

The British Press is Not Serious: A Post-Mortem of Hubris in Piers Morgan's *The Insider*

The British press occupies a unique, almost schizophrenic position in the global media landscape. On one hand, it is the birthplace of rigorous investigative journalism; on the other, it is a playground for "infotainment." To ask whether the British press is not serious is to interrogate the very soul of Fleet Street. In *The Insider: The Private Diaries of a Scandalous Decade*, Piers Morgan provides an accidental manifesto for this lack of seriousness. By chronicling his tenure at the *News of the World* and the *Daily Mirror*, Morgan reveals a media culture where proximity to power is a drug, the scoop is the only moral compass, and the boundary between news and entertainment is intentionally erased.

A "serious" press is traditionally defined by its role as a watchdog—an impartial observer that holds power to account. However, Morgan's diaries illustrate the rise of the "Celebrity Editor," a figure who views themselves as a peer to the prime ministers and pop stars they cover. This shift fundamentally undermines the institution's gravitas.

Early in the diaries, we see a young Morgan at the *News of the World* fascinated by the sheer mechanics of fame. As the years progress, the fascination turns into an assumption of belonging. By the time he is editing the *Daily Mirror*, his relationship with Princess Diana becomes the most visceral example of this proximity. He details private lunches where the Princess used him as a sounding board for her public image. A "serious" press maintains a critical distance; Morgan, instead, leaned into the intimacy. This wasn't journalism in the traditional sense; it was a collaborative performance. When the press becomes a "testing ground" for royal messaging, it ceases to be a watchdog and becomes a publicist.

Furthermore, Morgan didn't just meet celebrities; he competed with them. His infamous physical altercation with Jeremy Clarkson, sparked by the *Mirror*'s intrusive paparazzi coverage of Clarkson's private life, is the perfect "not serious" moment where journalism devolved into a literal brawl. Morgan's reaction wasn't to reflect on the ethics of the paparazzi, but to celebrate the "branding" opportunity. When the editor becomes the protagonist of the scandal, he is no longer an objective observer of society.

The charge that the press is "not serious" often stems from its tendency to prioritize sensation over substance. UK tabloids frequently use populist theater to stir public sentiment. The charge that the press is "not serious" often stems from its tendency to prioritize sensation over substance. Morgan's decision to run the headline "ACHTUNG! SURRENDER"—accompanied by images of British players in helmets—was not a serious attempt at sports reporting. It was a calculated provocation designed to boost circulation by tapping into historic national rivalries. In his diaries, Morgan recounts the glee in the newsroom as the controversy exploded, noting, "It is all very, very silly, but does make me laugh." Even as the public and management reacted with what Morgan called "foaming indignation," his internal response was one of genuine bewilderment: "Why wasn't he laughing? ... where was their sense of humour?"

This quote demonstrates a total disconnect from reality. While the public saw a

"disgusting piece of journalism," Morgan only saw a joke that didn't land. It proves that the tabloid press operates in a bubble where "engagement" and "fun" are the only metrics, even when the rest of the country is in a state of outrage. When a major national newspaper treats a sporting event like a declaration of war for the sake of a laugh, it signals a move away from serious discourse toward "performative" journalism. Morgan's unrepentant attitude toward the subsequent diplomatic fallout confirms that for the tabloid editor, the "noise" created by a headline is more valuable than the "truth" of the content.

Over the decade covered in the book, the newsroom itself undergoes a metamorphosis that mirrors recent developments in UK media where journalists are tethered to their desks with increasing workloads. This environment birthed "Churnalism", where press releases are cut and pasted into articles to save time. While Morgan's diaries focus on the "high-flying" side of editing, they inadvertently document the beginning of this decline.

- Views over News: Columns have increasingly become "views" rather than "news." Morgan's era championed this, turning the editor's personality into the primary product. It is a financial reality of a "not serious" press: it is far cheaper to pay one columnist to have a loud opinion than to pay ten journalists to leave the office and find a difficult truth.
- Chequebook Journalism: The massive payment for Paul Burrell's story shows a press that believes truth can be bought rather than discovered. This commodification suggests that the press is more interested in the "market" of ideas than the "accuracy" of ideas.
- The Loss of Vertical Depth: While the tabloid press is "vertical shaped" and targets specific demographics, like the Mirror's working-class focus on boxing and football, Morgan's diaries show these interests being exploited for sensationalism rather than served with depth.

