

# **FIX** **the** **MEDIA**

What We Can Do

**Media**  **North**

A Media North Publication

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# Media Reform: A Political Priority

We are living in a period of great social change against a background of rising populism and nationalism. The full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has yet to be felt in terms of public health and the economy. Meanwhile three movements are mobilising millions: around the increasing threats to us all from climate change; the #MeToo movement, against sexual harassment and sexual abuse, and the calls for fundamental and lasting change from Black Lives Matter. The latter dates back to the early part of the decade, and was given worldwide impetus following the brutal killing of George Floyd in May by members of the Minneapolis police, which was recorded on video and went global via social and mainstream media.

However, no matter what campaign for change we are involved in, we ignore the power of the media to shape public opinion at our peril. It is central to almost everything, which is why the case for media reform has never been so important.

## Newspapers

Rarely does the press critically examine itself. The issue of ever-increasing concentration of press ownership never makes the front pages; neither does the way it seeks to shape our lives and opinions. There was a brief period when the national press came under public scrutiny as a result of the fall-out from the phone hacking scandal which dated back to the first decade of this century. The scandal involved the now defunct *News of the World* and other British newspapers mainly (but not exclusively) owned by Rupert Murdoch. In addition to phone hacking there were accusations of police bribery and other unethical and illicit methods (blagging and pinging) used to get stories.

At first *The Guardian's* investigations found that hacking was limited to members of the royal family, celebrities and politicians, but in 2011 it was reported that the phones of murdered Surrey school student Milly Dowler, relatives of deceased British soldiers, and victims of the July London bombing had also been hacked. The scandal resulted in a number of corporate heads rolling

at Murdoch's company, News Corporation, and subsequently dozens of legal cases were brought against his company and the Mirror Group.

It was evident that the illegal gaining of confidential information for news stories was widespread. Press journalists, editors and executives, along with private investigators, public officials, and police officers, all benefited from the practice. Press regulation by the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) was feeble, so little was done to expose and stop these abuses in the early days. For example, in November 2009 the PCC gave the *News of the World* a clean bill of health. The PCC even said the *Guardian's* claims, which were subsequently confirmed, 'did not quite live up to the dramatic billing they were initially given'. (1)


However, the hacking of Milly Dowler's phone and the increasing public outrage at what was going on forced the government into setting up the Leveson Inquiry to examine phone hacking and police bribery by the *News of the World*, and consider the wider culture and ethics of the British newspaper industry. The inquiry published its first report in 2012 but was never allowed to finish its work. The government dropped plans in 2018 to hold the second part, which was meant to investigate the relationship between press, police and politicians, a decision condemned by many, including the NUJ and the Labour Party. Meanwhile there are still many cases before the courts about past hacking claims involving the Murdoch press and Reach (formerly the Mirror Group Newspapers, part of Trinity Mirror) which are rarely reported in the media as most are settled out of court. Vast sums of money are involved and in March 2020 media commentator Roy Greenslade reported that '... disturbing revelations, which involve allegations about the wholesale interception of voicemail messages by three MGN titles (*Daily Mirror*, *Sunday Mirror* and the *Sunday People*), appear to have passed under the mainstream media radar...' (2) A year earlier Simon Jack, the BBC's Business editor, reported that the publishers of the *Sun* and the defunct *News of the World*, along with the publishers of the Mirror Group Newspapers could face a total bill for phone hacking of up to £1bn. (3)

Very little concrete change has come about as a result of Leveson, although during this period there was strong public support for press reform partly due to the revelations made at the inquiry. For much of the mainstream/corporate press it's business as usual, although the economic foundations of the business get shakier by the month. As a result of Leveson, the main opposition parties in parliament campaigned in the 2017 and 2019 general elections on policies for limited press reform, but the substantial parliamentary majority gained by the Conservative Party in December 2019 has taken that reform off the political agenda for the life of this parliament at least. This in turn will influence just what can be done about the media as a whole, so we need to examine what issues can realistically be pursued in the coming period. These questions will be addressed in subsequent sections of this pamphlet.

In its 2019 *Media Manifesto*, the Media Reform Coalition pointed out that in this digital age our press at both national and local level is getting more concentrated with just three companies dominating 83 percent of the national newspaper market (up from 71 percent in 2015). Even when online readers are included, just five companies account for more than 80 percent of the combined markets. As we are all too aware, the mainstream or corporate press is owned by billionaire moguls who are dangerously close to this government and have considerable commercial interests in other media.

The majority of the national press is right wing in outlook, see themselves as instruments of political power (whilst publicly denying any such thing), are lacking in honesty and accuracy in their reporting and don't represent the diverse range of people and views that make up the UK.

Due to weak regulation they are almost completely unaccountable to the audiences they're supposed to serve. And those audiences themselves have lost trust in the British



**Due to weak regulation they are almost completely unaccountable to the audiences they're supposed to serve.**



media as a whole. This has been shown by many surveys, the most recent by The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism *Digital News Report 2020*, which showed that trust in news overall from broadcasting (more trusted) and newspaper (less trusted) sources in the UK was among the lowest in the world. (4) Just 28% of people in the UK said they trust 'most news most of the time' according to a poll in January this year, down from 40% in January 2019 and down 20% since 2015.

The regional and local press is facing a serious crisis. Well before the Covid-19 pandemic these sectors were in massive decline. A report to government in 2018 found that the number of frontline journalists had declined by more than a quarter - from 23,000 in 2007 to 17,000 in 2017 - and circulation and print advertising revenues had dropped by more than half over the same period. In the decade to 2018, about 250 local newspapers closed in the UK, according to the industry magazine *Press Gazette*. Much advertising revenue had shifted from classified advertising to online, while circulation of regional and local newspapers was also down in the same period by 51% from 63.4m to 31.4m. Readership was lost as the quality and range of local coverage declined mainly due to job losses. Many local communities are no longer served by a local paper which has serious consequences for democracy and accountability. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in pay cuts for journalists, thousands being put on paid leave (furloughed), falling paper sales and considerable losses in advertising revenue, despite some short-term government money for advertising copy.

As with the national press, there is an increasing consolidation of ownership of regional and local titles. The main regional news groups, Reach (formerly Trinity Mirror), Newsquest, JPIMedia and Archant (which was put up for sale in July), have been criticised in the past by the National Union of Journalists for underinvesting in local newspapers and prioritising cost cuts (the 'slash and burn' approach to the declining local market). Now even more cuts are being dished up with Reach announcing in July that it proposed to cut 550 journalists and editorial staff at its national and regional

titles across the UK to achieve savings by centralising. In 2019 Reach reported revenue of £702.5m (down 3% year on year) and an adjusted operating profit of £153.4m (up 5.4%). Digital revenue was £107m (up 17.2%).

Clearly there is a need to drastically challenge the failed economic model that underpins our press which is why in April the NUJ launched a News Recovery Plan for the UK and Ireland (see Section Two) to sustain the press and other news media through the Covid-19 crisis and reinvigorate the industry into a reimagined future, which includes an expanded role for the independent hyper-locals who are struggling to make their voices heard.

## **Broadcasting**

If journalism as a public service is being undermined at regional and local levels so is the concept of public service broadcasting at national, regional and local levels.

There are five public service broadcasters in Britain – the BBC, ITV, and Channels Four, Five (owned since 2014 by the global media group Viacom) and S4C, the Welsh-language television channel. Channel Four, which was set up in 1982 as a commissioning channel to be innovative and to cater for minorities, is now under threat as it faces financial shortfalls following a sharp drop in advertising revenue. In response, the channel's programming budget was cut by £150 million and has less than £10 million to spend until the end of 2020. It has been forced to discuss dipping into a £75m emergency credit fund to prevent collapse. Its future looks uncertain and there is frequent talk that the Johnson government is considering privatising it. (5)

In May ITV, the biggest commercial television network in the UK, reported that the pandemic had resulted in an advertising slump of 42% in April. In response the broadcaster took cost cutting measures including furloughing 800 staff, some 15% of its workforce. The broadcaster said it would reduce overhead costs by £60m in 2020, an increase in its previously announced £30m, and withdrew its final dividend for 2019. It is unclear how these measures will impact on programming and its regional and

local news coverage. Significantly, it has also called for the regulatory framework for the public service broadcasters, originally drawn up in 2003 before Facebook, YouTube and Netflix were launched, to be urgently updated.

Whilst the BBC has been facing financial difficulties for most of this decade, it has been in the political firing line since the election of the Johnson government in December 2019. Nationally it is facing massive job cuts following no increase in the licence fee between 2010 and 2017. In June 2020, the Corporation announced cuts of 450 jobs in England and 150 in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Further job losses were announced in mid-July. These cuts will hit local radio, along with regional TV and online services. The Corporation said its service in England had to contribute towards the £800m savings earmarked during this licence fee period and the £125m deficit caused by Covid-19. This means savings of £125m will have to be made in England by 2022. Earlier this year cuts of more than 400 jobs in News were announced but were later put on hold because of Covid-19.



These cuts, plus the attacks on the licence fee, represent a serious attempt by government to end the BBC in its current form. It may be hard to believe, but many in the government see the BBC as 'the mortal enemy' of the Conservative Party, a left-wing London-centred elite unrepresentative of the people. They are backed up by their attack dogs in the Conservative supporting press who want to see the Corporation's range of programmes and other activities significantly reduced.

The fact is that the BBC is the most widely used source of news in the UK although it has lower reach among the young and the less formally educated. However, because of its very structure and the way it was set up nearly 100 years ago, it has a close relationship with government (who set the licence fee), added to which its management is made up largely of establishment-leaning white men hardly representative of the diversity of our society. On the one hand it is always looking over its shoulder because of its dependence on government for its funding arrangements, and this threatens its ability to deliver impartial information and news. But on the other its impartiality is being questioned from both the left and right, which could leave it isolated and easy prey to government and the right-wing press, whose intentions are clear. In Section 4 we argue that whilst defending the BBC as a critical friend, we maintain that the Corporation needs reform and democratic accountability if it is to strengthen public trust in it.

