

Media North

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Murdoch at 90 still exerts his baleful influence over media and politics

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IT DIDN'T JUST HAPPEN!

By Granville Williams

ON 28 August 2009, before the phone-hacking scandal engulfed him and his father, James Murdoch gave the Edinburgh MacTaggart lecture. It was a polemic, a classic free-market attack on any form of media regulation with a particular focus on the BBC.

“No amount of governance in the form of committees, regulators, trusts or advisory bodies is truly sufficient as a guarantor of independence.... independence is characterised by the absence of the apparatus of supervision and dependency,” he said. He concluded, “The only reliable, durable, and perpetual guarantor of independence is profit.”

Fast forward to the present and the mounting concern in the US over the role Fox News, Sinclair Broadcasting, One America News Network, News-

Media policy decisions created a polarised media

max, and other conservative broadcasters play in disseminating disinformation to tens of millions of Americans.

In the UK we also see the influence and dominance of a bloc of right-wing newspapers which are able to poison political debate and create deep divisions. This at a time when UK public service broadcasting, with the requirement to be impartial in its news and current affairs reporting, is under threat (see p4).

Limbaugh effect

One clue to the origins of this disinformation and division is to examine how Rush Limbaugh, the right-wing ‘shock jock’ American broadcaster who died in February, became

so influential, injecting partisan venom into the US political bloodstream and providing his millions of listeners with scapegoats for their anger. He had an audience by 1994 of 20 million Americans tuning in on some 650 stations.

This dire situation didn’t just accidentally happen in the US. The polarisation of the US media stems in large part from public policy decisions – it was not inevitable. Coverage of political debates and controversies was shaped by the Fairness Doctrine, a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) policy which began in 1949. The doctrine was based on the notion that the television networks were ‘public trustees’. Licensed by

the federal government, they ought to serve the entire nation, the argument went, by airing competing perspectives on controversial issues.

In the 1980s, all of this changed. President Ronald Reagan believed the marketplace, not the government, was the best arbiter for competing viewpoints in broadcasting. Reagan’s appointee for FCC commissioner, Mark Fowler, had long opposed the Fairness rule.

Abandoning context

The abandonment of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 paved the way for Limbaugh and other opinionated broadcasters to address audiences on matters of political sensitivity and public interest without an obligation to provide contrasting views or context, and the establishment of Fox News in 1996 brought

• Continued on Page 12

PRESS CONTORTIONS CAN'T COVER UP BREXIT MESS – PAGE 6

Stephen Dorril on why the security services targeted trade unions post-1968

Spooks and the unions

THE ongoing inquiry into undercover policing is gradually revealing the activities of the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS) which was initiated in 1968 by the Metropolitan Special Branch and was used to infiltrate left-wing groups. Whilst this is extremely interesting, something of the context surrounding the events of 1968 and the way that led to the officially sanctioned attack on trade unions is being missed.

There remain to this day many unexplained events - bombings, shootings, forgeries, black propaganda, agent provocateur actions, the use of the extreme right, burglaries - during 1968, the year when, Peter Wright alleged, MI5 decided to stir things up.

An interesting biography of Ronnie Reed, a right-wing senior MI5 officer, was published in 2020 by his son. Reed is quoted as saying that during 1968: "There was a lot of subversion in this country. There were an enormous number of organisations who were ... against the Vietnam War. It was really quite ludicrous to see the way these people behaved.... An absolute group of rabble rousers."

Black propaganda

Reed boasted that MI5 "managed to infiltrate" these groups. "I used to go to some of their meetings, and wave the flag and say 'Up the anti-Vietnam Group'...This was terribly amusing, because the final demonstration to Grosvenor Square was led by one of the chief superintendents of Special Branch, and they didn't know it. So were in complete



control of the whole thing."

Clearly, MI5 was not in complete control but it did play a part. Leader of one of the groups, Tariq Ali, did wonder about the black propaganda which the government spread in the weeks leading up to the march. The press, in particular the *Evening Standard*, was full of plots about the violence that would result from the march. This was later traced to deliberate disinformation from the Special Branch.

Until this point MI5 and Special Branch compiled their files largely on evidence of Communist Party membership. Post 1968, they concentrated more

Why did unions become the prime target, leading to miscarriages of justice such as the Shrewsbury 23 and later Orgreave?

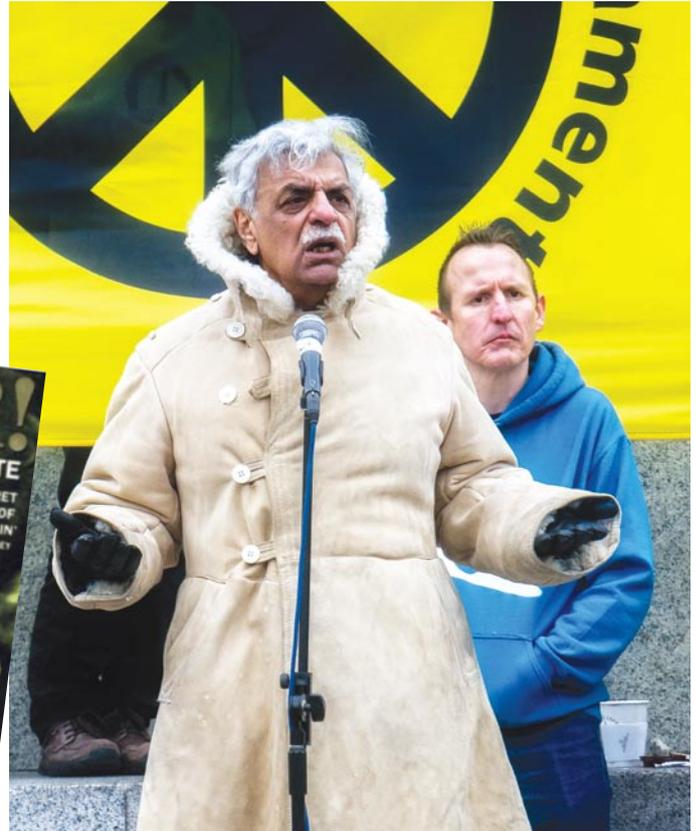


Photo: Garry Knight

Above: Tariq Ali at the #StopTrident rally at Trafalgar Square in 2016. He was spied on by at least 14 undercover police officers up to 2003.
Left: Cover for Stephen Dorril's book *Smear*

resources on what was known as the 'far and wide left'. Reed was one of those involved in this process. He admitted that he "co-operated with someone - I won't mention his name - who was on the National Council for Civil Liberties ... he was very helpful".