A serious press operates under a strict ethical framework. However, Morgan's diaries reveal a culture that viewed these regulations as obstacles to be survived rather than principles to be upheld. Morgan frequently refers to his inner circle as the "Mirror Mafia," a term that reframes editorial management as a blood sport. This approach is perfectly captured in his January 2000 stunt where he sponsored the boxer Julius Francis for a fight against Mike Tyson.

Morgan paid for the Mirror logo to be placed on the soles of the boxer's boots, knowing the fighter was likely to be knocked down. His glee at the result—"I sat watching it all happen at home with tears of laughter rolling down my face"—highlights a fundamental lack of seriousness. He was using a sporting event and a man's career to troll a rival network.

This lack of professional gravity became catastrophic during the "City Slickers" scandal. When Morgan was caught buying shares in Viglen Technology just before his paper tipped them, his reaction was not one of ethical reflection, but of tactical panic. Upon receiving an inquiry from the *Telegraph*, he writes, "I froze to the spot," but his subsequent entries focus almost entirely on the "war" with other papers. Even as his columnists were fired and he faced a potential seven-year prison sentence, he leaned into a "siege mentality," citing Teddy Roosevelt to frame himself as a "doer of deeds" whose face is "marred by dust and sweat and blood."

This reveals the ultimate hubris: Morgan saw himself as a gladiator rather than a financial journalist who had broken his own code of conduct. A serious press would prioritize the financial safety of its readers; a not serious press prioritizes the survival of the editor's ego and the paper's circulation figures.

The most damning evidence regarding the seriousness of the British press arrives with the Iraq War. Here, the lack of seriousness transitioned from celebrity gossip to a matter of national security. Morgan describes the symbiotic relationship between himself and Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's communications chief. The press and the government were locked in a spin cycle, part of the New Labour strategy of focusing on media reactions to establish an identity.

Morgan's diaries provide a chilling look at the "Downing Street Sofa" culture, where editors were treated as consultants for the government. Campbell's true view of the press is captured in a biting exchange where he reportedly snarled that editors "need to be" controlled. This proximity gave Morgan the hubris to believe he was a political player, and he even admitted to Peter Mandelson that the Mirror's previous blind support for the government was "Pravda style." This ultimately led to his 2004 decision to publish photos of British soldiers allegedly abusing Iraqi prisoners—photos later proven to be fakes. A serious press would have prioritized verification. Morgan's refusal to apologize highlights a "publish first, verify later" culture that is the antithesis of serious journalism.

While Morgan was dining with the elite at Chequers, he was often detached from the "somewhere" people: the rooted communities facing economic hardship. The tabloid press often treats these communities as a monolith to be stirred up rather than subjects of serious inquiry. The "Bendy Bananas" campaign, a recurring theme in the Brexit era, is a perfect example. The press focused on trivialities to drive a wedge between the UK and the EU, using headlines that suggested Europe was against bendy bananas. Morgan's diaries reflect this as a successful tactic for driving engagement over accuracy. This highlights a fundamental flaw: the press chose to focus on curved fruit rather than the complex economic and social realities of integration and multiculturalism.

Is the British press serious? Based on Piers Morgan's *The Insider*, the answer is a nuanced "no." It is a press that is deeply serious about influence, power, and profit, but remarkably unserious about objectivity, ethics, and verification. Morgan's diary reveals a decade where news was a weapon to be wielded in personal feuds and political gambles. From the flag-waving "Achtung!" headlines to the failure of the Iraq photos, the scandals Morgan recounts are the logical conclusion of a media culture that prioritizes the "insider" over the public interest. When the press is not serious, the public loses its ability to distinguish between a "bendy banana" and a "declaration of war." Ultimately, when the watchdog becomes a player, the truth is always the first casualty.