## **The Tech Giants**

The World Wide Web was introduced in 1991 and the 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed the rapid rise of the tech giants which have changed our lives. They have also impacted on the traditional media taking away advertising revenue from newspapers, magazines and commercial television. It is interesting to recall that the first advertisement was a handbill, printed in English in 1472 to promote the sale of a Christian prayer book, a long way from the targeted ads that appear on our laptops, apps and mobile phones! The internet is also used to gather massive amounts of search data and this has raised serious questions about privacy and security. Selling information has also made the tech giants very rich. According to analysis by Techwatch earlier this year, the top five tech companies generated over £8.1bn from UK customers in 2018, but collectively paid only around £237million in taxes – an effective tax rate of just 2.9 per cent, meaning around £1.3billion in tax was avoided. With a fairer tax regime considerable funds could be used to promote public interest

**Internet giants like Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Google have become bigger financial entities than some governments.**

journalism and strengthen those new independent voices struggling to make their voices heard.

Internet giants like Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Google have become bigger financial entities than some governments. For instance, Apple's revenues in 2017 were higher than Portugal's gross domestic product. (6) And they exercise such power without much responsibility, except to

their own boards and executives, although recently Facebook came under attack from a number of high-profile advertisers over the company's failure to deal with hate speech on their platform. In addition, recent developments in digital campaigning by political parties and other campaigning organisations have led to demands to tighten up electoral and data protection law.

Whilst fake news is not new, the platform to promote it is. Propaganda has been around for centuries, and the internet and social media are only the latest means of communication to be used to spread lies and misinformation. Just how to tackle it is becoming of increased public concern and raises serious questions about just how the global internet should be regulated and by whom.

Net neutrality is the principle that all internet service providers (ISPs) must treat all internet communications equally. It means ISPs may not intentionally slow down, block or charge for specific online content. Without net neutrality, they may prioritise certain types of traffic, meter others, or potentially block traffic from specific services, while charging consumers for various types of service. Currently it is protected by EU regulation which has been adopted into UK law, but its future is uncertain with the UK leaving the EU, more especially as the US has largely abandoned this protection, although individual states can still enforce it. The current pandemic has also highlighted the digital divide in our society, the uneven distribution in the access to, and use of the internet, which impacts most on the poor and disadvantaged communities.

## Building Support

This pamphlet highlights wide ranging issues. However it does not set out a massive shopping list of changes in media policy that we would ideally like to see. Rather, it offers a number of core reforms which, if we go about it the right way, have a chance of gaining public support in the period between now and the next general election expected in 2024. But we are not losing sight of our belief in building a flourishing, diverse and accountable media in a digital age that is essential for a healthy, functioning democracy. We hope this pamphlet will be an important staging post in building a wide coalition of people to achieve this objective.

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## Notes

1. Quoted in *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/jul/29/pcc-baroness-buscombe-to-step-down>
2. Quoted in *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/business/commentisfree/2020/mar/15/its-time-to-break-the-silence-about-mirror-phone-hacking>
3. Quoted on BBC news website 'Papers' phone-hacking bill 'could reach £1bn: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-48146162>
4. Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020 [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR\\_2020\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf)
5. Revealed in *The Independent* 23 March 2020: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/channel-4-boris-johnson-privatise-downing-street-election-boycott-a9353276.html>
6. Quoted in *Business Insider* 25 July 2018 '25 giant companies are bigger than entire countries': <https://www.businessinsider.com/25-giant-companies-that-earn-more-than-entire-countries-2018-7?r=US&IR=T#apples-revenues-in-2017-were-higher-than-portugals-gdp-23>

# Newspapers

*"The press is free when it does not depend on the power of government or the power of money."*

Albert Camus

In media mythology the press is presented as an independent 'fourth estate' acting as a fearless watchdog scrutinising politicians, parties and business. This myth is now inverted. The press, with honourable exceptions, functions as a fifth column rather than a fourth estate, actively seeking to distort the democratic process.

The slogan 'the freedom of the press' is ritually rolled out when attempts are made to encourage the UK press to set up an effective system of self-regulation or to challenge it when it engages in vicious, biased attack journalism. The charges against most UK national newspapers, particularly the tabloids or 'redtops', is that they promote division through racism, political bias or sensational distortion. By any measure the UK press is not free. Tom Baistow pointed out back in 1985, 'The real freedom of the press in this country has long been the freedom of millionaires, whatever their backgrounds or countries of origin, to buy themselves newspapers that will propagate their views.' (1)

Indeed, it is precisely because the UK press is dominated by the power of government *and* money that it creates a massive imbalance which also threatens the functioning of a healthy democratic society.

One striking example of this media/political power was when, soon after the 2010 election, Rupert Murdoch announced he wanted full control of BSkyB. While the bid was going through the regulatory process under the benign supervision of then Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt there were more than sixty meetings between ministers and News Corporation executives, including Murdoch and his son James, to iron out any problems. This was happening at the same time as a high-profile public campaign

opposed Murdoch's move to take full control of BSkyB. The bid only failed when the phone hacking controversy sank it in 2011.

After the Leveson Report Murdoch's reputation was in tatters. He was shunned and books appeared predicting the fall of the house of Murdoch. That has all changed. The third episode, 'The Comeback', in the three-part documentary *The Murdoch Dynasty* shown on BBC 2 in July 2020, documents how he revived his power.

A recent *analysis* of government transparency data reveals the links between the Tory party and the Murdoch empire. Employees of Murdoch's newspapers met with government ministers or their advisors a staggering 206 times in the last 2 years. This includes editors and executives working for *The Times*, *Sunday Times* and the *Sun* newspapers. Boris Johnson has met Rupert Murdoch twice in his first year as Tory party leader, the second time 72 hours after the general election result was announced.

The 2019 general election also revealed how closely political and press power were integrated. A bloc of pro-Brexit, Conservative-supporting newspapers remained absolutely on message promoting the Tory political campaign whilst viciously attacking Labour and Jeremy Corbyn in particular. The hard-right section of the Tory party now in power has put on hold prospects for modest media reform proposals, such as the second part of the Leveson inquiry into the relationship between journalists, politicians and the police.

## **Why are we in this situation?**

### **Press History: Anti-Labour Coverage**

During the 1970s an overwhelmingly partisan right-wing national press emerged in the UK. Rupert Murdoch acquired the Labour-supporting *Sun* in 1969. From September 1978 the *Sun's* editor Larry Lamb, later knighted by Margaret Thatcher for the paper's support in the 1979 election, began to hold meetings at her Chelsea home to discuss the kind of campaign she planned. The *Express* newspaper group was acquired in 1977 by Victor Matthews, a committed Thatcherite whose company, Trafalgar House, donated £40,000 to the Conservative campaign in 1979.



He was knighted a year later. The editor of the *Daily Mail* and a committed Thatcherite, David English, was also knighted soon after the 1979 election for his loyal 'services to journalism'.

The ferocity of this new political alignment in the tabloid press was on display in January 1979 when the Labour government's voluntary incomes policy collapsed with a series of strikes by low-paid workers. The result was apocalyptic headlines. The *Sun* predicted a 'Famine Threat' and that people would die through the closure of hospital wards. Derek Jameson, then editor at the *Daily Express*, recalled, 'We pulled every dirty trick in the book; we made it look like it was general, universal and eternal when it was in reality scattered, here and there, and no great problem.' In spite of the dire predictions the only death it was possible to relate to industrial action was that of a picket who died under the wheels of a lorry.

The so-called 'Winter of Discontent' was a crisis created by the media rather than a real one. Media coverage reinforced the totally inaccurate portrayal of a discredited, union-controlled government and played a key role in Labour's subsequent election defeat. It also dramatically illustrated how key sections



of the press had shifted and were now fiercely anti-Labour. (3)

This hostility was again on display in 1992 when Labour under Neil Kinnock was slightly ahead in the polls at the beginning of the election campaign. The single most effective propaganda theme developed by the Tories and their press allies was the false media memory of the 'Winter of Discontent'. As George Orwell pointed out, 'Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.' This attack theme was integrated with ones which bear an uncanny resemblance to those deployed in the 2019 election. Fears of immigration were whipped up: KINNOCK WON'T CURB FLOOD OF BOGUS REFUGEES, *Daily Mail*, 26 March 1992; LABOUR'S TAX LIES EXPOSED, *Daily Express*, 23 March 1992; OFFICIAL: KINNOCK'S KREMLIN CONNECTION, *Sunday Times*, 2 February 1992.

Between 1979-1992, 70 per cent of the national press opposed Labour and did so in a ferocious manner as their emphasis shifted from news to opinion, the positive promotion of the Tories and the denigration of Labour's policies. Two days after his surprise defeat Kinnock announced his resignation and attacked the 'misinformation and disinformation' of the Tory supporting press which had 'enabled the Tory party to win yet again when it could not have secured victory on the basis of its own record, its programme or character'.

Tony Blair learnt the wrong lesson when he was elected Labour leader in 1994. He believed the support of Rupert Murdoch was crucial to electoral success. That was why he travelled in summer 1995 to Hayman Island, Australia, and appeased Murdoch's interests: Labour's long-standing policies on media ownership were abandoned overnight.

The reality was, in the face of a disintegrating Tory government, which was under attack from the very papers which had supported its election in 1992, Blair didn't need Murdoch's support. The voting intentions of *Sun* readers were clear - they were going to support Blair anyway, regardless of what Murdoch decreed.

Politically the decision by Blair and New Labour to win

**Politically the decision by Blair and New Labour to win Murdoch's support meant that it was in thrall to Murdoch.**

Murdoch's support meant that it was in thrall to Murdoch. New Labour abandoned social democratic policies and, in government with a huge majority, pursued a defensive economic and social agenda, rather than challenging the neo-liberal agenda established under Thatcherism. Murdoch was deeply hostile to the European Union and

also played a *coercive* role in terms of New Labour's stance on Europe.

