

# British Journalism *Review*

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## How Twitter breaks news

■ Jessica Hill ■ Wendy Sloane ■ Catherine Mayer

# British Journalism *Review*

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# British Journalism *Review*

## Not so fast

If we ever thought the newspaper industry was tough in its treatment of employees, the behaviour of digital companies demonstrates how relative these things are. We suspected there was a price for those playrooms and cool workstations and organic cafes in Silicon Valley. With 11,000 jobs for the chop at Meta and Elon Musk walking into Twitter to whack half the workforce, we see that the new world believes no more in free lunches than the old one.

Having paid £39billion – put that in your pipe and smoke it, old media companies – he can do what he likes, though those who liked Twitter the way it was fear he will achieve only its destruction. Several self-important media commentators have announced its imminent demise, naturally choosing the site itself as the vehicle for their views. Given the gap between what many UK national newspapers – right and left - preach about freedom of speech and their response when the wrong people practise it, perhaps we should admire a man who promotes saying what you think to the point of having his workers say what they think of him.

Journalists tend to be ambivalent about Twitter. For sure, it has many of the faults attributed to it, allowing the rapid promotion of stories that aren't true, encouraging fantasists to believe they have an audience, creating a mob mentality. It is, argue its critics, an echo chamber that has no relevance in the world of real people. Yet it has given many journalists the bigger platform they crave and an opportunity to reach an audience without the intervention of editors and producers, freed from print deadlines and broadcast schedules. Worried that the story won't hold? Eager to show you are ahead of the pack? Then get it up on Twitter.

Many have built their own “brands”. The stand-out star is Piers Morgan, who refers frequently to his eight million followers. Unfortunately, they seem to be more useful to his sense of self than to his employer, News UK, which is paying him handsomely for a television show that very few watch. Does interaction on social media compensate for tiny audiences on

telly? Others, notably the ITV political editor Robert Peston, use Twitter as a live feed, breaking news and opinion in between his channel's bulletins. Sometimes we are reminded why editors and producers have their uses, as in the most recent Conservative Party leadership election, when the BBC's political editor Chris Mason tweeted that Boris Johnson had gained 100 backers before there was proof of his doing so, this at a time the former prime minister was seeking to build momentum.

The site has also been useful as a source of breaking news, for the first instinct of many citizens coming upon an accident, natural disaster or terrorist attack is to post footage online. It's where big figures go to announce something important. There are also funny videos and ready-made arguments to repurpose. Spats on Twitter make good page leads, requiring reporters only to cut and paste the comments. As a result, many reporters who might once have spoken to flesh-and-blood people spend hours scrolling the site. Occasionally, they find something lovely: it was touching to see Katy Perry's sentimental praise of papers so widely reported, as if the singer-songwriter's 108million followers might take themselves off to the newsagent to buy one.

But almost without our noticing, the site has had a more profound effect on journalism. First, that breaking news threatens to render obsolete the traditional functions of newspapers and news bulletins. We could keep abreast of recent political events in the UK more efficiently on Twitter – posts from politicians, knowledgeable observers and, yes, journalists – than by waiting for news bulletins or the next day's paper. Second, the often-hysterical opinion that is currency on social media has infected news channels. A front-page headline communicating a fact is no longer enough, because the fact is old. Some newspaper titles appear to have lost their minds, printing front pages that presented three successive Conservative leaders as saviours of the nation and comment columns extolling the ideological purity of tax changes seen days later to have been disastrous.

The industry is traditionally insouciant about such 180-degree turns – “never wrong for long”, as they say on television rolling news, “tomorrow's fish and chip paper” at newspapers – but it must raise its game if it is to keep the advantage over social media that professional reporting and thoughtful editing are meant to give it.

*KF*

# Not finally...

*Subjective views on matters journalistic*

## Why journalism matters

A little while ago, I sat in an audience of journalists, campaigners and donors at the Index on Censorship Awards and watched a fresh-faced young man give a short video acceptance speech on behalf of a remarkable Russian human rights organisation. Leonid Drabkin works for OVD-Info, which has monitored political repression in Russia for the past decade and supported protesters who have fallen foul of the Putin regime. It runs a helpline and provides legal assistance to those arrested (OVD is the acronym for the Russian Interior Ministry, the source of the repression).

Drabkin's speech was humble and understated, paying tribute to other civil society organisations and independent media helping to get the message out to the world that internal dissent in Russia does exist, despite what the regime might say. "Russian... propaganda states every day that everyone in Russia [is] supporting the current war," he said. "But that is not completely true. There are a lot of people and organisations in Russia that are against the war and our mission is to support them."

The OVD-Info website has a counter with the number of people arrested at protests since the February

24 invasion of Ukraine. It stands at 19,335 as I write. A single day of monitoring included reports on the eviction of the 86-year-old mother and two children of a Moscow region official who had supported environmental protests, an anti-war protester on hunger strike, and an OVD-Info lawyer challenging a decision to refuse him access to those detained at a St Petersburg rally in April 2021 in support of opposition figure Alexei Navalny.

The work of OVD-Info is obsessive in its detail and the sourcing and counting methodology are transparent. And this is the point. In a world of fake news and disinformation, objective truth and the hard reality of dissenting activity are precious commodities. The Index awards always serve to put our own parochial concerns in perspective, so it is a somewhat uncomfortable experience to toast the courage of journalists in extremis over a three-course meal in the comfort of a Mayfair hotel.

This year, this contrast felt particularly stark. The journalism prize went to Sophia Huang Xueqin, a reporter and women's rights activist who documented sexual harassment across China. Huang disappeared in

September 2021 and her arrest and imprisonment was only confirmed two months later. She is now held in the No 1 Detention Centre in Guangzhou. The arts award this year went to Cuban artist Hamlet Lavastida, who sees his art as a non-violent means of documenting the abuses of his country's government. For instance, an exhibition created during his residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin in April 2021 included transcripts of a police interrogation and the forced confession of a poet alongside a mosaic representing the Cuban security apparatus. He was arrested on his return after discussing the idea of stamping Cuban coins with the logos of activist organisations. He now lives in exile in Europe.

A common thread runs through the work of all three award-winners: an obsession to document reality. Each is driven to record the abuse they have witnessed in the face of threats to their own safety and liberty.

The obsessive nature of OVD-Info's work reminded me of Peter Pomerantsev's preface to his extraordinary book on fake news, *This is Not Propaganda*. He talks about his parents' lives as Soviet dissidents and the absolute imperative to get even the smallest details of information to the outside world. He describes the Chronicle of Current Events, one of the inspirations for the work of Index. "The Chronicle was how Soviet dissidents documented suppressed facts about political arrests, interrogations, searches, trials, beatings, abuses in prison. Information was gathered via word of mouth or smuggled out of the labour camps in tiny, self-made

polythene capsules that were swallowed and then spat out, their contents typed up and photographed in dark rooms. It was then passed from person to person, hidden in the pages of books and diplomatic pouches, until it could reach the West..." Pomerantsev's point is that these tiny pieces of smuggled truth provided essential ammunition against the vast Soviet edifice of lies. OVD-Info is the Chronicle of Current Events for the Information Age.

Thankfully, we do not need the equivalent of OVD-Info. With all its flaws, we have a national press and independent broadcast media that records the failings of the Home Office on an almost daily basis. But we should not be complacent. New legislation curbing the right to protest is a real concern and a National Security Bill that comes close to conflating spies and journalists should be opposed by everyone who cares about investigative journalism.

Perhaps more worrying still was the news of cuts to BBC local news radio announced in November. We saw during the round of interviews with Liz Truss in the run-up to Conservative Party conference this year just how important local knowledge can be in holding the powerful to account. The decimation of local newspapers already means that the reporting of local councils, courts and policing is withering away. In a time of austerity and economic uncertainty, this is precisely where some of that obsessive desire to document reality should be directed. And this is why the BBC's decision is so incredibly short-sighted.

Events in Ukraine and Russia

remind us that media freedom does not come cheap. I'd like to think that if some senior BBC executives had been in the room when Leonid Drabkin picked up the Index Campaigning Award, they would have thought twice about their decision. As the drive for "content" risks pushing out genuine reporting, we can learn from OVD-Info

and the dissident tradition it represents that simple facts are precious, whether they are contained in polythene capsules or their digital equivalent. They are precious when reporting on protesters in St Petersburg or from outside a local court in Newcastle.

Martin Bright

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## Proof that I am me

The first time a colleague asked me how to get verified on Twitter was some time in 2012 or 2013, soon after I started working at *The Times*. An opinion writer – I won't mention who – had discovered that someone had taken his name and profile picture to create a fake account on the still-new microblogging platform and was using it to spout problematic views. The tweets were getting traction and, for the majority of Twitter users, it was impossible to know which account was the columnist and which was the rogue actor. Very upset, my colleague demanded something be done. And, in my role overseeing the newspaper's social media output, I reached out to the powers-that-be at Twitter to see if he was eligible to be verified.

It was an eye-opening interaction. A company representative agreed to help but also invited me to submit a spreadsheet of all *Times* staff who wanted to be verified. This seemed

like a sensible pre-emptive move so I sent an email to all staff asking if anyone else felt they merited a blue check. My inbox was inundated: some reporters using the platform already, but also sporadic tweeters, staff with no public presence, and people followed only by their spouse and the local dry-cleaning company.

One person, I remember, set up an account just to be verified and, after some back and forth, I put myself on the list too, not agreeing with the catch-all approach but fearing missing out. Twitter's only condition was that staff change the email associated with the account to their work one, supposedly to validate that they were employees. There were no other criteria. This was VIP treatment but en masse.

Being verified on Twitter is ubiquitous in the media nowadays but a mini history lesson helps make sense of where we are. Back then, few



journalists had a blue tick and few cared. Musicians and sports people were who Twitter wanted on the platform but they were unhappy being the targets of parody and reputational damage. So, when the Silicon Valley company launched a pilot verification scheme in 2009, it was for a “small set of public officials, public agencies, famous artists, athletes, and other celebs who run the risk of impersonation”, not reporters or editors still figuring out what the then-140-character service was for.

Fast forward a decade and more than 438k users are now verified, around 1 per cent of the platform’s userbase, with thousands of journalists across the world tweeting from the safety of a verified account. Facebook and Instagram subsequently followed suit, launching similar schemes for their VIP users, and a whole black market industry has sprung up around gaining verification and the legitimacy and credibility that comes with it. Media companies have done well from it.

Except that’s about to change. Elon Musk, the world’s richest man and new owner of Twitter, made it one of his first tasks to overhaul what he called “Twitter’s current lords and peasants system” by charging users for the famous blue tick. Rather than just being the preserve of celebrities, anyone will be able to pay \$8 a month to verify themselves and to get a host of extra features, as well as fewer adverts. Musk, himself a verified tweeter with 114 million followers and counting, says the new system will give “power to the people”. Which, *The Washington Post* media reporter

Paul Farhi wrote, has left journalists and other media folk in a state of “verifiable angst” for the power that is at risk of being lost.

My colleague was pleased about his blue tick and not least because his presence was verified; the blue check, at that point, also had status and conferred a wealth of other alleged algorithmic benefits on the platform, including being recommended as useful people to follow. If you were verified, and tweeted regularly, and subsequently were deemed a person with “a fairly wide or mainstream appeal”, your account and tweets were more likely to be seen and you were likely to get followers. And that opened doors.

Job offers, speaking slots and book deals have all been offered on the basis of follower numbers as publishers caught on to the benefits of having ready-made distribution channels for the stories. One particular example that comes to mind was an early adopter sports reporter who found himself added to the roster of verified accounts that new Twitter users were encouraged to follow on signing up to the platform. No one knew exactly how that worked, or who picked the accounts, but he quickly gained more than a million followers. On the basis that that was a willing market of readers, he received a big money move to a Fleet Street newspaper not long after.

In 2016, this gold rush for journalists with sizeable followings became more acute as Twitter doubled down on “live news” as part of a new strategy to increase revenue. The app was moved from the “Social

Networking” section of the iOS App Store to “News”, and journalists and media professionals were added to a list of “highly sought users” eligible for verification, which was briefly opened up to the general public before being closed because of an influx of bots and fake accounts that might have had a part in Brexit and Donald Trump’s election. It is a system that needs careful calibration and maintenance, a system that Elon Musk is now considering blowing up.

The big question is whether verified journalists pay Musk’s \$8 a month levy to stay in the elite class? Will they risk reputational damage for the sake of less than \$100 a year?

CNN has already said it won’t pay on behalf of its staff, although 13 other US outlets contacted by *Business Insider*

declined to say, clearly waiting to see what their competitors would do next. Prominent reporters and editors have come out against paying up too: Matt Pearce, an *LA Times* reporter, said that “being verified doesn’t matter to me because I’ve never understood the point of verification as it currently exists”. However, Pearce has 155,000 followers who presumably won’t disappear overnight.

Other journalists who are less established or on their way up in the industry might be more inclined to shell out. The costs are minimal and, if you can ride out the taunts of users for buying verification, tweeting should continue as normal. Or whatever normal means nowadays in the crazy world of Twitter.

**Ben Whitelaw**

*The writer is a journalist, consultant and digital strategist and a member of the BJR editorial board.*

 @benwhitelaw

## Here today and gone tomorrow

This year, Charles (the king formerly known as Prince) guest-edited the September issue of the British African-Caribbean newspaper *The Voice*. He said he was “so touched” to be invited. The issue featured interviews with Baroness Lawrence (Stephen’s mother), Idris Elba, who praised the life-changing impact the Prince’s Trust had for him, and the Booker prizewinner Bernardine Evaristo, who spoke of her involvement in Camilla’s literacy scheme. So far, so good.

Charles celebrated “unity through diversity”. I doubt if he expected to get away without abuse, and he didn’t. On Twitter he was accused of “performative White allyship” – ie. play-acting at being involved. After all, had he ever come out publicly in support of his daughter-in-law Meghan Markle when she was subjected to what was perceived as racism? Others raised the thorny issue of reparations for slavery.

Meghan, you may remember, had

guest-edited the September 2019 issue of *Vogue*, the biggest-selling issue ever. Called “Forces for Change”, it celebrated women who champion a cluster of fashionable causes to do with emancipation and inclusion. Needless to say, it brought criticism. “Me-Me-Me-Meghan Markle’s shamelessly hypocritical superwoke *Vogue* stunt proves she cares more about promoting herself than the Royal Family in Britain,” wrote a shocked Piers Morgan in the *Daily Mail* (totally understandable that a man so self-effacing should find self-promotion repulsive).

Some said it was simply inappropriate for a royal ever to be involved with the tawdriness of magazines; presumably, that didn’t include *Country Life*, which Charles has guest-edited thrice, on his 65th, 70th and 72nd birthdays. After all, this was his terrain, preserving the countryside, red squirrels and Dame Judi Dench. You could say his relationship with the magazine is organic. His sister Anne guest-edited it once, and his wife Camilla guest-edited in July this year. “I have a profound sense of being at home in the countryside,” said Camilla, which is certainly true. I’m sure Meghan had a profound sense of being at home in *Vogue*.

But Charles’s days as a guest editor must now be over and so, one imagines, are Meghan’s, in Britain anyway. He is too royal and she isn’t royal enough. He is king, so an editorial from him would be tantamount to a proclamation, and she has become little more than a B-list US celebrity. In Britain, she is Mrs Spare. Prince Harry called his memoir *Spare*

– as in “gone spare”.

We are approaching the time of year when Britain’s most prominent annual guest-editing comes round. It’s BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme, where for the past 20 years they have had a different guest editor each day between Christmas and New Year. Generally, they field good solid candidates. Nothing to get too excited about, which is appropriate – most of the country is in a semi-vegetative state that week. But more of that anon.

What is this guest-editing business, what does it mean, and what does it entail? In fashion and society magazines – certainly in America – it is simply part of the game. The power of celebrity is so great that publications are in their thrall. The extent to which megastars are given copy clearance and right of picture selection means they are effectively guest editors even when they officially aren’t. Clearly, their presence adds sales power. But officially gazetting them is quite another matter. I have never worked on a publication where that happened but, given the difficulty of achieving a good product even where professionals and sanity reign, the mind boggles at the thought of doing it with egomaniacal amateurs.

In February 1996, Tina Brown, editor of the *New Yorker*, not averse to creating sensations, handed over an issue of the revered organ for Roseanne Barr to edit. “Frankly, the ideas, I didn’t like them,” Tina says. And speaking of guest editors, she said: “They don’t know how to get it right, any more than I would know how to commission a bunch of songs. As an editing idea, it’s fraught with roadkill.” That must often be true but

it doesn't stop it happening. It's just too profitable a stunt. In July 2007, Bono was handed an issue of *Vanity Fair* to focus on poverty in Africa. Maybe it sold copies, maybe it raised money, but Bono, *Vanity Fair*, poverty in Africa, give me a break!

The *Today* programme's casting doesn't display such dissonance. Last year, they fielded a shepherd (James Rebanks), a soldier (General Sir Nick Carter), a footballer (Raheem Sterling) and an expert on chimpanzees (Jane Goodall), among others. Their audience numbers are declining at the same rate as inflation is rising. Call it an annual nine per cent. The programme isn't a must-listen these days. They need to take a leaf out of Tina's book.

The programme needs a pick-me-up. Forget do-gooders and computer scientists. This year has produced two ex-prime ministers, damnit. True, one of them generally wouldn't get out of bed for less than a six-figure sum but he'd kill for a free run on the *Today* programme. And, as for Liz Truss, it took her ventriloquist's dummy just 25 minutes to destroy the British economy. Trussonomics is perturbing enough, but what about Trussosonics? The sound of her voice at breakfast will make people appreciate Martha Kearney and Mishal Husain as near-goddesses.

And another thought: it is now 18 years since Sarah, Duchess of York (the artiste formerly known as Fergie), was a guest editor of *Today* in 2004, which was 17-and-a-half years after

she starred in *It's a Royal Knockout*. Surely, as the original Mrs Spare, she should return and complete the cycle?

Come to think of it, I object to the very term guest editor. Being the editor of a publication is a serious and onerous proposition. These people brought in to sell extra copies on the strength of their name aren't guest editors – just guest celebrities, flavour of the week or the month. I appreciate one shouldn't say that of Greta Thunberg, who's been given the run of periodicals the world over. She's Greta Thunberg.

But I have known people who deserve the title "guest editor" – newspaper people who were blown into and out of the editor's chair in no time at all. At the *Daily Express* there have been many. Rosie Boycott was brought in when Clive Hollick decided to magic the right-wing, Conservative-supporting paper into a Blairist organ. Rosie was the guest invited to host this weird table-turn, then disinvited when it was sold to Richard Desmond, who soon returned it to its natural state.

At the end of the last century, Kim Fletcher, now editor of this august journal, was removed from the editorship of the *Independent on Sunday* after a year and replaced by a person who, according to Kelvin MacKenzie, "couldn't edit a bus ticket". It wasn't just silly, it was syllogistic. I sent Kim a supportive note: "You are an editor; she is not an editor. If she is an editor, you are not an editor." Though in this case you were a guest editor. So – Roseanne Barr-like – was she.

