



A red Triumph Acclaim was used in the murders. It was found in a field a stone's throw from the family home of the chief suspect, along with the weapons and DNA evidence. Film still from *No Stone Unturned* (2017), directed by Alex Gibney

## No Stone Unturned – defend press freedom

By **Granville Williams**

THE film *No Stone Unturned* is an outstanding piece of journalism that exposes human rights abuses in Northern Ireland. The film focuses on the unsolved murders of six innocent people in the village of Loughinisland, 20 miles south of Belfast. The victims were in a pub watching a World Cup football match between the Republic of Ireland and Italy in 1994 when two armed men burst in and shot them.

The killers and their driver were widely believed to have been members of the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force who lived locally. However, no one has ever been prosecuted for the murders.

The documentary, that was first shown in September 2017, names the three men most likely to be responsible for the massacre. Two journalists, Barry McCaffrey and Trevor Birney, were arrested in August last year in connection with their award-winning documentary and seven months on have still not been charged with any

crime. Instead, their bail has been extended to September 2019 and police have tried, unsuccessfully, to limit their freedom of speech as a condition of that bail.

The journalists were arrested in a dawn raid on their homes in August 2018 by 100 armed officers who took them into custody, questioned them for 14 hours and confiscated their computers and mobile phones. The arrests are said to be in connection with the alleged theft of confidential documents from the Police Ombudsman of Northern Ireland related to the killings and containing evidence of collusion between the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the gunmen. McCaffrey and Birney maintain the documents were leaked.

During the film's editing, the journalists offered the named suspects a right of reply,

### Police harass two journalists who want the truth. Why?

which was sent by registered mail. Their letters went unanswered. They also informed the Police Ombudsman's office of the likely suspects the film would name.

The Ombudsman's office passed that information on to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. They wanted to be sure the PSNI was informed in case there was any concern for the safety of the suspects or in case the police had any other compelling reason why the film should not be released. They received no response.

Although PSNI officers carried out the arrests in August 2018, it is not officially in charge of the investigation. In cases of political sensitivity, the PSNI calls in an external police force and in this case it is the Durham Constabulary.

Alex Gibney, the director of *No Stone Unturned*, writes, "It's hard to know why the police waited for a year to burst into the homes of Birney and McCaffrey, but I can guess at reasons for such a display of force. They may have hoped to intimidate

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# BBC over-75 licence fee consultation period closes

By Barry White

PUBLIC consultation closed in mid-February on the BBC proposals to take over the complete funding of the licence fee for the over-75s by June 2020. In response to the consultation – which is now being considered by the BBC Board – Age UK, the National Pensioners Convention and National Union of Journalists jointly wrote to the chair of the board Sir David Clementi on 14 February, telling him that the BBC should admit that ending free licences for the over-75s was wrong-headed and divisive and should insist that government take back responsibility for the benefit.

“The public never voted to make the BBC the arbiter of welfare benefits,” the letter to

Sir David pointed out. “It is not our public service broadcaster’s function to decide whether one pensioner receives a free licence, and another does not. Indeed, to do so risks alienating the BBC in the public’s mind at a time when the corporation needs support from its listeners and viewers as never before in its history. It is government who should make such policy decisions and it is government who must fund this vital social policy.”

The benefit was attacked by former BBC Director General Greg Dyke. In February he told Radio 4’s *Today* programme the BBC’s governors should now take the ‘difficult decision’ to change the whole system. He said: “I think the idea that they’re going to give the baby



**Pensioners' groups and trade unionists protested outside the offices of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport in London against the threat of the over-75s losing their free TV licences on 7 March.**  
Photo: NUJ

boomers, when they reach 75, a free licence is ridiculous. In a world when the poorest aren't necessarily the oldest, I don't see any justification to continue to the whole system. You have this ridiculous situation where if your elderly mother or father who is over 75 comes to live with you, you no longer pay a licence fee. It doesn't make sense.”

Age UK warned that scrap-

ping the free licence could condemn more than 50,000 pensioners to poverty. It called on the government to take back responsibility for the annual £745 million cost of the benefit. Some 4.45 million over 75s have TV licences.