Lance Price, a media adviser to Tony Blair from 1998 to 2001, made this observation: 'I have never met Mr Murdoch, but at times when I worked at Downing Street he seemed like the 24th member of the cabinet. His voice was rarely heard (but, then, the same could have been said of many of the other 23) but his presence was always felt.' Price's observation echoed that of Charles Douglas-Home, then editor of *The Times*, in 1984, who said that Murdoch was known in News International as 'the phantom prime minister'.

## **Newspapers Today**

In 1997 the *Sun* had a circulation of nearly 5 million. In March 2020 (the last time it released its circulation figures) it was selling 1.2m. National newspaper sales, according to the trade journal *Press Gazette* have fallen by nearly two-thirds over the last two decades. In January 2000, 16 daily and Sunday paid-for national newspapers had a combined circulation of 21.2m, but in January 2020 the same group of newspapers sold a total of 7.4m copies. So why should we be concerned about the need for urgent reform of a section of the media which seems to be dying?

The bulk of our national press is in the hands of three right-wing billionaire proprietors: Rupert Murdoch, the Barclay brothers and Lord Rothermere. The readers of these newspapers are getting older and young people don't buy them. As sales and profits plummet, now exacerbated even more by the impact

of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Barclay brothers are trying to sell their *Telegraph* titles; in February 2020 News Group Newspapers, the publisher of the *Sun* and *Sun on Sunday*, and former publisher of *The News of the World*, announced a pre-tax loss of £69m.

In May 2020 News UK announced that its titles would no longer be included in ABC circulation figures. Instead it would shift to a 'more holistic analysis of total brand reach' with a focus 'on total brand reach across mobile, tablet, PC and print' using PAMCo whose **data** indicates that News UK brands reach 72% of UK adults a month.

Surely we should just let these papers wither and die? The problem with this view is that, even in their current diminished form, these papers still have enormous influence. Indeed, there is evidence that these papers have become even more stridently partisan as their circulations and profits decline because they want to hold on to the largely elderly readers whose views they amplify.

The stark fact is that without reform of the ownership and regulation of national newspapers they will remain barriers to the economic and social policies which we need to move forward on: urgent action on climate change; inequality and low pay; rebuilding our public services; shifting political control back to local structures, and breaking the power of big money and covert lobbying in UK politics.

So what realistically can be done in the present hostile political climate?

## **Press Regulation**

Without effective, independent press regulation we won't have accurate and balanced news reporting, but the current dire state of press regulation is confusing.

Following the Leveson Inquiry which made a series of recommendations for a new, more effective regulatory system the Press Recognition Panel (PRP) was created by Royal Charter on 3 November 2014. To be recognised as a regulator bodies must comply with 29 criteria. In fact, the PRP recognises only one such

regulator, IMPRESS. IMPRESS currently regulates 155 publications but the bulk of these are small local or hyper-local publications. Left publishers like *The Canary*, *Novara Media* and *Left Foot Forward* are also registered, as is *New Internationalist*.

The vast bulk of the UK's national and regional press, with the exceptions of *The Guardian*, the *Financial Times* and *The Independent* (online), is signed up to another regulator, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO).

This was set up by the industry itself (so much for independence) when it became clear as a result of the Leveson Enquiry that the then regulator, the Press Complaints Commission, was doomed and discredited as Leveson had said that: 'It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the self-regulatory system was run for the benefit of the press not the public.'

But the press was absolutely determined to set up the kind of regulator that it wanted (that is, one that would allow it to carry on behaving exactly as it had done before) and not one sanctioned by Leveson. It thus mounted in the pages of its newspapers incessant attacks on Leveson's proposals and on those who supported them, and in October 2012 established an anti-Leveson front organisation in the form of the Free Speech Network. In the same year *Times* columnist (and former Revolutionary Communist Party member) Mick Hume wrote the book *There Is No Such Thing as a Free Press*, arguing that 'far from needing more regulation and regimentation, what the press needs is greater freedom and openness' and that press freedom was 'being muffled under a chokehold of conformism'.

The PCC's replacement would be designed to replicate it. IPSO was promoted through adverts and glowing coverage in the very newspapers which were paying for it to be set up. The mechanism for this is the Regulatory Funding Company which levies newspapers and magazines to pay for the costs of running IPSO.

It was a show of reform without the reality. There was no consultation with the public: this was exclusively newspaper executives talking to newspaper executives about how best to protect each other's interests.

The result was the creation of IPSO in autumn 2013 which

recreated the PCC's discredited complaints procedure with all the failings, so witheringly condemned by Leveson, carefully incorporated.

Since its creation IPSO has refused to submit itself for review by the PRP. Perhaps it's because they know it wouldn't pass muster. The Media Standards Trust has recently *chronicled* all the ways that IPSO is not Leveson compliant.

A government whose interests are so closely entwined with those of press proprietors is unlikely to intervene in these issues.

## Right of Reply

However, one positive focus for media reform could be to raise public and political awareness of the need for greater accountability by the press to the public by campaigning for a statutory right of reply to factual inaccuracies.

This key policy demand can unite those who are routinely the subject of biased and inaccurate media reporting: trade unionists, people of colour, Muslims, travellers, refugees, asylum seekers, trans people, climate change campaigners, and so on.

Of course, powerful UK press interests would, as they have in the past, fiercely resist this policy. But in the absence of any effective, independent regulation over their papers, and the dissatisfaction of those who have attempted to get redress through IPSO for their reporting, this can be a clear focus to draw people and organisations around this positive media reform initiative. (3)

## Protecting Ethical Journalism

Working for politically partisan newspapers can place great pressures on journalists who often work in a *bullying*, anti-union work culture. That's why trades unions are so essential to provide support and protection. Also vital is a journalists' conscience clause that enables journalists to speak out against unethical behaviour without fear of losing their jobs. (See Us and the Media page 50)

## Local and Regional Media

There is also another newspaper sector - local and regional newspapers - which has been weakened by the same economic and technological pressures affecting national newspapers. Over the past two decades the revenue sources that once made these newspapers lucrative enterprises - in particular the money that flowed in from local and classified advertising - have dried up as advertisers have shifted their spending to digital platforms.

These papers are local in name only. With a few exceptions, hundreds of local newspapers are owned by companies like Reach, JPI Media and Newsquest. Local news, or a version of it, is still being produced. Skeleton staffs at hollowed-out papers still try to inform readers about their communities. But we now have 'news deserts' where papers have closed and communities have lost the web of local stories and sometimes watchdog reporting, holding local institutions to account. As one former editor said, 'Councils and crooks must feel relaxed now that so few weeklies have sufficient space or journalists to cover councils and courts. It may seem trite, but we really are missing out on big chunks of knowledge, and that's bad for a community.' We ignore at our peril this crisis at the local and regional level: the news deserts, the information vacuums, the truths that will never be revealed.

It was in response to this crisis that the Cairncross Review was established by the Conservative government in March 2018. Its report was produced in February 2019. The government acted on some of the Cairncross recommendations but, as its proposals addressed a pre-Covid-19 world, the situation is even more dire now. A devastating **study** by media research group Enders Analysis and lobbying by the National Union of Journalists prompted action by the government which ran, from mid-April 2020, a multimillion-pound advertising campaign linked to the Covid-19 crisis in national, local and regional papers. The money was a stop-gap measure to compensate in part for plummeting advertising revenues.

However, the government's plans to help preserve local media consisted entirely of helping the major players. The modest Cairncross proposals to help independent local media were ignored

because the 'All in, all together' campaign was developed by the News Media Association, the trade body for the newspaper industry.

Creative policies are now urgently needed. We think the NUJ's *From Health Crisis to Good News* has a number of important policies to implement. It strongly argues: 'Journalism underpins democratic societies - when those structures are under strain, it is public interest news that scrutinises decision-making, bolsters public health messaging and provides accurate information as a vital counter to potentially deadly disinformation and scaremongering.'

Central to the NUJ News Recovery Plan is an urgent 6% windfall tax on the tech giants whose platforms suck up editorial content, without making any contribution to its production. The union is clear though: 'This is not and cannot be about the preservation of the status quo. The emergency intervention needed now can only be the first steps towards a news reimagined.'

'Specific intervention,' the union also argues, 'is needed to protect and invest in hyperlocal and community enterprises. These have provided much-needed diversity and proactivity in the press sector yet are especially vulnerable.'

It has very clear proposals which could be swiftly implemented:

- Establishment of a government-funded Journalism Foundation - as recommended in the UK's Cairncross Review - to invest in local news and innovative journalistic projects.
- Confer 'asset of community value' status on local newspapers - like community pubs - ensuring that titles are preserved for potential community ownership.
- Tax breaks, rate relief and other financial support for local social enterprises and journalistic cooperatives taking over titles from major regional operators, running them as not-for-profit enterprises.

The NUJ plan has great merits, needs to be publicised widely, and support won for it across the political spectrum, in the trade union movement and within civil society organisations.

You can read the full NUJ report [\*here\*](#).





## Finally

Newspapers can do invaluable work investigating corruption and malpractice. Think of the work done by Amelia Gentleman of *The Guardian* exposing the Windrush victims or by Shaun Lintern on the *Wolverhampton Express and Star* exposing

medical neglect at Stafford Hospital which led to an inquiry and the Francis report in 2013.

But too often the stories we read in newspapers or online may be inaccurate or unfair. We need quality journalism and our proposals for an effective right of reply, support for ethical journalism and journalists' rights, and for a new framework to support local and regional media are steps towards that ambition.

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## Notes

1. Tom Baistow, *Fourth-Rate Estate: An Anatomy of Fleet Street*, Comedia 1985
1. This section draws on chapter 3, 'Towards the "Winter of Discontent": the popular press and the road to 1979', in *Popular Newspapers, the Labour Party and British Politics* by James Thomas, Routledge 2005.
1. The right of reply is not a new policy. Tom O'Malley covers some of its recent history in the book, co-authored with Clive Soley, *Regulating the Press*, Pluto Press 2000.

