

Media North

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A simple message projected by Led By Donkeys on the iconic Anthony Gormley sculpture, *Angel of the North*

By Granville Williams

THE weekend newspapers after the election made grim reading. Election maps of the swathes of the country where once Labour dominated went blue. What went wrong?

One key factor for the emphatic Tory victory was their media strategy. Dominic Cummings, and the team working for him, have a track record of success with the Brexit campaign, the Australian election, and now this.

Cummings' style of media strategy is gloves off, cynical, fast and loose with the facts, driven by paid advertising on social media, and dismissive of the democratic role of broadcast media.

And, at the core of it, was a confident reliance on the bloc of Tory-supporting newspapers to be 'on message' and deliver a relentless attack on Jeremy Corbyn and Labour.

It's what we can now expect in future elections

The implications for sections of the UK media of

Well, we didn't stop him. So what next for the media?

the Tory landslide are pretty disturbing. We saw the way Boris Johnson treated colleagues he perceives to have been disloyal; he is a man who holds grudges and settles scores.

Johnson and his media chief, Lee Cain, issued a series of threats to public service broadcasters during the campaign.

Days before polling, when he was feeling heat over his refusal to be interviewed by the BBC's Andrew Neil, Johnson

declared that he was 'looking at' scrapping the licence fee. "How long can you justify a system whereby everybody who has a TV has to pay to fund a particular set of TV and radio channels?" he asked.

When Channel 4 News replaced Johnson and Farage with melting ice sculptures after they shunned a leaders' debate on climate change, the Tories lodged an impartiality complaint with Ofcom. It was rejected. Conservative media chief, Lee Cain, accused the

channel of a 'wider pattern of bias'. The party alluded to reviewing Channel 4's licence (which runs out in this parliamentary term) 'to look at whether its remit should be better focused'.

A clampdown on public broadcasters by an all-powerful government would be deeply worrying. The prospects for media reform are also likely to be frozen.

We won't see a second stage of the Leveson inquiry or the inquiries into media ownership and 'fake news' that Labour was promising. The Tory election social media campaign was driven by disinformation and fake news – why would they want to go near any inquiry?

And the Silicon Valley tech giants who would have been taxed to fund the Labour policy's free super-fast £20 billion broadband scheme can rest easy now.

• **Our Leeds conference on 8 February will focus on these urgent issues (see Page 8).**

NEW OWNERSHIP WOES HIT LOCAL MEDIA – PAGES 4 AND 5

TV correspondents should think before they Tweet

LAURA Kuenssberg's apology for her tweet reporting the fake news that a Conservative aide had been punched in the face by a Labour activist was yet another illustration of the erosion in editorial standards that has resulted from cut-throat competition among journalists to be first with the news on Twitter. By placing her trust in the truthfulness of Boris Johnson's propaganda machine she has endangered the BBC's reputation for accuracy and reliability.

As a BBC correspondent for 30 years I can speak with first-hand experience of the inherent dangers – and frustrations – of having to deal with media advisers closest to the Prime Minister who tend increasingly to speak exclusively to a handful of trusted journalists.

Once installed inside No 10, Johnson's mercurial spin doctor Dominic Cummings started to boast openly of how he and his team in Downing Street had a direct line to three top journalists – Kuenssberg, the BBC's political editor; Robert Peston, ITV's political editor, and Tim Shipman, political editor at the *Sunday Times*.

Cummings understands full well the manipulative power of a spin doctor that, by trading information on an exclusive basis to a handful of selected journalists, there is every likelihood he will get more favourable coverage in return.

Competing to be first

Herein lies the danger for Kuenssberg and Peston: both have to be the voice of authority for the BBC and ITV respectively, but they are also having to chase their tails in a media world where journalists are more than likely to be judged by the rest of the news

Trigger-happy Twitterati need to take more care, says **Nicholas Jones**



Laura Kuenssberg



Robert Peston

media on the strength of their following on Twitter rather than their political knowledge or judgement as a top broadcaster.

Competing to be first with the news on Twitter – despite an increase in the character limit from 140 to 280 letters – is high risk, all the more so for Ms Kuenssberg whose writ within the BBC is sacrosanct.

Once a fact or information from the political editor gets into the BBC's news machine that becomes the line to take, whether it is in a news bulletin on a local radio station,

news online or the Ten O'Clock News.