The BBC has said that it will make its decision later this year in sufficient time before the June 2020 deadline.

## No Stone Unturned

● From Front Page

McCaffrey into revealing his source, though he has said he has no knowledge of who sent him the draft report. More likely, the police may be acting on behalf of British intelligence and security services, which have little patience with being held to account for past crimes and want to send a message.”

CPBF(North) urges you to contact your MP and ask them to sign Early Day Motion No 2091 - Importance of Journalism in the Public Interest.

## Racism and the media

### Union backs journalists on racist threats

THE National Union of Journalists (NUJ) has issued two strongly-worded statements about national newspaper, freelance and broadcast journalists facing threats from the far right. The union says, ‘Individuals who seek to intimidate and silence the media by publishing photos, names or addresses of journalists and urge their supporters to target journalists should not be allowed to do so - it is unlawful harassment and intimidation.’

One person orchestrating the attacks is Stephen Yaxley-Lennon who uses the made-up name Tommy Robinson. He organised a demonstration at BBC Media City, Salford, on Saturday 23 February to intimidate staff at the corporation, particularly those working on *Panorama*, of which he is the subject of an investigation.

A week later he twice used social media to live-stream himself banging on the doors and windows of journalist

Mike Stuchbery’s home in the middle of the night. There have been calls to ban Yaxley-Lennon from YouTube (he is already banned from Twitter, Facebook and Instagram).

Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, said: ‘Journalists have a duty to scrutinise the claims and activities of those who foment Islamophobia, racial tension and violence. They should not be facing threats or intimidatory tactics because they are doing their jobs.’

# Crisis in local journalism: is Cairncross the magic bullet?

By Barry White

A YEAR ago the government set up of a commission chaired by Dame Frances Cairncross to examine the future of local journalism. Its purpose was to look into the sustainability of high-quality journalism, and threats to journalism, brought about by technological change and consumer behaviour. It reported in February.

Cairncross allowed just ten weeks (which included the August holiday period) for public consultation. Despite the relatively short time allowed, it received 757 responses. Among those giving evidence were the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ). The panel also met with organisations and individuals.

Her report, published on 12 February, echoed many concerns already raised about the future of the newspaper industry, including those reported in the last issue of *MediaNorth*. It reiterated the belief that the closure of local newspapers threatened democracy and noted that many local newspapers were owned by debt-ridden publishers which had cut investment and sacked hundreds of journalists to maintain profits.

The report continued: “The cost of investigative journalism is great and rarely seems to pay for itself ... given the evidence of market failure in the supply of public-interest news, public intervention may be the only remedy.”

Reaction to the report from media reformers was generally supportive, but critical of some recommendations. Steven Barnett, Professor of Communications at Westminster University, said the report “... has produced some inno-

“The big three regional groups have hoovered up the vast majority of those contracts leaving just a handful for the smaller independent and hyperlocal sectors”  
– Steven Barnett



native and potentially exciting ideas which – if properly and independently implemented – could genuinely deliver more diverse, high-quality public interest journalism, particularly at the local level where it is desperately needed. But it will require political will to resist a powerful print lobby motivated by corporate self interest...”

Steve also referred to the report’s recommendation for the expansion of the BBC-funded Local Democracy Service which currently pays for 144 reporter contracts with local publishers. “Because the scheme was

dreamt up in conjunction with the News Media Association (NMA) the big three regional groups – Newsquest, JPIMedia (formerly Johnston Press) and Reach plc (formerly Trinity Mirror) – have hoovered up the vast majority of those contracts leaving just a handful for the smaller independent and hyperlocal sectors.”

He referred to its cost of £8m to the licence fee payers which was effectively subsidising three very large regional publishing groups without any oversight or accountability, while these companies have been sacking

their own journalists.

Welcoming the report, Culture Secretary Jeremy Wright told the Commons on 12 February how the government intended to respond both to those recommendations which they were prepared to progress immediately and others where further consultations were needed. The government’s response on the entire report would be made later this year.

Whatever they come up with needs to be measured against the words of Roy Greenslade writing in *The Guardian* in July 2018: “The (Cairncross advisory) panel includes publishers who have been responsible for journalism’s deterioration, and who have a vested interest in making profits rather than aiding democracy.”

