

Media North



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100,000 dead

Boris Johnson and media play the blame game

By Julian Petley

AS the government casts around in its hunt to blame someone or something other than itself for the catastrophic levels of death and infection from COVID-19 it has settled on a new scapegoat: you and me. In this it has been greatly aided by our Pravda-like national press.

While the government endlessly urges people to observe the lockdown, it also makes the most of every opportunity to stigmatise those who are not doing so, supported by pictures of crowds frequently taken from a distance with telephoto lenses, thereby making them appear to be far closer together than they actually are.

However, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that irresponsible and selfish behaviour (a) is far less widespread than such coverage would suggest; and (b) where people do break the lockdown rules, it is frequently unwillingly and out of necessity as opposed to simply wanting to have a good time at others' expense.

Thus, on the first point, according to a study published by University College, London, on 13 January:

'Compliance with lockdown rules has been increasing since last September, especially as stricter measures have been brought in, with particular improvements since the start of December when news of the new variant became widespread. 'Majority' compliance with the rules is being reported by 96% of people; an improvement since the start of the autumn across all demographic groups.'

Similarly, a YouGov poll reported on 5 January that:

A grim threshold is passed. Tory newspapers avoid mentioning that this was absolutely avoidable

'Overall, the vast majority (85%) of Britons support the national lockdown measures introduced across the UK this week, including 62% who

'strongly' support them.'
On the other hand, however, another YouGov poll, released on 11 January, suggested that
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Tory press cheer attack on trade union rights

Review seen as ‘a race to the bottom’ and ‘bonfire of workers’ rights’

By Nicholas Jones

WHEN Conservative governments set about curtailing employment and trade union rights the route map for massaging public reaction follows tried and tested procedures.

Headline-grabbing objectives are floated in briefings to well-informed journalists, and then, amid a flurry of media interest, ministers row back from worst-case scenarios insisting that high standards in the UK will not be eroded.

Leaked reports in early January of an immediate post-Brexit review of the 48-hour limit on the working week were the precursor to the latest example of a well-honed routine.

The bluster behind Boris Johnson’s soothing words spoke volumes: his government was not about to ‘send children up chimneys’.

This is the signal to columnists and commentators on Conservative-supporting newspapers to pile in, to urge the Prime Minister to go even further and to ignore ‘the howls of rage from the Labour Party, trade unions and the usual collection of centre-Left establishment think-tanks’.

‘Reforming labour laws is vital to shake off inertia of the EU’ declared business and financial columnist Matthew Lynn who argued there had never been a ‘better moment to reform employment laws’. (*Daily Telegraph*, 16.1.2021)

Freeing Britain from Brussels’ ‘stranglehold’ has long

been the objective of the *Mail on Sunday*. Its political editor, Glen Owen, urged the Prime Minister to push ahead with regulatory reform: ‘Let’s make Britain the Singapore of Europe’. (17.1.2021)

Brexit-supporting newspapers had greeted with approval the *Financial Times*’ exclusive – ‘UK workers’ rights at risk in plans to rip up EU Labour market rules’ (14.1.2021) – and their enthusiastic commentary gave added impetus to the Prime Minister’s plea to business leaders to come up with ideas for easing regulations to support economic growth.

Initially Downing Street refused to confirm or deny that the newly appointed business secretary Kwasi Kwarteng had been asked to start a review of the EU working time directive, scrapping the maximum 48-hour week and a raft of changes including removal of the requirement to log the daily reporting of working hours and the inclusion of bonuses and overtime in calculating holiday pay.

A victory for workers

WE went to press as the news broke that controversial proposals by the Tories to tear up workers’ rights – including the 48-hour maximum working week – contained in a post-Brexit review of workers’ rights, have been cancelled after a storm of protest led by trade unions and opposition Labour MPs.

This victory follows ministers refusing to say whether the review even existed. Then they conceded the existence of the review by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but insisted it would not lead to any dilution of workers’ rights.



Mail on Sunday leaves no doubt about what it would like to happen

‘Government sources’ told a different story: a consultation on employment rights was signed off by Kwarteng’s predecessor, Alok Sharma, and had already been circulated to some select business leaders.

Ed Miliband, shadow business secretary, seized on the reports to warn that the review

of employment rights was the start of the ‘race to the bottom’ which ministers had long dreamed of for post-Brexit Britain.

‘It’s starting – the bonfire of workers’ rights’ declared the headline over a comment column in *The Guardian* (16.1.2021) in which Miliband pointed to Kwarteng’s longstanding belief that the UK’s labour market was too highly regulated.