Reed was a close friend and colleague of former MI5 officer, Lord Rothschild. It was Rothschild, who was in the early seventies head of the government Think Tank, who became the Prime Minister's unofficial adviser on intelligence matters. Having got the ear of Ted Heath, Rothschild became the conduit for reporting on the alleged threat posed by the trade unions and the efforts of Special Branch in opposing them.

Special Branch launched a highly successful operation which led to the recruitment of hundreds of trade unionists. Some evidence of the success of this was revealed in the excellent *True Spies* programme by Peter Taylor in 2002.

When MI5 learnt of the operation, it insisted that it be taken over by the Security Service, and it was. Shortly after, Heath took little persuading in agreeing to allow the Service to feed information on trade unionists to major companies, employer groups and anti-communist, black-listing organisations such as Common Cause and IRIS, which previously had been kept largely at arms-length by Home Office officials. Much of this material would find its way to right-wing commentators in the press, who were about to play a key part in Mrs Thatcher's bid to become Tory leader.

A key element of this was the role of the Foreign Office semi-covert Information Research Department (IRD), which had been created in 1948 by a Labour government as an anti-communist propaganda unit but by 1960 had turned towards counter-subversion.

Documents released in the last 18 months reveal that in IRD assumed a Special Poli-

cal Action (SPA) role and engaged in activity previously used abroad, involving the use of black propaganda, forgeries and recruitment of journalists. But, in the early sixties, IRD was allowed to engage in such activities domestically. This was a major change, requiring political sanction at the highest level, as effectively it meant using psychological warfare against its own citizens.

But why did trade unionists become the prime target, leading to miscarriages of justice such as the Shrewsbury 23 and later Orgreave? The short answer is that Tory MPs' post-bags bulged with letters from the Middle Class angry that they had been left behind whilst the socially mobile working-class were closing the gap on income and benefits.

Crushing defeat

In the shadow of the oil crisis of 1973 British industrialists and directors decided the only way to sustain profits and personal rewards was by cutting costs. The economy has never truly recovered from the resultant short-termism. Research and development budgets were slashed but the main target was wages, and trade-unions who were seen as the main obstacle to doing this. This is self-evident in the memoirs of Tory MPs, businessmen and economic journalists, and in numerous articles in the press of the time.

In 1975 in a meeting with the Permanent Secretary, Robert Armstrong, Tory MPs who later became the backbone of the first Thatcher government wanted to know what mechanisms there were in place to deal with the unions. Armstrong told them not to worry, it was all in hand. Indeed it was, and would lead to a crushing defeat for the miners in 1984-85.

Stephen Dorril has written extensively about the UK security services and is the co-author of 'Smear! Wilson and the Secret State'. Steve was one of the speakers in our recent *SpyCops and the Media event* which you can watch here: www.medianorth.org.uk

Why public media are still essential

Deborah Grayson on an important new initiative from the Media Reform Coalition

MEDIANORTH readers know public media are under attack from the right. At the same time, the BBC's close links to government over the past decade have lost it support from the left, and even some of its natural consistency in the centre have become frustrated by its coverage of Brexit.

Alongside attacks on the BBC, there are indications that Channel 4 might soon face privatisation, while many UK media institutions are struggling to pivot their business models with advertising moving online bringing them into competition with US tech giants.

It isn't all bad news. Some independent media are creating new models for journalism and cultural production which take advantage of the deeper relationships possible with digital audiences. However, their business models are precarious.

Meanwhile, corporate social media platforms hoover up most of the cash and are flooded with clickbait and disinformation.

A key attack line from the likes of Murdoch is that the whole concept of public service broadcasting is outdated

and irrelevant, a throwback to 1950s' deferential culture, unsuited to today's social and technological conditions.

Yet major events like the coronavirus pandemic and Brexit have shown how essential public media are – independent and accountable media institutions run in the public interest, rather than in the interests of politicians and governments, billionaire own-

ers and powerful corporations. include the media cooperatives and community media who are finding innovative ways to foster participation and accountability.

In the first half of 2021, we are holding public events with partners around the UK, exploring how public media relate to questions such as protest, international coverage of the pandemic, and the climate crisis. These conversations

will help us develop a Manifesto for a People's Media to feed into the BBC mid-term charter review in 2022, as well

as connected issues such as tackling concentrations of media ownership and universal broadband.

On 5 May, we are partnering with *MediaNorth* to host an event at the Sheffield Festival of Debate on public media and labour rights. We'll be discussing how public service broadcasters cover the world of work and relate to unions; what kind of public digital platforms we need to organise in 21st century workplaces, and how to defend worker rights within public media institutions themselves.

We invite *MediaNorth* readers to join us. (We'll send details later.)



ers or powerful corporations.

The BBC and Beyond: Reimagining Public Media is a new campaign from the Media Reform Coalition, aiming to host a conversation about how we defend and re-envision public media in the digital age.