# Fake News and Online Harms: The Press and the Internet

On 30 January 2017 the Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) Select Committee announced an *enquiry* into fake news. (1) This it defined as ‘the growing phenomenon of widespread dissemination, through social media and the internet, and acceptance as fact of stories of uncertain provenance or accuracy’. Among the questions on which it focussed were:

- What is ‘fake news’? Where does biased but legitimate commentary shade into propaganda and lies?
- What impact has fake news on public understanding of the world, and also on the public response to traditional journalism? If all views are equally valid, does objectivity and balance lose all value?
- How can we educate people in how to assess and use different sources of news?
- Are there differences between the UK and other countries in the degree to which people accept ‘fake news’, given our tradition of public service broadcasting and newspaper readership?

‘Fake news’ had for some time been a prominent topic in the national press – not the news that appears in its own pages, obviously, but in its hated competitor, the online world (apart, of course, from those parts which it owns), against which it has waged campaigns of mis – and dis-information almost since the World Wide Web became publicly available in 1991. Fake news, it relentlessly argued, was a characteristic only of online news which it didn’t itself produce.

In fact, fake news is entirely technology-neutral, and can and does occur in any medium. The term is obviously an oxymoron, but nonetheless it has been commonly used to describe four kinds of phenomena:

- ‘News’ which is deliberately made up for purely commercial purposes (i.e. attracting advertisers and/or readers).
- ‘News’ which is deliberately made up for political or ideological purposes.
- News which is not made up but is seriously inaccurate, either through lack of journalistic rigour, or because of deliberate bias, or both.
- ‘News’ which is deliberately made up for the purposes of media critique (examples include *The Day Today*, *Brass Eye*, and *The Daily Show*).

The history of journalism is, unfortunately, absolutely littered with examples from the first three groups, and particularly so in the UK. Significantly, two excellent books on the British press are entitled *Lies, Damned Lies and Some Exclusives* (1984), and *The Good, the Bad and the Unacceptable* (1993), both written by highly respected practising journalists (Henry Porter and Raymond Snoddy respectively).

‘News’ stories deliberately made up for political and ideological purposes are a particular speciality of Britain’s notoriously right-wing national press, as the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) repeatedly demonstrated. For example, stories in the late 1980s about ‘loony Left’ London councils banning children in their schools from singing ‘Baa Baa Black Sheep’ because it was racist, or stopping council employees from referring to manhole covers because it was sexist. More recently, there have been numerous stories about councils banning Christmas, bank branches banning piggy banks, and so on, because these were allegedly offensive to Muslims.

Add to this the Euromyths originally generated by Boris Johnson at the *Telegraph* which played such a key role in generating anti-EU sentiment, myths about human rights, which have been used to stir

up animosity against the Human Rights Act 1998 and the European Convention on Human Rights, untrue stories about 'floods' of refugees and asylum seekers, and you have a veritable reservoir of fake news stories.

Nor is fakery confined to 'heavy' political subjects. To take just two examples from the vast array which could have come straight from the pages of the *National Enquirer*: 'Illuminati Card Game That "Foretold 9/11 and Diana's Death" Predicts "Trump Assassination"', *Express*, 13 February 2017, and 'Close Encounter: Google Earth Satellite Pictures Show Moment Brit Was "Punched in the Face by a Grey Alien" before He Was Abducted', *Sun* (in its 'tech and science' section!), 24 January 2017.

The dangers are all the more apparent when one considers the deeply symbiotic relationship between the online versions of newspapers and other actors on the internet. Thus there are compelling financial reasons for newspapers to run in their online editions stories which are attractive to social media sites. Newspaper publishers have grown ever-increasingly reliant on Facebook shares for internet traffic and advertising income, and have accordingly ratcheted up the shock value of stories, and especially of those stories' headlines. Indeed, in an article in *The Guardian*, 17 April 2016, before the current concern with fake news had developed, Brooke Binkowski, an editor at the fact-checking site Snopes, stated that: 'Clickbait is king, so newsrooms will uncritically print some of the worst stuff out there, which lends legitimacy to - in a word - bullshit. Not all newsrooms are like this, but a lot of them are.' (2) And particularly in the case of many UK national titles. The symbiotic relationship is also demonstrated by the way in which online versions of newspapers absolutely litter their stories with readers' tweets.

On 24 January 2017 *BuzzFeed News* published a story by Jim Waterson headed 'Britain Has No Fake News Industry Because Our Partisan Newspapers Already Do That Job'. (3) This showed how certain kinds of stories regularly bounce in very considerable volumes from British tabloids to social media. These tend to be stories in the third category of fake news mentioned above, namely ones which contain a grain of truth, and rely on distortion and exaggeration rather than outright fakery.

Here's just one *example* of how this process typically works. (4) On 11 January 2017 the *Sun* ran a story headed 'Supermarket Terror', with the strap: 'Gunman screaming "Allahu Akhbar" opens fire in Spanish supermarket while "carrying bag filled with petrol and gunpowder"'. The same day's *Express* carried the headline 'Terror in Spain', with the strap: 'Gunman screaming "Allahu Akhbar" opens fire in supermarket'. Not to be outdone, *Mail Online* headed its piece 'Gunman Screaming "Allahu Akhbar" Opens Fire in Spanish Supermarket While Wearing "Suicide Vest" Filled with Gasoline and Gunpowder'.

The *Mail* story was shared 19,000 times on social media, and its breaking news tweet was retweeted hundreds of times. Amongst the pages on which the *Mail* story was shared were those of the far-right group Britain First and supporters of the anti-Muslim Dutch politician Geert Wilders, while the *Express* article was cross-posted on the blog of Pamela Geller, an anti-Muslim commentator from the US, and quoted at length by the US site *Jihad Watch*. But as *The Spain Report*, 12 January, pointed out, both the Spanish police and the supermarket chain Mercadona, which owned the shop in Ourense where these events allegedly took place, confirmed that the man did not shout 'Allahu Akhbar', was not wearing a 'suicide vest', and had no terrorist links. Instead, the incident involved a local man with what the police described as 'decreased mental faculties'. Admittedly, both the *Sun* and the *Mail* did change their stories after the truth emerged, and the *Express* took down its story altogether. However, by this time the story had already gone viral globally, and the damage had been done. One can also be certain that few, if any, of those who helped to spread it bothered to correct it, let alone withdraw it.

Unsurprisingly, the DCMS committee had carefully constructed the terms of its enquiry precisely so as to exclude consideration of the national press, but many individuals and organisations included criticisms of it in their evidence, on precisely the same grounds as those laid out above. But by this time the press industry itself had woken up to the potential dangers of the situation which it had helped to create, and mounted a defensive action. Inevitably this boiled down to arguing that Britain's newspapers couldn't possibly

publish fake news as they were so well regulated by IPSO – whose manifest failures and shortcomings are discussed in the press chapter of this publication.

Inevitably *IPSO* itself gave evidence in which it argued that what ‘provides the basis for distinguishing journalistic material from fake news’ is ‘oversight’ and ‘demonstrable accountability’ – in this instance, the good offices of IPSO itself. (5) This is entirely predictable, but what is more interesting about IPSO’s evidence is its neuralgic reaction to the consultation’s mention of ‘biased but legitimate commentary’. This it spotted as containing a possible threat to the kind of journalism in which sections of the British press specialise, journalism which has long been the subject of fierce criticism from organisations such as the CPBF but which IPSO does its absolute utmost to protect. Thus it notes that:

*The consultation suggests that bias, and other concerns relating to objectivity and the equal treatment of views, might be relevant factors in the identification of fake news. What may pejoratively be described as ‘biased’ by a critic might otherwise be positively described as campaigning journalism by a reader in agreement. The Editors’ Code of Practice, which is the basis for IPSO’s regulation of the majority of the newspaper and magazine industry, is clear that publications are free to editorialise and campaign; this only becomes problematic when it breaks down the boundaries between factual reporting, commentary and speculation, resulting in distortion.*

Unfortunately for IPSO, but as it knows perfectly well, the first clause of the Editors’ Code, which states that ‘the Press, while free to editorialise and campaign, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact’, is trampled underfoot daily and with complete impunity by significant sections of the national press. Furthermore, as scores of failed complaints demonstrate, IPSO roundly rejects the argument that opinion pieces must be based on facts – thus, for example, it would be perfectly permissible to write a column raging about a council replacing the word ‘Christmas’

with 'Winterval' when, demonstrably, there is no factual basis for the story whatsoever. A case of comments are sacred, facts are not required.

Taking a swipe at the critics of the papers which it is supposed to regulate, IPSO claims that 'the production of fake news, along with the mislabelling of legitimate content as fake news, undermines trust in traditional journalism'. However, as study after study has shown, the British trust their papers far less than do the citizens of any other EU country, and did so for decades before fake news became a subject for debate. But blithely ignoring the fact that a major reason why increasing numbers of people don't even buy, let alone trust, daily papers, is because of their strident opinionising and extreme political bias, IPSO warns the committee against trying to develop a definition of 'fake news' that would include 'journalistic content that is simply controversial or contentious. Concepts such as bias, objectivity and balance, for example, should not form part of the definition of fake news'.

In its response the **News Media Association** (NMA) also took the opportunity to mount one of its characteristically apoplectic attacks on those who have the temerity to criticise its members, complaining bitterly that:

*The term 'fake news' is being hijacked by those hostile to the press. The debate over fake news is degenerating rapidly in ways that are fraught with danger, with the term being used to attack real news, typically with the aim of bullying the press, silencing dissent and shutting down debate. (6)*

Indeed, in its view:

*Branding real news as 'fake news' is, right now, the more acute threat to democracy. Such calls are being used as a pretext for clamping down on press freedom, which would inhibit the ability of the press to perform its vital democratic task of keeping citizens informed and holding power to account.*

Which might be a valid argument if the UK national press actually performed that task.