Kwarteng was among the free-market campaigners who wrote a 2012 manifesto, *Britannia Unchained*, that declared that the British were ‘among the worst idlers in the world’ and he was co-author of a pamphlet proposing to exempt start-up firms from employment legislation.

Press opinion dominated by pro-Brexit and pro-business sources

Moves by Kwarteng to attack workers' rights may well run into a red wall

Carillon w calamity, bid to ban bosses is a positive sign

Economy, no-frills airlines could still be in it for the long

Reforming labour laws is vital to shake off inertia of the EU

Matthew Lynn

Johnson and media play blame game

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the blame game had successfully done its work, since it revealed that 58% of the general population hold the public most responsible for the rise in Covid rates in the past month, and only 28% blamed the government.

Among Tory voters the figures were 80% and 9% respectively.

On the second point, another category of rule-breaker has been largely conspicuous through their absence: those simply too poor to be able to give up work and who have been utterly failed by a chancellor for whom public spending at the present level goes against every ideological and economic fibre of his being, and is thus kept to the bare minimum.

However, the real paradox of this situation is that many of the MPs and newspapers blaming the public for behaving so irresponsibly are also themselves libertarians straining vociferously at the lockdown leash. This has resulted in indecisive, stop-go policy-making and confusingly mixed messages, and all this at a time when clear and consistent advice to the public should be at an absolute premium.

As Robert Shrimmsley argued in the *Financial Times*, 6 January, the result of Johnson being so deferential to his fellow libertarians in both parliament and the press is that 'the story of Britain's crisis has been one of delaying the inevitable until it is unavoidable, a vicious cycle of slow response followed by sharp correction which lasts longer for starting later'.

The consequences of so many of our politicians and newspapers being in such thrall to libertarian dogma are, quite literally, lethal.

Opinion

World Being

It's starting - the bonfire of workers' rights

Ed Milliband

Employment

16.1.2021

When MPs had a chance to confront the business secretary at a hearing of the Commons business select committee (19.1.2021), Kwarteng confirmed publicly that his department had started a post-Brexit review of UK employment laws, but the government did not want to 'whittle down' labour market standards.

"We are absolutely looking at safeguarding employment rights. I know there have been stories in the newspapers that there is going to be some sort of bonfire of rights. This could not be further from the truth.

"We wanted to look at the whole range of issues relating to our EU membership and examine what we wanted to keep. We are absolutely committed to having a really high standard for workers in high employment and a high wage economy."

Together with the employment rights review, there will be a far-reaching push under a newly established better regulation committee, to be chaired by the chancellor Rishi Sunak, to focus on ways to cut EU red tape for businesses.

Sunak's brief is to deliver 'a low-tax, low-regulation regime' now that the UK has the opportunity to do things differently.

Like Kwarteng, Sunak insisted that this was not a race to the bottom.

"This isn't about lowering standards, but about raising our eyes to look to the future - making the most of new sectors, new thinking and new ways of working."

Cheering on the government are the Conservative-supporting newspapers that are demanding to see solid evidence of a post-Brexit dividend.

However, Juliet Samuel's commentary in the *Daily Telegraph* (16.1.2021) did strike a cautionary note.

Predictably the review of EU labour regulations had been greeted by 'Labour and the country's rump of Brexit refuseniks as an assault on workers by swivel-eyed Thatcherites' but she doubted whether ministers were 'spoiling for a fight against the unions'.

Samuel might prove correct in her prediction, but the labour and trade union movement should be demanding far greater clarity and a real say in the consultation process.

Press opinion is dominated by pro-Brexit and pro-business voices and a concerted fight-back will need detailed facts and figures from the trade union movement to stress the importance of the 48-hour limit for key workers such as those in the NHS and the impact of removing overtime and bonuses from wage calculations.

Union researchers have no time to lose in coming up with answers to some vital questions: How many workers are safeguarded by the 48-hour safety cap? How will holiday pay be affected? What are the dangers in allowing employers to simplify the rules on maintaining records on the working week?

TO BAN OR NOT TO BAN?

In the dying days of the Donald Trump Presidency, and the mayhem at the Capitol on 6 January, social media banned his toxic tweets. Right or wrong? Here we present two views

Orwellian bullshit

Christian Christensen

DONALD Trump being banned from a cross-section of social media and digital platforms has generated outrage from right-wingers in the United States and Europe, with claims that these decisions are tantamount to censorship, a violation of Trump's free-speech rights and blatant political targeting on the part of companies described as 'leftist'. In addition, the actions of Twitter, Facebook, Google and others have led the same group of conservatives to lament the unfettered power of these multi-billion dollar companies and the 'Orwellian' tactics they are accused of employing.

