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## Press Release

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### **New in-depth study shows that the decline in media standards is far wider than just the current concern with hacking**

After a summer in which, for understandable reasons, all comment about the media concentrated on the tabloid hacking scandal, the other faults of the trade should not be forgotten.

In *Democracy under attack: How the media distort policy and politics*, published by The Policy Press on Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> November 2011, Malcolm Dean, the Guardian's longstanding chief monitor of social policy, expertly indicts his own trade through a series of seven case studies examining the influence of the media. The policies examined are: penal policy, drug reform, asylum legislation, child poverty, health and social care, vocational education and housing. Taking each in turn, he demonstrates the complex interplay between politicians, media, pressure groups, civil servants, think tanks and social research funders.

What emerges are seven deadly sins of the 'reptiles' (to use Dennis Thatcher's word for journalists). They are a mixture of the old and the new, but even the old are now perpetrated in a much more pernicious and malign way, generating deeper and more damaging wounds to the democratic process.

The book is fully up-to date with discussion of developments from 'the Murdoch meltdown' and Scotland Yard crisis in July. It offers a unique insider's perspective and a detailed and valuable account of news production in Britain.

Drawing on four decades of top level Whitehall briefings, topped up by interviews with 150 senior participants in the policy-making process, the book is packed with new insights and colourful stories from events in Whitehall's corridors, culminating in a damning list detailing the seven deadly sins. They are:

- Distortion: the over-promotion of one drug, Herceptin, and the subversion of another, MMR vaccine, which led to three million people without proper protection against measles, mumps and rubella; untrue allegations against asylum seekers and

crude headlines; distorted crime statistics, inaccurate reporting of 'Broken Britain', misrepresented drug researching findings.

- Dumbing down: ever more concentration by the tabloids on celebrities and the meretricious; a shift within serious papers to tabloid techniques: headlines with attitude, opinionated copy, views before news, picture-led layout, punchy front pages.
- More interested in politics than policy: an old sin, which has got worse as the policy differences between parties have narrowed. The Blair government's stricter eligibility rules for disability benefits received massively more coverage than the decision to abolish child poverty. Why? Politics. It was the internal political divisions over disability benefits that led to its massive coverage and the lack of such divisions that promoted the poor coverage of the pledge to abolish child poverty.
- Too adversarial: the huge majorities won by Tony Blair prompted much of the media to regard itself as the real opposition, as pointed out by John Lloyd, a senior Financial Times journalist, in his *What the media are doing to our politics* (Constable 2004). As one of the respondents to a 2005 Guardian survey of 50 high profile public or private sector leaders on how the media covered their field, suggested: "journalists do now seem to believe that the person in charge is always wrong." Or as Hugo Young, The Guardian's political commentator, noted: "sitting in government, watching quite a lot of political journalism chasing itself in a downward spiral of propaganda, innuendo and competitive truth-stretching...could anyone disagree that every prime minister will need an Alastair (Campbell) to fight back on their behalf."
- Too readily duped: Tony Blair was a master of camouflaging liberal initiatives with hardline headlines, most notoriously with the five year crime control plan in July 2004. A day before the launch he declared it would end the 1960s "liberal consensus". Next day the papers published long screeds about the end of such a consensus – which in reality had ended 12 years previously – and ignored the progressive proposals. Ben Goldacre in his Bad Science column in The Guardian has spent almost a decade documenting the many different ways the media have been duped by pharmaceutical PR agents, pseudo research units, quacks, cosmetic companies, and homeopathy.
- Group think: hunting in packs. An old sin that has become worse, as a succession of ministers brought down by the media from the Major administration onwards that only increased the lust for more ministerial blood

- Concentration on the negative: Dean argues this is the most serious of all and accounts for much public disillusionment with governments and politicians. If nothing is going right then politicians should be replaced. By 2005 much was going right in education, health and crime but not according to the reports of the media. David Bell, the Chief Inspector of Schools, complained about persistent negative media coverage. So did many other of the 50 chief officers responding to the Guardian survey. Mike Hough, former Deputy Director of Research at the Home Office, showed two thirds of the public still believed crime was going up, when it had been dropping dramatically for almost a decade. Why? In the words of Professor Hough 'because they are told by the media it is'.

Among the lessons that can be drawn from the book are:

- Where there is a policy vacuum, as there was with asylum, the media's influence can become disproportionate
- Ministers should be more ready to take on the tabloids – and also recognise, as the drug case study demonstrates, that they are not quite as predictable as believed.
- Targets can attract the media's attention to a reform and maintain political pressure for its completion, but only if the criteria are clear and there is regular measurement and monitoring.

The book has already received endorsements from leading figures in politics, media, policy-making and academia:

Baroness Shirley Williams: "Malcolm Dean's fascinating book explores an under-discussed dimension of politics – how policy and political decisions are shaped by the popular media. Many of his examples should cause us great concern."

Peter Preston, former Guardian Editor: "Malcolm Dean had a media seat in the stalls of social policy through four tumultuous decades. He's been there, seen it – and knows it better than anyone. A vital subject: a definitive book."

Geoff Mulgan, former Director of the Prime Minister's Policy Unit and the cabinet Office's Strategy Unit in Tony Blair's Government: "Malcolm Dean has been uniquely well-placed to witness innumerable policy successes and failures, and the often distorted lens through which they have been covered by the media. This thoughtful and wise book will be invaluable for anyone working in the media who's involved in explaining social policy, and to anyone involved in social policy who needs to get the media on their side."

Howard Glennerster, Emeritus Professor of Social Policy, London School of Economics and Politics: "Malcolm Dean, veteran guardian journalist, provides a unique insight into a much neglected but crucial area of policy-making. His case studies are a must read."

## Notes

1. *Democracy under attack: How the media distort policy and politics* by Malcolm Dean is published on 9 November 2011 price £19.99 hardback (ISBN 978 184742 848 6). It is available to buy from [www.policypress.co.uk/display.asp?K=9781847428486](http://www.policypress.co.uk/display.asp?K=9781847428486) at 20% discount, or from Marston Book Services, P O Box 269, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4YN Tel: 01235 465500 plus £2.75 postage and packing

2. Malcolm Dean joined *The Guardian* newspaper in 1969 where he served as roving reporter, social affairs leader-writer and assistant editor. He became Special Adviser to the Health and Social Services Secretary in 1978/79. Returning to the paper in 1979 post election, he launched its Society section, a highly successful weekly supplement specialising in social policy, which he edited for most of its first 20 years as well as writing daily editorials. He retired in 2006 to take up a fellowship at Nuffield College, Oxford, where he is still an associate. He has served on numerous social policy working parties and was chair of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation commission on older people. Media enquiries to:

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4. The Policy Press ([www.policypress.co.uk](http://www.policypress.co.uk)) is a leading social science publisher based at the University of Bristol and is committed to publishing books that make a difference.