Further press ructions have been occasioned by the government's plans to introduce an **Online Harms Bill** (absolutely inevitably described as 'world leading'). (7) This measure will impose a 'duty of care' on online providers and pressure them to remove materials 'that may not be illegal but are nonetheless highly damaging to individuals or threaten our way of life in the UK'. This is not the place to discuss this measure (which is indeed highly problematic, but not in the ways that the press portrays it), but it's important to understand that decades of press stories about the evils of the internet (apart from those parts of it that it owns) have played a significant role in propelling this measure forward, and many of these featured recently in the *Telegraph's* '**Duty of Care**' campaign. (8)

One might have thought, then, that the press would welcome this measure with open arms. But when it spotted that 'threats to our way of life' include 'disinformation' and 'false or misleading information', it realised that the very papers which had helped to shepherd this measure into existence could fall within its regulatory remit - and the press is absolutely allergic to anything remotely resembling regulation.

There are two main reasons why the press owners are concerned. Firstly, because the White Paper states:

*We propose that the regulatory framework should apply to companies that allow users to share or discover user-generated content or interact with each other online.*

*These services are offered by a very wide range of companies of all sizes, including social media platforms, file hosting sites, public discussion forums, messaging services and search engines.*



This could include comments under online versions of newspaper articles. If it did, it would bring them within the remit of Ofcom, which has been designated as the online regulatory body. (*The Times* described these as 'often lively debates', although others may sometimes wonder if they've mistakenly clicked onto the websites of Stormfront or the English Defence League). The second cause for concern, although for obvious reasons this is never quite stated outright, is that if a social media site such as Facebook felt obliged to take down content that is legal but considered harmful under the terms of the new measure, and if this is derived from material in the online version of a mainstream newspaper, this would reflect extraordinarily badly not only on that paper but on the body (IPSO) which is supposed to be regulating it. Furthermore, social media sites could well start to block links on social media to similar types of stories when they appear in online versions of newspapers, thus robbing those papers of extremely valuable opportunities for publishing clickbait.

After a draft of the White Paper was leaked to the *Mail on Sunday*, *Press Gazette*, 26 March 2019, reported that Society of Editors executive director Ian Murray had written to Culture Secretary Jeremy Wright MP raising concerns that any new online regulator and code of conduct 'does not bring in press regulation by the back door'. (9) He argued that:

*While no one would argue that some measures do need to be taken to protect against serious threats from online harm, there are concerns such regulation if too broad would restrict areas that were never intended to be regulated. An attempt to crack down on disinformation - so-called fake news - would be a case in point. Who will decide what is fake news? While we appreciate that the press and media as a whole are not the target of any new regulation in this area, there is a great deal of experience of those who wish to restrict the freedom of the media using laws never intended for that end.*

Wright *responded* on 10 April, and his reply was also sent to IPSO and the NMA. He stated that:

- ... where the online services which fall within the remit of the proposed measure are already well regulated, as IPSO and IMPRESS do regarding their members' moderated comment sections, we will not duplicate those efforts. Journalistic or editorial content will not be affected by the regulatory framework ... We are clear that the regulator will not be responsible for policing truth and accuracy online. (10)

The same points were reiterated by the DCMS Minister Lord Ashton in a debate in the Lords on 30 April. (11)

However, the press was very far from mollified. Thus, in its submission to the consultation, the *Society of Editors* stated that:

- There must be a clear and stated total exemption from the proposed laws and regulations/regulator for recognised media, their digital output, their digital presence on social media and other platforms and legitimate comment on their websites on any and all topics of discussion.
- Consideration be given to scrapping altogether the intent to regulate content considered as disinformation - fake news - and priority given to combatting illegal online content.
- All steps are taken to ensure no future government can tamper with the Online Harms law to attempt to regulate the media. (12)

*IPSO* inevitably followed the same self-serving line that it had taken in its response to the fake news consultation, arguing that:

*Inaccuracy in journalistic content should be considered differently from disinformation and fake news. The IPSO mark, and IPSO membership more broadly, demonstrates that publishers have pledged to take care in relation to avoiding inaccurate and misleading content and when they do get things wrong they will correct their content and explain this to their readers/consumers. (13)*

More interesting, however, is its obvious, but never quite overtly stated, concern that standards applied to what appears online could have a negative impact, albeit indirectly, on what appears on newspaper websites, and on the ability of social media sites to link to such material. In particular they express concern that the White Paper's proposals 'could adversely impact ... the right to express opinions and share views that other people may find offensive or challenging, and 'to be partisan, to challenge, shock, be satirical and to entertain'.

However, the strongest response by far came from the *NMA*, which ran to a furious and declamatory seventeen pages and offered a very revealing glimpse into how this organisation conceives of and exercises its role. This argues that 'the White Paper presents a grave threat to press freedom', and makes the usual point about the work of IPSO making any further regulation unnecessary, but, again, what is most interesting here is the concern that certain kinds of online press journalism might be negatively affected by regulations applying to other forms of online communication. As they point out:

*Newspaper publishers' own trusted journalism disseminated by social media will be subject to the new regime, through policing by the tech companies in the course of their own fulfilment of the duty of care upon them [via] ... their operation of 'compliance' systems advocated by the White Paper, including algorithms, commercial 'fact checker' services and moderators.*

('Trusted' in this context occurs eleven times in the document, even though, demonstrably, much of the journalism to which it refers is no such thing.)

Such a possibility would, of course, seriously jeopardise the online publishers' ever-increasing reliance on sensational clickbait. The NMA does at least admit this, but, typically, wraps up an argument about profit in the language of press freedom. Thus it states that:

*The dominance of the tech companies in search and social media entails that they now play a very significant and unavoidable role in the dissemination of news publishers' trusted content online and the audience which it attracts - as well as the advertising revenue which funds that trusted journalism.*

In its view:

*The White Paper's proposed regime will increase and legitimise the tech companies' powers and controls over the public's discovery and access to news publishers' content and their controls over the dissemination of national, regional and local news publishers' online content through Facebook, Twitter and other platforms, or the tech companies provisions of news feeds to Facebook users, traffic to its websites and search rankings. This will put at risk news publishers' journalism, its audience and the advertising revenues that fund that journalism. The White Paper proposals would therefore create disproportionate and unnecessary restrictions on press freedom.*

The NMA, the language of whose document is quite remarkably intemperate and authoritarian, all but orders the government to leave the press entirely out of the online harms arrangements. (The words 'exemption', 'exemptions' and 'exempt' occur no less than 52 times in total.) Thus:

*It is imperative that news publishers - all NMA members - and their content are wholly exempt from the proposed regime. Exemption must be complete - both robust and*

*comprehensive. Exemption must not only apply to the news publishers, corporately and individually to all their workforce and contributors and in respect of all their online publications, services, website content, but exemption must cover all news publishers' content that is disseminated online, broadcast, print or any other means, including by third parties especially the tech companies through social media and search. Such exemptions must be all encompassing and enduring, without any potential loophole that could be exploited to induce regulatory action, or legal claim, or state repression, or over cautious censorship by third party distributors.*

Well, that's telling them.

Were they to have their way, the most powerful news outlets in the country would be specifically exempted from rules applied to almost every other major website. But these, of course, are exactly the same newspapers that campaigned vociferously to have themselves totally exempted from the Human Rights Act 1998 (which they are still determined to have repealed). Thus there would be a two-tier system in which the journalism most in need of regulation once again escapes it, and online publications that are frequently highly critical of that journalism, such as *BuzzFeed News* and *HuffPost* would fall within its scope.

If it isn't already blindingly obvious, the one reform that is required here above all is a Leveson-compliant system of press self-regulation. This would rid the press, in both its printed and online versions, of its most problematic contents, which would in turn pull the plug on the material circulating on social media which has its origins in such contents. Of course, the bullies of the NMA will ensure that this will never happen, but that, of course, is why we need the reforms put forward in the press chapter of this publication.

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## Notes

1. 'Fake news inquiry launched', available at <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/culture-media-and-sport-committee/news-parliament-2015/fake-news-launch-16-17/>
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# Public Service Broadcasting - What it is and what it could be

Broadcasting is like the weather, we all have opinions about it. We take it for granted, except when we're stretched to pay the BBC's licence fee or renew our Netflix subscription, or are angered by inaccuracy and bias. This chapter suggests we should pause and consider what it is, and what it could be.

Before the 1980s TV and radio in the UK meant BBC1, BBC2, ITV, BBC Radio and Independent Local Radio, with Channel 4 and S4C added in 1982; broadcast services regulated to make sure they provided a content which met as wide a set of social needs as possible - Public Service Broadcasting (PSB). Since then the changes have been immense. Satellite, cable, internet, phone, and smart TVs have opened up new ways of experiencing content and also new sources of content: subscription services like Sky TV, Netflix, Amazon Prime, NOW TV; catch up services - the ITV Hub, More4 or BBC iPlayer; podcasts; streamed music; video, music and speech on YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter!

Welcome as many of these changes are, there is a problem. Once at the centre of our lives as viewers and listeners PSB is rapidly being undermined by policies promoting more commercially orientated content at the expense of the idea that content should prioritise the public interest, that is, content designed to inform, educate and entertain, over content calculated to attract large amounts of advertising or subscription income.

This chapter tries to cast light on what is driving this change. It points to the successes and shortcomings of PSB and presents some simple, workable ideas designed to help democratise and develop public service broadcasting in our ever more complex media environment.

More is at stake than meets the eye. Changes to PSB mirror what has happened to public services in general in the UK over the last forty, dark years of neo-liberal governments pledged to enhance the wealth of the few with scant regard to the welfare of the many. (1)

## What is Public Service Broadcasting?

These days it can be popular dramas like *The Bodyguard*, *Killing Eve*, *A Very English Scandal*, *Gentleman Jack*, *The Durrells*, *His Dark Materials*, *I May Destroy You*, *Dr Who* or top serials like *Coronation Street*, *EastEnders*, *Pobol y Cwm*, *Emmerdale* or *Holby City*. Or it's popular entertainment: *X Factor*, *Strictly Come Dancing*, *Eurovision*, *The Great British Bake Off* and *Gogglebox*. It includes documentaries like *Blue Planet*, *Dynasties*, *Horizon*, or specials such as *Once Upon a Time in Iraq*, *The Rise of the Murdoch Dynasty*, *Stephen: The Murder that Changed a Nation* or *Grenfell: Our Home*.