Over the coming year, we will be bringing together a broad coalition to think creatively about the kind of media we need to face the huge challenges ahead. While there will be a focus on how public service broadcasting can be renewed and updated for the current social and technological context, we are defining 'public media' more broadly to

Biden joins Amazon union fight

AMAZON opened a warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, a year ago. It is now the site of a fiercely contested battle to establish what would be the first union-organised Amazon warehouse in the United States.

Darryl Richardson was one of the workers who got over 30% of his 5,800 fellow workers to sign cards calling for a union

'No to intimidation, coercion, threats, anti-union propaganda'

election. Richardson says he was motivated by the way workers were treated and fired for falling below production quotas: "You ain't got time to look around. You get treated like a

number. You don't get treated like a person. They work you like a robot," he said.

Amazon are playing dirty through relentlessly attacking the union drive. In a Tweet US President Joe Biden intervened to say: "There should be no intimidation, no coercion, no threats, no anti-union propaganda."

A toxic environment for the BBC

Michael Klontzas analyses the context of Ofcom's report *Small Screen: Big Debate*

ATTACKS on the BBC make their appearance with predictable regularity, typically in the run-up to the Royal Charter renewal or debates around the licence fee settlement.

The BBC is pushed into a position of continually having to pre-empt or respond to developments outside its control. This constant campaigning diverts increasingly scarce resources away from the BBC's core objectives and disrupts its planning.

It also instils short-termism with a focus on demonstrable quick wins and avoidance of risk-taking. When the strategy fails to turn the tide, services are curtailed, innovation suffers, ambition is compromised, and talent goes elsewhere.

The intense public policy activity in recent months is a case in point. Ofcom delivered its five-year review of PSB in February 2020, and last December it launched its *Small Screen: Big Debate* report and consultation on the future of Public Service Media (PSM) (closing on 16 March).

There is a palpable sense of urgency in the report reflecting the fast-changing media landscape which has made the framework of the 2003 Communications Act obsolete.

Celebrating the importance and continuing relevance of PSB as a UK media 'success story', Ofcom's report swiftly moves on to why acting now is necessary. In a nutshell, technological advances and global competition means that the audience share of broadcast TV has been in decline particularly among younger viewers.

Established Subscription Vi-

deo On Demand (SVOD) providers, Netflix, Amazon and Now TV, consolidated their position during the COVID-19 pandemic, to be joined by an ever longer list of new entrants, such as Apple, Disney+ and Discovery, plus the bewildering array of online activities that also compete for our attention.

It is not surprising that the audience fragmentation that multichannel television started would snowball with the expansion of reliable broadband. PSB's own individual or joint streaming platforms may be essential, but they cannot reverse this trend, which is bound to accelerate if left unchecked, particularly as the all-important discoverability of content depends on prominence and how platform operators perform as gatekeepers.

Declining audience share also undercuts the sustainability of commercial public service broadcasters that see the value of their advertising space dropping. It also threatens to delegitimise the universal licence fee that funds the BBC.

Ofcom recommends a framework that will facilitate the transition to a broader, clearly defined but flexible public service media arrangement that embraces offline and online.

Market conditions aside, the future of PSB is being debated in a political climate that is hostile towards the BBC



The new system is envisaged as securing the crucial prominence and availability of PSM on a range of platforms. This can increase their reach and how audiences appreciate their contribution, even when content is consumed on other platforms. That would help shift the common 'I never watch the BBC' perception.

Ofcom discusses the public service obligations that make PSB commendably different, but conspicuously ignores the fact that global platforms operating in the UK market can be more agile as long as they don't face similar requirements.

The report flags up the challenges sustainable funding for PSM presents, and points to entrepreneurialism and efficiency savings, with partnerships between PSBs and other companies as one way to achieve them. There is, however, only so much you can achieve this way after years of underfunding, unless you are prepared to lose key public service principles, such as universal availability.

Contestability of public service funding resurfaces in the report, and there is the wishful

thinking that SVOD providers will contribute funding for the public service content.

Market conditions aside, the future of PSB is being debated in a political climate that is hostile towards the BBC. The Conservative government has been openly ideologically committed to weakening the BBC and appeasing the loud #DefundTheBBC supporters mobilised by the reactionary press. There are now indications that Boris Johnson will appoint Paul Dacre, the former editor of the *Daily Mail* and still editor-in-chief of the Mail group, as chair of the independent, 'evidence-based' Ofcom.

If this does not prove another kite-flying exercise, Dacre, a known critic of the BBC, will oversee the articulation of Ofcom's proposed strategy for the future of PSM. Even if this appointment does not go ahead, this remains an example of the toxic environment within which the BBC has to operate.

Michael Klontzas is an Associate Lecturer at Goldsmiths, the University of London.

Tim Gopsill

argues that freedom of speech becomes meaningless when it doesn't matter what is said

The right to lie...

FREEDOM of expression must be a valuable right. Even the Tory government believes that. A person whose right is denied, under the terms of the trumpeted 'free speech' law they put forward in February, can have money instead.

The new Higher Education White Paper proposes to compel universities and student unions to prevent interference in free speech on campus, to fine those who fail to do so and force them to compensate individuals who find themselves no-platformed.

Naturally Education Secretary Gavin Williamson sees everything in money terms, and free speech always benefits the rich and powerful whose voices are louder. But he also sees a smart way to concoct a plausible appeal to people understandably confused by the chaos in national politics.

Williamson is invoking demons, capitalising on the panic stirred up by the media around the 'cancel culture', which imagines a scary alliance of anti-racists, anti-imperialists and transgender women assaulting a bastion of British liberty.

There has been a handful of dubious cases when invitations to speakers have been stridently opposed or withdrawn, but failing to invite someone to speak doesn't seriously suppress their freedom. They can speak elsewhere; there isn't a right to be listened to.

The Tories are moving into

space vacated by the Labour Party, whose inept leadership has already allowed the government to present themselves as the champions of protecting jobs and low-paid workers, public finances, public health and the NHS, raised taxes to fund public spending and now human rights. (No wonder they're 6 points up in the polls.)