David Robson

*The writer's memoir of four decades on national newspapers, The Owner's Mother Loves My Stuff, is available from wrenthambooks.com or via Amazon at £10.*

# Who do they think they are?

Given one of the principal aims of new US digital news company Semafor is to bring transparency and clarity to a business that has become too polarised, I can't say I was particularly encouraged by co-founder Ben Smith's recent remarks to the *Financial Times*. "Our big competitors that dominate global news were created back in the 20th century. [They are] exporting news from London or from Atlanta or from New York," he said. "We're trying to build a much more networked way for a totally different moment."

He went on: "There are just these blindingly obvious consumer discontents with the news business..." One of these "discontents" – in fact, the main one, he says – is lack of trust in the media. In the spirit of transparency and clarity, then, I would point out that he has a bit of a nerve complaining about people not trusting journalists any more.

For it was during his leadership of *BuzzFeed* that the website – unlike other news organisations which held back because they couldn't verify its sensational contents – decided to publish the entire so-called "dirty dossier" (compiled by the former British spook Christopher Steele) claiming Donald Trump cavorted with Russian prostitutes etc and was in hock to the Kremlin.

Given the fuss Trump and his friends were able to make about media bias and collusion with the Democrats when the dossier's claims were widely debunked, Smith hardly did the cause

of trust in American journalists any favours. Anyway, here he and his Semafor co-founder, the former Bloomberg Media chief executive Justin Smith (no relation, but a fellow American), are with yet another digital news venture that vows to cut through the growing partisanship of the "legacy media" and give readers the plain, unvarnished truth. Or, to be realistic, some semblance of impartiality to their right-minded, liberal, university-educated target audience.

Smith's last job was media correspondent of *The New York Times* so he certainly knows a thing or two about US news organisations whose impartiality and objectivity are under challenge. In arguing that many people – and not just Americans – have got tired of bias in news outlets where they used not to detect it so easily, the Smiths clearly have a point. (Every other week, I meet a longtime *New York Times* subscriber – invariably older and, I would say, more discriminating ones – who say they can't hack it any longer.)

But is Semafor the answer? It hopes to stand out from the competition with an unusual article structure, dubbed Semaform, by which all stories – with the exception of breaking news – will be divided into five sections: The News, Reporter's View, Room for Disagreement, The View From... (the reaction abroad) and Notable (further suggested reading). So you don't get strictly impartial news but you do get the partiality

flagged up. It's not a million miles from what *The Week* has been doing for years. On the page – and Semafor pages are yellow-coloured – it all looks just a little convoluted to me, even if the intention is the opposite.

It certainly has its work cut out becoming the international network of news providers – “we’re a global news company at birth”, it boasts – that its founders envisage and essential reading for its target market of the world’s English-speaking university graduates. Semafor has only 60 staff (*The New York Times* has more than 1,700 journalists) and \$25million of funding from a clutch of rich backers who – if I had to take a punt now – might not be seeing much return on their investment.

The venture once again illustrates the almost limitless self-regard of American journalism, not to mention the extent to which their countrymen fall dutifully in line behind those assumptions (for most of Semafor’s backers are American, too).

A cynic might say that the strategy behind Semafor seems to be

little more than take two big-name journalists, dream up a gimmicky new way of presenting stories that surely didn’t take much effort, and wait expectantly for the world to be wowed. Or venture capitalists to come in and pay them millions for the idea before it crashes in flames.

Both Smiths left very cosy jobs to prove that, despite so many before them failing, they have cracked digital news. I can’t imagine many British hacks would have dared do the same, but then, they tend not to share the self-satisfied kudos that American journalists have enjoyed for years, with their endless Pulitzer Prize announcements and august temples such as the Columbia Journalism School.

They are Jedi knights and we poor benighted British hacks are just imperial stormtroopers, shovelling the crap. They may be a little deluded in their view of themselves, but when it comes to selling bold “we’re splitting the atom” ventures such as Semafor, it certainly helps.

Tom Leonard

# Downing Street loses the plot

*James Hanning*

*Would Liz Truss have lasted longer if she had communicated better? No one can remember a leader being so bad at it*

God mocks those who make plans, and howls at those whose ambitions are unchecked by humility. Former prime ministers sometimes say they were too cautious after arriving in Downing Street, but Liz Truss's extraordinarily misplaced belief in her abilities had her hitting the ground sprinting – and stumbling. The removal men had barely finished their tea before she was making a dash for growth in a way more redolent of Anthony Barber than of her heroine Margaret Thatcher.

This was, of course, the disaster that defined her brief premiership, but it was compounded by an over-confident assumption that she, like Thatcher, would quickly be able to overcome a woodenness of delivery. With Thatcher, the early lack of fluency was taken to show conviction and authenticity. It added to the sense that she was no fake. But, to be unfashionably fair to Truss, Thatcher's premiership had a big advantage over her admirer. It was still the age when – roughly speaking – No 10 called the shots. The deferential age of journalists kowtowing to the prime minister had gone, but the game was that much simpler than now.

Thatcher's first couple of years were wobbly, but once the unions, the Argentinian junta and her cabinet "wets" had learned who was boss, her authority over the news outlets was established too. Not that the media particularly worried her. She left that to Bernard Ingham, a civil servant, let us not forget, who played hardball with less pliant journalists. Particularly after she trebled her majority in the 1983 election, Cabinet assumed a role of dull conformity, the Heseltine shooting star being the only exception.

Norman Tebbit played the polecat, ensuring the sidelining of non-believers, and the media reflected to its reassured consumers a belief that the strikes, inflation and unruliness of the 1970s were vanishing into the past.

What's more, there was money to be made as the newly unchained multitudes bought shares in the newly privatised state assets. There was a clarity of purpose, and potentially dissenting voices could be anticipated, pre-empted and, if necessary, rubbished. On television, big beasts such as Robin Day and Brian Walden prowled proprietorially, but performances on their stages could be prepared for and contained.

The lobby played its part, unattributable smears being administered to warn any faint-hearts thinking of straying. "Friday night drops", when journalists would obligingly hold their mouths open to be fed easily recycled titbits from Downing Street, were the norm. A boycott of the lobby, led by vigorous newcomer *The Independent*, became a *succès d'estime* among centre-left idealists, but they were outside the orthodoxy in any case and could be safely ignored. It wasn't quite groupthink, but it was not journalism's finest hour. For government, though, it was a golden age of control. Never did the phrase "one of us" carry more menace.

Which cannot be said of the John Major years, when Euroscepticism, largely massaged into quiescence under Thatcher, was on the march, making the Tory party harder to manage. Major's small and shrinking majority, his divided party and his self-harming scrutiny of the newspapers fed a frenzy. Not only was the prime minister unable to gag his dissenting Cabinet ministers, but he lacked the authority even to prevent his collective term for them – "bastards", enunciated in private but recorded and disseminated – becoming central to the narrative.

According to even the Tory papers, this was not a big man with eyes set stirringly on distant horizons. On the night of Black Wednesday, one of his biggest crises, Major phoned the editor of *The Sun* – who was astonished to receive any call from the PM amid such mayhem – with a friendly inquiry as to how the paper planned to cover the episode. The reply from Kelvin MacKenzie was as anarchic as can be imagined: "I've got a bucket of shit on my desk, prime minister, and I'm going to pour it all over you." We must hope Major acknowledged, at least, the respectful use of "prime minister". Famously, that was the moment the Tories' record for economic competence evaporated, triggering a fusillade of hostile leaks from "stab-in-the-back" Thatcherites and rumours of challenges to Major's leadership.

The 1997 landslide victory for "New" Labour now looks more like an



inevitability than any election result in recent years. It came about because the public could recognise a shambles when it saw one, and after 18 years in office, that is what the Tories had become. Labour, by contrast, in opposition was terrifyingly disciplined, and even more so in government. The implicit control of the Thatcher years returned, though in a more mechanical, formalised guise, rebutting here, smearing there. Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell were ruthless, freezing out “unhelpful” journalists, schmoozing susceptible ones, and keeping Tony Blair, Thatcher-like, above the fray. The “grid” was developed, ensuring the news outlets were well fed – hence Blair’s famous search for “eye-catching initiatives” – and had little time to indulge in mischief.

The Iraq war of 2003 was the ultimate symbol of No 10 media control. The awkward squad that disliked Blair would always be likely to oppose unseating another country’s head of state without unambiguous UN backing, but there were awkward voices ideologically not far from him who needed bringing round. And sufficient of them – it is not unfair to call them the “should have known better” brigade (I’m thinking particularly of you, *The Observer*), excited to be briefed by real-life spies and others – ended up deferring helpfully to the Blair-Bush insistence on seeing off Saddam Hussein and supported the war. It was a remarkable example of what No 10 can swing, given a large majority and the full forces of the state behind it.

Or, rather, what it used to be able to swing. David Cameron’s coalition with the Lib Dems largely followed the Blair playbook, the former PR man enjoying the support from the Murdoch papers that had been drifting away from Gordon Brown between 2007 and 2010. The narrative of a nation-saving coalition – rather than of Cameron’s failure to win a majority despite Brown’s uncertain and rift-ridden rule and 13 years of Labour – became the accepted chorus. The presence of a former Murdoch editor by Cameron’s side undoubtedly helped conduct that chorus, and on at least one occasion, I understand, Andy Coulson dictated a *Sun* front-page headline over the phone from No 10.

A sense of assured competence – or at least one that outflanked Ed Miliband’s – presented Cameron with a shock election win in 2015, but the control was illusory and the forces of mayhem, led by the Eurosceptic Leavers, not far away. The pre-election promise of a referendum that Cameron had used to keep control of his troops had to be delivered, but by then the forces of anarchy were unchained. Whereas in 1975 the referendum on the EU was won by the status quo-supporting side spending 10 times

more than the antis, in 2016 that same “sensible centre”, on whose influence Cameron had gambled, let him down. The barbarians had grabbed the levers. Dominic Cummings’s mastery of social media, opinion polling and marketing took back control from Downing Street as well as Brussels.

The media had atomised. The Forum, once peopled by strolling senators musing paternalistically through settled, conventional channels, was now teeming with gadflies, Downing Street’s grip long in the past. Newspapers, though still powerful, had lost their primacy. The BBC was deemed suspect and Radio 4 became an optional. Where previously experts talked of setting the agenda, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook had no such pretensions. What would be would be. Dissenting voices now had any number of platforms, including their own. There were countless more radio and TV shows, many more wannabe Paxmans. No longer did we take what we were given. Now we could choose, algorithms reminding us how right we were.

### *Enter Boris Johnson with a new approach*

Who less suited could there have been to walk onto this meme-infested stage than awkward, *faute de mieux* Theresa May? In response to “Brexit means Brexit”, the collapsing conference stage and the disco shimmy, the world simply fell about. As we know, her government lasted only three years, until Boris Johnson’s treachery finally had its reward. And in bringing in Mr Take Back Control, Johnson opened a new chapter, one in keeping with the restrictions forced on the government by the pandemic. Under Cummings’s guidance, Johnson’s premiership ended the Downing Street obsession with playing the media’s game. A new, centralising ethos took over. Special advisers were to be chosen by him, not their immediate bosses. Dispassionate technocrat mandarins were replaced by those who were “onside” with the new, polling-driven policy formation.

But the most noticeable change, and what a shock it was to many of us, was the ethos that most voters don’t care about Westminster village talk or Twitter or *Private Eye*. Sacred cows were machine-gunned. Who needs the *Today* programme? Millions got their news (“news”) on social media. The BBC could be written off as biased and, with the licence fee looking outdated, on notice. Leaky ministers were to be defenestrated (and, in passing, let us not forget how much Coulson loathed Cummings for his leaking in the Cameron era).

And where they wanted to convey a message, they would make their

own news. So, using Covid as the excuse, a snapper from the press pool taking pics was displaced by a court photographer, introduced by David Cameron, taking disarming pics of, say, Dilyn the Downing Street dog and other such Twitter-friendly puffery. The BBC became the subject of spine-chilling briefings as to its likely post-licence fee fate, and its bosses quaked. Paul Dacre was mooted as the new boss of Ofcom.

And, in the most alarming example of the madness of crowds, Johnson's obvious unsuitability for high office – for his default mendacity, his inattention, his disorganisation – was for a long time, before and after 2019, overlooked not only by Tory members but by their print cheerleaders (again, file under “should have known better”), for fear that Jeremy Corbyn – yes, really – might oust the Tories.

Cummings's take-back-control strategy for No 10 was not in itself wrong, and as mayor, under the lash of his guru Lynton Crosby, Johnson had shown uncharacteristic discipline, curtailing the clowning and the off-the-cuff, media-friendly soundbites, but it wasn't a cure-all. Refusing to feed the beast looked absurd when the government refused to put anyone on the *Today* programme to explain its Covid position. The former health secretary Jeremy Hunt, at that time a critic of much of government policy, had to stand in, effectively as the government's translator. Remaining mute looked evasive and cowardly when government competence came under fire. So much for control.

Historians will probably look back at late 2022 and agree that running a Tory government then was as hard as it has ever been. Four decades after Thatcher applied her stamp, prime ministers must dream of the sort of control she had, but they occupy a far more unruly media landscape than hers. The media is now too diverse, too hungry, for government to rule from a pulpit.

But competence and conviction are essential if loyalty, and thus control, is to be maintained. The Thatcher government had those. The same cannot be said of Liz Truss's. Who would be a spin doctor with that hand to play, but she has set a low bar for her successor to improve on.

*James Hanning was deputy editor of the Independent on Sunday, co-biographer of David Cameron and author of Love and Deception: Philby in Beirut.*

# Taking the lid off the lobby

*Julia Langdon*

*Spoon-fed by government spin doctors? It's simply not true, says a journalist who made her career by building contacts with politicians*

I can't remember how the invitation arrived but it was clear from the outset that its unstated purpose was top secret. The late Bruce Page, then editor of the *New Statesman* for which I wrote an occasional column, wanted an undercover rendezvous. I don't think I was actually told to dress incognito, but I was summoned to a discreet address and instructed to mention the appointment to nobody. I was fascinated, of course, thrilled by the clandestine arrangements and profoundly puzzled as to the meeting's possible intention.

When he told me that he wanted me secretly to tape-record a lobby meeting, I burst into laughter right in his very disappointed face.

There has been a myth about the parliamentary lobby, which, admittedly, its founding fathers and the original rules governing its operation did much to perpetuate. The reality is that under normal circumstances, the daily meetings during my many years of attendance were usually an exercise in endless, mind-numbing, sleep-inducing tedium. No, we were not spoon-fed exclusive stories on Downing Street silverware. We were told about the appointment of new vicars, given progress reports on white papers, informed about the prime minister's day, and given advance information on a need-to-know basis about such things as future ministerial movements: the foreign secretary is off to Africa, for example, and those who wish to go might need a visa or two and some injections. The Downing Street official would take questions and nobody would dream of asking anything about a story he or she was pursuing and alert others to the fact that there might *be* a story.

Sometimes, the spokesperson would make a mistake or let something slip,

an occasion which would be a source of unconfined joy – but it didn't happen often. Sometimes, someone might even make a joke in the comfortable knowledge that it wouldn't be repeated. Lord Carrington, a very genial cove, came to the lobby once as foreign secretary to discuss an ongoing problem about French fishing fleets. He would use every weapon at his disposal to protect the British interest, he told us. Somebody asked: What weapons? "Oooh," he said, "Cruise? Perhaps Trident?" We all laughed and nobody reported it because we knew it was a joke. It is difficult to imagine that happening today.

So while it can be possible to get some fun out of it and because circumstances are not often normal in politics, there is often heightened tension and always that chance of a mishap, mostly it was certainly not worth recording. Sorry, Bruce! The point, though, is that then, as now, if you had a staff post it was necessary to be there, as proved by the bold but short-lived boycott instituted by the newly-founded *The Independent* (and cravenly followed by *The Guardian*). I chaired the lobby at the time and, as I recall, the outcome was a ballot among the journalists, a decision to attribute briefings to a Downing Street spokesperson, instead of "sources", and *The Independent* joined the lobby. And *The Guardian* came back too.

The existence of the lobby, the sense that there is some sort of secret society that has access to a privileged source of news, has always distorted the perception of the way in which governments manage the communication of their policies to the wider world. And while I'm on the subject of secret societies, I might just mention that there has been very little attention ever drawn to masonic lodges in Parliament. For obvious reasons, I know very little about this, but I do know there was – and possibly still is – a flourishing membership of masons among parliamentary journalists and others in Westminster and Whitehall which, I suspect, might have had an influence in all manner of ways.

What has become far more significant than the operation of the lobby, however, is the way in which the government's public relations are directed from 10 Downing Street. And the difference is what happened when the Blair government took office in 1997. It is from that date that the most important changes can be traced.

Before that Labour landslide, government press secretaries were employed by the civil service. They were not necessarily career civil servants – Harold Wilson had brought in Joe Haines, for example, who was a political journalist before and after his years in No 10. Bernard Ingham, who came to

personify Margaret Thatcher's press operation, had been a journalist (and is still writing two weekly columns today, aged 90) but had joined the civil service as a government press officer from *The Guardian* in 1967. He was not only Thatcher's press secretary but head of the government information service. He represented Thatcher and the government, but not the Conservative Party. He never attended party events and he tried – not always successfully – to avoid internal Conservative politics. He did, however, attempt to deal even-handedly with the lobby, as I learned from working for different newspapers. This would not remain the case.

Throughout its history, the Labour Party has suffered from a sense of resentment at the treatment it has traditionally received at the hands of what used to be termed the capitalist press. It was a vain attempt to redress this that led the party to launch *Labour Weekly*, which ran from 1971 until 1988. By the time Tony Blair won the leadership, the party was determined to raise “its game” – in the words of Alastair Campbell. They set about that in a highly professional manner. It was the beginning of spin.

### *Campbell cleared out press officers*

One significant early change was that the cabinet secretary, Robin Butler, was persuaded to allow Campbell (and Blair's other political adviser, Jonathan Powell) to become civil servants, a change approved by order in council, which gave them authority to give orders to other civil servants. (This highly controversial change was subsequently reversed, but a precedent had by then been broken.) The permanent secretary at the Cabinet Office, the late Robin Mountfield, was then asked to chair a working group to draw up proposals to strengthen the government information service. According to Nick Jones, the former BBC industrial and political correspondent, who has written several books on these matters, the intention was “effectively to put the government information service under political control”. And so it was, under Campbell.

The plan – as set out in what became the Mountfield report – was that departmental press offices should be ahead of the game and government briefings should “grab the agenda”. A generation of directors of information in government departments were moved on, or “let go”. Their successors were required to clear their press operation with Downing Street via the “grid” that was brought into being and they were encouraged to trail announcements in advance. The irritation of the present Speaker of the House of Commons (and his predecessors) at government announcements

being made without first being relayed to Parliament can be traced to this departure.

Nick Jones points out that this major change gave civil service information officers the power of spin doctors, handing them the ability to release confidential information ahead of a parliamentary announcement and also to place the story wherever they wished. It was a development ruthlessly exploited by Campbell and it came to mean, Jones says, that political correspondents were judged more on their ability to deliver exclusives than “on such old-fashioned virtues as reliability, accuracy and judgment”. They could place their stories with journalists who would do their bidding and where the government got the best coverage. According to Jones, the person placing a story might even demand copy approval and ask to see how the story had been written.