Comedy programmes, like *Fleabag*, *Gavin and Stacey*, *Chewing Gum*, *Derry Girls*, or *Ghosts*. News bulletins on the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and S4C, or current affairs documentaries like *Dispatches* or *Panorama*. Sport is a staple, as is the long tradition of great children's programmes like *Blue Peter*, *Horrible Histories* and *Crackerjack*.

PSB channels include all BBC Channels, ITV, ITV Breakfast, Channel 4, Channel 5 and S4C. In addition there are the BBC iPlayer and BBC Sounds for on-demand viewing and listening. There are the BBC Radio Channels: Radio 1, Radio 1xtra, Radio 2, Radio 3, Radio 4, Radio 4 Extra, Radio 5 Live, Radio 5 Live Sports Extra, 6 Music, Asian Network, BBC Scotland, Radio nan Gàidheal, Radio Cymru, Radio Ulster, Radio Foyle, and BBC Local Radio; and the very popular, domestically and globally, BBC Website. Together, in 2020, PSB channels provided over 32,000 hours of new UK content in a wide range of **programme** types. Apart from the BBC News Channel they are distinguished from their purely commercial rivals by having to provide a mix of high quality education, information and entertainment programming.

## PSB in the 2020s

72% of all PSB viewers highly rate the importance of showing new programmes made in the UK. In 2018 Public Service Broadcasters accounted for 55% of all television viewing, although younger viewers aged between 16 and 34, watched less than **older ones**. In 2019 BBC One was the most-used



news source among adults (58%), followed *by* **ITV** (40%). During the Covid-19 health emergency of 2020, PSB became a crucial source of information. In the first phase of the crisis, the BBC News website 'recorded its biggest ever weekly traffic, with 70m unique browsers on its sites and apps.' **The BBC News** Channel audience grew by 70% on its 2019 average. ITV's News at Ten was up by 22% and BBC News at Six up by 27%. At **21 April 2020**, BBC services were the most used source of information about the Covid-19 crisis.



**PSB gives greater attention to public affairs and international news than purely commercial systems, designed simply to deliver viewers to advertisers**

At **21 April 2020**, BBC services were the most used source of information about the Covid-19 crisis.

PSB gives greater attention to public affairs and international news than purely commercial systems, designed simply to deliver viewers to advertisers. It makes people more knowledgeable about those topics, minimising the knowledge gap between advantaged *and disadvantaged citizens*. When they make entertainment programmes the requirement that they are of high quality means they have to be innovative, original, respect their audiences and have high production values, all important contributions to an accessible, rich, public culture. In spite of the competition, PSB still occupies a very important space in the communications landscape of the 2020s.

## **What makes PSB work?**

The simple answer is law and regulations designed to provide a positive framework for the creation of high quality, diverse programming.

The Communications Act 2003 invests the regulator, Ofcom, with powers to oversee commercial, that is, advertising or subscription funded companies which take on some PSB obligations (ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5), and aspects of the BBC's activities. Programmes have to cover a wide range of subject matter; services need to meet the needs and satisfy the interests of as many different audiences as practicable; television services

have to be properly balanced in subject matter and nature; and programmes have to maintain high standards in content, quality and editorial integrity. All PSB channels, including the BBC, have to be universally accessible, free at the point of reception and adhere to due impartiality in the presentation of news and **current affairs**.

The Royal Charter and Agreement is the instrument governing the BBC's mission to inform, educate and entertain. The current Charter started on 1 January 2017 and will have a mid-term review in 2022. The BBC's Board, which is in charge of the organisation, has to make sure the Corporation fulfils public purposes: providing accurate, impartial, news and information; supporting learning for people of all ages; showing the most creative, high quality, distinctive output; representing the diversity of the communities, nations and regions in the UK; reflecting the UK, its culture and values, to the world. Ofcom monitors the BBC to make sure it fulfils these **obligations**.

The BBC is funded largely by a licence fee levied on owners of TV sets. ITV, Channel 4, S4C are supported by advertisements and sponsorship. The licence fee allows the BBC to experiment with programming that may never attract large audiences, but is of immense social or cultural value. Additionally, Channel 4 has a **legal responsibility** to make programmes which champion unheard voices, innovate and take bold creative risks, inspire change in the way we lead our lives and stand up for diversity across the UK. The **public regulation** of broadcasting has also helped fund a strong **creative industry** sector in the UK, which is heavily dependent on Public Service Broadcasters commissioning a wide range of work from it.

## **Popular but far from perfect**

PSB is popular and has been a major contributor to the quality of life in the UK for decades, because it is carefully regulated in the public interest. But it is not perfect.

It has a long history of informative and campaigning journalism. BBC coverage helped undermine public support for the illegal invasion of the Suez Canal by the UK in 1956. PSB journalism

**On the other hand, on key, pivotal issues, the BBC, our most important broadcaster, has routinely interpreted due impartiality in a manner 'skewed towards the interests of powerful groups'.**

exposed the injustices associated with the imprisonment of the Birmingham Six after the 1974 pub bombings, and police malpractice towards miners arrested at Orgreave in 1984. There are many more examples of this, especially from programmes like the BBC's *Panorama*, ITV's *World in Action* and *This Week*. (2) In recent years PSB has informed the public in detail about the threat to the planet posed by climate change. Also,

innovative and challenging programmes, such as *The Wednesday Play*, *Play for Today*, *Film on Four*, *Line of Duty*, *Noughts + Crosses*, or *McMafia*, are part of a long tradition of engaging public interest in important issues by using drama.

On the other hand, on key, pivotal issues, the BBC, our most important broadcaster, has routinely interpreted due impartiality in a manner 'skewed towards the interests of powerful groups'. On 18 June 1984, BBC news altered the sequence of events in their coverage of a confrontation between the police and striking miners at Orgreave, to make it appear that the miners had provoked the police, in the context of reporting that, like that of the newspapers, was overwhelmingly favourable to government perspectives. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to BBC coverage which tended to reflect pro-war assumptions linked to its reliance on US and British government sources. (3)

BBC reporting of the **2008 financial crisis** was dominated by the perspectives of stockbrokers, investment bankers, hedge-fund managers, traditional economists and City analysts. Its coverage of internal conflicts in the Labour Party in 2016 gave nearly twice as much airtime to critics of the Leader, Jeremy Corbyn, than to his supporters. (4) During the **2019 General Election** campaign, the BBC gave far more time to critical analysis of the Labour Party's Manifesto by the Institute of Fiscal Studies, than to that of the Tories. So, all is not well with the editorial judgement of the BBC.

In addition, the BBC has also suffered from the social and political biases that riddle the system of appointments. Only 7% of the population are privately educated, but in 2019, 29% of BBC executives had been to private schools and 31% of BBC News executives went to Oxford or **Cambridge**.

Many of the key figures in BBC journalism and management have very right of centre associations. Evan Davies, who in 2020 was the lead presenter on the BBC Radio 4 flagship PM programme, was at one time seconded to Mrs Thatcher's office to work on the infamous Poll Tax. (5) **Sarah Sands**, who was appointed editor of the BBC Radio 4 programme *Today* in 2017, came to the BBC having been Editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*, Consultant Editor on the *Daily Mail* and Editor of the *London Evening Standard* - all Tory supporting newspapers. In 2013 **James Harding**, editor of Rupert Murdoch's *The Times* between 2007 and 2012, was appointed Director, BBC News and Current Affairs; and the **high profile** political journalist Andrew Neil, formerly editor of Murdoch's *Sunday Times*, has been, since 2008, the **Chairman of Press Holdings**, whose titles include the right-wing weekly, *The Spectator*, formerly edited by Boris Johnson. In 2020 the BBC appointed **Tim Davie** to succeed Tony Hall as Director General, a man with a background in marketing for Pepsi Cola Europe and Proctor and Gamble, and - surprise, surprise - formerly deputy chairman of the Hammersmith and Fulham Conservative Party.

The people who run Ofcom and the BBC are appointed in a way that excludes the public and lacks any form of democratic accountability; unsurprisingly their make-up bears no resemblance whatsoever to the social composition of the population they are meant to serve. **Melanie Dawes**, appointed in 2019 as Chief Executive of Ofcom, at a salary of £315,000 per year, is a former top civil servant. In 2020, the **Ofcom Board** on which she sat was comprised of people with equally unrepresentative backgrounds, usually from senior positions in telecoms, accountancy, broadcasting and investment banking. At the same time, the **BBC's Board** was full of people with backgrounds in industry and public life, not one of whom owed their position to a process of public selection conducted wholly outside the Corporation. In neither

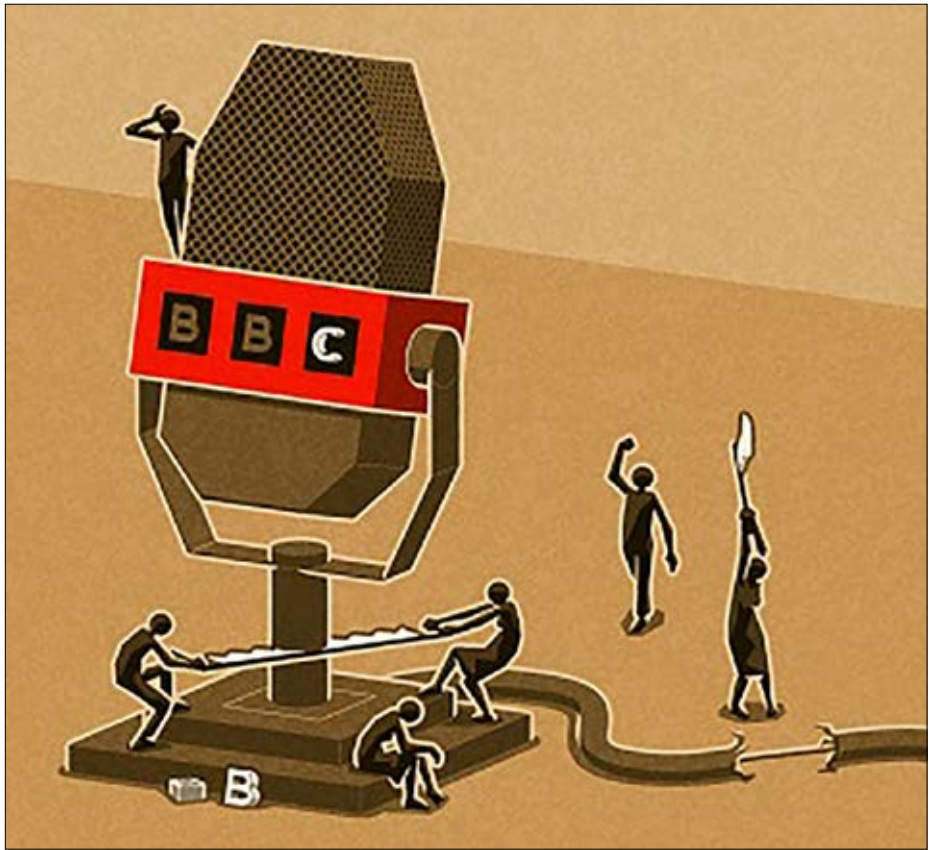


Illustration: Matt Kenyon

case does the appointments procedure foster any strong sense of accountability to a world outside the upper echelons of politicians, civil servants, regulators and broadcasters.