We must make sure that as a result of this report public money is not used to line their pockets, which will do nothing for good quality journalism and democracy.

## The Cairncross recommendations

● **Direct funding for local public-interest news:** The Local Democracy Reporting Service should be expanded, and responsibility for its management passed to, or shared with, the proposed new Institute for Public Interest News.

● **Establishing an Institute for Public Interest News:** A dedicated body could amplify efforts to ensure the future sustainability of public-interest news, working in partnership with news publishers and the online platforms as well as bodies such as Vesta, Ofcom, the BBC and academic institutions.

● **Investigating the workings of the online advertising market to ensure fair competition:** This would examine the likely dominance of Facebook and Google in this market.

● **New codes of conduct** to rebalance the

relationship between online platforms and publishers with oversight from a regulator.

● **News Quality Obligation:** The efforts of online platforms to improve their users’ ‘news experience’ should be under regulatory supervision.

● **Innovation funding:** the government should launch a new fund focused on innovations aimed at improving the supply of public-interest news, to be run by an independent body.

● **Tax Relief:** The government should introduce new tax reliefs aimed at encouraging (i) payments for online news content and (ii) the provision of local and investigative journalism.

Other recommendations included an Ofcom review of the BBC’s market impact and a call for the government to develop a media literacy strategy.

# Broadcasters' Brexit challenge: Find more representative Vox Pops

Former BBC correspondent **Nick Jones** gives an insider's account of the failings of the Vox Pops formula for canvassing comments and opinions

**R**ADIO and television reporting of the tortuous Brexit saga has tested almost to the point of destruction the already much-derided format of using Vox Pops interviews to canvas opinion.

Rarely has a technique become so over-used and repetitive, or failed so spectacularly to present an informative or representative snapshot of local views.

Indeed, if ever there was an assignment that illustrated the shortcomings of lazy broadcast journalism it has to be the despatch of a television crew or radio reporter to a shopping centre to conduct random interviews with passers-by.

Instead of thinking ahead to identify and target those residents, workers or students who might, for example, be directly impacted by Brexit, the broadcasters have almost always resorted to the easy option of a quick, in-and-out visit to a town centre location.

Such Vox Pops sequences have invariably displayed common characteristics: those asked for their opinions were usually the elderly because the interviews tended to be recorded in the late morning or early afternoon when most people of working age or studying were absent.

Day after day throughout the Brexit trauma, from the start of the European Referendum campaign through to the Parliamentary defeats and Theresa May's delaying

tactics, we saw and heard the same scenes being played out.

A television reporter walked around a near-deserted shopping centre, joshed with traders on stalls in the market place and invariably ended up chatting to customers in a pub, café or bingo hall.

There was a strong editorial preference for visits to Leave-voting towns and constituencies in the Midlands and the North of England with the aim of establishing if the residents were having second thoughts about Brexit. But the shoppers and customers who were being interviewed were predominantly retired rather than in work, and the least likely to have changed their opinions.

By their answers, they gave every appearance of being set in their ways, their comments reflecting more often than not the influence of years of hostile popular press coverage that has ridiculed and attacked the EU and inflamed fears about uncontrolled immigration.

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**Broadcasters have almost always resorted to the easy option of a quick, in-and-out visit to a town centre location**



Due to time constraints, filming tended to be in locations that offered easy access for a television crew and the chance to put together a sequence of set-up shots.

Hence the endless pictures of market traders piling up fruit and vegetables on their stalls; of pints being pulled at the bar; gurgling coffee machines; lucky numbers being ticked off at bingo parlours; or pensioners twirling away at afternoon tea dances.

Because the interviews were being conducted during the middle of the day there was little opportunity to question workers queuing at bus stops or students arriving at college, but there was never any on-air explanation for the narrow age range of those approached for an opinion.

**W**HAT viewers and listeners did not understand when they were presented with what the programmes liked to imply was a balanced reflection of the voice of the people, was that they were in fact being short changed by a combination of sloppy editorial planning and the consequences of cost-cutting in hard pressed newsrooms.