Shameless lying

All the Tory poses are false. Freedom of speech means the freedom to lie. Right-wing journalist Peter Osborne, a rare and honest writer, has just published a book on his party called *The Assault on Truth*. He writes that 'the scale and shamelessness of the lying by the Johnson government far exceeds anything Britain has experienced before'.

Johnson won't be bothered; Osborne's book will do him no harm. Freedom of speech becomes meaningless when it doesn't matter what is said. So there is no evident concern as many point to Williamson's double standards when, even as he promotes his champion, he orders universities to censor discussion on Palestine and Israel by imposing the discredited definition of anti-semitism from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

This conflates Jewish people with the state and has become (unwittingly by its authors) a device to prevent criticism of it. One body employing it whole-

ART: 123RF.COM

heartedly is, of course, the Labour Party, embroiled in a furious (and unreported) internal war as Keir Starmer's people crack down on the left. The corporate media look the other way as the party sets about the slaughter of Corbynism, using the IHRA definition to legitimise the assertion that the party is riddled with anti-semitism - one of the great lies of our time.

But there is a free speech movement within the party, driven by members who have been expelled or suspended on false suspicion of anti-semitism or continuing to support Corbyn. In February activists from Labour Against the Witchhunt and the Labour in Exile group of expellees launched the Labour Campaign for Free Speech.

Osborne's book will do Johnson no harm. Freedom of speech becomes meaningless when it doesn't matter what is said

In truth it isn't a movement for free speech alone, but for democratic rights in general. With the devaluation of messages, the demand for free speech becomes the slogan of a wider range of causes, some good but more bad.

Deceitful publications

In the USA, the much-vaunted first amendment to its constitution that guarantees 'the freedom of speech, or of the press' is now a weapon of the corporate right, invoked by employers who have bullied the courts into declaring that a corporation is a person with the same rights.

Back home, when in 2012 Lord Justice Leveson came up with his timid reforms to press regulation, fierce resistance was mounted by the national press with its claim that Leveson was a threat to free speech, equated with their own deceitful publications, even though there was no real threat. Obviously, it worked and the Tories were able to kill the scheme with ease.

A battle for free speech alone is futile. It will only be real when other battles are won.



Press contortions can't cover up Brexit mess



Brexit-supporting newspapers can no longer fool their readers

Brexit press blame EU for Britain's faults and failures

By Nicholas Jones

AS collateral damage from deficiencies in the EU withdrawal agreement cause ever-increasing disruption, Brexit supporting newspapers are grudgingly having to face the reality that they can no longer go on fooling their readers about the sunny uplands awaiting Global Britain.

A 'Truckin' disgrace' was the headline over the *Sun's* report of a lorry driver's 'diary of despair' about the misery inflicted on the road haulage industry by the bureaucratic barricade that has resulted from the UK's departure from the EU single market.

Free-wheeling truckers have long been the *Sun's* heroes and its double-page spread about their tale of woe (7.2.2021) blamed their plight on petty EU officials causing 'hell for hauliers' rather than expose the pit-

falls of the deal agreed by Boris Johnson.

As the champion of bucolic country life, the *Daily Mail* has been going through similar contortions and is having to accept that its daily reportage cannot ignore the crisis for the farmers of middle England as meat exports are hit by tough controls and complex red tape.

Again, the blame is laid at the door of the EU, but the depth of despair among farming folk leaps out from the text below the jokey headline, 'Why these three little piggies aren't going to market'. (8.2.2021)

There was never any doubt that the Brexit press would hold the EU accountable for any faults or failures in the UK's new trading arrangement and the *Mail's* everyday story of farming life is true to form:

'EU intransigence, arrogant pen-pushers and endless red tape have hammered Britain's



Sun blames petty EU officials for truckers' woes

pig exports. As 100,000 pigs languish in limbo, no wonder one in six of our farmers is threatening to sell up.'

A regular tabloid tactic is to insert flashbacks to previous front pages. Perhaps the glaring absence of a reminder of the *Mail's* euphoric coverage and triumphant headlines

for Boris Johnson's Christmas-eve deal needed no further explanation: 'Get Ready for Blast off, Britain!' and 'Masters of our own destiny'. (26.12.2020)

From the start of the year there have been two dominant storylines about the catastrophic complications flowing from the small print of the EU agreement

We'll burn goods... it beats high Brexit fees say stores

by David Jones

It's not the first time that the cost of kitchenware has risen since Brexit. But it's the first time that the cost of kitchenware has risen since Brexit. But it's the first time that the cost of kitchenware has risen since Brexit.

Deal gives Nissan 'confidence' in UK

Nissan executives have said they are confident that the UK government's deal with the EU will allow the company to continue its operations in the UK.

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Just when we thought that for them, the Brexit war was over...

Vengeful French pouring POISON on our POISSONS

Just when we thought that for them, the Brexit war was over... Vengeful French pouring POISON on our POISSONS

UK vaccine success gives pro-Brexit commentators plenty of ammunition

Italy snubbed in its hour of need. France and Germany at each other's throats. Hungary and Austria turning to Russian and Chinese jobs...

Amid the deadly black comedy of the vaccine farce, the EU is tearing itself apart right before our eyes

«Our people should not be dying because Brussels is slow and inflexible?»

Just when they thought it was all over!

CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

Hands off our jobs, Boris tells EU

PM's warning as eurocrats plot to snatch our supplies of Covid vaccine

AstraZeneca boss: It's Europe's fault for dragging feet

So what are we to make of Brussels' hypocritical stunt to distract from its vaccine fiasco? THANK GOD WE'RE OUT!