There's a lot to unpack here. To me, however, we really need to start by cutting through what can only be described as the dishonest, cynical and utterly decontextualised bullshit at the heart of the right-wing criticism of the Trump ban.

Bluntly, if there's anything 'Orwellian' about all of this – and it is clear that many citing Orwell's 1984 have either not read or don't understand the book – it is that the political right in the United States and Europe are re-framing as 'leftist' and 'anti-democratic' the for-profit, privately controlled 'free market of ideas' they have

religiously and relentlessly pushed for decades.

After a relentless and unbroken 40-year fight to hand informational control and power over to a small number of corporate actors, the political right is now wetting their collective pants over Trump being banned by a privately-owned company. A company that the right has been telling us should be trusted – free from Nanny State intrusion – to make precisely such a decision. As if that hypocrisy wasn't enough, Trump's ban was clearly rooted in his violation of the terms of service to which he agreed when he got his Twitter account. So, apparently, another conservative moral mantra – 'personal responsibility' – has also been conveniently forgotten in this whirlpool of 'Orwellian' bullshit.

What is clear is that the 'leftist social media' myth has now merged with the traditional 'leftist mainstream media' myth to form an overarching 'leftist media ecosystem' myth. With this meta-myth, all media criticism can be waived off as ideologically driven. And, in true Orwellian fashion, this right-wing critique positions multi-billion dollar corporate owners as, of all things, leftist. The problem with this argument, of course, is that Twitter has been a gold mine for Trump...and Trump a gold mine for Twitter. His ban came only days before he left office, and only after the violent events in Washington. And, an overwhelming por-

tion of Facebook and YouTube traffic is driven by right-wing content. A good argument can also be made that the current power of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube in the information ecology is directly linked to the historical re-regulation, commercialisation and subsequent entertainment/conflict orientation of news and information in Europe and the US.

Who were the people warning us for decades about the excessive power of centralised corporate control over media and information? About the threats of this centralised control to democracy? 'Libertarian' Trumpites now complaining so vociferously? Reagan Republicans? European Conservatives? No. It was academics and the political left, saying that the excessive power of news organisations such as Fox News, CNN and the *New York Times*, and the excessive power of social media platforms, are dangerous.

And what was the standard reaction of the political right when researchers and media reformers expressed basic concern over the concentration of power in our informational ecosystem? That we were naive, free market-hating Marxists scared that our worldview would be thrashed in the 'marketplace of ideas'.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the real world. The corporations the right fed through the de-regulation of media markets, the enabling of increased concentration of cor-

porate ownership, generous corporate tax breaks and actively marginalising and attacking the few remaining non-commercial alternatives (like public service broadcasting) were re-framed, overnight, from monuments to Capitalism to oppressors. The history of the political right in their creation was erased and revised, with conservatives rewritten in the updated version as the innocent victims of corporate media power, run over by multi-billion dollar corporations operating in the service of 'Marxism'.

Orwell couldn't have written it any better.

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“In true Orwellian fashion, this right-wing critique positions multi-billion dollar corporate owners as, of all things, leftist”

– Christian Christensen

“Trump’s messaging is deranged, with wild accusations of his opponents conspiring against him, but those tweets didn’t incite anything”

– Tim Gopsill

Democracy is the loser

By Tim Gopsill

WHICH allegation is worse? That a conspiracy of powerful figures is rigging national elections; or that government is threatening freedom with measures to safeguard public health in the throes of a pandemic. And which is more likely to be banned?

In terms of damage to the community, the second is plainly more serious. The UK has one of the highest covid death rates in the world. Tens of thousands have died needlessly as a result of the vacillations of a government in hock to its rampant right wing and

the rabid right-wing press.

Placing personal liberty and business profits firmly ahead of public health and safety, their constant undermining of the regulations and inciting of people to ignore them are crimes against our humanity. But no one wants them banned.

Meanwhile the social media corporations are censoring expressions of extreme opinion from right and left alike. They even no-platformed President Trump as he was leaving the White House.

Twitter banned him for two tweets: one in which Trump said he would not attend the inauguration of Joe Biden and another in which he said: “American patriots will have a GIANT VOICE in the future.” Twitter said they presented a risk of incitement: “The president’s statements can be mobilised by different audiences, including to incite violence.” Facebook banned him too.