A decision on which town to visit would usually have been taken at a morning editorial meeting, and by the time a reporter arrived at the chosen location, the working population was long gone.

Camera crews would have needed no reminding that more obvious and livelier points

Photo: Karen Muller –Freelimages.com



In my 30 years as a BBC radio and television reporter I conducted countless Vox Pops interviews and I am sadly all too aware of the limitations and pitfalls. If I was forced to view and hear my own archive gallery of Vox Pops, I would undoubtedly retreat in shame.

Nonetheless, whenever possible, I did always try to make a point of talking to those directly affected, especially during the bitter industrial unrest of the Thatcher decade.

Even if it meant getting up early or staying late, I endeavoured to station myself at a pit gate or factory entrance early enough to catch workers arriving or if need be, I would stay around for clocking off.

Collecting a representative sample of opinion requires dedication, the necessary newsroom resources to deploy enough reporters and crews, and most importantly of all, an editorial chain of command that thinks ahead and refuses to take the easy way out.

I have no alternative but to accept the reality of today's broadcast journalism. However unrepresentative a Vox Pops snapshot might be, perhaps that is all television and radio can offer given the financial restraints of limited newsroom budgets and the incessant demand for the latest instant reaction.

I like to think that if I was on the Brexit beat, rather than finding myself forced to record yet again the all-too familiar reflections of pensioners and the retired, I would be outside the gates of Nissan, Honda or Jaguar Land Rover factories; that I would be door-stepping commuters at a railway station or bus terminus; and searching out workplaces or colleges where employees and students were contemplating their future in a Britain outside the EU.

Instead of a dreary high street and a backdrop of boarded-up shops, I would search for interviews outside the centres of excellence that are building what they hope will be a forward-looking future for the Midlands and the North. Occasionally there are targeted Vox Pops in fishing communities and most recently outside car plants facing closure or cut-backs in production, but the broadcasters' reliance on town centre forays has failed to reflect a shift in attitudes among the wider workforce and younger voters.

Opinion pollsters suggest a reversal since the Referendum with 54 per cent for Remain and 46 per cent for Leave, a switch that is rarely given voice by stopping elderly shoppers in town centres up and down the country.

Nicholas Jones was a BBC industrial and political correspondent for thirty years until retiring in 2002. His books include, *The Lost Tribe: Whatever Happened to Fleet Street's Industrial Correspondents?*

of call such as railway stations or bus terminals would be sparsely populated.

Reporters would also have realised there was no point turning up at a factory gate or college entrance because they would be too late to talk to those arriving, and even if there had been a chance of gaining access, permission would have been needed in advance.

At this point on such assignments the clock is ticking. There is always a tight deadline as filmed material and interviews need to be edited back at base in order to be ready for tea-time news bulletins. With such a short window on these last-minute visits, there is no alternative but to sweep up the comments of the few elderly shoppers walking around the town centre.

Desperation does tend to set in quickly, so it is off to the nearest pub or café as the camera crew will be anxious to get a colourful action sequence of staff busying themselves behind the bar or dishing up meals.

Again, the slice of Vox Pops on offer is limited, either the elderly, perhaps a whisky lunch-time drinker and a pensioner having a cup of tea, or a pub landlord or market trader with a Union Jack emblazoned on his stall.

In an attempt to assuage my frustration at the continued failure of broadcasters to offer a more representative cross section of opinion, I decided to monitor and log Vox Pops news

packages in mid-January in the immediate aftermath of the crushing 230-vote defeat for the withdrawal agreement negotiated by Theresa May.

ITV News went to South Devon, conducting interviews in the Fork in the Road Café and the late bulletin was in Middlesbrough with a set-up sequence filmed in a bingo hall and at a shopping centre in Totnes.

Sky News chose Boston, broadcasting set-up shots of coffee-making and interviews with shoppers in the market place. A further sequence featured a café in Camberley, again with another coffee-making sequence. Next morning Today's interviews were of retired men in a miners' welfare club at Knottingley.

My sympathy goes out to correspondents and television crews who found themselves parachuted into a newsworthy Leave-voting town and were told they had just a couple of hours to gauge local opinion, film some relevant sequences and head back to base.