These developments did not affect me personally. I was no longer in a staff job after 1992 and, although I remained a member of the lobby, I no longer had dealings with official government sources. Indeed, after Campbell’s arrival, they were no longer prepared to talk to me. “It’s because of the rubbish you write,” Sue Nye, the director of government relations for Gordon Brown, told me once. I think she meant because I was not prepared to be subject to official direction.

What has happened in the intervening years can be attributed to this change, instituted initially under the Blair and then Brown Labour governments, and pursued in the same manner under David Cameron and his Conservative successors. That this should have happened in what feels like an atmosphere of ever-increasing chaotic incompetence perhaps points up the lesson: that effective political control of the press can only work if the government itself knows what it is doing and that – as recent history has so graphically illustrated – it is, in any case, a highly undesirable ambition.

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# Losing friends in high places

*jane fae*

*Our newspapers' support of the Tory party will not do  
them much good if a Labour government takes over*

In 1991, the Tory MP and chief secretary to the Treasury David Mellor warned that the press was “drinking in the *last-chance saloon*”. Two years later, the press responded with a monsterring over his marital infidelities. Righteous scoop? Retaliation? Perhaps a bit of both. Either way, Mellor’s career was in tatters. Some 30 years on, the UK press is still propping up the bar in that infamous watering hole. A little battered and bruised after a further five – yes five! – official inquiries. But still largely untouched.

However, with clamour for statutory regulation once more finding voice, the question must be: what are the chances of a new, not-Tory government finally calling “Time!” on this most problematic of institutions?

Of course, cynical observers might conclude that we’ve seen this all before. Over the preceding 70 years, according to a 2015 report by the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, there have been nine official inquiries – that’s inquiries kicked off by government or Parliament – into the workings of the UK press. That is one every eight years or so. Plus, a rather more indeterminate number of police inquiries looking into outright illegality.

Since the last major inquiry (Leveson) reported back approximately 10 years ago, we are surely overdue another. Because whatever we have been doing in response to these inquiries appears to many just not to be working.

The big question remains “to regulate or not to regulate?”. That was the view of Sir David Calcutt, who chaired one official inquiry back in 1989. Of the Commons National Heritage Select Committee, which called for a statutory press ombudsman in 1995 and also of Lord Leveson, who called



for a new, independent, body, grounded in statute, to replace the existing Press Complaints Commission. This last fell at the first hurdle, as prime minister David Cameron thanked Leveson for his work, then politely declined to pass the requisite laws.

In March 2018, government passed on the opportunity to follow the first Leveson Inquiry with a quiet announcement by then-culture secretary, Matt Hancock. The second phase would be cancelled. Campaign groups declared themselves appalled. Few, though, were surprised. For in the interim, most of the UK national media had thumbed its collective nose to Leveson by signing up not to Impress, the body that he had proposed as replacement for the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), but to their own creature, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (Ipsos), a barely re-branded PCC.

2015 also saw the publication of the optimistically titled Best Report – named after its chairman – a report on press regulation by the Lords Select Committee on Communication that concluded that although the issue of press regulation had become less prominent, “unless the UK has a system of press regulation which adequately balances the right to privacy with freedom of expression, and which has the confidence of potential claimants and the press itself, it is likely that this issue will come back again to haunt the public and the press”.

That much, at least, seems uncontroversial. Tautologous, almost. It takes refuge in the somewhat tired format of Hegelian dialectic, juxtaposing thesis (freedom) to anti-thesis (privacy), and then leaving the room. Except they aren't opposites. This is “false dichotomy territory”, and this neat rhetorical conclusion elides multiple serious issues, including political bias, culture war and serious harm to individuals under one simplified rubric.

Perhaps one of the most serious blocks along the road to press reform is the fetishisation of “free speech”. This figures much in government rhetoric, although recent legislative proposals, such as the Online Safety Bill, reveal a dilemma at the heart of official thinking, and real decisions to be faced in the not too distant. More on that in a moment.

A second issue is that, historically, the UK has never been keen on state regulation of creative and artistic endeavour. Politicians can spot a mile off the enormous bear trap implicit in statutory embedding that they fear would inevitably lead to ministers being roasted in Parliament for the bad behaviour of film-makers, or advertisers, or... journalists.

That is why the preferred model, across many industries, has been self-regulation, with the state called upon only as last resort. Film has been

regulated for over a century now by the British Board of Film Classification (originally Censorship), established by the film industry and largely independent of statutory interference throughout its lifetime. As film, so market research (Market Research Society), advertising (Advertising Standards Authority) and, for the most part, online content.

That last is important, as even in respect of the most controversial manifestations of pornography, the preference of government has been, until recently, to fulminate – but otherwise leave policing of content to the online service providers. Thus, David Cameron in 2012.

A major exception to this tendency remains Ofcom, because for historic reasons, including the fact that the UK has state broadcasting in the shape of the BBC but not a state press, some level of state back-stop in this area was always inevitable. What, then, has changed? Why, now, should the UK press be worried that there will come a polite knock at the door, followed by a dread cry of “Time, Ladies and Gentlemen, please!”?

### *Opposition parties resent Tory complacency on regulation*

A number of factors are now in play or, depending on larger political developments, likely soon to be. It begins with a presumption increasingly locked into the price of politics that the next government, coming to power some time between May 2024 and January 2025, will not be of the same stripe as the current one. Whether it turns out to be deepest red, or some motley collection of Labour, Lib Dems, Greens and Nationalists, is another matter entirely. Indeed, given current political instability, that date could arrive sooner.

No change, no threat. The present incumbency, as evidenced both by a lukewarm response to the Leveson proposals and the Online Safety Bill, would appear to be perfectly happy with the current state of press regulation. More, it seems prepared, courtesy of the latter, to legislate some new and quite exceptional privileges for the UK press (More Harm Than Good, Steven Barnett, *British Journalism Review*, Vol 33 No. 3).

In contrast, the opposition has every reason to resent a press establishment that many consider little more than a Tory Party mouthpiece.

Surely, twas ever thus? From criticism of the sartorial and lifestyle choices of Labour leaders, runs a clear line. Michael Foot wearing a “donkey jacket” at the Cenotaph; Ed Miliband’s difficulties with a bacon sandwich; Jeremy Corbyn bowing improperly at a Remembrance Sunday Cenotaph

ceremony; and “Beergate”, in which allegations about Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, already dismissed by police, were resuscitated to distract attention from larger allegations about the then-prime minister Boris Johnson.

It’s all part of the “game of politics” and politicians tread very carefully in this area lest they be accused of wanting to impose undue control on the press. Besides, the press is an equal opps attack dog. It will bite anyone that gets in its way, so long as the story is right. Hence the less than helpful coverage of Tory MPs. Again, there is a pretty clear timeline, from David Mellor in 1992 to David Cameron and that now notorious allegation about a pig, through to more recent attacks on Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, according to how the political wind is blowing on the day.

The real issue, perhaps, is not the scurrilous and the sensational, as the fact that when it really matters, much of the UK press comes through and delivers in highly partisan fashion. That is, at election time. According to research from the Media Standards Trust in 2015, some 95% of tabloid editorials in the run-up to that election were anti-Labour, with most directly disparaging Labour leader Ed Miliband. Some 77% of the News UK papers’ leaders were anti-Miliband, and it’s getting worse. The comparable figure for 1992, the year that *The Sun* claimed “It’s *The Sun* wot won it” for John Major, was just 44% deemed to be anti-Kinnock.

More recently, in a study looking at the 2019 general election, Loughborough University’s Centre for Research in Communication and Culture (CRCC) found press hostility to Labour was more than double the levels identified during the 2017 election.

In Scotland, the nationalists too have reason to be unhappy. Press coverage during the 2014 independence referendum exhibited much the same features as UK election coverage. To wit, personalisation (to Alex Salmond), demonisation, and a massive imbalance in the reportage, both in the way stories were covered, and in the balance of pro and anti-stories. To be fair, bad behaviour by the press was, in this instance, significantly overshadowed by claims of misconduct by the BBC.

Another area where the press is busy making enemies is in respect of the so-called “culture wars”. These have been likened to the good old days of sensational stories around “political correctness gone mad”. However, the comparison is flawed. First, because this campaign has seen take-up by government in ways that the old political correctness campaign never did. At the heart of “anti-wokeness” is a real disagreement around the nature of discrimination, whether structural racism/sexism/homophobia exist at all

– or are just inventions of the post-modernist left. More importantly, they have been weaponised, by leading politicians against individual communities.

Thus, analysis by Trans Media Watch submitted to the Women and Equalities Committee suggested that press coverage across the period of a consultation on the Gender Recognition Act was running at between 10 and 20 to one against.

The significance of all this is not to argue for or against any particular politics. Rather, it is to note that by being so bound up with a particular politic, and by being so vociferous in its opposition to certain groups, the UK press is creating a coalition of resentment. All well and good if the current regime is endorsed once more at the next election. Rather more problematic if it is not, and the resentful achieve positions of power.

It is against this background that the neat contrast put forward by the Best Report – between freedom and privacy – also breaks down. A further feature of recent politics has been to politicise “freedom”. So, a concept previously regarded as a universal good, like motherhood and apple pie, has now been inserted into political discourse. This, in turn, has led people to notice inconsistencies between demands for absolute freedom on university campuses and broader freedoms for the public to speak out on issues.

### *If “content” can be regulated, why not the press?*

It has also placed into the public arena a broader critique of press claims about the unalloyed benefits of free speech. Perhaps freedom to speak should not be regarded as freedom from consequence. This elides neatly into issues raised by the Online Safety Bill. For if the mood music from Number 10 a decade ago was “leave online regulation to the internet companies”, this proposed legislation represents a very clear reversal of that view. As currently written, that bill gifts to the press a unique and privileged position: exemption from the proposed new crime of producing fake news. Moreover, the mere existence of such a bill, combined with awareness that it is not even-handed between online social content and online press content, is a massive hostage to fortune. Because once embedded in popular thinking that content is the thing that needs regulating, sooner or later the dots will be joined and it will be argued that proper regulation of press conduct might be a good idea after all.

Last, but by no means least, we return to where we started. Pressure for statutory press regulation received significant boosts at points along the

way, with revelations that press wrongdoing all too often crossed the line into illegality. That was, after all, the impetus for the Leveson Inquiry in the first place, and before that, various inquiries by the authorities.

Criminal behaviour by the press was intended to be the focus of Leveson II, the one cancelled because government deemed it no longer necessary. Yet here we are, in 2022, with a host of public figures, including Sir Elton John, the Duke of Sussex, Baroness Lawrence and actresses Sadie Frost and Elizabeth Hurley filing cases against the *Daily Mail*/Associated Newspapers Ltd for illegal activity.

The claims are strenuously denied by the *Mail*. On their own, they are nothing we haven't seen before. Over and over and over. The difference now is that several major factors are beginning to come together once more, as they did in 2012. Like some dark celestial alignment portending doom for self-policing by the UK press: allegations of criminality; an acceptance in principle by political allies that (online) content should be regulated; and possibly coming soon, the ascendance of a coalition of the disgruntled and openly hostile.

It's nowhere near the end. Yet. But it might be a good time, if you're a UK press baron, to get in "one for the road". You might need it.

# Where Russians go for the news

*Wendy Sloane*

*An older generation relies on television for news about war in Ukraine – and President Putin is keen to keep it that way*

Russian journalist Svetlana Kunitsyna's credentials are impressive. In her long career, the 50-something Muscovite has been the arts correspondent at Russia's NTV before it became the state propaganda channel, editor-in-chief of the weekly *Meantime (Time Out)* magazine, editor of *Snob* magazine (launched in 2008 for the "sophisticated" middle class), and director of broadcast content for Dailyonline.ru. She also worked as a Moscow-based freelancer for Radio 4 and spent a year in London with *Big Ben from London* on BBC World Service.

But in late September, Kunitsyna abandoned her career in Russia. Armed with a suitcase on wheels and a "senselessly small" rucksack, she travelled 24 hours by train from Moscow to Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia, then paid for lifts with strangers before dragging her luggage several kilometres on foot to reach her destination: the Georgian capital, Tbilisi.

"I don't regret going through the hell prepared by my motherland for even one second, although I've had to bite my lips until they were bloody," she posted on social media, alongside a video of her punching the air ecstatically after crossing the border. "But that doesn't matter anymore."

Like many highly educated Russians, Kunitsyna's decision to leave Russia was not spontaneous. "On February 24, it became clear to me that I have nothing in common with a state that kills people and destroys a neighbouring country," she recalled in an interview a few weeks after settling in Tbilisi. "During the first several days I had the illusion that people like me, those who are against the war, are in the majority in Russia. But when fellow

citizens frantically shout propaganda slogans at pro-war rallies, it became clear that I was surrounded by Putin's aggressive electorate. Even in Moscow."

As much as the West lauds decisions like Kunitsyna's, not all Russians agree. While Ukrainians are being hit by Iranian suicide drones and threats of nuclear strikes following the attack on a major bridge linking Crimea to the Russian mainland in October, Russians are also suffering from shortages of food and other items, the first mobilisation since the Second World War, and the possibility of completely closed borders and martial law.

Reactions to the changes vary. Some Russians are swallowing the official party line, believing that Putin is embroiled in a battle that began against Nazis and nationalists and now incorporates "terrorists" too, after the Kerch bridge attack. Others are risking their lives – or at least their livelihoods – to protest against the current situation and, in some cases, flee the country. And a considerable percentage of the Russian population is now doing what many of us do when confronted with the brutal reality of a situation: they are burying their heads in the sand.

Putin's quest to shore up support is facilitated by state-controlled television, the primary source of information for many older Russians. In provincial Russia, TV audiences consist mainly of people aged 50-plus, who watch it either out of habit or because in small towns there is no alternative. Not many Russians outside large, westernised cities such as Moscow or St Petersburg have access to the internet or speak a foreign language, which would enable them to access international news.

As a result, the older generation largely believe the war is a defensive one, according to polls, and that Russia had no choice but to fight back to protect Ukraine's Russian-speaking population, especially in the Donbas. Putin's popularity soared when Crimea was annexed in 2014, and many observers believe he decided to launch his invasion of Ukraine when the rosy so-called "Crimea effect" had diminished.

"Before Crimea, people had been supportive of the president but not particularly engaged. When we asked people how proud they felt of their president, very few people did feel pride," says Graeme Robertson, co-author of *Putin vs the People: The Story of a Popular Dictator and the Struggle for the Future of Russia*.

"But after Crimea, lots of people felt pride. So you had lots of people who felt joy and an emotional transformation to Russia. It's possible that Putin drew from this experience the idea that if he could launch a successful war, he could once again capture the hearts and minds of the Russian people."

A Levada poll taken in late September showed Putin's 80 per cent overall approval rating dropping to 77 per cent. But this number is "more nuanced than the headline figures suggest", wrote Andrei Kolesnikov, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Denis Volkov, the Levada Center's director, in a joint article published in *Project Syndicate*.

Up to 20 per cent of Russians do not agree with their country's actions in Ukraine, according to the poll, which is up from 14 per cent in March. "This group is dominated by young urban dwellers who consume news from the internet, rather than state-controlled television," the article said.

While many independent news organisations have been forced out of Russia and/or blocked, the encrypted messaging app Telegram is still going strong. Interestingly, Putin tried to bar access in 2018 but it was officially unblocked in 2020 – with some saying the app's ability to reach large audiences means it's useful both for those against the war and for the Kremlin.

### *Telegram Sam is now their main man*

"It's very noticeable that after the Russian government moved to ban other social media platforms earlier on in the conflict, there has not been an attempt to ban Telegram. We increasingly see interest in what is being reported on Telegram, especially by pro-military bloggers," said Joshua Tucker, director of the Jordan Center for Advanced Study of Russia at New York University, speaking at a recent online conference at Columbia University.

But while the pro-war bloggers get huge followings on Telegram, the app is also playing a pivotal role in creating an "alternative narrative", said Timothy Frye, the Marshall D Shulman Professor of Post-Soviet Foreign Policy at Columbia. "We know that autocracies have low information systems, and there is really a great hunger to try to figure out what people are thinking," he said. "We know from other autocracies that leaders are constantly looking for any source of information to try and figure out what is going on in the absence of a free media and other sources of information that operate in some countries."

Telegram has grown exponentially since the war began, with an estimated 2.5million extra users joining in the first three weeks of the war – a jump of 25 per cent, according to Al Jazeera. That's partly because it provides its users with "inside information", said Sam Greene, director of democratic resilience at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) and professor in Russian politics at King's College London.



“If people just want to know what’s going on in the war and just be able to talk about it round the kitchen table, then for a lot of people television is enough. For some people for whom this is particularly important and want to have a sense of involvement, then keeping track of the inside information you get from Telegram is great,” he said. “What Putin has done with the mobilisation is actually giving people a lot of reason to pay attention to these Telegram channels much more than they were before. Because now, all of a sudden, the war is real.”

Telegram is also popular due to its interactivity. “Ukrainian armed forces are using Telegram as the most effective channel to get Russian conscripts to surrender, as there are telephone numbers they can call where they can surrender safely without being killed,” said Anastasiia Vlasenko, postdoctoral fellow at the Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia. Sending messages to the Russian population in that way would be impossible through the normal Russian TV channels, she added.

*I Want to Live* is a Ukrainian Telegram channel that opened in September, offering Russian soldiers both the chance to give themselves up and to get cash in exchange for Russian military equipment. Soldiers will be treated as captives, not traitors, so they would not face reprisals later. “It is better to surrender to Ukrainian captivity than to be killed by the strikes of our weapons,” Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky said in Russian on his own Telegram channel in September, according to *iNews*.

Russians support the war “more as a matter of conviction than of conformism”, with some respondents to the Levada poll commenting that “they cannot know exactly what is going on, indicating that the government knows best”. While some might experience fear and anxiety surrounding their country’s involvement in Ukraine, the “desire to stay in their psychological and intellectual comfort zone prevails”, Robertson writes.

After decades of being kept in the dark by the government, many (mainly older) Russians are content to turn a blind eye to reality, according to a former *Moscow Times* reporter, “Sara”. “Don’t discount the fact that people just don’t want to know. People want to have an ordinary life, so they look away from the news that disturbs them,” she says.

Can age, education and geographic location really forecast what Russians feel about the war? Many believe so. Russians today can be divided into three groups: a “shrinking minority” who have been against Putin from the very beginning and have already begun to leave the country; hard-liners who are “real enthusiasts” about the war and want Putin to take a harder

stance; and those in between, says Peter Conradi, *Sunday Times* Europe editor, author of *Who Lost Russia? From the Collapse of the USSR to Putin's War on Ukraine*, and a former Moscow correspondent.

“In the middle, you have a large number of people who see that the war is basically being waged in a faraway country they are only aware of on their TV screens. They are not enormously troubled by it,” he says. What is beginning to bother them is that shortages of some items are beginning to emerge – although Robertson says that sanctions are a “slow burner” with little or no impact thus far – and that it’s becoming more difficult for most people to travel outside the country.

