

Press freedom is fostered in an environment in which media outlets act responsibly. Acting responsibly means never knowingly publishing false information, never disseminating stories with no basis in evidence and respecting the privacy of individuals in cases where it is reasonable to suppose no law has been broken. In the current climate, sections of the press compete by acting irresponsibly. Ultimately this poses a risk to good government and a healthy democracy, for example by exaggerated vilification of people in public office. There is a risk that, instead of continuing to appease hostile and irresponsible sections of the press, a future government might seek to control it. This would reduce press freedom in a way that we all wish to avoid.

The best policy is to act to prevent such a crisis occurring. In the absence of an agreed system of self-regulation featuring deterrent penalties for infringements, there must be legal curbs on press irresponsibility managed by an organisation independent of government and of the press.

Realistic penalties for infringements should include a requirement to publish front-page apologies, exposure to suits for damages and at the extreme a day's moratorium on publication.

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