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**Reliance on town centre forays has failed to reflect a shift in attitudes among the wider workforce and younger voters**

# Shafted revisited ten years on

THE first edition of *Shafted* was published in March 2009 for the 25th anniversary of the 1984-85 miners' strike. It sold out a long time ago. The new edition of *Shafted*, with a foreword by TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady, was published in April 2019 for the 35th anniversary of the strike. It is virtually a new book.

Editor Granville Williams says, "So much has happened since the book was first published: cabinet papers on the strike; the establishment of

the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign; publications on the pit camps set up in the wake of the October 1992 announcement of 31 pits closing with the loss of 31,000 jobs; a flood of creative work – films, plays, poetry – and a recognition that there is a direct link between the Tory attacks on the miners and other trade unions and the precarious world of low-paid, zero-hours work which hundreds of thousands of workers are subject to today."

All of these issues are reflect-

ed in new chapters in the book. Contributors include former BBC journalist Nick Jones, the Sheffield Women Against Pit Closures authors who produced the book *You Can't Kill The*

*Spirit!* on the Houghton Main pit camp, and film producer Tony Garnett.

The book also contains a selection of evocative photographs by Sheffield-based photographer Martin Jenkinson who died in 2012. A wonderful exhibition of his work, *Who We Are*, was held recently at the Weston Park Museum, Sheffield.

*Shafted* is published by CPBF(North) and costs £9.99. You can buy a copy for £11.00 inc P&P from [cpbfnorth@outlook.com](mailto:cpbfnorth@outlook.com)



Front cover of *Shafted* by Harry Malkin

## Meet the man behind the cover

THE cover of *Shafted* is a powerful painting by Harry Malkin. Harry worked as a miner until the pits closed. He says about the painting, "Monday morning and shifting Everest with a banjo is really about my father. He was a ripper at Fryston when I was growing up and when I started there he was working his way out, as was the thing with mining.

You worked towards the face for the money, then worked out as you got older. Anyway, he would always get on about having to go to work and shift a load of muck as big as a house every day. It wasn't until I started there and saw the men regularly doing this day in day out that I appreciated what he had to go through."

## What's happening

**Ackworth Public Library Bell Lane, Ackworth, Pontefract WF7 7JH.**  
**Friday 12 April 6.30-8.30pm**

Talk about new edition of *Shafted* begins at 7.00. Admission £4.00 Price includes wine and nibbles. Proceeds to Ackworth Community Library. Tickets in advance from library 01977 625617 or on the night. Speakers: Harry Malkin (ex-miner and artist) and Granville Williams, editor *Shafted*.

**Red Shed Wakefield 18 Vicarage St, Wakefield WF1 1QX.**

**Saturday 27 April 1.00-4.00pm**  
*Defending Coalfields and Communities (1984-93)* Speakers Ex-BBC journalist Nick Jones, *You Can't Kill The Spirit* authors, and Granville Williams. A Wakefield Socialist History Society event. Free admission.

**Quaker Meeting House Sheffield.**  
**10 St James' St, Sheffield S1 2EW.**  
**Thursday 9 May 7.00-9.00pm**

*From the Miners' Strike to the Gig Economy* Speakers: Peter Rowley (author of *Class Work*) and Granville Williams. A joint CPBF(North) and Orgreave Truth & Justice Campaign meeting. Admission Free. Part of Sheffield Festival of Debate season.

**South Yorkshire Festival, Wortley Hall, Wortley, Sheffield S35 7DB Unison Room**  
**Sunday 11 August 3.00pm,**

Speaker: Nick Jones, *Revealing hidden secrets: the miners' strike cabinet papers*. Admission free.

*Further meetings are planned in Manchester, Newcastle and Durham. If you would like to organise an event around the book **Shafted** contact [cpbfnorth@outlook.com](mailto:cpbfnorth@outlook.com)*

## Praise for first issue of MediaNorth

- "A brilliant front page ... eye catching and authoritative at the same time and the logo really packs a punch. *Media North* has a real sense of ownership about it – this is our territory and we know what's going on."
- "Excellent, particularly about Johnston Press. My local newspapers, *Spensorborough Guardian* and *Batley News*, are produced by them."
- "Excellent first edition. Really informative and punchy."
- "This is great."
- And from the States: "Looks great – will circulate within the NewsGuild here!"