In fact, life was more or less “tolerable” for most Russians, Conradi says, until Putin announced his plans to step up military activity. “The decision for mobilisation, even a partial one, has really brought home to these people that their country is involved in a war and there is a danger that they, their country and their sons will have to fight in it, and there is a very good chance they will not come back alive,” he says. “That is really a decisive moment.”

### *Brain drain as 400,000 Russian men vote with their feet*

Low morale among Russian troops, poor military training, a dire lack of supplies including safety and first aid equipment, and a shortage of effective weaponry already plagued the Russian army before conscription came into effect. Julia Davis, creator of the (now banned) Russian Media Monitor and columnist at *The Daily Beast*, recently tweeted: “Meanwhile in Russia: Tempers fly, as not everybody is happy with the government’s failure to properly equip the troops, leading to proposals to cancel the New Year’s festivities and spend the money on the military. One pundit concludes: ‘The government sh\*t its pants’.”

As videos emerge of conscripts advised to purchase tampons to use as bandages before going to the front, Conradi predicts things will only get worse. He points to Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu, who has said that Russia has succeeded in calling up 200,000 conscripts. “But already an estimated 400,000 who were eligible for the draft have left the country. People directly affected, directly at risk of being conscripted, are heading for the border. Long term, what does that mean?

“It means Russia is essentially suffering an enormous brain drain, as quite well-educated people are leaving the country. There are already serious demographic problems and an ageing population. If there is an exodus of

smart people as well, long term, that is very serious for the country.”

Russians who speak out openly against the regime now are swiftly silenced, either with fines or with prison sentences. They face criminal charges for “inciting” others to participate in protests, which are categorised as “unsanctioned”, as well as for “discrediting the Russian armed forces”.

Grigory Ivanov, an IT specialist from St Petersburg in his mid-20s who didn’t want to use his real name, asked for political asylum after landing at Heathrow in May. He had taken part in several political demonstrations against the invasion and was worried that he’d either have to betray his conscience or be arrested. “I couldn’t do nothing, and I didn’t want to land up in prison,” he told me after he had been in the country only a few weeks. He was living in Home Office accommodation, sharing a room with seven other men who smoked, but said it was worth the discomfort and lack of privacy. “I heard on the news that anyone who demonstrated would go to jail, so I had no choice but to leave.”

For people like Ivanov, the door has opened and will perhaps never swing shut. Kunitsyna says she also cannot foresee going back to Russia soon – and expects more people to follow her lead. “Given that about 70 per cent of Russians have never been abroad, it’s not hard to imagine that they would easily believe any tales concocted by Russian propaganda about the West,” she says. “Are they happy to stay where they are trapped now is another matter entirely.”

She is in Tbilisi recharging her batteries while she ponders what to do next. “I am torn apart by conflicting feelings. On the one hand, as a journalist, I would like to sit in the front row of the *parterre*, watching the moment when the inevitable changes will come to Russia. On the other hand, I understand that this moment may well not come in my lifetime. But I am an optimist. I hope to clear up the rubble left by the Putin era.”

*Wendy Sloane worked as a journalist in Moscow from 1989 to 1995, writing mainly for Moscow Magazine, the Associated Press, The Daily Telegraph and Christian Science Monitor before becoming a magazine editor in the UK. She currently freelances for The London Economic, among others, and is an associate professor and journalism course leader at London Metropolitan University.*

🐦@wendyutah

# Getting it right really matters

*Georgina Lee*

*When warring sides are skilled in propaganda how does  
a television station make sure the footage is real?*

If I say the words “Mariupol maternity hospital”, I’m sure you can picture her. A young woman stares blankly at the camera, face bloodied, clutching a tatty quilt, in the middle of a bombsite. Like “Napalm girl” five decades earlier, there are some wartime images that cannot be unseen.

There is one way to banish that gnawing horror from the mind of the viewer, though. What if the scene as it appears really is too awful to be true? What if this woman is not a new mother, an innocent caught in the horrors of an illegal war – but instead an actor, cynically defrauding the sympathies of a right-minded global public?

That was the alternate reality the Kremlin began to construct in the hours after Russian bombs rained down on the hospital. By Moscow’s account, the facility had been cleared of patients and was, at the time of the attack, housing “neo-Nazi” Ukrainian soldiers. Had this been true, the strike would have transformed from potential war crime to legitimate military operation.

At the time, we were nearly two weeks into Russia’s full-blown invasion of Ukraine. Every day, my intrepid *Channel 4 News* colleagues were sending through hours of footage from the front line, documenting in brutal and often unbroadcastable detail the latest horrors perpetrated by Russian forces on Ukrainian civilians.

On the ground, the *Channel 4 News* foreign team, headed by our international editor Lindsey Hilsum, has investigated war crimes, while correspondent Paraic O’Brien has produced hard-hitting reports on rape as

a weapon of war. All underpinned by our presenters Matt Frei and Krishnan Guru-Murthy, who have led efforts by the programme to rigorously analyse the rapidly unfolding events.

My first instinct was that the scenes from Mariupol were exactly as they appeared, that the young woman really was an imperilled civilian caught in Putin's deliberate fire. And that instinct, it would transpire, was sadly correct. The Kremlin line would be comprehensively debunked: we would soon know that the woman and others pictured there were not actors, and that some of them did lose their lives that day, including a baby who was stillborn.

But, as a fact-checker, I know that instincts, however compelling, must always yield to due diligence. Yes, Russia had already committed appalling acts in this war. But that didn't mean every alleged instance should be treated as another on the list without verification. Guessing is not knowing.

What, then, does verification look like? In this case, we were fortunate that journalists from reputable news outlets, including the Associated Press and Sky News, were quickly on the scene. They shared their own images of the devastation Russian artillery had wrought, and managed to track down the woman in the blanket as well as others.

First-hand accounts and images collected by multiple reliable news sources are about as good as it gets in this business. The trickier task is verifying images and videos from social media. This conundrum is not exactly new – so-called “user-generated content” has been a blessing and a curse for traditional news outlets for more than a decade. If genuine, it can provide unparalleled insight and eyewitness footage before news crews have had time to scramble to a scene.

But we also know that, for the most part, social media algorithms are designed to serve up content that is engaging, regardless of its veracity. By definition, if you're watching a video online and it makes you feel something – thereby passing an early test of newsworthiness – that's the first sign of potential trouble.

There are a few tricks of the trade that help sift out the fakes. At the most basic end, right-clicking a picture and running a reverse image search can sometimes tell you if it has been taken out of context – for example, if it's years old or from another part of the world.

At its most sophisticated, image and video verification can mean forensic examination of whatever's in shot – from a local skyline to a scrap of rubbish – or a deep technical interrogation of the post's metadata. Bellingcat is often rightly seen as the industry leader in this, but perhaps the most memorable

single example was BBC Africa Eye's *Anatomy of a Killing*, which used, inter alia, the outline of a distinctive mountain range in a contested video to prove it was what it appeared: footage of a brutal killing by soldiers in Cameroon.

As in Russia's Mariupol bombing, the veracity of the video had been denied by a state actor – in this case, the Cameroon government. BBC Africa Eye did not shy away from presenting that government's arguments, just as many outlets – including *Channel 4 News* and the FactCheck team – gave airtime to the Kremlin's claims about the Mariupol bombing.

There are no doubt some who would object to this, who argue that to ventilate the propaganda of states that are known to have an uneasy relationship with the truth is to give false equivalence between fact and fiction.

### *Important questions about belief*

But, to my mind, this objection misses one crucial point: whether we publicise them or not, propagandists, be they state-sponsored or private individuals, will find ways to get their messages out – most often, by seeding them on social media and in fringe publications. So the choice for professional journalists is not between “allowing” the public to find out what the propagandist says or not; it's between whether or not our viewers and readers believe us when we say we're giving them the full picture. If a cursory glance on social media reveals that there is apparently another side to the story – a side the bogeyman mainstream media “won't let you see” – that only serves to erode public confidence in journalists. And worse still, it could leave readers and viewers with the erroneous impression that once-trusted outlets have ignored a propagandistic claim not because it's false, but because it's true.

That's not to say that all fictions are worth refuting. We fact-checkers must always ask ourselves: by reporting this story, even to debunk it, am I passing on the falsehood to more people than would have ever seen it otherwise, giving it unearned credibility? There's no hard-and-fast answer to this, but there are two tests I usually apply. First, is the false claim likely to be seen by a lot of people anyway, even if we don't cover it? If the answer is yes, we can hardly be accused of giving the fake news undue prominence because it is already well-known. Russia's claims about the Mariupol “actors” and Cameroon's doubt-casting over the killing video clearly pass this test. Secondly, what, if anything, can we add to this? The UK is blessed

with a number of highly respected fact-checking organisations, of which FactCheck is only one. In a world of finite time and resources, FactCheck's energies might be better deployed on another story if a competitor has already done a comprehensive job.

Examining fake or misleading news about conflicts like the one in Ukraine is just part of what we do. The majority of FactCheck's coverage deals with domestic politics, interrogating the claims of public figures and trying to explain key concepts that will help readers and viewers understand the policy questions of the day.

Methodologically, this presents different challenges than does video verification or the interrogation of wartime propaganda. That's partly because when you're looking at phone footage or gathering evidence about an event, you are dealing with something that has already happened. In those cases, you are pursuing a set of falsifiable claims: is this person pictured truly who they say they are? Was this video really shot in that location? What is the chain of events? These are questions about the past. In theory, enough investigation – however difficult – will yield an answer.

By contrast, some of our most vexed political debates are over competing visions of the *future*. With Brexit it was “Project Fear” versus “sunlit uplands”. With the first and possible-second referendums on Scottish independence, much rests on whether Scotland would be financially better off outside the UK. During Covid, politicians and scientists clashed over what would happen if we eased or tightened restrictions.

So it is tempting to think that we must wait until these things have happened – say, for Britain to leave the EU, Scotland to become independent, or the government to change Covid rules – to find out which projections were right and which were wrong.

Certainly, there is value in looking backwards, and doing so helps hold politicians of all persuasions to account. But waiting for the future is no use in the present. Our viewers and readers are also voters and many of them look to fact-checkers and other journalists to help to decide the balance of evidence lies.

So, while we can't yet say which is right and which is wrong, the more salient question is: how can we work out which projections are plausible, and which aren't?

A first principle is that, whether it's medicine or economics, good science knows its own limits. If it's an academic article, you'd expect to see confidence intervals (“we, the researchers, are 95 per cent confident that

the following will happen”) and language that caveats the findings appropriately, making clear what the researchers still don’t know or can’t reliably anticipate. Conversely, any projection that touts itself as a crystal ball is unlikely to be such.

Beyond that, I’d be wary of any projection that makes truly outlier claims. While they catch the eye, and therefore make for tempting journalistic fodder, projections that stand out from the crowd are, statistically speaking, unlikely to be accurate. Most often, there’s a reason that none of the other experts in this field have reached this conclusion. Just as it is good practice never to lean too heavily on a single opinion poll, but rather report on the general direction of travel, so we should consider a range of projections and see where they collectively point.

Ultimately, projections about the future are not predictions. We can only use them to say what is likely, not what is inevitable. That is the job, and sometime curse, of the fact-checker: to lay out what we know, and, however frustratingly, what we still don’t know.

*Georgina Lee is the senior journalist overseeing the Channel 4 News FactCheck.*



# twitterwatch

**Sir Michael Take CBE @MichaelTakeMP**

Oct 30

This is sewage being sensibly dispersed at St Agnes in Cornwall today. You'll see the beach is empty so NO ONE is being harmed. This would of course have been stopped by the nit picking EU. Brexit means we can now employ such SAFE procedures. Good news!

**Top News@TopNewsWorks**

Daily Mail shit hot reporters fail to notice that Sir Michael Take is a micky-take, and, as per usual, the standard of their reporting is about equivalent to a floating turd. Of course the post has since been updated - but Sir Michael still is there in the Google result.

**Sir Michael Take CBE@MichaelTakeMP**

Delighted to see that The Daily Mail has had the good sense to quote me regarding the government's sensible idea to disperse sewage in coastal waters in a safe manner whilst beaches are empty. The Daily Mail continues to be an example of rigorous & well researched journalism.

**Sean McGrath@sean\_uk**

Amazing. This is a brilliant parody account but the fact that the Mail has actually quoted him is nothing short of amazing...

**Tickling Sticks@eggs\_horse**

My first thought was to double-check the source. And yes, Daily Mail Online DID use Twitter, and specifically, Sir Michael Take @MichaelTakeMP as a source.

**Louis Defend the right to vote@LouisHenwood**

Oct 31

Bloody hilarious The night shift at the Mail online have just quoted Sir Michael Take as a former Conservative MP, supporting the discharge of sewage off the coast of north Cornwall

**Dr Paul Budd Brexaster Resister #FBPE #FBPR@PaulCanOnlyGet1**

Quite right. I think Elon should clamp down on these parody newspaper accounts. People are going to lose the ability to distinguish between good clean Tory sewerage and the nasty socialist stuff that needs to be treated before discharge.

**Sunday Sport@thesundaysport**

Alas, our slapdash colleagues on Fleet Street seldom apply the rigorous standards enforced by Britain's most-trusted news source.

**Matthew Pennell@Matt\_building**

I remember when popular and well-respected MP Jonathan Aitken lambasted standards in British journalism how worried we were. Here's proof, however, that the Mail sets the standard in diligence, accuracy and credibility

# How I helped kill the high street

*Jessica Hill*

*This business reporter knew how to generate the online hits her paper wanted, but at what cost to the communities it served?*

As a regional business reporter who knew how to generate the most page views, I did not work in the best interests of the town centre economies I represented. In fact, I'm ashamed to admit it but I believe I actively contributed to the downfall of the Great British High Street during the nine months I spent at a large regional newspaper.

The methods I deployed to generate the most clicks might have been good for our business, at least in the short term, but they spelt bad news for the town centre retail businesses in the areas I covered. It was June 2018 when I started the job, having spent much of the previous seven years working abroad as a freelance journalist.

I arrived at a time of significant upheaval for local and regional titles, with increasing reliance on revenue coming from click ads as print advertising was in decline. This led to an emerging hierarchy in the newsroom whereby it was not the most talented writers who were the most highly praised by the editor, but those who were the most willing to tease intrigue, outrage and a sense of shock into a headline and intro.

The job title role was telling of the downward spiral regional newspapers were caught in: my predecessor, who had done the job for over a decade, had been "business editor" with the appropriate pay to match the title. Whereas I found myself undertaking essentially the same position with the title "business writer", and on substantially less pay.

I was still expected to edit the work of two colleagues, one of whom was several years over the statutory retirement age and had been working for

the newspaper since he left school. He came from the old school of journalism where news was mainly generated by tip-offs from a wide circle of acquaintances, but as his contacts had mostly retired or died off, he occupied himself by rewriting press releases and gossiping with colleagues. My other colleague was the paper's rural life and farming reporter, who helped me edit our weekly business section. On other days, the paper had just one business page.

Business stories had, until I turned up, been the least popular of the newspaper's online stories, right down at the bottom in the page view stats, along with opinion pieces. While it was still seen as being important to have a business section of some sort in order to be perceived as a serious broadsheet newspaper – which then, I assume, helped persuade companies to advertise with us – my predecessor had found his business stories were getting the lowest rating of any journalist on the paper. There appeared to be little faith in me being able to turn things around when I arrived on the scene.

But the newspaper had, around this time, begun to strongly encourage its journalists to post links to articles they had written on social media pages and in groups, which offered a way to get content out there to people who would not normally read it. I was used to using Facebook for work purposes; as a freelance journalist, I had required case studies for personal finance articles and lifestyle features, so had deliberately extended my friendship network on there as much as I could to widen the net when I posted requests seeking interviewees. Sometimes I would also post the finished article on Facebook afterwards, but it was never an expectation of the previous newspapers I worked for to do so.

The social media postings I was expected to make for my new job were different. The idea was to actively join as many Facebook community or business groups as we could, for which it was necessary to hide our true identity as journalists and our real intentions for joining the groups. We were never dissuaded from posing as members of that community to gain access where it was a closed group.

Then when one of my stories broke, I would post it on the group along with a suitably shocked message teasing out the gist of the story. Having to lie to the group's administrator about my reasons for wanting to join the group played on my conscience and occasionally led to some angry messages from them when my true identity and purpose for joining their group emerged, but that didn't stop me.

Using these tactics, we could ensure the people in those communities

who might be interested in that news were directly targeted with it. And it meant that while the core of our traditional newspaper readers were based in and around the region's largest town, by directly targeting Facebook groups, we could penetrate communities right on the fringe of our newspaper's reach, where we were in competition with papers owned by rival publishers.

The year I joined this newspaper was a particularly bad one for the retail sector, with people migrating online in droves for their shopping. And while our core readers had previously shown little interest in business-related articles, everybody was interested to hear which was the latest retail outlet under threat in their town. Among the big names that closed stores nationwide that year were Debenhams, House of Fraser, Toys Я Us, Mothercare, Marks & Spencer, New Look, Carpetright, Maplin, Prezzo, Byron, Poundworld, Carluccio's, Gourmet Burger Kitchen and Edinburgh Woollen Mill. I think I covered the demise of them all. Even if it was mere speculation, based on a national retail chain closing stores in other areas, I knew a headline on the lines of "could our county lose its Debenhams store?" was sure to get people clicking on it to find the answer.

### *A good store closure always out-clicked an opening*

I could see the topic of the demise of town centres was one that created chatter online. Often, if a town lost one of its flagship stores and was unable to get a new occupier for the vacant unit, it prompted locals to chinwag over how it hardly seemed worth going into the town centre any more and almost talk themselves into staying at home instead. I rarely heard any opposing voices.

Amid all this doom and gloom, there were some brave new independent retailers moving into empty town centre premises and my job was also to write about these new openings and the entrepreneurs behind them. But while some people clicked on those stories when I posted them on Facebook and wrote the odd encouraging post, these stories generated far less interest than the ones about store closures. So, for the purpose of generating clicks, it hardly seemed worth posting the good-news stories.

Stories of long-serving stores closing down, particularly when they were independently owned ones which were seen to have helped shape the character of a town and given it a sense of living history, generated a real anger too. Councils were often blamed for allowing large out-of-town retail

outlets, which people were still flocking to at that time, to open.

The bland stories about a new large discount chain opening in a retail park based on a generically written press release always justified the new development on the grounds of the number of people who would be employed as a result of it. But the figures included the construction workers involved in building it, which seemed misleading to me. Inevitably, they did not take into account the job losses the opening might have inadvertently caused by sparking the demise of a town centre business with a similar offering.

Sometimes, the sense of outrage prompted by the articles about store closures led communities to fight back to try to save the store in question, and I covered a few petitions and protests too – particularly in middle-class areas. There was clearly a trend happening of national retailers such as Next and Marks & Spencer sensing that town centres no longer had viable futures and shifting their offerings out of town, and in the case of M&S, diversifying more into food.

I remember, in particular, the closure of one M&S in an affluent seaside town being fought tooth and nail by the residents, but to no avail. At least in this particular town, the townsfolk did for the most part own cars and could reach the shiny, new, out-of-town retail parks. They just preferred to see their town centre thriving because they cared about it.