Liberals and Democrats cheered, but not everyone. The radical American journalist Glenn Greenwald wrote in January that the widespread demands for censorship of the far right were ‘grounded in the long-discredited, oft-rejected and dangerous view that a person should be held legally accountable ... for the consequences of their free speech’.

Trump’s messaging is deranged, with wild accusations of his opponents conspiring against him, but those tweets didn’t incite anything. And god

help us if accusing our political opponents of foul play, even if demonstrably wrongly, is a case for censorship.

The right wing rabble swarming into the Capitol in Washington on 6 January led to strident demands for action to suppress dissent. But it could have been prevented. Everyone knew they were coming, not least because the group that had booked the rally there, Women for America First, had been warning police and the White House for days that a gang of white supremacists was plotting a violent intervention. However there was no extra security and the officers that were there stepped aside and let them in. All the footage of the crowd makes this clear.

It was hardly the storming of the Winter Palace, but Chuck Shumer, Democrat leader in the Senate, compared the event to the Pearl Harbor attack of 1941. The protesters have been labelled ‘terrorists’ by politicians and the frustrated anti-Trump media alike.

President Biden is reported to be planning a tougher anti-terror law targeting the right wing. It takes you back 20 years to when, within days of the September 11 2001 atrocity, a law was presented to Congress called, inane, the USA PATRIOT act (standing for Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism).

It was the biggest single assault on US citizens’ rights of all time, allowing the security services unrestricted access to all communications, widely extending the definition of terrorism and imposing heavier penalties.

Looks like they’re at it again – rather confusingly using the right as the pretext instead of jihadists, foreigners or the left. Glenn Greenwald called it ‘the Liberals’ 9/11’, writing on 7 January: “It is stunning to watch as every War on Terror rhetorical tactic to justify civil liberties erosions is now being invoked in the name of combatting Trumpism.”

The UK was embroiled in the 2000s’ ‘war on terror’, which infected its media too - notably with a surge in Islamophobic reporting. There was a series of anti-terror laws that affected journalists trying to report activities of the state.

The censorship now is imposed by giant tech monopolies that are not just unaccountable but omnipotent, and there are calls to regulate them. But distinctions between private and public are meaningless.

The problem amid a security hype is that the mighty media corporations perform precisely the state’s bidding. They didn’t ban Trump for his views or because he was dangerous but because he was weak. In his own word, he had become a ‘loser’.

Democracy becomes the loser when security triumphs over free speech.



Julian Assange: Investigative journalism takes a big hit

By **Barry White**

JANUARY was a month of mixed fortunes for Julian Assange. On Monday 4 January district judge Vanessa Baraitser rejected US demands to extradite Julian to stand trial on criminal charges and violations of the 1917 Espionage Act.

On closer reading it was clear that the judge had rejected all the defence arguments against extradition in order to protect free speech, the right to report, that the extradition was politically motivated and he would not get a fair trial in the US. It was the appalling state of the US prison system that was a key factor, taken with Julian's mental health history, which led her to believe that he would be potentially in danger of taking his own life if so incarcerated. Lawyers for the US are to appeal.

Two days after her ruling came the setback when the

same Vanessa Baraitser sitting at Westminster magistrates court rejected his application for bail, saying that Julian "still has an incentive to abscond from these, as yet unresolved, proceedings. As a matter of fairness the US must be allowed to challenge my decision."

Immediately after the 4 January judgement NUJ General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet pointed out the implications of the judge's ruling. "This decision will be welcomed by all who value journalists' ability to report on national security issues," she commented. "However, whilst the outcome is the right one, Judge Vanessa Baraitser's judgement contains much that is troubling. Her basis for dismissing the US' extradition request was the suicide risk that Assange poses in a US penal system that would probably have kept him in near total isolation."

She added that, "The judge

rejected the defence case that the charges against Assange related to actions identical to those undertaken daily by most investigative journalists. In doing so, she leaves open the door for a future US administration to concoct a similar indictment against a journalist."

Hammering home the point after the verdict, the US Justice Department said: "While we are extremely disappointed in the court's ultimate decision, we are gratified that the United States prevailed on every point of law raised. In particular, the court rejected all of Mr Assange's arguments regarding political motivation, political offence, fair trial, and freedom of speech. We will continue to seek Mr Assange's extradition to the United States."