# How the ‘left-wing’ British media sides with status quo

By Ian Sinclair

NAMED Collins Dictionary’s Word of the Year in 2017, “Fake News”, along with Russian interference in Western political systems, has become an obsession for the UK and US media and political classes.

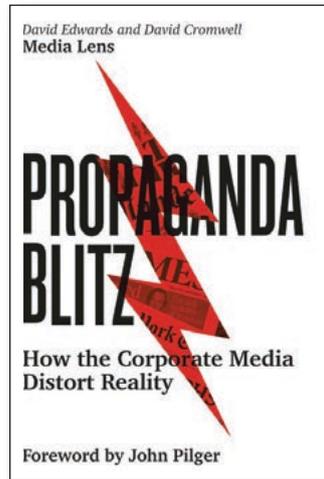
David Edwards and David Cromwell, co-editors of media analysis website Media Lens – [www.medialens.org](http://www.medialens.org) – don’t buy into this convenient, self-serving framing. “That fake news is a systematic feature of BBC coverage, and the rest of Western mainstream media, is virtually an unthinkable thought for corporate journalists”, they noted recently.

The corporate media then “fundamentally distort every significant issue they touch,” they argue in their new book. “Exposing the fraudulence of the ‘free press’ is therefore highly efficient for positive change.”

Based on their Media Alerts – timely critiques of news reporting they have been publishing regularly since starting Media Lens in 2001 – they look at how the media provides state and corporate-friendly coverage of Western foreign policy, climate change, NHS privatisation and the Scottish independence referendum.

## Less willing to engage

Compared to their previous books there are fewer illuminating exchanges with journalists – the truth-tellers in the newsrooms seem less willing to engage with the authors than they used to. However, their correspondence with *Guardian* cartoonist Martin Rowson and ITV News’s Bill Neely regarding the definition of terrorism are both surreal and revealing. As ex-*Guardian* columnist Glenn Greenwald tweeted: “I’ve never



encountered any group more driven by group think and rank-closing than British journalists.”

*The Guardian* plays a key role in this corporate news ecosystem, sharply defining and

## PROPAGANDA BLITZ How the Corporate Media Distort Reality

by David Edwards  
and David Cromwell  
Pluto Press, £14.99

defending the bounds of acceptable debate.

From Jeremy Corbyn’s rise to the Labour leadership to Julian Assange seeking asylum in the Ecuadorian Embassy and Russell Brand’s political awakening, Edwards and Cromwell highlight how the UK’s supposedly most left-wing mainstream newspaper sides with the status quo and assails those trying to create significant progressive change.

Best of all is their *Anatomy of a Propaganda Blitz*, a six-step

model for how the media attack and discredit enemies, preparing the way for (Western) intervention.

The 2002-3 media-assisted propaganda onslaught in advance of the invasion of Iraq is a good example of this kind of campaign, as is the 2018 antisemitism controversy and the current Venezuelan crisis. Like Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s Propaganda Model and Stanley Cohen’s theory of Moral Panics, this should be required reading on every university journalism and media studies course.

Essentially a £14.99 course in intellectual self-defence against thought control in a democratic society, *Propaganda Blitz* is an indispensable read for anyone who consumes the news.

## Edwards and Cromwell on media coverage of Venezuela

“IT is an excellent example of a propaganda blitz. When opposition leader Juan Guaidó declared himself ‘interim president’ on January 23, US-UK journalists depicted it as a classic watershed moment – Venezuelans had had enough of the socialist government of Nicolas Maduro, who had to go, had to be replaced, probably by Guaidó.

Maduro is a sworn enemy of the West, which has been working long and hard to regain control of Venezuela’s oil.