COMMENTARY by Ross Clark

Slammed, German claim that Oxford jab is only 8% effective for over-65s

GPs to draw up reserve lists so spare doses don't go to waste

(Daily Express, 12.12.2020) and 'We'll send in gunboats' (Daily Mail, 12.12.2020)

With access to European markets blocked for UK shellfish, the Mail has retreated from its pre-Christmas jingoism, and its post-Brexit coverage offers no solution to the despondency of once thriving communities:

'Vengeful French pouring poison over our poissons' (21.1.2021) and 'Human cost of EU's spite' (14.2.2021).

Continuing success in the UK roll out of vaccinations for Covid.19, coupled with the EU's embarrassment over its short-lived imposition of the Northern Ireland protocol in its dispute over supply of the Oxford AstraZeneca jab, has provided pro-Brexit commentators with a fortuitous platform from which to applaud the UK's EU departure.

'The lumbering EU monster panicked and showed its true nature. A better vindication of Brexit could not be found,' declared the Mail on Sunday's comment column. (31 1 2021)

Ecstatic Mail columnists were given plenty of space to ram home their justification for supporting Brexit and a chance to renew their belief that the EU is about to turn in on itself:

Knee-jerk responses a forte of British press

that Johnson signed up to. Seemingly insurmountable problems have blocked UK exports of shellfish, and tension in Northern Ireland has been heightened by disruption to supply lines for goods going from the UK to Northern Ireland, and the knock-on impact for cross-border trade with the Republic of Ireland.

Both complications were flagged up during the Brexit negotiations, but the subse-

quent disarray has attracted the knee-jerk response that is the forte of the Brexit press rather than an explanation as to why this is a direct consequence of the terms the UK negotiated with the EU.

Gung-ho headlines in the days before Johnson finally signed off the EU agreement promised that Britain would stand firm in defending the interests of its fishing fleet:

'Gunships to guard our fish'

HEALTH LOTTERY TICKET

DAILY EXPRESS

£15 OFF

FREE

GUNSHIPS TO GUARD OUR FISH

Special Barbara Windsor or Tribute edition

FREE

Delicious festive recipes with Jack Monroe

How the newspapers covered post-Brexit impact

From Page 7

'So, what are we to make of Brussels' hypocritical stunt to distract from its vaccine fiasco? Thank God we're out!' was Ross Clark's verdict ('Hands off our jabs, Boris tell EU', *Daily Mail*, 27.1.2021).

Douglas Murray reheated his prediction of EU disintegration: 'Amid the deadly black comedy of the vaccine farce, the EU is tearing itself apart right before our eyes'. (*Daily Mail*,

21.2.2021)

Fellow Brexiteer Tim Stanley used his column in the *Daily Telegraph* to berate Brussels' control-freakery: 'We always knew the EU was a protectionist racket'. (8.2.2021)

Many of the potential repercussions from the Brexit deal have yet to surface and will continue to be masked as Conservative-supporting newspapers encourage Johnson to press on with releasing the

country from lockdown restrictions as rapidly as possible.

Judging by the warm welcome from Johnson's cheerleaders for the promotion to the cabinet of the UK's lead negotiator, David Frost – now the ennobled Lord Frost – the Brexit press remains hell bent on confrontation.

'Lord Frost, the man putting Brussels on the back foot' was the headline over Patrick O'Flynn's stirring words of

praise for the 'one negotiator capable of going toe to toe with the EU's Michel Barnier and coming out ahead on points'. (*Daily Telegraph* 20.2.2021)

Perhaps O'Flynn needed reminding that the roles have been reversed and that the legions of employers and employees whose jobs are on the line want to see the delivery of what was promised by the advocates of Brexit instead of renewed turmoil in UK-EU relations.

Brexit is a catastrophe for artists who plan to tour Europe

Government accused of abandoning nation's cultural industry

By Nicholas Jones

READERS of the UK's mass-circulation, Brexit-supporting newspapers have been spared the grim details of the reality facing hundreds of thousands of musicians, actors and artists who have lost the prospect of employment across the European Union.

A handful of paragraphs on an inside page – or a dismissive, jokey headline – gloss over the government's catastrophic failure to negotiate a deal to facilitate future European tours by bands, orchestras, theatrical groups, and the rest of the artistic community.

The Guardian and the *London Evening Standard* are two newspapers campaigning on behalf of artists and cultural workers who now face layers of bureaucracy and visa costs.

At a hearing of the culture select committee, MPs accused the government of having abandoned the cultural industry to 'endure a no-deal Brexit' that had led, for example, to a bill for £600 in visa-related costs for a British pianist due to perform a concert in Spain.

When challenged, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sports minister, Caroline Dinenage, admitted there are currently no negotiations with individual EU states over entry requirements, visas and work permits for artists, musicians, and technical crew.

'Brexit rules are thwarting the next generation of British stars' was the heart-felt warning from Elton John (*The Guardian*, 8.2.2021) who urged the music industry to establish a support organisation to help new and emerging artists to tour Europe and broaden and build their audiences.

Almost ignored

Except for a few paragraphs on an inside page, the tabloids have ignored the artists' plight and the *Daily Telegraph's* contribution – 'Musicians have created a Brexit storm in a teacup' – summed up the dismissive response of the Brexit press.

In his *Telegraph* column, *The Arts Agenda* (21.1.2021), Neil McCormick downplayed the impact of bureaucratic hurdles and visa fees arguing that the consensus among



The Guardian campaigns on behalf of actors, artists and musicians

those who organised concerts was that 'as long as European audiences want to see British musicians, promoters will find a way to keep the show on the road'.

In a letter from the performing arts union Equity, some of the biggest names in British theatre implored the government to return to the negotiating table to ensure visa-free work in the EU for artists, ac-

tors, and theatre workers.