But in another seaside town, this one being one of the most deprived in the country, people were not only angry about town centre shops closing but had a sense of palpable powerlessness to do anything about it. These people often didn't have the means to reach out-of-town retail parks and had relied on town-centre shops for the necessities of life.

I sometimes did vox pops with shoppers in such town centres and picked up on frustration that every other store was now becoming a charity shop. The town centre was becoming messy and unkempt, and often there was also a sense of bitterness that any new stores opening tended to cater for immigrant communities. "It no longer feels like our town," was an often-quoted line.


Within six months in my role, I had become one of the most prolific and successful journalists on the paper with all my online hits. I had penetrated Facebook communities far and wide, bringing my messages of despair and foreboding to their patches. I was generating thousands of anxious conversations which, in many cases, seemed to prompt the conclusion that it was no longer worth venturing into town anymore.

We had an online dashboard screen on one side of our office which

charted a “top 10” of that day’s newspaper’s stories and how many page views they had. I think I became somewhat addicted to the dopamine hit of watching the page view figures rise as I fed my doom and gloom stories into unsuspecting online communities. Every month, we gathered in the newsroom for the editor to heap praise on those journalists whose stories had generated the most page views. There was talk of journalists being rewarded with some sort of bonus scheme for page hits, but this was seen as a step too far. There was a backlash from the features and opinion writers and the incentive scheme was never introduced. Nonetheless, I often joked that it felt as though my job was more that of a salesperson than a journalist. But any short-term pleasure I got from seeing stories do well online did not bring me long-term job satisfaction.

My addiction to generating online hits affected my home life. It meant that often long after I had left the office and returned home, I still found myself constantly checking my phone to see whether my stories featured yet in the paper’s top five “most read” section of the website, or checking Facebook groups to read what people were saying about my stories. It didn’t set a good example to my children to see their mum constantly checking her phone.

I was also so driven to do well in my job that I ended up working more hours than I was contracted for and felt exhausted most weekends. I started looking for more meaningful and better-paid journalism jobs elsewhere. Ironically, I ended up spending the next three years at a trade publication for local government officers, leading me to write stories about attempts to revitalise town centres. I look back and feel ashamed of my success in feeding off the misfortunes of high street businesses. In many ways, I have no doubt that I contributed to their decline.

*Jessica Hill has just started a new role as investigations reporter for Schools Week and FE Week, after spending three years at Local Government Chronicle. She worked on the business desk of the East Anglian Daily Times from 2018-19, after spending five years as a freelance journalist based in Abu Dhabi.*       @jessjanehill

## QUOTES OF THE QUARTER

“One of my favorite sounds ever is the sound of a crisp new newspaper being read over breakfast for an hour or so... The popping out of it, the folding, the scribbling on the crossword... I hope it never goes out of fashion in our digital world. It is too romantic.”

– *Singer songwriter Katy Perry, tweeting to her 108.9million followers*

“There is currently great danger that social media will splinter into far right wing and far left wing echo chambers that generate more hate and divide our society. In the relentless pursuit of clicks, much of traditional media has fueled and catered to those polarized extremes, as they believe that is what brings in the money, but, in doing so, the opportunity for dialogue is lost.”

– *Elon Musk, in an open letter to advertisers explaining his purchase of Twitter*

“The BBC is the one organisation that can be relied on not to have a political agenda. The BBC’s only agenda is to try to get to the truth of things. It doesn’t have a political slant, it doesn’t have particular views it wants to get across. It is as near as we can get to an objective truth teller. And I think, in a world where there is a cacophony of voices and a cacophony of different prejudices and opinions and distortions prevailing, it’s absolutely vital to have something where, whatever its faults, its intention is to strive to tell the objective truth.”

– *David Dimbleby, on the BBC’s centenary*

“The paper has become internally dysfunctional, with writers and editors alike all terrified of saying The Wrong Take. I saw this coming in the Corbyn era when I was repeatedly warned off writing about Labour from my perspective as a Jew. Then I was told not to write about gender from my perspective as a woman. When I asked what part of my identity was acceptable to turn into copy, it was suggested that I write about my children.”

– *Hadley Freeman, to the editor of The Guardian, reported Private Eye*

# How to find news stories

*Emma Robinson*

*Many fear the newspaper industry is losing touch with communities. A scheme funded by an internet giant is seeking to redress the balance*

Kate Lockett, a reporter on the *Helston Packet* in Cornwall, worked in the NHS for 12 years as a housekeeper for Helston Community Hospital. Now she is following in the footsteps of her dad, Noel Perry, who reported on Helston for the *West Briton* for 40 years, before his death in 2013. Kate, 33, said: “It’s something that I have wanted for so long, so I just did it. I took a leap of faith.”

“Journalism was always the goal to do since I was about six or seven. I have always wanted to be a journalist since I can remember. Growing up, I saw the respect my dad got as a reporter and the friendships he made. I admired him and wanted to be a part of it.” She got the chance to change career when she spotted an advertisement on Facebook for the Community News Project (CNP), a scheme funded by Meta – the digital giant behind Facebook – to get new faces into journalism to report on local communities.

I left my job as news editor of the *Essex Echo* a few years ago after a fantastic training and career telling the stories that really matter to local people. There’s no job like it. It’s why I joined the industry’s training charity and why I love inspiring others in my current comms role at the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ). But I had seen first-hand just how challenging it was, with scarce resources, to do justice to all the community news alongside all the crime, court reports and council meetings that drove the news agenda. There had been no one like me in my newsroom, where my strong Teesside accent earned me the title of the office foghorn (of which I was secretly proud).



It was against this backdrop that the Community News Project was born in 2019, to provide the resources and expertise to try to deepen the relationship between communities and their local news organisations. The ground-breaking scheme attracts people who bring something different to the news – whether that be because of their ethnicity, a disability, their socio-economic background or life experience – and to reinforce the focus on the issues that matter to local communities.

Initially, the partnership brought together Meta (formerly Facebook), the NCTJ and nine regional publishers. The pilot programme created 82 new community news reporter roles – funded by Meta – to inject a much-needed boost to the publishers’ coverage and to their audiences’ sense of engagement, even trust. Recruitment to fill the community reporter roles began with a drive to attract a diverse mix of people who were passionate about reconnecting with those communities that had been forgotten, isolated and unheard.

Recruiting the right people into these roles was critical. News organisations wanted to hire reporters who could successfully engage with these communities – be that through their faith, sexuality, background or upbringing – so they could build the bonds to unearth new and hidden stories. With the NCTJ overseeing the scheme, publishers were able to recruit untrained talent: people from within the applicable communities themselves, who might not otherwise have been attracted to journalism or who had thought it was out of reach. Once in role, they could train towards the Diploma in Journalism alongside the day job.

Publishers used more varied recruitment methods than they might usually, seeking to unearth hidden potential. It wasn’t just a case of online ads in the usual places: publishers visited local colleges, posted information in Facebook groups, and pinned job descriptions to village notice boards. The project’s primary objectives were threefold: to deliver trusted journalism to underserved communities; to hire a diverse cohort of reporters; and to equip the reporters with professional skills and an industry-recognised qualification. Those early recruits hit the ground running.

It has now been almost four years since the CNP was launched and the number of community reporter positions funded by the scheme has grown from 82 to 100, creating a real difference to newsrooms whose renewed coverage of previously underserved communities has become an invaluable asset to the news operation.

When Meta confirmed at the beginning of 2022 that it was keen not

only to extend the existing positions but to expand the scheme, the NCTJ ran a public tender process to bring new partners in. The result was that the CNP now benefits 23 regional news publishers in the UK, from the biggest (Reach, Newsquest and National World) to many smaller outfits (the *Brighton & Hove News*, the *Southmark News* and the *Congleton Chronicle*, to name just three).

The focus on attracting talent from under-represented backgrounds has remained vital. Among the community reporters currently in post who have provided information, 67 per cent meet one or more of the CNP's diversity criteria (ethnicity, sexuality, disability, educational and socio-economic groups are all taken into consideration).

Among this third cohort of community reporters is George Harman, 26, who was working as a mechanic when he joined the CNP. George said he always had an interest in politics and current affairs and is now enjoying getting to grips with the issues facing local rural communities at the *Wellington Weekly News*, connecting with people in the villages and small towns in his patch.

### *From rebuilding engines to rural reporting*

He said: "After leaving school, I did not know what I wanted to do, even though I had been good at writing. I became a fully qualified mechanic after school because I got into cars. I learnt a lot of valuable stuff, but it has always been in the back of my mind to write for a newspaper.

"You wouldn't think that there were a lot of transferable skills. But as a mechanic you learn how to talk to people properly and communicate to decipher what people mean. I can interact with a mix of people. I am enjoying this job so much more. I have got so much more energy in life."

Iona MacDonald joined the scheme to focus on stories about rural areas in the north west Highlands, working for the *Highland News*. Aged 16 and with no formal journalism training, but from the region herself and passionate about the role, Iona combines learning on the job with training for her NCTJ Diploma in Journalism at Glasgow Clyde College.

She said: "My patch is pretty rural with lots of small villages but there's a lot going on, especially tourism, though I think a lot of it is often missed because it's so rural. It's exciting to have these areas more recognised in the media. Because I am from the area, there's a lot of people I know or vaguely know but may not have spoken to them in a professional way. I will use that

to my benefit.”

George, Iona and Kate and follow in the footsteps of the 82 reporters who joined the CNP in 2019, many of whom have taken up permanent journalism roles after completing their training. Naomi de Souza became a senior reporter at *BirminghamLive*, having started her career as a community reporter at Reach PLC in Coventry.

She completed both her Diploma in Journalism and the National Qualification in Journalism during her time with the project, having never stepped inside a newsroom before. She also won the Community News Project award at the NCTJ’s most recent Awards for Excellence, recognised for work including an investigation into the sale of skin-lightening products across Coventry.

She said: “Getting to represent unheard stories from large swathes of the city was a privilege. You have a special power to bring important stories to the forefront. People talk a lot about diversity in the newsroom, but you see its benefits in action on the scheme. Reporting on stories that strike at the heart of diverse communities and resonate with real people not only builds audience, but trust, which has sometimes been lost in newsrooms.”

Indeed, it’s not only the reporters themselves who have benefited from the project; crucially, so have the communities those reporters serve. Charity champion Ursula Myrie, 48, from Sheffield, says that her relationship with Lisa Wong, who was a community reporter at the *Sheffield Star* in the CNP’s first cohort, really made an impact within the black community in the city and helped instil trust in the media.

Ursula, who founded a survivor-led mental health service Adira, which supports the black community, forged a close connection with Lisa. “My community have loved Lisa’s stories; she has gained a lot of trust. There’s more about my community in the paper now. This is new for us – to have our stories out there. And they are positive stories too. They’re not about missing fathers, single mothers, black-on-black crime. Lisa has definitely bridged that gap.”

*Emma Robinson is marketing and communications manager at the NCTJ.*

🐦 @emmarobinson14

# Not just for oldies

*James Brindle*

*The charity created by Charles Dickens to help journalists fallen on hard times is supporting young reporters who are struggling to find their feet*

A sum of £45,000 might not seem such a huge number during these days of multibillion-pound rescue packages, but back in the mid-1970s it would, on average, have bought you 10 houses in the provinces, with change left over for a new car, a foreign package holiday and a posh dinner set from one of the nation's many multi-floor department stores. Remember them?

The 1970s are relevant because of the growing number of economic and political similarities from that epoch to this. Journalists in their 50s would have spent their formative years in the 1970s and 1980s and will recall a very different socio-cultural landscape to the one around us in late 2022. Their backgrounds, educational experience and career paths differ and diverge, but they at least tended to start jobs with credit in the bank.

Not now. If you're about to graduate from university in England in 2022 and embark on your career in journalism, you'll owe on average £45,000 in student debt – and that's before you have thought of owning a home or car and, quite possibly, before you have finished the training needed to earn money as a journalist. So, to see a figure of £0 on your student loan statement would be (almost) as fantastical as a lottery win. Really.

When you ask anyone what the Journalists' Charity does, the chances are they'll tell you it helps old folk who've hit hard times. They aren't wrong, for the charity has supported countless older journalists and former journalists since its creation by Charles Dickens in 1864. But in 2019 the trustees refined and restructured the charity to make it more fleet of foot, because first came Covid and then this cost-of-living calamity. Never before

had so many working journalists needed the support of the JC.

But just as crucial to the charity's future role and relevance, the spotlight of support has widened. There is a younger generation that needs help. If you're a talented, aspiring journalist from a working-class background in Burnley, one of the most deprived areas in Europe, and you're offered a poorly-paid job in expensive London, and you're already in debt to the tune of £45,000, chances are you will be tempted instead by something that offers more money and less hassle. After all, no dream is immune to a harsh financial reality check.

If you turn away from journalism, you may well rue your decision for the rest of your life. And journalism, striving to boost diversity of background, would suffer a loss too. No organisation can completely remove the career-busting barriers created by high debt and low pay. But as a national charity which strives to help as many journalists as possible in financial need, the Journalists' Charity had to do something.

Our answer, the first jobs fund, is as far as we know, a unique assistance scheme that tackles some of the financial barriers that pose a serious challenge for new entrants to journalism. Through the fund, new starters can get financial help with essential work-connected costs, from accommodation to transport, relocation and sometimes kit. Since its launch in 2021, the first jobs fund has helped dozens of bright young faces leap with greater confidence into new roles in broadcast, print, digital and social journalism.

Emily got help with relocating to London from Middlesbrough, Joel was given cash to help fix his car to cover his new patch as a trainee reporter in the north west, Usma was awarded assistance for wheelchair adaptations for a flat near to the newsroom, Dee received support to relocate to Dublin for her new role as an online reporter.

Starting out has always been tough, but probably never so challenging or expensive as it is today. Through the first jobs fund, the Journalists' Charity is supporting new starters from financially challenged backgrounds who might otherwise walk away from an industry that perhaps has never needed them more.

*James Brindle is chief executive of the Journalists' Charity.  
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# Matt Frei wins Wheeler Award



The 2022 *British Journalism Review* Charles Wheeler Award for Outstanding Contribution to Broadcast Journalism has been won by the *Channel 4 News* presenter and Europe editor Matt Frei.

Frei has worked in journalism since 1989 when he reported for the BBC in Jerusalem, before moving to Bonn as the Berlin Wall fell. In his time at the BBC, Frei reported from Hong Kong, the United States, and also hosted the *News at Six* and *Newsnight*. Moving to Channel 4 in 2011, he became a regular fixture reporting US presidential elections.

He has previously won an International Emmy for News and was Royal Television Society Journalist of the Year in 2015 and 2017. This was the 13th Charles Wheeler Award in an annual series that began in 2009 as a tribute to the celebrated BBC journalist, and which is now recognised as one of the most prestigious journalism awards of the year.

The *BJR* award was presented in front of a packed house at the University of Westminster's Regent Street Cinema, after which Catherine Mayer, author, journalist and co-founder of the Women's Equality Party, delivered the annual *BJR* Charles Wheeler Lecture. The evening concluded with a question-and-answer session with Mayer, hosted by Professor Steven Barnett, a member of the *BJR* editorial board, and a drinks reception.

*Author and journalist Catherine Mayer joined a packed house in the University of Westminster's Old Cinema to celebrate Matt Frei's award and to speak about journalism. This is her speech in full:*

“ Some years ago, I discovered what it is to be on the receiving end of a Matt Frei interview. He appeared benign. You might even say he twinkled. The questions, though, were razor-sharp, their edge intended not for me but to fillet out facts about our subject, Charles Windsor, at the time Prince of Wales. The location Channel 4 chose for this shoot was an Islington pub called The Peasant. I'm sure the name was coincidental.

It is good to see Matt looking warm and happy. We last glimpsed each other as we sheltered from the rain under neighbouring broadcasting marquees outside Buckingham Palace, live commenting on the unfolding story of dying and renewal. The Queen's death cut across a whirling news cycle of war and political convulsions, creating its own 12-day vortex – and challenges.

I don't know what was going on under Matt's marquee, but under mine we were dealing with technical glitches, at various times losing contact with the gallery and a roving reporter. Perhaps audiences might have found such behind-the-scenes struggles more interesting than our efforts – until confirmation of the sad news – to say very little very carefully, but broadcasters and monarchy share an impulse for seamless pageantry and an aspiration, increasingly difficult for both in this polarised, atomised world, to secure loyalty from the broadest possible swathe of the population.

Let me leave my views on the future of the monarchy for another occasion. This room is bulging with a different kind of royalty – British media royalty – and I would like in the short time allocated to me to address the future of journalism. I'm delighted to be here to celebrate Matt's many achievements and journalistic excellence. And I also want to say this: excellence is the only route to survival. Journalism, is embattled and some of the things done to try ensure survival – the blanding-out of content, the false balance, the trivialising of important opinions and issues – are not preserving our profession, but instead speeding its hollowing out.

I speak to you as an insider-outsider, a frequent visitor to the realms of broadcasting and of royalty as one of vanishingly few biographers to be granted direct access to the man who is now our king. I rose high in print journalism. I write books. I've won awards, if not this one. So far, so media establishment. But not British media establishment. I've only rarely worked

on staff for British media organisations.

My first job, at *The Economist*, was a mixed experience. It didn't help that I was American-born, young, female, hadn't gone to Oxbridge, or that my first boss there told me he hired me because he fancied me. Later, in accepting a job writing in German for a German news weekly, I formalised my outsider status as part of the foreign press corps in this, my adopted country. Later still, I returned to my American roots in a series of senior editorial positions at *Time*.

So, for most of my working life, I have known the British media as your close and admiring colleague. At your best, you are the absolute best, world-beating (if Boris Johnson hasn't ruined that phrase), great broadcasters, great journalists, role models and inspirations, funny, clever, irreverent, uncompromising.

I also engage with the British media as a punter, a voracious consumer of your product. I have experienced your darker sides too, observed you from the perspective of your prey. Friends and family have been hacked and chased and papped. Those involved in the pursuit have sometimes tried to convince me that a loss of privacy is the price of fame. Here's the thing, though. It's a short step from denying the humanity of the famous to dehumanising those who are not in the public eye.

In smaller ways, I've made the news myself, seen my own story told and mis-told, my views well represented and caricatured. And, since co-founding the Women's Equality Party, I've acquired a granular understanding of the media reflexes that right now risk boosting and normalising exactly the populist politics that aims to kill off journalism – if we in the media don't manage that trick all by ourselves.

For years, latterly as *Time* Europe editor, I covered the rise of the populist hard right across the continent and heard again and again from British politicians and UK media colleagues why this could never happen here... a robust electoral system built for stability... sensible voters... the bulwark of a constitutional monarchy... blah blah blah. Yet I was seeing something quite different: the Conservatives and Labour contorting themselves into remarkably Ukip-like positions to try to regain some of the support both were losing to that upstart party, while the electorate grew increasingly angry as their votes went uncounted, their voices unheard. All the while, social media simultaneously eroded the economic models sustaining older media and blew up trust in most institutions, indeed in truth itself.