Moral outrage focuses on the claim that Maduro is a ‘tyrant,’ ‘despot’ and ‘dictator’ (he is democratically elected), who is full-square to blame for the economic and humanitarian crisis (US sanctions have played a significant role), who rigged the May 2018 elections (they were declared free and fair by many credible observers),



**Nicolas Maduro: Sworn enemy of the West?** Photo: Wikimedia

who crushed press freedom (numerous Venezuelan media are openly and fiercely anti-government).

This propaganda blitz has been particularly surreal. ‘Mainstream’ media don’t seem to notice that it is Donald Trump – the same groping, bete orange widely denounced by these same media as an out and out fascist – who is guiding efforts to overthrow Maduro. Adam Johnson made the point for Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting:

“The same US media outlets that have expressly fund-raised and run ad campaigns on their image as anti-Trump truth-tellers have mysteriously taken at face value everything the Trump White House and its neoconservative allies have said in their campaign to overthrow the government of Venezuela.”

# Facebook under fire

## Company ‘deliberately sought to frustrate our work’

By **Granville Williams**

A HARD-HITTING report *Disinformation and ‘Fake News’* by the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee came out on 14 February. It is the result of an investigation launched in 2017 as concern grew about the influence of false information and its ability to spread unchecked on social media. The inquiry gained even more impetus in March the following year, with the revelations about the Cambridge Analytica data-harvesting scandal.

Damian Collins, the committee’s chair, was excoriating in his comments on Facebook: “We believe that in its evidence to the Committee Facebook has often deliberately sought to frustrate our work, by giving incomplete, disingenuous and at times misleading answers to our questions.

“Even if Mark Zuckerberg doesn’t believe he is accountable to the UK Parliament, he is to the billions of Facebook users across the world. Evidence uncovered by my Committee shows he still has questions to answer yet he’s continued to duck them, refusing to respond to our invitations directly or sending representatives who don’t have the right information. Mark Zuckerberg continually fails to show the levels of leadership and personal responsibility that should be expected from someone who sits at the top of one of the world’s biggest companies.”

The 111 page-report argues, “Companies like Facebook exercise massive market power which enables them to make



money by bullying the smaller technology companies and developers who rely on this platform to reach their customers.”

It continues, “These are issues that the major tech companies are well aware of, yet continually fail to address. The guiding principle of the ‘move fast and break things’ culture often seems to be that it is better to apologise than

ask permission.”

One key recommendation is for clear legal liabilities to be established for tech companies to act against harmful or illegal content on their sites. The report also calls for a compulsory Code of Ethics defining what constitutes harmful content.

An independent regulator should be responsible for monitoring tech companies, backed

by statutory powers to launch legal action against companies in breach of the code. Companies failing obligations on harmful or illegal content would face hefty fines.

This would be similar in nature to the powers Ofcom wields when it comes to regulating the content put out by broadcasters to ensure it does not incite abuse or crime, and is age appropriate for the time it is shown, for example.

The report states: “Social media companies cannot hide behind the claim of being merely a ‘platform’ and maintain that they have no responsibility themselves in regulating the content of their sites.”

*Disinformation and ‘Fake News’* is an important report. We can be sure of one thing. Facebook and the other tech giants will deploy their enormous lobbying resources to fight any attempts to restrict and regulate their lucrative operations.

## Tech giants and lobbying

GOOGLE, Amazon, and Facebook spent record amounts to influence the US government in 2018. They poured a combined \$48 million into lobbying last year – up 13 percent from 2017, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Lobbying growth among the tech giants – especially companies that leverage user data for advertising revenue – comes as they are falling under increased government scrutiny. Facebook in particular faces a record Federal Trade Commission fine over apparent violations of data privacy practices in the Cambridge Analytica scandal that was revealed last year.

And in the UK the three internet giants

are beefing up their UK lobbying operations in preparation for efforts to tighten regulation in the UK and Europe.

At the same time as Nick Clegg, former deputy prime minister, was announced as Facebook’s head of global affairs and communications in October 2018, job listings suggest that Facebook, Google and Amazon were looking to increase the number of employees focused on influencing UK policy.

Responsibilities of the advertised jobs include working with policymakers on tech policy and shaping agendas “inside and outside government”. It is estimated that about 50 people work in lobbying for the three companies in the UK.