### **Eroding, undermining, changing PSB**

This situation arguably owes much to the fact that, since the late 1980s, PSB has been subject to attacks by governments determined to promote more market competition in the media and to ensure that those running the system broadly support that perspective. In 1986 the Peacock Report recommended that broadcasting should operate primarily as a commercial enterprise; that ITV companies should have more commercial competition; that the BBC should provide only what the market

couldn't; and that, in time, the licence fee should be replaced by subscription. Subsequent government policy has been framed by these ideas. In addition, the commercial media organisations, like Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, have been trying to weaken PSB by relentlessly lobbying successive governments to 'deregulate' broadcasting and by remorselessly attacking the BBC in the pages of their newspapers in order to undermine the Corporation and so grab a bigger slice of the market. (6) The BBC has also been subject to decades of criticism by right-wing think tanks such as the Institute of Economic Affairs and organisations like *News-Watch*. News broadcasters such as the extreme right-wing Fox News in the USA, and channels stacked with poor quality entertainment programming is what would face us were these kinds of attacks successful in destroying PSB.

Since the 1980s, under pressure from intensified commercial competition, and, in recent years, with the support of Ofcom, ITV has shed many of its public service obligations. Indeed, since 2003, Ofcom's job has been to cultivate the spread of competition in communications. The BBC's finances have been squeezed by government control over the amount of licence fee revenue it can raise. Between 2010 and 2020 the BBC's real income *was slashed* by 30%. Between 2008 and 2018 the amount of drama produced on all PSB channels dropped by **289 hours** and spending on programmes for the nations and regions declined by **3%**.

BBC Director Generals have supported market orientated changes in the Corporation (John Birt in the 1990s), or have agreed, under direct pressure from Tory governments, to the BBC taking on massive financial obligations, such as funding S4C, the World Service and the licence fees of people *over 75* except for those receiving *Pension Credit*, at colossal cost to the organisation (Mark Thompson and Tony Hall in the period after 2010). (7) Many of the senior appointments mentioned above are arguably a consequence of the Corporation bowing to political pressure from successive neo-liberally inclined governments.(8)

## Ditch PSB? Move to Subscription

The influential neo-liberal think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs, stepped up the pressure in 2020, reasserting its long held policy that the BBC should be *funded by subscription* and that there is 'no need for specific policy in relation to public service broadcasting'.

By 2018, subscription services like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and NOW TV had revenues of £1.3billion. *Even PSB channels* like Channel 4 and ITV were rolling out subscriptions for advertisement-free versions of their online hubs; and ITV and BBC have launched the subscription service BritBox. By **2019**, 5.1 million households had at least two of either Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, or NOW TV. The existence of these giants puts pressure on the system, generating calls to end the licence fee, and lift regulations limiting advertising-funded PSB channels' capacity to make money. So, why not ditch the licence fee and get rid of PSB obligations in ITV?

Well, subscription services don't want to have to make PSB content. In 2018, UK PSB channels were producing 32,000 hours of new productions, compared to just **210** hours on Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. Companies like Netflix transmit considerable amounts of BBC programmes, funded originally by the licence fee, but their services are dominated by *American content* which is no substitute for PSB produced UK-relevant, new content. Anyway Netflix is about maximising profit, not spending on PSB content. In 2018 it paid no UK tax on an estimated **£860 million** in revenues earned here!

Also, the vast range of output we get from PSB costs us nothing, directly, for the advertising funded channels, and only **£157.50** a year, or about £13.12 per month for the BBC Licence. Netflix, which produces very little original UK programming, can cost between **£5.99** and £11.99 a month.

## Futures

In spite of sustained attacks and major changes to the media environment since the 1980s, PSB remains a much loved and important part of the communications landscape. But many of the changes that have occurred point, in particular, to the need

for a radical overhaul of policy and the principles governing appointments to senior regulatory and broadcasting positions and for a new sense of public service in broadcasting

Change is possible. Broadcasters are less racist, less homophobic, less sexist, more committed to diversity in employment and representation on screen than they were 40 years ago, because people campaigned hard for change.

We need to elect the Boards of Ofcom and the BBC, or, if not, organise a system of nominations from representative organisations in society, free of government interference.

The licence fee should continue, until we find a workable alternative. That could be a tax on all households, set, collected and distributed independently of government. And it should fund only the BBC, not licences for pensioners, S4C or the World Service - these have traditionally been the responsibility of government, and rightly so.

Setting the level of the licence fee gives government too much power over the BBC. We should establish an independent board to fix the fee. We might also think about doing away with the Charter Reviews, or holding them less often, as these are frequently used by governments to apply pressure to the BBC.

We must devolve power over strategy to the national Parliaments and Assemblies of the UK, ensuring that they too set up structures to keep broadcasting oversight independent of political interference.

All regulatory bodies should have strong independent representation from the public, major community organisations, and trade unions representing workers in the industry.

Ofcom should be made to prioritise public service provision over and above the management and promotion of markets. This means rewriting the purposes of the organisation as set out in the Communications Act 2003 so as to place the emphasis squarely on promoting public service values across the communications system, rather than the current vague and commercially focused requirements to '**further the interests** of citizens in relation to communications matters ... and of consumers in relevant markets, where appropriate by promoting competition'.



PSB should remain universally accessible, with public support for those who cannot afford the licence fee. Subscription prevents universal access to high quality programmes.

A levy on the advertising revenue of media monsters like News Corporation, Google and Netflix can provide funds to support initiatives giving voice to people from a greater diversity of backgrounds. Ofcom's regulations should be altered to make any provider deliver PSB content once it reaches a specified share of the market.

We can see what is happening to all our public services, our environment and our welfare because of the effects of neo-liberal, right wing policies. That is also happening to Public Service Broadcasting as its purposes are eroded from within and without. We need to act to preserve and extend the principle of public service in communications. You never know what you've had - the everyday, the routine, the barely thought of - until it's gone!

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## Notes

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# Us and the Media

As viewers, listeners or readers, we are not passive consumers. With media, we don't just take it or leave it. Yes we can pick and choose, but, as citizens, we can engage with them. Using digital technology, we can interact with many types of media and take part in a process of change.

## Stand With The Staff

Throughout this century there has been a fall in media standards that mirrors that of the general public discourse, in which national leaders are not only undamaged by revelations of their dishonesty but can brag about it. They call it 'post-truth', but it is not just a matter of declining accuracy; there is yet more commercially-oriented, advertising-based, clickbait-driven, badly-edited dross which also drives declining accuracy. If media are to improve, then it is journalists that will have to play a role. This is a task that many of them appreciate but few have the confidence to perform. A whole storm of political trends has flattened journalism into its worst condition in recent history: for a start there has been a weakening of the unions, the loss of thousands of jobs and the casualisation of many that remain, and the collusion of powerful media corporations with evermore right-wing governments.

We described earlier how powerful media groups were able to mount, unchallenged, an assault on an imaginary threat to press freedom posed by the Leveson report. They told their staff, already fearing for their jobs, that they were in a fight for survival, with the enemy at the gates!

Too many fell for it. Faced with a backlash from members in the national publications, the National Union of Journalists, which supported Leveson's reforms, had to withdraw its support for one contentious proposal that would have penalised publications that failed to sign up to a 'recognised' regulator under the scheme.

For nearly 20 years the NUJ's own prescription for raising standards has been through the adoption of a 'conscience clause' in journalists' contracts of employment. This would entitle them to

decline to do work they consider to be in breach of the NUJ Code of Conduct without fear for their jobs, by giving them a defence at the tribunal if they are sacked.

The idea had been advocated in the early 2000s by the NUJ chapel at the *Express*, where the then proprietor Richard Desmond was dictating racist front page headlines about immigrants, sometimes for days on end; he also instructed business desk staff to write favourably of investments he liked and slag off his commercial rivals.

The proposal was submitted to the Leveson hearings where it won the approval of Lord Justice Leveson. It is, after all, a basic principle of independent journalism that practitioners be free of direction by state, political or commercial interests; a requirement of press freedom, in other words - one that the freedom-loving proprietors of the British press somehow fail to recognise.

They refused even to entertain discussion with the NUJ. The conscience clause campaign must be taken up as widely as possible again.



It is easy to despise and ignore much of the mainstream media, but despite what many would wish for, they are not going away. They are simply, under commercial pressure, migrating their output away from print to online. The billionaire owners of the bloc of right-wing newspapers, the managers, the editors and the columnists hired to write to order may be our enemy, but the bulk of working journalists are not.

They are, however, in an unenviable place. Journalists are beleaguered, desperate and demoralised. Such have been the excesses of their employers and so mistrusted is their work that it has come to be defined almost entirely by its failings. Most people want their work to be known by its successes, and journalists do have plenty. Yet they are better known for what they get wrong.