When Kuenssberg and Peston tweeted that a Tory aide had been punched by a Labour activist after a visit to Leeds General Infirmary by the Health Secretary Matt Hancock (9.12.2019) they were relying on briefings by Conservative sources and had not seen footage of the incident itself.

In their subsequent Twitter apologies Kuenssberg said 'two sources suggested it had happened but clear from video that was wrong' and Peston acknowledged it was 'completely clear from video footage' Hancock's adviser was 'not whacked by a protestor, as I was told by senior Tories'.

Formidable reputation

My 30 years with the BBC ended in 2002 – well before the Twitterati started to dominate the news agenda – but the seeds were already being sown for the erosion in editorial standards.

Back in the 1970s the BBC's political editor would get briefings from the Prime Minister's press secretary that were not available to other correspondents or journalists, but the purpose then was to explain government background and thinking rather than promote a new story line.

In the 1980s, the redoubtable Bernard Ingham had a formidable reputation for the insight he could offer journalists in similar off-the-record briefings about the ins and outs of the Thatcher era, but his remit remained that of a government information officer rather than

a voice for the Conservative Party.

Alastair Campbell's edict on entering Downing Street with Tony Blair in 1997 was that he wanted the government's information machine to 'grab the agenda' rather than just supply information or simply react to requests from the news media.

At election time his operation merged seamlessly with that of Labour and the blurring of responsibilities between government and party has continued with a vengeance under Cummings.

Salutary lesson

In my final years as a BBC correspondent, my difficulty was that it was hard to check out or challenge information passed down the line from the political editor.

At critical times the point of contact was – and is – the BBC's political editor; calls from other correspondents did not get through. Hence my concern at the additional responsibility that filing instantly for Twitter has placed on the likes of Kuenssberg and Peston.

What they are reporting as news is often no more than a tip off – and, as any journalist knows, that has to be substantiated.

Perhaps a salutary lesson for the trigger-happy Twitterati is to recall what happened when John Prescott was involved in a confrontation with a protestor on the way into a Labour rally in Rhyl in the 2001 general election.

Despite an exchange of blows having been witnessed by its own reporter, Sky News waited a full hour in order to view the video before reporting that Prescott had in fact retaliated, hitting the protestor on the chin with a left jab.

Quentin Gray surveys the turmoil and uncertainty facing local and regional newspapers

New round of ownership woes hits local media



THE provincial media ownership maelstrom goes on as once proud titles continue to see their financial strength fade away.

The shift of readers away from printed newspapers, which traditionally provided the bulk of revenues and profits through copy sales and advertising, has been stark.

Enders Analysis detailed that total weekly regional newspaper circulations fell by half from 42m to 22m between 2009 and 2016, with paid-for copies falling from 26m to 13.8m.

After Johnston Press – the *Yorkshire Post*, *Lancashire Evening Post* and *The Scotsman* publisher – went bust with debts of £220m in autumn 2018 and morphed into a new group JPI Media, it was only a matter of time before it would be sold or broken up



The fate of regional newspapers with a proud history could soon be decided by David Montgomery

for possibly some thin profit by new owners– a consortium of four former lenders.

But things have got so bad in regional print and linked internet sites that the new owners have been struggling to sell off the 200 plus print titles and web sites.

All that has gone is the i

national newspaper sold in November 2019 for some £50 million to the *Daily Mail* owner.

So what is left to save the once mighty Johnston Press: a white knight with bags of dosh from an internet growth stock? No, there is a not-so-new kid on the block hunt-

ing down the fading assets of JPI Media and possibly other groups across the nation.

Growling on the sidelines is David Montgomery, 71, whose historic claim to fame was as an editor of the *News of the World* in the 1980s and between 1992 and 1999 he served as chief executive of

New owners save bankrupt Scottish publisher

ONE of Scotland's largest publishers of local newspapers is under new ownership after briefly going into administration.

Administrators were called in by Scottish Provincial Press (SPP) on Tuesday morning 11 December. But a new company - Highland News and Media Ltd - was quickly formed

to take over the business.

The move secures the jobs of 135 people and ensures the survival of 18 local newspapers, including the *Inverness Courier*.

The new company is a joint venture between SPP's former majority shareholder Peter Fowler and Cambridge-based Iliffe Media.



