Only the guilty will cheer curbs on the press

Journalists have a duty to expose wrongdoing by the rich and powerful but a new law threatens to make it impossible.

Tom Bower

Exposing the abuse of power by political figures and public officials has been my lifework. Ever since I claimed an illegal arms shipment from a Middle East arms dealer, I have appreciated the power of the media as a weapon of truth. The dealer denied a war was being fought, but his case and public opinion affected the law on the export of arms. In that era, media organizations had a strong role in liberal democracy. Defending the public interest to expose wrongdoing was the DNA of newspapers and TV. All those who successfully climbed the ranks of power used their wealth to influence the course of our lives—could truthfully expect to be subjected to honest inquiry.

Supported by that confidence, newspapers notified my books exposing the misdeeds of many controversial characters (including Robert Maxwell, John Howard, Richard Branson, Richard Branson, and Conrad Black. All of them sued for libel (Maxwell six times) and either lost in the courts or did not pursue their complaints. Mr. Cameron’s complaint against The Times was dismissed by the Court of Appeal—his complaint was based on his conduct for dishonesty, followed by three years in jail.

Many others—including footballers, oil chefs, politicians, and prominent CEOs—have been claimed to have sold their newspapers too much for their own interests. Mr. Murdoch has moved to improve his regulation, and the Independent (the paper he will make his first cut) relies on public donations to continue its work.

Crooks like Maxwell could lose libel battles and still win millions of pounds from the libel courts.

Mr. Brittan’s case was a classic example of how the press can use the courts against them. The Independent, however, continues to publish, and its work has been crucial in exposing the activities of high-ranking politicians.

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