At its peak, Ukip won just a single seat at Westminster, yet, in lockstep



with new media (and arguably in league with it), it transformed politics, muzzling Labour opposition to Brexit and eventually – even faster than I anticipated – capturing the Conservative Party wholesale.

Ukip and its successor parties didn't have to win controlling power at the ballot box to do this, but they did need to pose an electoral threat. In creating the Women's Equality Party back in 2015, Sandi Toksvig and I hoped to harness a similar phenomenon to benefit women and equality. And our concept has proved successful again and again. Wherever we run, other parties seek to neutralise us by becoming more like us, fielding female candidates, stealing our policies. Tiny as we are, we have not only won seats in local government, but important changes in political process, policy and culture. Hurrah.

However, we also wrestle with media bias in a way that the Nigel Farages of this world, for all they present themselves as marginalised, never face. Just for example: ahead of the European elections in 2019, in the name of impartiality, the BBC pulled a programme featuring the Women's Equality Party's deputy leader Hannah Barham-Brown, talking not about the party's electoral platform but about her experiences as a disabled doctor. Meanwhile, they splattered Farage all over the airwaves, even though the party he by then represented, the Brexit Party, was, at least in theory, a new entity and had never contested an election.

Many rules and guidelines meant to achieve impartiality are woefully out of date in the digital era, but at least media gatekeepers can see their quirks and unfairnesses, even while protesting that nothing can be done to change them. It's harder to persuade the media to take a good look in the mirror.

Last year, I received the following invitation: "We have a six-minute segment called *Culture Roar* where we will be asking the question 'Has feminism gone too far?'. We were wondering whether Catherine Mayer would be interested in coming on the show for this segment?"

Hilarious enough to think I'd engage with such a wrongheaded, loaded question against whichever Toby Hopkinpole they fielded against me for a WHOLE SIX MINUTES. More hilariously still, the date of the proposed debate was March 8, International Women's Day. What a way to celebrate female achievement that would have been.

Now, if I tell you the invitation came from GB News, many of you will relax. Oh, you'll think. GB News. No wonder it was crass. We're different. No, you really aren't.

Since founding the Women's Equality Party, I've been asked by many

broadcasters and newspapers to debate whether feminism has gone too far, whether Me Too has gone too far, whether gender pay gap reporting goes too far and so on, ad, almost literally, nauseam. Worse still, such debates are typically constructed for fireworks rather than insights, pitting women who know their stuff against controversialists, often female – cat fight! – whose arguments rely on wilful ignorance. This pattern was already established in 2015 but the War on Woke has taken things to a new level, successfully rebranding debate on what was settled consensus.

Thus it is that anti-racist or pro-equality positions are treated with no more weight than any others. Thus it is that reports about *Roe v Wade* and efforts to limit reproductive rights in many countries, including this one, deploy phrases such as “pro-life”, and platform extremist views in the name of balance. I’m not saying it’s easy to make the correct editorial calls in an age in which those extremist views win electoral representation, but the rise of populism makes it imperative that we do so.

During my years in journalism, I watched us get better improving diversity in newsrooms and working towards the inclusivity essential for a wider range of voices to inform editorial decision-making. Then, as money got tighter and teams shrank, diversity took a battering too. The unfortunate homogeneity of newsrooms breeds groupthink, feeding through in skewed coverage that misses the impacts of policy decisions on different sectors of the population and categorises stories involving women, whether about violence or childcare, as women’s issues and not of huge importance to everyone. It helps to explain how editors signed off on the nuclear-grade misogyny that greeted Meghan Markle’s arrival at Prince Harry’s side. It helps to explain how any of them bought into the notion, as the pandemic struck, that we were all in it together, even as Covid exposed and exploited every conceivable underlying inequality.

Journalism isn’t just about ferreting out stories. Sometimes it’s about seeing things that are right in front of us – or, like a pantomime villain, behind us. The broader the range of experience in any newsroom, and the better the channels for sharing insights and ideas, the less danger the obvious will go unseen.

A quick example. From the Queen’s death and through to the end of state obsequies, I was lucky enough to work with a great team at ITV News to try to provide commentary that was properly informative, but also challenged and analysed what we were seeing and acknowledged dissident

views. This felt important to me and in no way disrespectful. I had spent time with and around the Queen, a shrewd woman, and not one to honour with lobotomised coverage.

Anyway, I was in the ITV studio when the queue for the Queen's Lying In State first opened. As the excellent Nina Hossain spoke to an ITV reporter on the scene, I realised, with a jolt, that the queue ran along a stretch of wall between Westminster Bridge and Lambeth Bridge on the south side of the Thames. In that instant I knew exactly what we weren't seeing: the 220,000 hearts painted on that wall behind the reporter. Those hearts are inscribed with the names of the Covid dead. One of those hearts I inscribed myself, with the name of my beautiful husband Andy.

So it was a gut punch to realise where the cameras were and that they were pointing not at the wall but away from it. Still, I was able to tell viewers what they were not seeing, what other journalists were not seeing.

When I went down to the wall the next morning, our colleagues were leaning on it, stacking their equipment against it, ignoring it, despite the signs every few metres proclaiming it the "National Covid Memorial Wall". "It's nothing to do with the Queen," said one reporter, when I challenged him. Well, yes and no. In her last two Christmas messages, the Queen spoke about and for the Covid bereaved better than anyone in government ever managed. Journalists were quick to seize on the queue as another narrative of "we're all in this together", yet if they had but stopped for a minute to think about the significance of this location, they could have told a more poignant tale, one directly affecting huge numbers of their viewers and listeners and readers, about the intermingling of private grief and public mourning in a run of years marked by loss upon loss. Instead, most news organisations missed this story – and the opportunity to connect with their audiences. The Facebook group for Covid Bereaved families bubbled with disdain and distress. They felt unseen, like the hearts of our loved ones. Erased.

This room tonight is full of brilliant people. You make a difference. The work you do has always been essential and is ever more urgent as existential threats to freedoms, rights, protections and life itself multiply. I want you to connect so that you and your organisations flourish. I want you to *see* so that everyone flourishes. So thank you for all that you do. Please do more of it, and even better.



*Catherine Mayer*

🐦@catherine\_mayer

# The Mirror wins Cudlipp Award



**Alison Phillips, editor of the *Daily Mirror* receives the award from Bill Hagerty**

The award to celebrate the name of one of journalism’s greatest figures has a new home, the London Press Club Awards, writes Bill Hagerty, *BJR* chairman emeritus where it has attached itself to a small but select group of categories that are prized throughout the news industries.

Lord Cudlipp, late editor, editorial director and Mirror Group chairman, would be delighted with the move and

with the continued independence of the distinctive award itself – a facsimile of one of Hugh’s famous and typically irreverent front pages, advising Soviet leader Khrushchev: “Don’t be so bloody rude.” The *British Journalism Review* launched the award in his name in 1999, the year after his death.

The winner for the years 2021 and 2022 – a year having been lost through Covid-19 – is the *Daily Mirror* for the revelations of illegal socialising at the heart of government that would lead to denials by, and the subsequent fall of, a prime minister. “Partygate”, by the paper’s then political editor Pippa Crerar, swept the board.

The judges were unanimous in their choice, but also praised Inside Russia’s Filtration Camps, Dean Kirby’s exclusive and impactful disclosure for *iNews* of Moscow’s mass deportation of Ukraine citizens. It was highly commended. The other shortlisted works were Air Pollution and Dementia, *The Times*; Menopause Matters, *Fabulous* magazine, *The Sun*; No Work on Full Pay Gridlock Drivers, *The Times*; and Skill Up Step Up, *London Evening Standard* and *The Independent*.

# Time to lie down for a little rest?

*Julian Petley*

*Freedom-of-speech-loving British newspapers are getting far too angry about writers expressing opinions in The New York Times*

Ever since Brexit, papers such as *The Times*, *Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sun* have complained bitterly that the liberal media in the States, and in particular *The New York Times* (*TNYT*), have represented the UK in a highly negative and distorted manner. In short, to quote Charles Moore in *The Daily Telegraph*, as “a hellhole of xenophobia and racism”.

However, since August, and in particular the Queen’s death, complaint has tuned to rage and distemper. For example, in an article in *The Daily Mail* headed “Why do the useful idiots at *The New York Times* keep putting the boot into Brexit Britain when it’s America that’s a crime-ravaged basket case being torn apart by wokery?”, Andrew Neil declares that “when it comes to Britain, you can’t trust a word it says”. In *The Daily Telegraph*, Madeline Grant, in an article headed “The American Left has a vendetta against Britain”, argues that the paper’s UK coverage “has moved beyond parody ... Everything, however mundane, is a symbol of national decline. Everyone is nostalgic for the empire, or racist”. Oliver Kamm in the same day’s *Times* accuses it of conducting a “weird vendetta” and laments: “What a meretricious spectacle this once-esteemed title has become.” Two days later in *The Daily Telegraph*, Sam Ashworth-Hayes observes that its coverage is “marked above all other things by a seething hatred of Britain”, and in the same title, Douglas Murray opines that the newspaper which he calls “a poisonous rag” has “developed a strange and intense loathing of Britain”.

A number of papers quote a remark by Lord Tebbit to the effect that “*The New York Times* is now well-known for being a very anti-British newspaper.

This is not a surprise but feels particularly egregious in the wake of the Queen's death. It's the sort of scum that rises to the top of dirty water". In *The Sunday Times*, Rod Liddle lambasts the "dim-witted observations by critical race theorists in the world's worst newspaper", and a *Sun* editorial lays into its journalists as "woke infants". A section headed "New York whines" in a comment column in the *Daily Mail* compares the paper to a "demented stalker" and rages that "ever since we voted for Brexit, the sanctimonious left-wing rag has launched a fusillade of gratuitous attacks against us".

Andrew Neil returns in the *Daily Mail* to opine that *TNTT*'s "bile and bilge when it comes to Britain knows no bounds" and to damn its coverage as "ludicrously malevolent". Zoe Strimpel in *The Daily Telegraph* calls it "one of the most anti-Britain newspapers", and in the *Daily Mail*, Dominic Sandbrook dismisses it as a "woke newsletter" which "never misses an opportunity to traduce and sneer at Britain". And finally, in *The Daily Telegraph*, Charles Moore argues that the paper "must be the most anti-British publication outside Putin's Russia".

This is only a small selection from a considerable corpus of articles, but it is enough to give a clear impression of the enraged tone of these newspapers' coverage of *TNTT* from August onwards. So what has caused such fury on this occasion?

In fact, the targets of their wrath were only a few articles, but the British titles circled around these quite obsessively. Furthermore, all but one of these is very clearly labelled Opinion, something which is not exactly in short supply as far as *TNTT*'s accusers are concerned – and, in their cases, not simply in the op-ed pages either. Nor are these titles backwards in coming forwards when it comes to offering negative comments about foreign countries – particularly if they are EU ones.

The earliest article cited was from August 15, 2018, and concerns the culinary revolution in London. According to its author, Robert Draper: "This otherwise noble capital inclining its palate to devotees of porridge and boiled mutton was never a thing to celebrate". But now, however, "no longer can it be said that London is only a great city between meals. What was once a sallow and predictable dining experience is now salubrious and full of surprises, befitting a metropolis of such diversity and ingenuity". But both Neil in the *Daily Mail* and Guy Adams in the same paper failed entirely to communicate to their readers that the vast bulk of the article *praised* contemporary London cuisine. Furthermore, if one takes the very

brief remark about porridge and mutton in its full context, and if one isn't in search of an axe-grinding opportunity, it comes across as nothing more than a flippant *aperçu* and not as a factual description of the recent dining habits of Londoners.

Another piece which caused various British journalists to have conniptions was a video published in the paper on September 5 this year by Jonathan Pie, a fictional British political correspondent created by actor and comedian Tom Walker. Although those journalists who attacked it did fleetingly admit that the video is satirical, their rage (and perhaps lack of a sense of humour) appears to have made them lose sight of the fact that the purpose of satire is to satirise. In fact, the video's tone is not that different from *Have I Got News for You* and it's actually less abrasive than Radio 4's *Alexei Sayle's Imaginary Sandwich Bar*, although of course the papers which denounce the *NTT* as "left wing" routinely lay the same charge against the BBC. But for Grant in *The Daily Telegraph* to dismiss as "unhinged" Pie's remark that "you can't get in or out of the country because of airline staff shortages and queues at border control" suggests both that she doesn't grasp the bounds of satire and that she hasn't tried to leave the country in busy periods via Dover, the Channel Tunnel and St Pancras International.

As already noted, one of the ways in which these articles make their case is via highly selective quotation. This can best be illustrated by the furore over a lengthy *TNTT* opinion piece headed "Mourn the Queen, not her empire". This was written by Harvard history professor Maya Jasanoff, author of the award-winning books *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* and *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East, 1750-1850*, although she was tagged by Douglas Murray in *The Times* as a "grievance studies professor" and by Guy Adams in the *Daily Mail* an "expert in grievance studies". Of course, no such absurd discipline exists, but inventing it, along with the "grievance industry", is simply a snide and lazy way for right-wing papers to disparage and dismiss ideas that they dislike, as opposed to engaging critically with them. The article argues that:

*The queen embodied a profound, sincere commitment to her duties – her final public act was to appoint her 15th prime minister – and for her unflagging performance of them, she will be rightly mourned. She has been a fixture of stability, and her death in already turbulent times will send ripples of sadness around the world. But we should not romanticize her era. For the queen was also an image: the face of a nation that, during the course of her reign, witnessed the dissolution of nearly the entire British Empire into some 50 independent states and significantly reduced*

*global influence. By design as much as by the accident of her long life, her presence as head of state and head of the Commonwealth, an association of Britain and its former colonies, put a stolid traditionalist front over decades of violent upheaval. As such, the queen helped obscure a bloody history of decolonization whose proportions and legacies have yet to be adequately acknowledged.*

After noting how this bloody history played out in the so-called “emergencies” in Malaya, Kenya, Aden and Cyprus, the article goes on to argue that:

*In Ireland, the Troubles brought the dynamics of emergency to the United Kingdom. In a karmic turn, the Irish Republican Army assassinated the queen’s relative Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last viceroy of India (and the architect of Elizabeth’s marriage to his nephew, Prince Philip), in 1979.*

Only by quoting from the article at some length is it possible to illustrate just how distorted and partial was the reporting of it in sections of the British press. Thus Murray in *The Times* and Strimpel in *The Daily Telegraph* concentrated to the exclusion of almost everything else on the sentence about “bloody history”, although this didn’t prevent the latter from accusing Jasanoff – twice – of being reductive. In the *Daily Mail*, Adams added the remark about the “karmic turn”, which he called “particularly vile”, and this also aroused the ire of Caroline Graham and Jake Ryan in the *Mail on Sunday* in an article headed “Now *New York Times* condemned for article that called murder of Mountbatten ‘karmic’”. The latter suggested via an anonymous source who worked for *TNYT* that this meant that “Mountbatten’s murder was somehow deserved” while Adams simply quoted the OED’s informal definition of the word as meaning “good or bad luck, especially as a result of one’s own actions”. However, taken in its full context, “karmic” here suggests not that Mountbatten deserved or was responsible for his death but, rather, that he was the victim of a process of events coming full circle.

Other *TNYT* articles that inspired the wrath of British journalists include “Britain is drowning itself in nostalgia”, Sam Byers, March 23, 2019; “Requiem for a dream”, Roger Cohen, January 31, 2020; “The fantasy of Brexit Britain is over”, Richard Seymour, August 1, 2022; and “My family fought the British Empire. I reject its myths”, Hari Kunzru, September 11, 2022. Significantly, URLs provided in British journalists’ execrations of these articles and those discussed in more detail in this piece never take the reader to the original *TNYT* articles themselves but simply to other entries in the catalogue of maledictions that is the subject of this piece.



Most of the main charges against the *NYT* will be clear by now, but some of the underlying themes of this campaign bear closer examination.

First, *TNYT* stands accused of pandering to anti-British sentiment in the Democratic party – in particular to Irish-American voters and what Grant in *The Daily Telegraph* refers to as “Joe Biden’s rambling Irish-American schtick”. Gerard Baker in *The Times* links this with what he perceives as a hatred of Brexit among the Democrats – because it “transgresses against their world view of ever closer global political integration” – and argues that “this anti-Brexit and pro-Irish leaning underscores the hard line Biden and his Democratic colleagues who control Congress are likely to press over the new government’s efforts to undo the Brexit protocol”.

A second charge is that *TNYT* is running these articles for commercial reasons. Thus Ashworth-Hayes in *The Daily Telegraph* claims that the paper’s main reason for its “irritating proselytising” is that “it’s profitable to be a hater”. He continues:

*The New York Times is a (regrettably) successful money-making enterprise. It publishes these articles because they work to bring in attention; they are deliberate click-bait, written in the knowledge that people will be angry. Hate clicks are still clicks; hate shares are still shares; and eyes on ads are eyes on ads no matter their intention.*

Similarly, an editorial in *The Sun* excoriates *TNYT* journalists as “hacks so addicted to the social media cesspit that they devote their careers to concocting lies about the UK for ‘likes’”.

Newspapers telling their target readership, for reasons both financial and ideological, what they think they want to hear, and using click-bait to spread their message on social media, isn’t exactly unknown in the case of the British papers discussed here, but what really bothers the latter is the nature of the readership to which *TNYT* is appealing. Thus Ashworth-Hayes claims that:

*The Britain-bashing is designed for a very specific audience: British people, and in particular self-loathing europhiles. The British newsroom of The New York Times has 70 editorial staff, with CVs listing Buzzfeed, gal-dem, The Guardian, and the BBC among others – exactly the sort of people who know how to write for this lucrative market segment.*

According to Neil in the *Daily Mail*, *TNYT* has “assembled an impressive array of Britain-haters to spread their bile. Interestingly, they’re all British (but then we’ve never been short of British-loathing Brits). But it’s unlikely you’ve ever heard of them”. In the same vein, Murray in *The Daily Telegraph*

refers to “the paper’s decision to recruit otherwise unemployable hard-Left journalists from Britain”. More accurately, however, they’re unemployable only in the kind of right-wing papers that so dominate the UK national press – as indeed is the former chief political correspondent of both the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*, Peter Osborne, whose devastating exposure on *openDemocracy* of the manner in which certain British national titles were acting as cheerleaders for the Johnson government marked the end of his 30-year career in Fleet Street, and in broadcasting as well. (He too has written for *TNYT*, most recently “The Ruination of Britain”.) Thus, these journalists’ “unemployability” is as much a comment on the right-wing hegemony that prevails in significant sections of the national press as it is on these writers’ journalistic skills

### *Free speech in America snuffed out by woke groupthink*

And so we come to the ur-theme of the press campaign, the one that underlies all the others discussed above – namely, these papers’ obsessive culture war on the chimera of “woke”. This is absolutely classic “unspeak”, as defined by Steven Poole in his 2006 book of the same name, in that “woke” is not a neutral descriptive term but one that carries with it certain *unspoken* assumptions, attitudes and judgments – in this case, encapsulating a bitter hostility towards and a toxic caricature of the kinds of liberal values associated with certain forms of identity politics. Such a position is perfectly illustrated by Neil in the *Daily Mail*:

*The university campuses, the media and even corporate America are now increasingly in thrall to the Left-liberal ideology of identity politics, better known as wokery. Even powerful people are afraid to say what they think, lest it unleashes a social media lynch mob against them. A groupthink which tolerates no deviation on racial or gender matters is in the ascendency, snuffing out free speech in the process. It started in America’s universities, especially the elite ones, more than a decade ago. That generation of students has now moved into the country’s newsrooms and boardrooms, taking their wokery with them. With only a few exceptions, American media is now pretty much a one-party state when it comes to such matters, with The New York Times the cream of the crop.*

Neil might here portray this invasion of the media by the “woke” as a relatively recent phenomenon, but he made a remarkably similar charge in his 1996 book *Full Disclosure*. In it, he complained of a “depressing monotone” in most US television news output, and argued that the news programmes

broadcast by the three main networks

*are all produced and presented by journalists who generally share the same liberal-left attitudes and agenda of the East Coast media establishment. Since that same outlook and agenda also dominates the leading big-city newspapers (The New York Times, Washington Post and Los Angeles Times) and the main weekly news magazines (Time and Newsweek) it means that news in America, despite the variety of outlets, is something of a one-party state.*

Of course, Neil failed to break the US journalistic mould at Fox television in 1994 with his *Full Disclosure* news programme which, he told *The Washington Post*, he wanted to fill with “stories with ‘attitude’, stories that ‘cause trouble’, stories that ‘tweak the Establishment here, like we did in Britain’”. But this never even made it to air, and while it would be uncharitable to suggest that this might help to explain Neil’s dyspeptic attitude towards much US journalism, the programme’s failure to appear suggest a significant gulf between dominant models of journalism in the US and the UK, one which, in the case of sections of the British press and the kind of classic liberal journalism represented by *TNTT*, has now widened into a yawning chasm.