Iliffe Media come to the rescue



the Mirror Group.

He has had mixed forays into UK and European provincial newspaper ownership.

The most unfortunate sideline was Mecom Group which swallowed up titles across Europe including ones in Berlin, Norway and Holland, until itself fading away after being bought in 2014 by a Belgium group. Mr Montgomery spearheaded the purchase of Northcliffe Media by Local World, a consortium of regional newspaper publishers and investors, before the company was sold to Trinity Mirror – now Reach – in 2015.

His new UK company National World is eyeing to gobble up JPI Media as a readymade empire. In early December the new company was invited to start talks over a formal bid. National World was created in September 2019 to 'buy and

build' news publishing businesses. The company said: "National World will jettison legacy systems and archaic industrial practices to create efficient dissemination of news, monetising it by matching content to audience."

Montgomery could even target former JPI Media suitor Newsquest, owner of *The Herald* titles in Glasgow and Darlington's *Northern Echo*. The Newsquest group was said to have dropped out of the race in November after the merger of its US parent company Gan-

Montgomery spearheaded the purchase of Northcliffe Media by Local World

nett was completed with New Media Investment Group.

Another major industry bidder from the UK for JPI Media also dropped out in the autumn. New Reach chief executive and former News UK executive Jim Mullen took a look under the bonnet and found that the spark really had faded away and dropped talks over a £50m offer.

Instead, Reach (formerly Trinity Mirror) plans to launch new websites under its burgeoning Live arm early in 2020. Some 50 journalists are being recruited to target Sheffield and Sunderland to further challenge JPI Media and in Newport and Bradford to face up to Newsquest.

In the provinces, at least a few independents keep battling on. Iliffe Media has been revived as an independent

family-owned group backed by Yattendon and now publishes titles across the Midlands, the East of England and Kent.

It was formed in September 2016 and over the past three years has bought 13 East of England titles from Johnston Press, plus the KM Media Group, the *Newark Advertiser* and *Newbury Weekly News*.

Of the few remaining independents, the *Barnsley Chronicle*, *Rotherham Advertiser* and *Stranraer & Wigtownshire Free Press* in south west Scotland show that there is still life in providing proper news coverage for a local area. Long may they reign.

Quentin Gray was a business and news sub-editor on the Yorkshire Post for nearly 25 years.

Newsquest drops jobs plan

NEWSQUEST Glasgow has lifted the threat of compulsory staff redundancies after nearly 87 per cent of those voting supported the NUJ's ballot for industrial action.

The papers involved were *The Herald*, *The Herald on Sunday*, *The Glasgow Times*, *The National* and *The Sunday*

National.

The union had also raised the issue of bullying which the company had dealt with promptly.

In addition, the NUJ conducted a stress survey, in which just 9 per cent said they had confidence in the organisation's management of its Scottish operation.

MediaNorth

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Editor: Granville Williams

Design and Production: Tony Sutton, www.coldtype.net

If you would like to receive future copies of the online version of *MediaNorth* contact us at cpbfnorth@outlook.com. *MediaNorth* is published quarterly, and we welcome any comments or suggestions for articles. We're on Facebook. Become a friend at: Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom North – and Twitter: @campaign_and

Media policy: What the election manifestos said

By Barry White

THE central role the media played in the General Election campaign is undeniable. So too was the pro-Conservative party dominance of much of the national press together with its anti-Labour party bias. Social media offered alternative platforms for the parties and people to get their messages across.

So what new policies did the parties offer?

Section 40 criticised

The Conservative Party's manifesto does not say much, but what it says is significant. On free TV licences for the over-75s, it states that: "We recognise the value of free TV licences for over-75s and believe they should be funded by the BBC."

The BBC has said it will continue to provide TV licences to over 75s who claim means-tested pension credit.

On the press: "...we will repeal section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which seeks to coerce the press" and: "We will not proceed with the second stage of the Leveson Inquiry." This is not new. After the last election the May government said it would repeal section 40 and scrap Leveson 2, but these proposals were not implemented. The government did not have the numbers to pass the necessary legislation.

