restrictions on the behaviour of media 'scrums' were also introduced.

Whether this leads to meaningful and long term changes in behaviour remains to be seen.

To quote Stephen Glover again: 'The tabloid press is a many-headed hydra, not a monster with a single will. It is mercurial and fiercely competitive.' Lacking a single will makes change difficult, but for the moment each head of the hydra is singing the same tune.

In its leader on the Monday after the tragedy, *The Times* reflected on the challenge Diana's death posed to the monarchy. 'Not since the Abdication has the Palace needed sound heads as it does today.'

An interesting comparison, because many people thought the Abdication would also change things forever.

Robert Graves and Alan Hodge said of that event: 'The Left rejoiced that the Abdication had at least served to break down the atmosphere of hysterical mysticism with which the Royal Family had been surrounded. No more, they said, would kings be looked upon as anything less than human'.

That was written in 1941.

Richard Evans