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 @JulianPetley

# A kindly Boswell, loyal to the last

*Alex Massie*

*Boris Johnson. The Rise and Fall of a Troublemaker at Number 10, by Andrew Gimson (Simon & Schuster, pp425, £25)*

If we were considering another man, this might be a propitious moment for reappraising the Johnson years. Given what followed with Liz Truss, could his fall have been avoided? Might the Conservative Party have resisted the urge to regicide? Do those who supported it now have some measure of slayer's remorse?

To which the answer is, in the main, no. As Johnson left Downing Street, he noted, with more than a sliver of self-pity, that "when the herd moves, it moves". In this case, however, the herd was found in the country first. Tory MPs were following the lead of their constituents, many of whom had given up on Johnson before they were prepared to do so themselves.

It feels too soon, perhaps even a little unseemly, to reappraise Johnson's administration. Andrew Gimson, formerly a *Daily Telegraph* sketch writer more recently ensconced at Conservative Home, that great barometer of grassroots Tory activism, does not pretend to offer a comprehensive or wart-filled account of the Johnson years. Instead, he seeks

to do something that is, in some sense, more ambitious than that. For Gimson wishes to explain just why Johnson was, for a time, the most popular politician in the country.

He approaches this task like a defence lawyer who suspects the jury has already decided to convict before the trial has even begun. He accepts that many people have a "profound and implacable aversion" towards Boris. This includes the author's own children, one of whom responds to the suggestion that his work might be dedicated to them by suggesting: "Only if you say we think he's a vile, disgusting human being." (Job done, the book is dedicated to "Eliza, Clive, and Katy".)

Still, a show must be made and a thin case stretched as far as it will go. But there are only so many times the benefit of the doubt may be granted to a man who, let us remember, both wanted to be and was prime minister, and only so many times circumstances can be so extenuating as to render judgment otiose.

Johnson's Boswell – forgive me,

but how else to describe an author who has written two Boris biographies, one of which has been updated on no fewer than four occasions? – writes lightly and with charm. He is an understanding and forgiving scribe, whose protective instincts towards his subject hint at something essentially childlike within Boris; a Peter Pan figure doomed to find himself in a room to which only adults should really be admitted.

Sometimes the understanding runs amok. “The removal of the [Conservative] whip from Sir Nicholas Soames was particularly painful for Johnson”, who, we are told, “can be astonishingly tender-hearted”. The purge of Tories disinclined to risk a no-deal Brexit might have been useful politics for Johnson (and Dominic Cummings) but I am unpersuaded that Gimson, or Johnson’s other defenders, would grant a Labour leader – Jeremy Corbyn, say – quite the same latitude for running their party on what journalistic convention demands we deem such “Stalinist lines”.

This sympathy reaches its zenith with the observation that Johnson is “a joker with a brilliant instinct for power who yearns for immortal fame. He is Disraeli’s heir”. You may think this both coming it a trifle high and a delicate way of describing an egomaniac.

Nevertheless, it is true – and Gimson ably demonstrates as much – that a good portion of Johnson’s success and appeal came from the way in which he contrived to annoy many of the right people. At least initially, Johnson had all the right enemies. He “communicated an unholy joy in

teasing the prigs” and the “moralists” and “the longer I studied him, the more I concluded that people warmed to him precisely because he was subversive”. Plus, of course, he made people laugh.

Even so, and to a degree Gimson does not wholly recognise, Johnson was fortunate in his moment and his opponents. Brexit, which he had helped create, had both become unmanageable and given him a cause. He told an exhausted nation it was time to “Get Brexit Done” and to hell with the details and this, after years of mud-bound attritional warfare, at last promised some sweet release. And, in Jeremy Corbyn, he had a Labour opponent of truly historic ineptitude. Johnson won a mighty election victory but Corbyn repelled voters just as much as Boris attracted them.

This marked a low moment in British political history. Corbyn’s devotees, like Johnson’s, thought he had all the right enemies too. This, they concluded, was proof their man was on the side of the angels. It was a period in which politics was not about doing but, rather, about feeling. Politics as a “mood” or, in the parlance of the moment, a “vibe”.

But government – actual government – is a different matter. Once Brexit had been accomplished – and like a dog walking on its hind legs, it is more surprising to see it done at all than done well – Johnson began the process of making himself redundant. For after Brexit, what worlds were left to conquer? What, in the end, was it all about? The answer, it rapidly became clear, was very little. Johnson occupied Downing Street for the sake

of occupying it, not because he had a clear, let alone a deliverable, vision for a new Britain.

The best appraisal of Johnson comes from a Downing Street adviser, speaking in the summer of 2021, who laments that “He doesn’t do his boxes. He doesn’t really read his notes. It’s very rare that he’ll read the things you need to read before the meeting”.

At the meeting, whatever it may concern, “he will give multiple conflicting steers”, resulting in confusion, muddle and delay. The machinery of government breaks down for, faced with this kind of indecision, “the machine doesn’t really know what to do” and “gets into a horrible muddle”. Because Johnson is “terrible at confrontation”, he sets up “lots of rival camps and can take soundings from whichever one he wants”. This creates “a dysfunctional court”.

“I don’t think he’s a very good prime minister,” the adviser concludes. But – and here we get to Johnson’s appeal – “I like him very much” and “I feel that it’s unfair to be cross with

him for not being something he never was”. This something, you will note, is being prime minister.

“It’s very difficult,” the adviser concludes, “because he’s extremely charming. You’re often furious, appalled, enraged – you basically hate him and then you go into a room with him, and he’s extremely charming, and it makes you mad.”

The forces that made Johnson a success were also, then, those that guaranteed his failure. It is not entirely humourless to suppose, or even to quietly insist, that a prime minister address themselves to some of the tasks traditionally demanded of a prime minister.

Here, Johnson’s instinctive view that rules for other people might be suspended for him proved his downfall. He was not Prince Hal become King Henry, he was Falstaff all along. Gimson’s biography, understanding and sometimes charming as it may be, unwittingly demonstrates as much. The suspicion lingers that we may not have yet heard the last from the old rogue.

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🐦 @alexmassie

# Are we still in love?

Roger Mosey

*The BBC: A People's History*, by David Hendy (Profile Books, pp656, £25)

This is a book to warm the hearts of supporters of the BBC. It is an engagingly written journey through the organisation's century of existence, and it captures all the reasons why public broadcasting is as essential now as it ever was. But Professor Hendy also illustrates, sometimes unintentionally, why the BBC has a fight on its hands to stay afloat for another 100 years.

Hendy is at his best summoning up the people and capturing the atmosphere of different times. It is individuals who made the BBC, most obviously its first leader John Reith. Fortunately for this country and for the wider world, Reith had a vision of what broadcasting could add to the public realm, and it was by no means certain that Reithian values would have existed without Reith.

The start of broadcasting offered a clean sheet: nobody had done it before in this country, and the pioneers were making it up as they went along. One of the other founders of the British Broadcasting Company (as it was in 1922) was Cecil Lewis, who was less keen on the "inform" or "educate" part of what became the BBC's mission. "I didn't really care what was happening in Abyssinia," he said. "What I was up

to, *that* was interesting, and that means drama... a new artist or a big show or a big concert... We were an *entertainment* medium."

This was reinforced when television arrived – a medium about which Reith was deeply suspicious. Hendy's account of the opening night of TV broadcasts from Alexandra Palace might explain why. The acts included a tuxedo-clad male trio from the Cole Porter show *Anything Goes!*, a pair of Chilean dancers, and Pogo the pantomime horse. Sport has also always been a driver of the BBC's offering, hosting many of the first outside broadcasts – whereas at the start of television there was no customised news service, and the only offering was British Movietone News.

And yet clashes with the government about the content of broadcasts go back to the BBC's inception. Hendy vividly tells the story of the General Strike of 1926, when the prime minister Stanley Baldwin did one of his key broadcasts to the nation from Reith's own home. I would not recommend that the current director-general Tim Davie offer the same facility to Rishi Sunak. Under intense pressure from the government, Reith denied a right of

reply to the Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald and even turned down a proposed conciliatory broadcast from the archbishop of Canterbury. Winston Churchill, then chancellor of the Exchequer, does not emerge well from this tale since he advocated the BBC taking an unabashedly propagandistic line against the strikers. As Reith later said, “there was I, in the invidious position of having to arbitrate between the prime minister of the country and the archbishop of Canterbury because I was so frightened of what Churchill would make of it”. Complete state control was the threat.

The BBC emerged rather better from the Second World War. Despite the horrific circumstances – a war for national survival against the Nazis – and suffocating relationships with the Ministry of Information, the managers of the time realised that to be credible, the BBC also needed to respond to the interests of the people of Britain. They wanted more than ever the entertainment and comedy that brought communities together in those dark days, and also the most credible news service that was compatible with national security. The introduction of Radio Newsreel, with its modern sensibility about breaking news and eyewitness accounts, set a pattern for the free reporting that was then possible in peacetime.

The battles with governments didn’t stop, of course. It has usually been Conservative administrations that have found the BBC ideologically distasteful, and the book chastises them for trying to clip the corporation’s wings. But if they set out to destroy

the BBC – Hendy claims Margaret Thatcher saw the BBC as an “enemy” – they made a poor job of it. Through all the crises and government reports and inquiries of the 20th century, the BBC normally emerged unscathed and often slightly bigger than before. Hendy rather lets Labour governments off the hook by saying they were sometimes “disappointed” by the BBC, partly because of “its apparent failure to compensate for the right-wing partisanship of the British press”. This does not explain the way the Blair government attacked the BBC over the reporting of the origins of the Iraq war and set up the appalling Hutton inquiry, or some of Harold Wilson’s bullying in the 1960s and 1970s.

But the bigger question underlying the later stages of the book is why the BBC is so vulnerable as it enters its second century. It’s partly the volume of competition, of course. Hendy is possibly too kind about the BBC’s self-inflicted scandals and also about its creativity: *Strictly Come Dancing* puts in heavy-duty work as a repeated example of something that’s distinctive and with mass appeal, as it does indeed in the BBC1 schedules. But this is the BBC which is also reviving ancient commercial formats such as *Gladiators*, and whose daytime schedule is full of quizzes, property and antiques shows just like all the other channels.

More serious, however, is the public expectation of the breadth of voice that the BBC is uniquely well-placed to capture. In his earlier chapters, Hendy welcomes the broadcasts from the communities of the UK that started being possible in



the 1930s – sharing the experiences of working people in an unprecedented way – and he rightly praises the explosion of creativity in the 1960s with new voices that reinvigorated drama and comedy. Homelessness, racism and teenage pregnancy became part of the national conversation. But he stumbles over Brexit, where he approvingly cites a view that the debate was about reason (Remain) versus emotion (Leave) and says that the arguments in favour of Brexit were as erroneous as those of climate change deniers. This reflects the corporation’s own failure to understand or report sufficiently on the tide of support for Brexit or to recognise that the politicians advocating it should be taken seriously – and that there is a political case for not being in the EU even if the economic arguments for leave didn’t stack up. In other words, even for Remainers such as Hendy

(and me) you can’t just be in favour of hearing from the grassroots when you happen to agree with them.

This matters because Hendy ends his final chapter thus: “When its political enemies are circling with such murderous intent, the crucial question we should ask ourselves is surely this: will the people – *all* the people – return the favour and stand on the side of the BBC?” Well, that depends whether people think the BBC is on *their* side – and the population includes Red Wall Conservatives in Bishop Auckland and independence supporters in Dunfermline as well as the swathes of the metropolitan and university-educated who fill so many roles at the BBC. That is, I know, the concern of Tim Davie, and he deserves recognition for advocating the kind of universality that would preserve the strengths of the BBC articulated so well throughout this book.

*Roger Mosey is the Master of Selwyn College, Cambridge. Previously, he spent most of his career at the BBC. His final role was as editorial director, and previous jobs included being editor of Today on Radio 4, controller of Radio 5 Live, head of television news, director of sport and the BBC director of London 2012.*

 @rogermosey

# Too good to be true

*Alex Brummer*

*The Pyramid of Lies: Lex Greensill and the Billion-Dollar Scandal*, by Duncan Mavin  
(Pan Macmillan, pp384, £20)

In the years after the Great Financial Crisis of 2007-09, central banks went on a money-printing splurge of the like never seen before. The Bank of England alone spent £895 billion between 2009 and 2021, a sum equal to 40 per cent of national output. The supply of money in the United States surged by 45 per cent from 2010 to 2015. The actions taken by central bankers (with the support of governments) in the immediate aftermath of the crisis and again at the onset of Covid-19 in March 2020 were honourable. They were intended to support growth and employment (which they did) and avoid a repetition of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

But with so much cash sloshing around the money markets, not all of it ended up in sensible hands. Technology shares flooded the market, the price of cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin soared and there was a rush of debt-fuelled takeovers. The “bezzle” as the great John Kenneth Galbraith described it in his classic work *The Great Crash 1929* was back. In plain English, “plunder”.

Among the products of this period were the Theranos scandal, uncovered by *The Wall Street Journal*, and graphically told in the book *Bad Blood*. The leading protagonist Elizabeth

Holmes faces a long prison sentence. It is hard not to see parallels between Holmes and the rise and rise of Lex Greensill, the founder of Greensill Capital. Despite an unpromising background as the son of a sugarcane farmer in Bundaberg in the outback of Queensland, Greensill (like Holmes) knew the value of making friends in high places.

Having managed to gain employment at the investment bank Morgan Stanley in London, he catapulted his status there into the highest echelons of business and government. He was helped along the way by the late Cabinet secretary Lord Jeremy Heywood, a Smythson embossed business card, boasting his status as a Downing Street advisor and a relationship with David Cameron. He also learned that the way to win the hearts and minds of business leaders and politicians was to acquire trappings of wealth. These included Savile Row suits, a landed estate and the use of private jets.

What Greensill was selling, as London-based *Wall Street Journal* reporter Duncan Mavin uncovered, was a financial technique (that used to be known as factoring) which was as old as the hills. Greensill Capital

would buy the unpaid invoices of companies waiting for payment in exchange for cash. It would collect a fee for its trouble. Greensill's access to the UK government, secured through the Heywood and Cameron connections, meant he came close to selling his services to government during the Covid-19 crisis.

Greensill sought to ride the tech bubble by portraying the company as part of the financial technology revolution. Governments and businesses around the globe, from Greensill's native Australia to Germany and the United States, were anxious after the financial crisis to embrace new techniques. In Germany, the rise and fall of Wirecard, after a lengthy investigation by the *FT* (and now a Netflix documentary *Skandal*), provides an almost direct parallel to Greensill Capital.

There were problems with Lex Greensill's business model. Most of the biggest and richest corporations already had supply chain (factoring) relationships with their bankers. Indeed, in many cases it was reluctantly offered by big banks, because the costs were high and profit margins narrow, as a service to keep business customers happy.

This meant that as Greensill and his associates went about finding customers, they had to go bottom-fishing among some of the dodgier enterprises. In the UK, its major client, which had interests around the world, was the steel and metals magnate Sanjeev Gupta of Liberty

Steel, currently the subject of an inquiry by the Serious Fraud Office.

Greensill was canny enough a salesman to convince the bank Credit Suisse that the invoices it had bought could be sliced and diced into securities and sold on to clients, like the sub-prime mortgages of an earlier era. The late former Labour City minister Paul Myners raised questions about Greensill's activities in the House of Lords. In spite of such warnings, former prime minister David Cameron willingly accepted the role of informal ambassador for Greensill after leaving office.

Mavin says Cameron collected hundreds of thousands of pounds of fees and millions in bonuses for opening doors to Greensill around the world. Annoyingly, he does not pinpoint the actual sums. As Cameron was never a director or held a formal executive role, his fees were not required to be disclosed by company law.

Mavin claims a leading role in the unravelling of the Greensill empire. Certainly, revelations in *The Wall Street Journal* played a part. But *The Sunday Times* led the way in connecting Greensill to Gupta and his collapsing steel empire. The *FT*, as with Wirecard, focused on the weak financial underpinnings of the group. The *Daily Mail* focused on Greensill falling through the regulatory net.

Mavin, nevertheless, has a riproaring tale to tell, laced with plenty of lifestyle detail. His is among the latest additions to a fast-growing genre of post-crisis financial scandals.

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# Who says it's raining?

*Ivor Gaber*

*20 Things That Would Make The News Better, by Roger Mosey (Biteback Books, pp272, £18.99 hardback)*

I shall begin with my only major quibble. This book should not be “20 things that would make the news better” but, rather, “20 things that would make TV (and mainly the BBC) news better”. Why? Because there are only passing mentions of the other TV news providers and literally no mention of the shortcomings of newspapers. Nor of the online media, in all its various forms. Yet they are all so much more in need of “making better” than our broadcast news.

That said, this is a terrific overview of the state of television news by one who knows it from the inside. Roger Mosey, now head of a Cambridge college, was editor of the *Today* programme, controller of 5Live, head of BBC TV news, and director of the BBC's Olympics coverage. For anyone wanting to understand the good, the bad and the ugly of TV news (and yes, hunting down clichés is one of the author's many targets), this is a brilliant summary.

Although, wearing my academic hat, I have to say that many of the criticisms Mosey makes have been made before by the much-abused community of media studies scholars – and fiercely resisted by BBC

apparatchiks and presenters. One of the points Mosey doesn't make is that the BBC would be better served if it was less defensive and more willing to listen to its critical friends – and not just to politicians (mainly from the right) whose motives for attacking the BBC are less than pure.