Next day the National Theatre announced that because of Brexit it had been forced to shelve plans to tour Europe – an opportunity for a snide headline over a seven-paragraph snippet that at least revealed a knowledge of William Shakespeare:

'Luvvies' labours lost as European tours shelved'. (*Daily Mail*, 18.2.2021)

By Gary Herman

THE idea that a sovereign nation should pass a law regulating news published in its country on social media sites, like Facebook and Google, may seem at first unexceptionable. We all know the part social media plays in the transmission of lies and libels and how influential those media are. But Australia's legal moves are not a matter of suppressing defamation and falsehood.

On the contrary, the very name of the new law, passed with all-party support in a rush last month, should clarify any confusion; it's known as the 'News Media Bargaining Code' and the bargaining is definitely financial, involving Australia's mainstream media and social media giants who make a habit of reproducing news (stealing it, some might say) without permission or payment.

Attracting eyeballs

The problem here is simple. Social media make their money from selling advertising space and (particularly in Google's case) providing other related advertising services.

Their main concern is to attract 'eyeballs' and one of

Unfriending Australia

Big media and tech giants battle it out in fight to 'attract eyeballs'



their chief methods is to run news stories on their own and related websites.

They have been phenomenally successful at this. According to the Statista website, more than 60 percent of the populations of many countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe use social media as a news source. Even 52 percent of Australians do the same. For most of them Facebook is the primary source of news, says Russell Skelton of the Australian Broadcasting

Corporation, while conventional news media suffer.

The result? An official inquiry found there was a power imbalance which 'threatened the viability' of mainstream news businesses and the independent Australian press.

Of course, the proper instrument for dealing with this situation would have been to modify copyright law so that any organisation seeking to use copyright material would be obliged to pay a statutory fee.

Unfortunately, copyright law is both complex and subject to global treaties. Previous attempts to wrestle with overarching issues like hyperlinking and copy and paste technologies have all failed. So the Australian government's proposed code would have obliged social media companies to

negotiate separately with individual mainstream media from giants like Rupert Murdoch's News Corp (which supports the government) to hyperlocal newspapers.

This is a huge task. Facebook, which last year agreed to pay mainstream UK news outlets to licence their articles, decided not to bother. It unilaterally blocked Australian users from sharing and viewing news content. Unfortunately, it also blocked government bodies, charities and health information services, while letting through misleading posts about Covid-19.

Hasty Retreat

The resulting furore caused Facebook to beat a hasty retreat, remove the block, and sit down with Australian lawmakers.

The lawmakers agreed to modify the original legislation to strengthen the code's commitment to dedicate the funds it will generate to support Australia's independent news media. It will now enter a two-month mediation period to allow more time to broker agreements and will revisit the code's operation after a year.

Everyone seems happy. For now.

Outgoing chair warns of 'institutional self-harm'

SIR DAVID CLEMENTI'S four-year term as chair of the BBC came to an end in mid-February.

In his parting words to BBC staff he warned that any moves to weaken the broadcaster would be 'a colossal act of national self-harm'.

Such warnings by outgoing BBC chairs are unusual.

There have been rows in the past. Former chairman Sir Michael Lyons threatened to resign, together with his then director general, Mark

Thompson, to block - at least for a period - plans to make the BBC pay for free-licence fees for the over 75s.

However, Clementi's warning got minimal press coverage.



The *Times*, which has under Murdoch been calling for the 'reform' of the BBC for decades, covered the story in a small piece on page four.

The increasingly demented *Daily Express* claimed that 'Britons were furious' that Sir David Clementi had dared to take a veiled swipe against 'Boris Johnson making any changes to the "world class" broadcaster'.

Never mind that Sir David did not rule out 'any changes' but furious Britons turned out to be *Express* readers who thought Clementi was 'having a laugh' at those who wanted to defund the BBC by claiming the broadcaster was held in high regard.

Mail comes up with cunning plan

THE *Daily Mail* has come up with a new funding system for the BBC.

A licence fee of around £100 a year for news and current affairs, big national occasions, and local TV and radio. Access to everything else, from soaps to high-end dramas, would be by monthly subscriptions.

Such a system would cause confusion among viewers, and more anger from those reluctant to pay for news.

Just what the BBC-hating paper would call a good outcome.

Post-Brexit and post-Covid, can the UK cope with a Fox-like news channel?

By Charlie McCarthy

GB News promises US-style TV news programming built around presenters who have right-of-centre views on current affairs. The 24 hour news channel will be free-to-air and therefore completely reliant upon advertising to fund its planned 6,500 hours of content per year. Andrew Neil, chairman, has started a first recruitment drive at the new TV and online news channel. GB News will target in Neil's words, 'the vast number of British people who feel underserved and unheard by their media'. The broadcaster tells potential recruits: "We're looking for brilliant journalists from all backgrounds to help us shake things up.

"We are serious about changing things, so only apply if you genuinely want to make a difference and reflect the stories and issues that really matter to the people of the UK."

GB News has a clear vision about the niche it wants to occupy, somewhere between Fox News and the UK broadcasters. With at least £60m to spend, GB News has the ability to attract exactly the presenters it thinks will deliver news to the 'underserved and unheard'. The Dubai-based Legatum Institute is one of the funders. Discovery, the American cable giant, is another investor.

Strident opinions

The *Evening Standard* reports that John McAndrew, GB News's director of news and programmes, is on the case. He is currently wading through show reel 'tapes' sent by prospective presenters for the 24-hour channel that is due to launch in the first half of this year. He is seeking diverse characters with regional accents, strident opinions and other traits that will distinguish GB News from his former employers, the BBC, ITN and Sky News.

Curiously, the current names on the GB News shortlist don't

Rachel Johnson

Andrew Neil

GB News: Seeking 'disrupters and innovators' and people with accents

quite fit its revolutionary fervour. Among the presenters it is courting are Nick Ferrari and Rachel Johnson (both regulars on Sky News's *The Pledge*, which McAndrew oversaw) and TalkRadio host Julia Hartley-Brewer. These are hardly the diverse group with regional accents that will enable GB News achieve a unique position in the UK broadcasting environment. This collection of curiously well-established presenters have been labelled as 'veterans of the Murdoch empire' by the *New York Times*. New voices with unfamiliar accents they are not.