The Section 40 decision is heavily criticised by Natalie Fenton of the Media Reform Coalition who says: 'Section 40 ... is key to persuading the press to join a recognised regulator through a system of carrots and sticks – if a news publisher joins a recognised



Covers of the manifestos issued by the three main political parties

regulator then access to low cost arbitration becomes mandatory. This removes the threat of potentially huge losses for both ordinary citizens who may be the victims of illegal journalistic behaviour and for publishers who may be threatened by a wealthy litigant who doesn't like what they have printed.'

However, Section 40 has been criticised by a number of press freedom organisations as well as the media owners. *Free Press* editor Tim Gopsill, writing on Leveson in its final issue (215, Summer 2018) stated that: '...we have ended up with a demure and pointless Press Recognition Panel (PRP) and above all the absurd injustice of Section 40 of the Crime and Courts act under which the redress that people might attain from a publication would depend on which regulator the offender happens to be affiliated to...' Index on Censorship described Section 40 as 'a direct threat to press freedom and must be scrapped...'

Parents in deprived areas pay a small fortune for subscriptions offering a few miserly kilobytes of decrepit and creaking copper broadband...



Safeguard plurality

Labour had six main pledges including supporting public service broadcasting and local newspapers and media outlets; action to address the monopolistic hold tech giants have on advertising revenues, and to safeguard a healthy plurality of media ownership.

They also promised to provide free 'full-fibre' broadband for every home and business. As an article in *The Guardian's* Society (3 December) points out: 'This manifesto commitment goes well beyond

flinging an election freebie at voters largely able to pay for subscriptions themselves. ... speed and access are not the only problems. When young people do access the internet, which is most likely to be through a mobile phone, they see different things: those in deprived areas are bombarded with burger and betting advertisements, while young people in more affluent areas are shown advertisements for university open days and sports equipment.'

The article also reminds us that: 'We see parents in deprived areas paying a small fortune for subscriptions offering a few miserly kilobytes of decrepit and creaking copper broadband...' This is happening not only in rural areas, but in urban/city internet cold spots. The proposal aims to bring about high quality provision for all.

Leveson-compliant regulator

The Liberal Democrats also offered six main pledges including the introduction of a Leveson-compliant regulator and holding Leveson 2, while the Green Party offered four, which included the need to: 'safeguard a healthy plurality of media ownership'. Both the Scottish and Welsh national parties wanted devolution of media policy to their parliaments.

All but the Conservative Party made attempts to address some of the long-standing policy concerns highlighted by media reformers, but we need to go much further if we are to have a media that serves our 21st century democracy. Urgent reform is needed to reclaim the media in the interest of the public.



Wapping strikers tell their stories

THE Wapping dispute of 1986-87 was a fight to save jobs. Before the dispute, Fleet Street newspapers were typeset with hot metal and the print unions were powerful. Rupert Murdoch secretly built a system to print and distribute all of his newspapers from a new high-tech plant at Wapping.

When negotiations between Murdoch and the print unions over employment conditions for the new plant broke down, nearly 6,000 workers went on strike. Murdoch immediately dismissed them. The sacked workforce

arranged demonstrations and pickets to disrupt Murdoch's business and fight for their jobs and workers' rights. The industrial dispute raged for over a year.

Now a film about the momentous events of that year, titled *Wapping: The Workers' Story*, is being made by Chris Reeves of Platform Films. Chris says, "We have filmed 20 interviews with sacked printworkers and the 'refusenik' journalists who joined them."

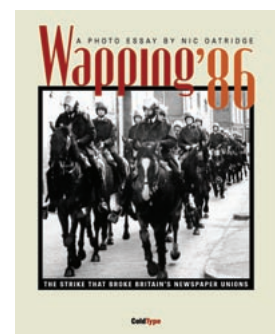
The film will be shown as part of the Sheffield Festival of Debate season in Sheffield.



Book the date: Thursday 7 May, 7.00pm at the Quaker Meeting House, St James' St, Sheffield S1 2EW.

Remembering Wapping '86

Download Nic Oatridge's 16-page photo essay (right) at www.coldtype.net/Assets/pdfs/Wapping1.pdf



The man who bought a paper and created chaos

DAVID Dimpleby has anchored the BBC's coverage of every general election since 1979. This year he was replaced by Huw Edwards. But Dimpleby's views on the 2019 election campaign were withering: "This election is the most vile election that I've ever seen... I hate the amount of hatred and disillusion that is about. I think it's the most appalling spectacle."