However, the American Civil Liberties Union pointed out that the charges were a direct assault on the US first amendment which protects

freedom of the press and freedom of speech, while the International Federation of Journalists and other press freedom organisations raised serious concerns. All agreed that the decision left the door open for further similar prosecutions and would have a chilling effect on national security reporting around the world.

As well as appealing against the rejection of bail, Julian's defence team also need to challenge the judge's rejection of their case against extradition which could, if adopted into law, create a dangerous precedent.

We need to keep the pressure up for Julian's release, the US charges to be dropped and the right to report strengthened in the light of the judge's ruling. Julian's struggle is far from over and neither are the threats against investigative journalism highlighted in Vanessa Baraitser's ruling.

REVIEW

Wapping: Powerful new film tells inside story

By **Granville Williams**

The Wapping dispute began 35 years ago. It was a lock-out, not a strike.

Wapping – The Workers' Story is a film about the momentous year-long industrial dispute which began in 1986 when Rupert Murdoch plotted to move production of his papers overnight from central London's Fleet Street to a secretly equipped and heavily guarded plant at Wapping, a docklands district in east London.

5,500 men and women lost their jobs and centuries of tradition in one of London's last manufacturing industries came to an end.

Military-style police tactics, the use of new laws which shackled the unions' hard-won freedoms and strike-breaking organised by the electricians' union led to a Murdoch victory.

The dispute had interna-

tional ramifications for Murdoch's expanding press and broadcasting empire in the United States and around the world.

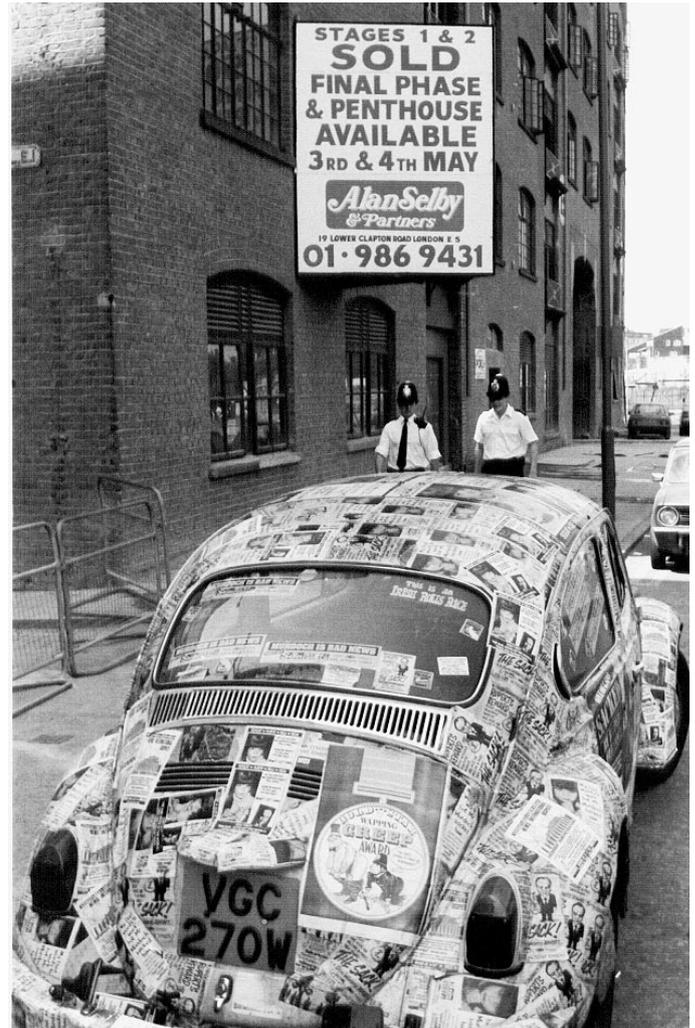
It took place as the Thatcher government embraced monetarism - deregulating finance, privatising key industries and undermining local democracy.

The story is eloquently told by sacked printworkers and the 'refusenik' journalists who joined them. It was made with the News International Dispute Archive group whose publications, website and travelling exhibition gave a voice to the sacked workers and their families on the 25th anniversary of the strike

Both the creation of the archive and the production of this film are tremendous achievements, testament to the determination of those involved in the projects to provide vivid personal accounts both of the



SIX MEN AND THEIR DOG. The main entrance to the Wapping plant was only allowed six pickets at a time as a result of legislation introduced by the Thatcher government.