If GB News was truly looking to 'break the mould' of TV news in the UK and wanted to bring unheard voices into the mainstream and create new audiences for news in this coun-

try, an alternative, legitimate strategy might be to look to a new generation of broadcasters. Although the proportion of top journalists who were educated at private schools has fallen, the media continues to be one of the UK's most elite professions. GB News says it will change the broadcasting landscape by employing a more locally embedded workforce to deliver its programming agenda. If the first advert for journalists who 'want to make a difference' and to 'reflect stories and issues that really matter to the people of the UK' don't immediately throw up these voices, then John McAndrew should get out of his London bubble and go and look for them.

Neil describes the current state of news broadcasting in

the UK as 'pretty much a one party state. They all come at stories from various shades of left'. The big question now is will GB News establish itself in the UK broadcasting landscape and what effect will this have if it does? Post-Brexit and post-Covid, can the country cope with a Fox-like news channel?

Following a campaign calling for a boycott of the new channel, Neil lashed out at critics calling them 'woke warriors', saying they were trying to destroy a new channel before it had aired a single programme. He added GB News would cover news from 'centre, perhaps the centre right' – not the hard right of extreme of Fox. "You can't take Fox News to this market and give it a British accent. It just doesn't work."

Politics of resentment

Murdoch has previous in the UK broadcasting ecosystem. In 2017 he brought Fox News to these shores but had to withdraw following two violations of impartiality standards: Sean Hannity's coverage of Mr Trump's ban on people from majority Muslim countries and Tucker Carson's coverage of a terrorist attack in Manchester.

The reason for Sky dropping the channel was due to the small audience at the time.

When we get over the worst of the pandemic, some experts predict that the culture wars that so divided Britain post Brexit will resurface. GB News may find itself well placed to give voice to the 'politics of resentment' which, according to Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, "is often driven by older white men who are right wing. It is a market that is well served already in print and online."

GB News is due to start in April. Watch this space.

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 Charlie McCarthy writes on politics, current affairs and climate change for Yorkshire Bylines

BOOK REVIEW

Illuminating politics since the 1980s

AGE OF STATIC:**How TV Explains Modern Britain**

Phil Harrison

Melville House 2020

£9.99**By Pat Holland**

The Age of Static is an entertaining read which offers a range of highly original insights into the content, structure and implications of popular television in Britain.

What, asks Phil Harrison, can we deduce about the mood and attitudes of the British audience from its favourite programmes? To dismiss the importance of TV because of its 'worst offerings' would be 'a bizarrely absolutist and self-defeating position to take' (p.205). And the tone of that sentence – colloquial, argumentative, expressive – reflects the tone of the book, as he traces the ways in which television illuminates the political history of Britain from the 1980s onwards.

Harrison discusses a wide range of programmes – identifying subtexts, attitudes and moral messages across the output. Television, he argues, is 'a sort of cultural clearing house which both reflects and influences changes in society' (p.17). 'It isn't always taken as seriously as it deserves.'

Well, Phil Harrison certainly takes it seriously. For him television programmes offer an 'indispensable road map to the British psyche', in which 21st-century lives are like a reality show. PM Boris Johnson behaves like a contestant, using media tactics to 'tweak his

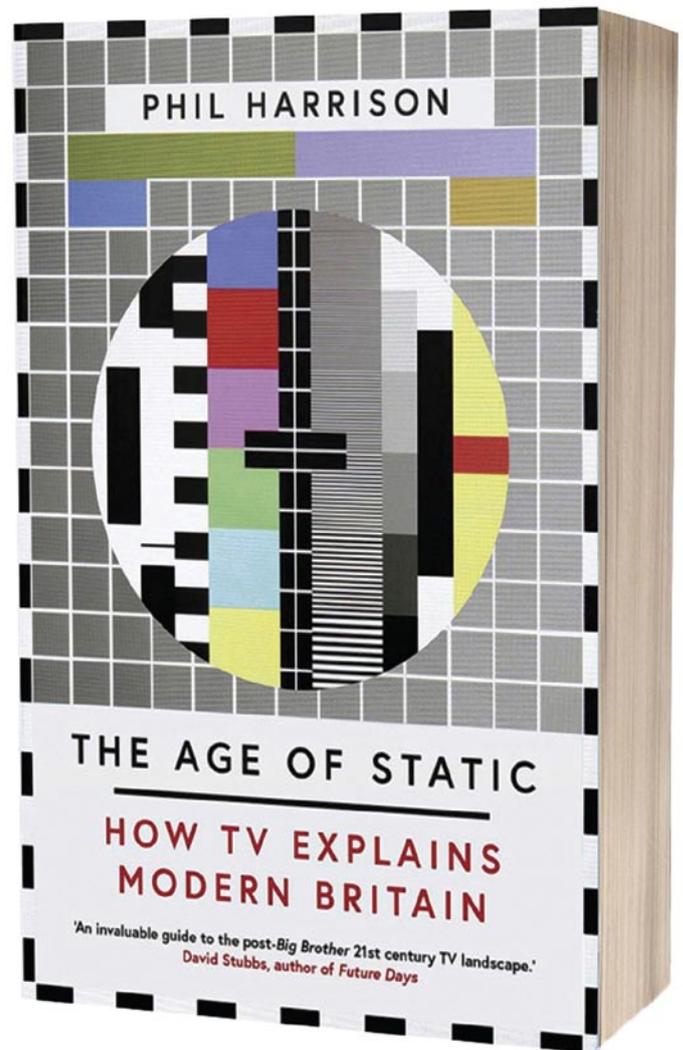
persona for maximum effect' (p.43). Political populism and reality TV have 'developed in parallel'.