The book hits all the right targets but it's worth stressing that the shortcomings that Mosey identifies are in a context in which television news in general, and the BBC in particular, are still the most used and most trusted source of news in the UK. For that we give thanks for the protective carapace of public service broadcasting under which they have operated.

Unsurprisingly, many of the author's targets revolve around the corporation's coverage of politics, and here one can find, in microcosm, faults. Mosey makes many salient points but let me highlight just three. First, there is the problem, identified in academic terms with the writings of the sociologist Stuart Hall, of the “dominant narrative” and “preferred sources”. The former, reinforced by the lobby system, is at its most naked when political correspondents gather after a press conference or speech and

agree the “top lines”. All in a good cause, of course, to ensure that they aren’t the recipients of abrasive calls from news desks later asking why they have not covered a particular angle of a story that has appeared elsewhere.

Preferred sources is the tendency among all journalists, not just the political ones nor just the broadcasters, to use “authoritative sources”, ie. the usual suspects, rather than looking for a diversity of views and expertise. And that doesn’t mean a greater use of vox pops – still the curse of too much of our current TV news diet.

Then there’s the problem of “phony balance”, which reached its apotheosis in the coverage of the Brexit referendum. This is well-turned ground and Mosey turns it well, pointing out the problem of expecting the audience to judge between two versions of the same issue – one based on verifiable facts and the other on speculation and unfounded opinions. As an American media scholar once observed, if one person says it’s raining and the other says it’s not, the job of the journalist is not to report both sides but to step aside and verify which of the two versions is correct.

Another issue that Mosey draws attention to is the negative effects of the “performative” nature of much of the news coverage (though I doubt whether he would use such a term). He identifies how much programme editors love to have their reporters do “lives” with an appropriate background behind them – stories

about Prince Andrew, for example, were frequently reported from outside Windsor Castle, where he didn’t live but it did make for a lovely backdrop.

I recall sitting in the newsroom at Millbank feeding quotes from a government press officer into the earpiece of the BBC’s political editor as he stood outside Number 10 giving the presenter the “latest political developments”. Although my favourite more recent moment was when Chris Mason, now the BBC’s political editor, was live outside Parliament just after 6am. It consisted of him saying nothing had happened since the last live report previous evening but it was now raining and he was fed-up. It was brilliant TV but probably not what the editor had in mind.

Let me end, as I began, with a quibble, but a more personal one. Mosey pokes fun at how, in an environment of news ubiquity, BBC News on a Saturday night still “warns” football fans that they should “look away” if they didn’t want to know the day’s football results. He says it’s to protect the sensitivities of the *Match of the Day* production team. If it is, it also ensures that those of us who struggle to stay awake as one 0-0 draw follows another have some incentive to stay watching rather than start snoozing.

But that quibble aside, this is a book that, if read by the right people, should, as the author hopes, make TV news better. The newspapers will have to wait until his next book.

*Ivor Gaber has been a broadcast news scriptwriter, reporter, an editor for BBC radio and TV, ITN, Channel Four News and Sky News. He is a member of the editorial board of the BJR and professor of political journalism at the University of Sussex.*

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# Revealing sources

*Hugh Pope*

*Fixing Stories: Local Newsmaking and International Media in Turkey and Syria*,  
by Noah Amir Arjomand (Cambridge University Press, pp288, £75 )

“I call myself a rat,” complains one frustrated character in Noah Amir Arjomand’s new book about journalistic “fixers”, a rare, clear and eye-opening study of the alchemy between sources, guides, fixers, translators, stringers and reporters in conjuring up “the news”.

A warning: some readers might feel queasy seeing what goes into the international news-making machine. But – based on my experiences as a former *Wall Street Journal* Middle East reporter who started his career as a fixer/translator on the streets of early 80s Damascus – I’d say it’s a fair cop: *Fixing Stories: Local Newsmaking and International Media in Turkey and Syria* is an excellent account of how international reporting is really done.

Few angles go unobserved: a social scientist, Arjomand goes beyond exhaustive interviews and turns himself into both a fixer and reporter to see what’s happening at first hand. The research subjects at the core of his narrative are “composite”, including the character representing himself, which is disorienting. Yet it feels authentic.

This book can be read on many levels. A future foreign correspondent

will quickly learn tricks and pitfalls of the trade that others, including myself, take years to work out. Someone wanting to understand where news stories come from will reach a far deeper understanding of why and how certain subjects reach their newspapers or screens. Social scientists – the primary audience – will have much to discuss. The book is even philosophical, invoking Karl Marx, Max Weber and Edward Said. Along the way, Arjomand’s acute political eye will satisfy connoisseurs of the politics and conflicts of Turkey and some aspects of Syria in the mid-2010s.

Arjomand’s definition of who it’s all about is to the point: “News ‘fixers’ are translators and guides who assist foreign journalists. Sometimes key contributors to bold, original reporting and other times key facilitators of homogeneity and groupthink in the new media, they play the difficult but powerful role of broker between worlds, shaping the creation of knowledge from behind the scenes.”

Paid fixers have always been a critical support to the news business. They include drivers, office assistants, media monitors, producers, translators, guides, stringers,

bodyguards, friends and even sexual partners. Ministry minders, activists, publicists and brokers who secure or issue visas may overlap in some of these roles, as do internet search engines, news portals and social media feeds. Once mostly invisible – it is only in 1971 that the *Oxford English Dictionary* finds the first attested use of “fixer” for this role – they now get more recognition. They can get credit at the end of stories, even joint bylines. Since 2017, fixers are eligible for one of the Reuters/Kurt Schork Awards, which seeks “to highlight the work of some of the unsung heroes of modern journalism”.

Arjomand’s narrative describes how fixers get started, how their tasks overlap with that of journalists, how fixers must bridge biases, ambivalences and conflicting needs to satisfy themselves, their sources, their reporters and their multiple audiences. Also, how this can lead to frustration and even a sense of acting treacherously to one’s own community (the feeling of being a “rat”), how fixers translate situations into news stories, how more senior meta-fixers subcontract to a web of sub-fixers, and, at the end, how fixers are forced to choose career paths on the continuum from the local to the global. Their ideas – and fixers themselves – can and often do travel up the journalistic production chain. Some prefer to remain invisible to protect themselves in their home country, while others use fixing and translating as an apprenticeship (as I did) to join the international reporting set.

At first, I felt uncomfortable about Arjomand’s admission that the “fixers” he names in his story are not real

people, but fictionalised, composite characters created to protect people’s real identities. My biggest bugbear as a reporter was the way some colleagues made things up to give the reader a sensational experience and I feared that I would miss the hard rock of fact to stand on. But I soon got over my reservations.

Arjomand’s appendix explaining this methodology is forthright, the characters are convincing, and the research that is cited seems impeccable. I learned elsewhere that composite methodology is respectable in books recounting people’s medical and mental problems. In the end, following the careers of real-sounding people makes the book easier to read and understand.

The punchline is not unexpected: fixers supply indispensable ingredients in the informational chain of production towards the “amalgamated artefact” of news. One of the most important fixing functions is what Arjomand calls “sensemaking” or “transcoding” between sources or events and often fresh-faced or biased reporters.

Money plays a big role in who works for whom, and cash-strapped newspaper stringers are shown to be at the back of a long queue. Fixers’ background training (notably for those covering the Syrian conflict) was “cultural, not professional ... tour guides, English teachers and third culture kids who leaned to the secular and cosmopolitan in outlook”. When a fixer has a similar outlook to the reporter, it results in greater trust and influence, but the price of that can be unconscious bias and loss of local

nuance.

“When fixers align information *too* well to reporters’ frames, news stories can come out sounding like MIDI tracks [music created by computers],” Arjomand argues. “When they clean up the noise of sources’ statements and translate local realities to fit neatly within reporters’ frames, fixers contribute to the production of conformist, formulaic, uninspired stories.”

Indeed, what will strike outsiders to the system is the evidence Arjomand keeps picking up about how flawed the news production process can be. Pre-interviews co-opt sources into pre-agreed storylines. The prediction and compression of reporting results in a tendency towards homogeneity. Framing by fixers, reporters and editors alike screens out unexpected angles that might make for truly original reporting and can even force fixers to supply fake interviewees. Reliable sources are returned to again and again, diminishing diversity of views.

Chaotic, even absurd situations arise as the best-intentioned translators struggle to keep up, leading to an almost complete lack of communication between source and reporter. Reporters are (usually) unwilling to be seen to be

making things up, but as they seek touches of local colour to boost the sense of on-the-ground reality to validate their story, the speed at which they have to work makes them vulnerable to making mistakes in their observation of unfamiliar localities.

Arjomand gives full weight to fixers’ dilemmas when dealing with “parachute” journalists and their pre-determined framing of the story. Editors – and their interpretation of what will keep readers reading to the end of the page – often force reporters to pitch a fully formed story idea before an expensive or difficult trip is approved. Yet that idea is usually based on assumptions, groupthink or desk research from afar, and can undermine the whole point of doing original reporting at all.

My own experience of how filters at home distort people’s understanding of news from abroad became a principal theme in my book *Dining with al-Qaeda: Making Sense of the Middle East*. Yet I still had faith that close contact with conflicts and crises resulted in a deeper understanding. Arjomand’s dissection of fixing and its natural flaws is a great new helpmate in maintaining our vigilance as we search for truth or objectivity in news from foreign parts.

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# Kissing the frog

*By Phil Harding*

*Scoops. Behind the Scenes of the BBC's Most Shocking Interviews*, by Sam McAlister (Simon & Schuster, pp288, £16.99)

Most books on television are written either by one of the familiar faces in front of the camera or by one of the bosses. This book is written by one of the producers: the people behind the scenes who make the programmes happen, whose names only briefly flash up in the closing credits, and who we rarely hear from. This is very much a bottom-up view of the industry and all the more welcome because of it. The author lays bare all the insecurities and fears of those working on a production team who often feel, as she puts it, “overlooked, underpaid and unappreciated”. Every boss should put that on their wall.

But, of course, the reason we are hearing from Sam McAlister above others is that she was the BBC producer behind Emily Maitlis’s jaw-dropping *Newsnight* interview with Prince Andrew. The book keeps us waiting until the last 70 pages for the story of that. First, you have to get past accounts of several more humdrum interviews. But the wait is worth it.

Like many, McAlister ended up in TV almost by accident. She started out training to be a barrister but dropped out, then while at a loose end, contacted a friend, spent a couple of

days with the Radio 4 *Law In Action* programme, got a six-month contract, and stayed at the BBC for 18 years on a succession of short-term contracts. An ad-hoc existence in an ad-hoc industry.

On *Newsnight*, she became the guest booker, finding the right people for studio interviews and discussions, then moving on to longer-term projects securing big name interviews, or “gets” as they are known in the jargon. She explains that the successful booker’s craft, at which she obviously became expert, lies in finding what she calls the potential interviewee’s “sweet spot”. In other words, finding the right combination of words and logical and emotional arguments that will convince a reluctant guest that they have something to gain by saying yes to an interview.

Sometimes the approach takes the form of a carefully prepared and scripted pitch to the interviewee or, more likely, to their agent or PR minder. Sometimes the approach comes the other way round, from a publicist or agent with a book or a film to sell. That’s what happened with Prince Andrew. In the book, McAlister tells the incredible story of how she and her colleagues managed to turn a

failed bid by a PR firm to get publicity for one of Andrew's favoured charities into an hour-long no-holds-barred interrogation on prime-time TV. At each step they expected the project to run aground. But it didn't. What seems astonishing from reading this book was that although all of this seemed to be going on in plain sight of

the fabled Palace media operation, no one there thought to step in to stop it. Even more incredibly, they thought it had gone well afterwards. Then the penny dropped.

No wonder the interview is now used by journalism courses on how to secure difficult interviews and by PR courses on how to stop them.

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# All hail to the Mail

*John Lloyd*

*The Chief: The Life of Lord Northcliffe, Britain's Greatest Press Baron, by Andrew Roberts (Simon and Schuster, pp556, £25)*

Alfred Harmsworth, Lord Northcliffe, created the *Daily Mail* in 1896, and with that, the popular newspaper. Instantly scorned as the filler for the idle hours of clerks and secretaries, it was the daily newspaper for those repelled by the stuffiness of much of the existing press, but who wished to understand and follow the news of the nation and the world. "The board schools," he told a friend, as he was preparing for his dive into the publishing pond, "are turning out hundreds of thousands of boys and girls who are anxious to read... they will read anything that is simple and

sufficiently interesting." The *Mail* was, like its founder, fickle in its praise and denunciations: but, like him, entirely sure of its judgments, often expressed in the paper version of a bellow – even where the judgment directly contradicted a position of passionate intensity taken a little time before. He was large, and contained multitudes, in life and work (not that there was much of a division).

Harmsworth was born to a middle-class Protestant family in Dublin in 1865. His father, Alfred Senior, was a teacher in Dublin turned barrister in London, "unambitious,

hopeless, but outgoing and popular”, making too little for a comfortable life for his family in both these professions, in large part because of his alcoholism, and the more, since his wife Geraldine gave birth to 11 children – eight of whom survived after infancy. Alfred, the firstborn, loved his “hopeless” father, but was devoted for life to a mother who held the family together through periods of near-hunger, and which he never forgot. All others of every rank in society could be insulted, ignored, snubbed and forgotten: only his mother, whose word was law, could command his presence at any time. Harmsworth and his wife, Mary Elizabeth Milner, lived largely separate lives for much of their marriage, and both took lovers: one of his children was born to a 16-year-old maidservant (he was 17), and Harmsworth paid for his upbringing and education. He later had three other children with a long-time mistress.

Andrew Roberts endorses his book’s title: this was the greatest press lord of the times, and perhaps any time. Apart from *The Mail*, he owned *The Evening News*, *Daily Mirror* (aimed at a female audience, but at first a flop) and the *Weekly Dispatch*. He acquired *The Observer* in 1905 and *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in 1908, all making large losses, in spite of – in the case of *The Times* – large fame as a paper of accurate record. By the outbreak of war in 1914, he had 41 per cent of morning and 45 per cent of evening circulation. He attracted criticism, even hatred, from much of the political and senior administrative classes, who looked down on one from a penniless background who had no

formal education after 15, and who entered the industry by producing a magazine named *Comic Cuts*, modelled on the already popular *Tit-Bits*. He also, with the large power he wielded, attracted much toadying, and some real respect – as from Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George, two men who endured more volleys of slings and arrows than he.

When in his pomp, he met a young Australian journalist, Keith Murdoch. Murdoch revered the older man, Northcliffe took to the Australian, as one with something of the same ambition, and invested in his expansion of a growing press network. Murdoch’s son, Rupert, has a claim to the “greatest” title: his papers – *The Sun*, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in the UK, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Post* in the US, and more than 140 newspapers in Australia, including the only national newspaper, *The Australian* – have clout and can make profits if they can make a successful transition from paper to digit. They can also make large losses, as both the leading tabloids, *The Sun* and the *New York Post*, do – *The Sun* sporadically, the *New York Post* chronically – except, briefly, in the past year.

Murdoch has the merit of having kept good papers going through thin times; he has the very large charge against him of providing a platform for conspiracy peddlers such as Tucker Carlson, who, in a three-part series last year, suggested that the attack on the US Capitol in January 2021 was mounted by leftists, supported by the FBI. Others have endorsed the QAnon organisation’s fantasies, that Donald Trump, when president, waged war

against a group of progressive, Satan-worshipping paedophiles. These appear to have real-life consequences: NBC News has reported that QAnon followers have been “implicated in armed standoffs, attempted kidnappings, harassment and at least one killing”. It’s difficult to confer the accolade of “the greatest” on one who broadcasts such stuff under the guise of a serious news channel.

Was Northcliffe, with all the power he had, as guilty? He certainly fiercely opposed political figures and policies with which he disagreed. Roberts shows how he hastened the departure of Liberal leader Herbert Asquith from the premiership during the First World War, in 1916 (to the fury of his wife, who, a few years later, asked Northcliffe to give space to a friendly interview on the subject of her book).

He promoted then attacked Lloyd George, Asquith’s successor as prime minister and, most consequentially, he kept unremitting and eventually successful pressure on the government for the lack of shells produced and shipped to the army in France, resulting in attacks by British troops being even more bloody and futile than they would have been with adequate artillery cover. These were real-world arguments and campaigns: he exaggerated the part his newspapers played in securing the changes he sought – but the influence, as contemporary politicians attested, was

significant.

He modernised, and perhaps saved, *The Times* – promising editors editorial freedom, which he repeatedly flouted. To the end of his life – he died, at the age of 57, of a disease contracted during a world cruise designed to restore him to health, one which had the side-effect of inducing paranoia and explosions of anger – he closely read his newspapers and poured out blame and praise, suggestions and demands to his editors: many foolish, which the stronger among his senior staff ignored, as many to the point. He itched, though he denied it, to play a direct part in government – and partially succeeded in being appointed, by Lloyd George, to direct the UK’s propaganda mission in the US, and later in the UK.

Roberts, whose lucid style lets the narrative flow smoothly, is kinder to him than previous biographers: by making clear that his late outbursts were a consequence of sickness, not of his nature, he rescues him from much criticism. But he’s not a hagiographer. When he strikes a balance, he makes clear what weight he’s giving to each pan on the scales. The world he describes, in which newspapers proliferated and were the feedstock of every debate, conversation and scandal of consequence, is as nostalgic for newspaper people as the soft light of gas lamps (the few remaining in London are now under a sentence of death). The media world is much more diverse, much harsher, now.

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# The way we were

*From the British Journalism Review of 10 years ago (vol. 23, issue no. 4, 2012)*

“What’s done greater harm to the reputation of British journalism, the incompetence of the BBC or the illegality in which newspapers engaged? The question is prompted by the self-righteous fury with which the newspaper industry has fallen on the beleaguered broadcaster.”

– BJR editorial

“...trust still matters to the BBC and while the polls don’t tell the full story, the one they do tell is grim. Over 70 per cent of us, apparently, no longer trust BBC executives to tell the truth; about the same percentage suspects a cover-up over [Jimmy] Savile – two-thirds think the shelved Newsnight investigation was part of that; and two-thirds trust the BBC less than before. For the first time ever, fewer trust the BBC than don’t. Trust hasn’t been shaken; according to one pollster, it’s been “shattered”.”

– *Kevin Marsh, former BBC editor of The World at One and Today*

“...if journalism is to regain its credibility and regain the trust of the public, it is essential that it takes ethics very seriously – and is seen to do so – and that it creates the right professional forums and programmes where such issues can be discussed and best practice shared.”

– *Phil Harding, former editor of the Today programme*

“...I don’t believe that Twitter is a magic bullet. I don’t go along with the naïve belief that the Arab Spring was a Facebook revolution. I also know that Twitter, blogs and online campaigns really get traction only when the mainstream media take up the cause. But modern technology and social media are bringing to public platforms evidence that once would have remained hidden...”

– *Joy Johnson, director of media for Ken Livingstone when he was mayor of London*