STRIKING BODYWORK. A picket uses his car to promote the cause of the striking printworkers near the News International plant at Wapping.

distinctive culture of 'working in the print' and their experiences during the dispute.

Chris Reeves, director of *Wapping: The Workers' Story*, has a strong track-record with Platform Films making documentaries in support of the trade union and labour movement. They made *The Lie Machine* in 1984, for the Miners' Campaign Tapes, a project involving other independent film-making groups.

One section of the documentary deals with the solidarity of Fleet Street with other trade union struggles. In 1972 all Fleet Street newspapers closed when five dockers - 'the Pentonville Five' - were jailed, and during the 1984-85 miners' strike printworkers not only raised over £2m in support of the striking miners and their families but also actively challenged the extreme bias in the way the strike was covered in

the predominantly right-wing press by demanding 'the right of reply'.

One example: John Brown, Imperial Father of the Chapel in the Composing Room at the *Sun*, had fierce battles with the foul-mouthed, bullying editor, Kelvin MacKenzie, on this issue.

Brown was involved with a group of NGA progressives and the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, and during the miners' strike his nickname became 'right of reply Brown'. "All I tried to do was get some balance. It was the best year we had," he said.

The great strength of this new documentary is the way it cuts from contemporary news-reel footage to interviews with former Wapping strikers.

These interviews are structured around particular themes (in the print, Murdoch,

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Watch the film

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the role of the police, the media, etc) with the people often speaking against the backcloth of their union or chapel branch banner.

Wapping was located within a packed Docklands community which also suffered the impact of the scab lorries driving out of Wapping. It was good to see CPBF stalwart Mike Jempson in the film describing the solidarity action taken by Wapping residents in support of the striking printworkers.

Wapping: The Workers' Story was funded by donations from trade unionists. It deserves to be widely shown and I urge people to buy the DVD and publicise it through their own contacts and networks.

This film helps us to understand how it was that Rupert Murdoch began his remorseless rise to global media power as a result of Wapping, but it also punctures the false claims he made that breaking the print unions would lead to more newspapers and a diversity of viewpoints.

WATCH THE FILM

Wapping: The Workers' Story can be viewed on-line at: <http://vimeo.com/ondemand/wappingtheworkersstory> for £2.25. A DVD version with extras is available from Platform Films, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1R 0DU. To buy a copy or copies e-mail: platform.films@virgin.net with your details.

The price is: £8.00 + £1.00 P&P and cheques should be made out to Platform Films.

Further Reading

The End of the Street by Linda Melvern (1986) tells the inside story.

Bad News: The Wapping Dispute by John Lang and Graham Dodkins (2011). The authors were librarians at *The Times* and *Sunday Times* and active participants in the strike.

Uncertain future for Montgomery's JPI Media

Cost-cutting reputation makes journalists anxious

By Tim Gopill

THE future of Yorkshire's primary newspaper group is at the mercy of an owner with a reputation for ruthless asset-stripping.

On New Year's Day it was announced that owner JPI Media had sold the *Yorkshire Post* and its 100 other titles at a rock-bottom price to National World, a company led by David Montgomery, who has bought and sold newspapers, slashed costs and reaped the profits for the last 30 years.

Staff are braced to hear his full intentions. JPI's top managers have gone, but apart from the positive platitudes he declared at the start no-one knows what Montgomery will do.

He set up National World in 2018 to buy the JPI titles, which were put on the market in a shocking financial state because of massive debts created by a series of reckless acquisitions in the early 2000s on the part of its originators, the Scottish publisher Johnston Press. The firm collapsed in 2018 when its share price plunged to zero. JPI was set up by creditors to manage until they could sell it.



David Montgomery: 30 years of slashed costs and reaped profits

Two years on Montgomery has bagged the lot for £10.2 million. In 2002 Johnston Press had paid an insane £570 million for the *Yorkshire Post* and *Evening Post* alone.

Montgomery had been editor of the *News of the World* but turned manager in 1991 when

he was installed by the banks as chief executive to cost-cut the Mirror group after the fall of its criminal owner Robert Maxwell. He became so hated that staff nicknamed him 'Rommel ... because Monty was on our side'.

He ran a company in central Europe until the board could stand him no longer and paid him £2.3 million to get out. In 2012 he set up Local World, which bought up and 'rationalised' the papers of two regional groups, selling them in 2015 - to the Mirror group, now called Reach - for £220 million.

Over the last ten years JPI's titles have already shed half their staff - roughly 750 out of 1,500 - and had their working structures drastically altered. Their future looks unlikely to get better.

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