With neo-liberal capitalism as the dominant system, lines have become blurred like never before – between fiction and reality; truth and artifice, performing and being yourself. *The Age of Static* illustrates a range of aspects of this changing political context: increasing class differences; the growth of nationalism; the role of 'political correctness' and campaigns against it; the situation of the BBC; and the concept of 'Britishness'.

In Chapter 2, reflecting on the growing gulf between the classes initiated in the 1980s by Margaret Thatcher's move from a welfare-based to a market based-society, he points to *Relocation, Relocation* (2003) in which a home becomes an 'investment opportunity' to be sold or rented for a profit. At the same time the long-running soaps continued to show a working class cohesion which had already vanished.

A recurring theme of the book is a lament for the 'communal experience' which had earlier characterised the role

Public service broadcasting has come to seem anachronistic – described as the elite imposing on the masses



of television, but which is becoming increasingly fragmented. The online environment, together with the growth of streaming and other ways of accessing visual entertainment and information is making the television 'flow' less relevant. Instead of drawing viewers together for a shared experience, the last few years have led to 'mutual incomprehension' (p.212–3). Public service broadcasting has come to seem anachronistic – described as the elite imposing on the masses.

Throughout the book, Harrison's arguments are constructed around detailed examples – based on his wide knowledge of the television output. Each chapter is headed by a list of relevant programmes to be discussed.

In the important chapter *How the BBC became the story*, interwoven with a discussion of Newsnight, Question Time and other factual programmes, he gives a clear account of the increasing problems faced by the

Corporation – from attacks by the Murdoch press to legislation by successive Conservative governments.

Basically, this is a book about the politics of television – even though 'there's hardly anything British television cannot reduce to the status of jolly japery' (p.199). Harrison concludes: 'The medium animates and illuminates the life of our nation like no other art form.'

A couple of afterthoughts: the nerds amongst us need more references, dates and background information about the programmes discussed; the title, *The Age of Static*, is somewhat mysterious – as there is no explanation of why our modern age is 'static'; and Harrison does not explain why he refers to 'Britain' throughout rather than the 'UK'.

Pat Holland is the author of 'The Angry Buzz: This Week and Current Affairs Television'

It didn't just happen!

● From Page 1

the same partisanship to cable news.

For conservatives, the success of talk radio proved that their suspicions about the Fairness Doctrine had been right. Conservative voices had long been ignored in the mainstream media, they claimed, but now that the free market had been unchained, it was clear what the people wanted.

Over four decades deregulation has transformed the US media landscape in both economic and political terms.

These changes also mean that the content produced and carried by powerful media entities in the US is unfettered by any obligations towards fairness or even truth.

Murdoch at 90

Rupert Murdoch will be 90 on 11 March this year and he clearly hopes to be around for a few more years. In March last year Murdoch and his fourth wife, Jerry Hall, purchased Great Tew manor in the Cotswolds. It will be several years before they can live in it because of the property's derelict condition. At least £20 million will be spent on refurbishment.

His baleful legacy so far, echoed by the ideas his son expressed in 2009, has been disseminated globally in his print and broadcast media, ideas which have fostered anger, hatred, war and division over six decades.

MediaNorth counterposes to this an affirmative view of the media, one which assigns a role for media as a powerful force for human enlightenment, which respects media diversity and recognises media's key function in sustaining a well-informed democracy. It's a view that's under threat (see p10) but it's one that it is essential to campaign and build wide support for in these troubled times.

Getting better?

In October 1984 Hugo Young, Political Editor of the *Sunday Times* from 1973-1984, wrote a devastating critique of the paper, 'Rupert Murdoch and *The Sunday Times*: A Lamp Goes Out', in *The Political Quarterly*. **Stephen Dorril** tells us why he thinks the paper is getting better under a new editor

THE print newspaper industry is in a desperate state with a historical low of five million daily sales. Many newspapers are up for sale but there are few takers. Most are in a death spiral cutting costs to maintain profits or lessen losses. The result is a drop in quality journalism and continuing loss of sales.

A page count of the *Guardian* reveals a paper where football is more important than international news. Its attempt to attract younger readers has produced a tabloid paper that fails to satisfy either the millennials or its older readers.

One newspaper has bucked the trend by still producing long form journalism - the *Sunday Times*.

Under its female editor, Emma Tucker, the paper has been at the forefront of exposing the cronyism and corruption in the Boris government. Its business section is, outside of the *Financial Times*, a place to go to understand what is really going on in the country. It has produced interesting articles on climate change, the mess of Brexit and an extraordinary piece ('My sad conclusion is that privatisation just didn't work',



3 January 2021) by Ali Husain, who concluded that the way out of the energy mess was 'nationalisation'. This in a paper which under Andrew Neil was the real author of Mrs Thatcher's privatisation policy.

It's still a Murdoch paper but appears to have become less ideological, less strident in the past few months. Anyone else noticed this?

Gravy train for 'union' boss at Murdoch papers

THERE is a 'union' at Murdoch's News UK, the so-called News Union set up by Rupert Murdoch to give a semblance of workers' rights for journalists on the *Sun*, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*.

The latest News UK accounts have some interesting information on the organisation. The general secretary,

Jeremy Vine, a former *Times* letters editor, represents 1,700 staff at the London office and is paid £105,187.

Whilst his members had a pay freeze and News UK cut staff, he received a 5% pay rise last year. He has an office provided rent-free by News UK at its London Bridge HQ.

News UK is savvy enough

to know that few of its journalists would be willing to pay their subs to News Union so they have their membership paid for them. The sole income of News Union consisted of a grant of £272,000 from News UK.

A scandal – but you won't read about it in Murdoch's union-bashing newspapers.

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