Dimpleby said he first noticed the souring of political debate whilst chairing *Question Time* during the Brexit



referendum campaign. One person who has played a key role in both coarsening political debate and fostering anger and division in the reporting of elections is the subject of Dimpleby's new podcast se-

ries, *The Sun King*.

Murdoch, now 88, still remains controversial in the use of the global media he owns to exert political power in Australia, the UK and the USA.

Dimpleby tells the story of how Rupert Murdoch turned *The Sun* from a cautious broadsheet into Britain's most widely read tabloid newspaper. He also shifted it from being a Labour-supporting newspaper to a strident Tory-supporting tabloid.

The podcast follows Murdoch to America where he

took on the *New York Post* and explores his controversial war against the British print unions at Wapping.

Media dominance under Margaret Thatcher helped Murdoch gain unprecedented access to power. *The Sun King* also covers 'the media mogul's lowest moment' – the phone-hacking scandal. It also looks at the origins of Fox News in 1996 and its part, two decades later, in supporting the rise of Donald Trump.

The Sun King is available on the Audible podcast series.

Jack's story shows need for media reform

ONE media event in the election highlights the urgent relevance of the *MediaNorth* conference in Leeds on Saturday 8 February (see details below).

It was the media storm generated by the publication in the *Yorkshire Evening Post* of Sarah Williment's four-year-old son Jack being forced to sleep on the floor at Leeds General Infirmary in his mother's red coat due to a shortage of beds.

The boy's mother sent the photo to the YEP and before publication the paper checked the veracity of the photograph. The hospital apologised, admitted there was no bed and that the treatment of the boy fell woefully short of the high



Graphic from the election-day front page of the *Yorkshire Evening Post*.

had seen a Facebook post that proved we are lying'.

That's why the front page of the *Yorkshire Post* on election day had the headline 'Call for urgent electoral reform'. Its Comment column stated, 'It is not hyperbole ... to suggest this relentless, unchecked, unregulated online wild west is threatening to destabilise our democracy...'

standards of the NHS. The story was fact-checked and meticulously sourced before publication.

The story triggered what the paper described as 'some of the most aggressive negative social media reaction we have experienced'. The YEP's sister paper, the *Yorkshire Post*, was also caught in the flak by

a 'sophisticated and concerted attack on the veracity of our story by online trolls and activists'.

For the *Yorkshire Post* the tipping point came when loyal, committed, life-long readers began contacting the editor to advise him they would no longer be buying or reading the paper because 'they

The paper says 'the people of this country must never again be asked to navigate a maelstrom of misinformation in order to decide who will govern them' and calls for a 'root and branch review' by the government. That might be a tall order for a party which has just been elected on lies and disinformation.

MediaNorth Conference

IT'S THE MEDIA, STUPID!

POST-ELECTION POLICIES FOR MEDIA REFORM

HENRY MOORE ROOM, LEEDS ART GALLERY, THE HEADROW, LEEDS LS1 3AA

Saturday 8 February 11.00-5.00pm

Conference fee £10.00 Concessions £5.00

This conference will analyse the lessons to be learned from media coverage of the 2019 General Election and put forward arguments, ideas and policies for diverse, democratic and accountable media. This will be a popular conference and you need to book your place in advance.

SESSIONS ON:

- The Media and the Election
- The Press: Ownership, Regulation and Ethics
- Broadcasting: Regulation & Impartiality
- Policing Propaganda: Democracy and the Internet
- Looking Forward: Policies for Media Reform

SPEAKERS CONFIRMED:

- Dorothy Byrne, Head of News and Current Affairs, Channel 4
- Nick Jones, former BBC Political and Industrial Correspondent
- Dr Justin Schlosberg, Media Reform Coalition & Birkbeck, University of London
- Prof Dominic Wring, Loughborough University 2019 Election Survey

Book for the conference by sending a cheque, payable to CPBF(North) with your name, address, organisation (if applicable) and email address to CPBF(North) 24 Tower Avenue Upton near Pontefract West Yorks WF9 1EE. Or you can pay by bank transfer to CPBF(North) at the Cooperative Bank, sort code 08-92-99, account number 65796090 Ref 'Leeds Conference' - but please post or email (cpbfnorth@outlook.com) your details to us

Leeds Art Gallery is 10 minute walk from Leeds Railway Station and a 15 minute walk from the city centre bus station