So, if people do appreciate brave and honest reporting they should let it be known: share the items on social media, forward them to colleagues and friends, message the journalists. Why not? Do complain when it's warranted, but try to bear in mind that for every item you object to there are probably a dozen you have seen the same day that were quite acceptable and helped you form your view of the world. After all, everything we know about the world outside our own circles comes from some media or other, including new entrants producing excellent journalistic work, for example, *Byline Times*, *Byline Investigates*, *openDemocracy* and so on.

## **Hit Them Where It Hurts**

The owners' derisory response to Leveson's plan for a truly independent self-regulator was to rebadge their tame regulator the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) as the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). There were a few token gestures such as the announcement of an arbitration scheme for complaints that no-one has ever taken up, as far as examination of IPSO's website can show. It also promised fines.

It is often said that the inclusion of 'independent' in the title of an institution means that it isn't but wants people to believe it is. Rarely can this have been more true. No-one should ever take a complaint about the press to IPSO. Its true function is to protect the editors from the readers. It acts as a buffer to fob off complainants and to

**It is often said that the inclusion of 'independent' in the title of an institution means that it isn't but wants people to believe it is.**

avoid responsibility.

If you complain to a paper about something that defamed or offended you, you are likely to be referred to IPSO. Refuse this absolutely. Write back and say, no, I want to deal with the paper directly; they have done this and it is the editor's responsibility. Keep saying it. Engage with them. They hate that.

In the USA there is no statutory regulation that is specific to the press. Any suggestion of restraint, even as feeble as IPSO's, is seen as a breach of the First Amendment (the free press amendment) to the US constitution. As a result, the media must face their critics themselves.

The US press is protected by libel laws that effectively make it impossible for people in public positions to bring legal action claiming lost reputation, but their standards are far higher than ours because they have an entirely different press culture which takes seriously its public responsibility and in return expects press freedom to be respected. The US press employs small armies of fact-checkers, readers' editors and researchers, something which sections of the UK press regularly sneer at and accuse of producing 'boring' and 'worthy' journalism. Their politics may be as bad as ours, but their journalism is more publicly responsible.

Why should we trust the press to regulate itself? We are suspicious of police and lawyers doing so; why should press journalists be different? The answer is that any state-backed outside influence is supposed to infringe press freedom, but does it really?

If you accept that it does, as Leveson did, then the press are effectively unaccountable. But judging their work after publication, which an effective regulator would do when there's a complaint, doesn't censor anything. The crucial concept is prior restraint - that media must never be prevented from publishing what they wish. This is the 'publish and be damned' principle. Expecting them to take responsibility for what they have done, after the event, as everyone else in society has to

do, is surely fair. We need effective self-regulation of the press, which is what IMPRESS, the only Leveson-compliant press regulator, offers. The problem is that, as we described earlier, the big media groups refuse to join it. This is an essentially political problem highlighted by the relationships between the national press and successive governments.

The sad truth is that the industry is in such a sorry state – at the same time paranoid and overbearing – that it is utterly unwilling to hold itself to account.

## **Support Your Chosen Media**

Ask yourself a question, if you were around more than ten years ago: how much might you have spent each week on media, buying newspapers, magazines, pay-TV, subscriptions and donations? Say, £20 a week? And what are you doing with the money now? The internet has given everyone the idea that they can get news, information and entertainment online for free? So why pay for it? Ironically, this notion has been strengthened by the two media companies considered by many to be better than most: *The Guardian* and the BBC, which provide copious content round the clock free of charge. *The Guardian* is honouring its solemn commitment never to charge for access, and the BBC is just always there.

Access to neither is actually free. We all pay for the BBC, and *The Guardian* runs on a sophisticated version of the crowdfunding model. It has a complicated combination of support membership and selling membership activities, but it's paid for by those who choose to do so.

No news comes for free. All media cost money to produce and if we want them we must fund them. Subscribe or donate to media you like and support crowdfunding appeals, especially if they don't take advertising. For instance, Wikipedia is a brilliant resource that runs on donations. When it started, commercial media were keen to prove it unreliable because it is largely compiled by amateurs, people who know what they are talking about!

No other large-scale outlet permits external correction to the same extent. Give generously!

And if media you appreciate do rely on advertising, then never use ad-blocking software. Irritating as ads are, if publications take them, then they are what keep them afloat. Reading *The Canary* is like being hopelessly lost in a black and yellow maze, but it needs the money!

## **Organising For Change**

We obviously cannot rely on the mainstream media to inform the public about the changes needed. Nor can we rely on politicians when the climate is so hostile. Structural change can't happen until politicians know that the public are vocal and organised demanding it.

The problem is that, as we have seen, it isn't just those who want democratic, accountable media reform who are active around these issues. Indeed, such voices are often over-shadowed by groups like #DefundtheBBC and #scummedia which get wide publicity. We have to recognise that these ultra-populist groups can draw on a deep well of anger over issues such as the changes to the BBC licence fee for the over-75s. The 'solutions' that these groups offer would lead not to a more democratic and publicly accountable media but to a broadcasting system which reproduces all the worst aspects of the press, and to newspapers even more extreme and raucous than they are now.

We should all take the message wherever we can. You can contact the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (North) or other media reform campaigns. We can provide materials, a speaker for a meeting, or a model resolution to take it through your trade union or Labour Party branch.

But these traditional labour movement methods are no longer the principle campaigning routes. We need to strengthen our links with progressive social media and other online resources such as the expanding 'clicktivist' petition sites which have a much wider reach with faster results.

In the present state of post-election defeat we have to get things going quickly, but it's important to remember that the media reform movement has had its successes. One is the continued public service status of the BBC. Its powerful

commercial rivals have been trying to undermine it, break it up, divert its income to their own purposes, cut back its website or force it into a subscription service model for decades, often with the active support of governments, but it is still there.

It is true that the BBC's own management has too frequently caved in to government pressures, for fear of threatened reductions in its licence fee income, and accepted several such humiliations, but there is no doubt that constant pro-public service campaigning has combined with popular appreciation of BBC programming to maintain its basic status while other public services have been privatised altogether.

There have been particular successes against the media reformer's leading demon, Rupert Murdoch. After his defeat of the media unions in the 1980s and his triumphalist TV rampages of the 1990s, things turned sour for his News Corporation conglomerate in the new century. His newspapers suffered more than most in the print turndown, with the great scandal following their illegal snooping activities now estimated to have already cost him around a billion pounds, and still rising. Murdoch's repeated bid to win outright global control of the Sky TV network failed twice: the first time because of the phone-hacking scandal, the second because bigger and even more rapacious US-based corporations beat him to it.

But both the Sky bids were held up by determined opposition campaigns for months on end that allowed the lethal factors to develop. The first, in 2010-11, by the CPBF and the media unions, was topped off by the new online campaign 38 Degrees, which notched up what is believed to have been its first 100,000-plus petition.

The second bid saw a consortium of protest groups centred on the Media Reform Coalition (MRC), again including 38 Degrees, but now also with the global campaign Avaaz. The team produced impressive research reports and worked closely with opposition politicians. The outcome was sweet revenge for a movement that had resisted the Murdochs for 30 years.

As well as these networks there are the Downing Street petitions and the instant petitions anyone can start on [change.org](http://change.org) and



others. For media critiques there are the Media Reform Coalition, Media Lens, and InForm; the anti-racist Stop Funding Hate initiative that targets advertisers, with some success; and Hacked Off, the anti-phone-hacking pro-Leveson group that has kept going on its mission for effective press self-regulation.

We also have new sources for information on bias: single-issue and political blogs and websites that focus on hostile or unfair coverage in their areas. New media that have sprung up since 2015 - *The Canary*, *Novara*, *Evolve Politics* and *The Skwawkbox* - all go in for critical analysis of reporting of the Labour Party. Beyond these, other organisations campaign against racist reporting such as MEND, TellMAMA and the Muslim Council of Britain.

Then there's *Zelo Street*, which critiques appalling press coverage of all sorts, and *SubScribe* which highlights the best and worst of UK journalism. And, if in doubt about the veracity of a report, there is the invaluable work of *Full Fact*. All these organisations' work deserve wider attention - they're nothing like as well known as they should be, even among media reformers.

There's plenty going on but we need more co-ordination. That applies to all those working for media reform, but we also need to involve the people and organisations at the receiving end of biased, inaccurate reporting in this activity too. We hope the ideas and policies presented here can persuade you to play an active role to make them a reality.

**MediaNorth** is the quarterly publication of the Campaign for Press & Broadcasting Freedom (North) which covers the North West, Yorks & Humber and North East of England. We also have supporters in Scotland.

CPBF (North) highlights threats to regional media such as the assaults on jobs and conditions in local and regional newspapers, and campaigns for strong regional media. We also strongly support alternative media, both print and online.

Nationally we want diverse, democratically accountable media.

CPBF (North) publishes books and pamphlets, and holds public meetings. If you want to support CPBF(North) you can do three things:

- Contact us at [cpbfnorth@outlook.com](mailto:cpbfnorth@outlook.com) to join our email list to receive future issues of *MediaNorth*, details of public meetings and other news
- Become a friend of CPBF(North) on Facebook at Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom North or follow us on [Twitter@campaign\\_and](https://twitter.com/campaign_and)
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# It's the Media, Stupid!

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the 2019  
Election and  
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# FIX *the* MEDIA

## What We Can Do

*Fix the Media* recognises a harsh reality. The hard-right Tory government now in power makes the prospect of even modest media reforms minimal. Instead Tory hardliners want their own destructive 'reforms' – and one target is the BBC, which it is actively destabilising.

*Fix the Media* argues that the media reform movement needs to move quickly and get organised. *Fix the Media* focuses on some key policy proposals for us work together on and build wide support for.

*“The NUJ is campaigning for a news media reimagined, one that is squarely focussed on the public good, and key to that is the long-overdue need for media reform. *Fix the Media* is a welcome contribution to that debate and the push for meaningful change and greater plurality in the UK media.”*

**Michelle Stanistreet,**  
General Secretary, National Union of Journalists