

Media North

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Setting right priorities for post-election media reform

By Granville Williams

THIS special issue of *Media-North*, produced for the Leeds *It's the Media, Stupid!* conference on 8 February, is intended to shape discussion on what sorts of policies and campaigns for media reform are realistic in the wake of the Tory election victory.

One thing is certain. The relationship with those sections of the media which Boris Johnson, his adviser Dominic Cummings, and the No 10 Communications Director, Lee Cain, deem recalcitrant or too critical will be difficult.

We already see something of this in the changes announced by Lee Cain to the way the lobby will operate.

Lobby journalists, the accredited press based at Parliament, used to be briefed by the Government's official spokesperson twice a day – once in the morning and again in the afternoon. Holding briefings in the House of Commons enabled journalists who wanted to cover afternoon proceedings in Parliament to also easily ask questions of the Government's spokesperson.

These briefings were previously held in the Lobby room of the House of Commons, but under Boris Johnson's new administration they have been moved to Number 9 Downing Street. The changes were imposed without any consultation on 20 December 2019 and came into effect on 6 January 2020.



In a message to journalists, Lobby chairman and *Telegraph* chief political correspondent Christopher Hope warned the change will make it harder for journalists to attend briefings, particularly those from smaller new organisations with only one or two accredited political reporters. These are often the regional press.

He also raised concerns that journalists would not be able to take their mobile phones into the morning briefing at Downing Street, 'which will mean that it is difficult to file accurately and promptly straight after it'.

This action by Lee Cain (who

Sarah Williment's son Jack lies on the floor on her coat at Leeds General Infirmary. The picture, first published in the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, provoked social media attacks that it was 'fake'.

the YEP published the story and photo of Sarah Williment's son Jack being forced to sleep on the floor in his mother's coat at Leeds General Infirmary. The papers were subjected to concerted attacks on the veracity of the story by online trolls and activists but fought back strongly.

A *Daily Mirror* reporter was banned from the Boris Johnson campaign battle bus and broadcasters came under fire. Incidents with broadcasters included Channel 4 replacing the Prime Minister with an ice sculpture during its climate debate, an ITV News correspondent asking Johnson to look at a photograph of a boy forced to sleep on a hospital floor, and Andrew Neil's monologue on the BBC after Johnson snubbed an interview with him.

The BBC World Affairs editor, John Simpson, has accused the government of 'limbering up' for a 'major attack' on the BBC. He said it was 'payback time' because the Prime Minister and the Conservatives 'feel bruised and damaged by the broadcasters'.

So one focus for the conference is likely to be how do we defend independent public service broadcasting against attack?

incidentally used to dress up as a chicken and heckle Tory politicians in the 2010 election when he worked for the *Daily Mirror*) fits into a broader pattern.

Regional papers like the *Yorkshire Post* are part of the lobby but nevertheless, during the election campaign, it and the *Yorkshire Evening Post* took a strong position over the furore created when

Get involved

If you can't attend the conference we would still like to hear your views on what sort of media reform policies we need to focus on in these post-election times.

• You can contact us at cpbfnorth@outlook.com



A selection of anti-Corbyn stories that were endlessly recycled in the Tory press during the election campaign.

Challenging press vilification

EVER since he emerged as a serious contender for the Labour leadership Jeremy Corbyn was subjected to unprecedented vilification by the UK's dominant Conservative-supporting, pro-Brexit press. Some of the country's best-paid columnists and commentators succeeded in delivering a masterclass in the character assassination of a British politician.

Steps can be taken to challenge the agenda-setting impact of national newspapers, but that requires the news media at large to have the courage to flag up the heightened politicisation of UK newspapers.

The 24-hour news cycle and the explosion in social media have combined to extend the reach of the kind of hostile coverage which was meted out to Corbyn and which constantly repeated the claims of the tabloid press that he was the terrorists' friend and a security risk.

Whatever one's views on Corbyn's past activism, or the company he kept, his demonisation has been intense, concentrated into a four-year period from his leadership campaign in the summer of 2015 through to the lead-up to the general elections

Nicholas Jones explains how broadcasters could highlight media bias

of both 2017 and 2019.

Journalists were able to draw on a treasure trove of stories and photographs dating back for 30 years or more. The challenge for the Tory commentariat's elite was to find ways to project fear and alarm from faded press clippings from the 1980s and 1990s, and especially images of a much younger looking Corbyn.

Their aim was to exploit his links with leaders of Sinn Fein, and then, in the wake of the Manchester Arena and London Bridge terrorist attacks, his past associations with Jihadists.

Corbyn's failings in dealing with the Labour Party's disarray over complaints of antisemitism opened a new avenue of attack. The now familiar story lines had to be continually reworked, but any study of the journalists' output underlines their ingenuity

and ability to recycle the same material.

Instead of being just supporters, newspapers such as *The Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Telegraph* have now become campaigners and propagandists for the Conservative Party. Their front pages are blatant party promotion, although as late as the 1990s most papers kept their political endorsements to an editorial column on an inside page.

Press politicisation could be countered by broadcasters, starting perhaps with the introduction of a system of health warnings. When controversial front pages are reproduced on screen in television press reviews there should be a notification of a newspaper's political allegiance, a reminder, for example, that its readers were urged to support Leave in the 2016 EU Referen-

dum or vote for Boris Johnson in the 2019 election.

Television and radio presenters rarely indicate the political background of media guests taking part in press reviews and political discussions.

Columnists and commentators with regular by-lines in Conservative, pro-Brexit papers are often introduced neutrally as 'authors' or 'historians'.

Radio and TV programmes are failing in their responsibilities, misleading the public by giving the impression that their guests are somehow independent writers or observers. Presenters should be far more transparent about the political hinterland of their interviewees, not least, for example, if they were a mainstay of what became a production line of anti-Corbyn tirades.

My fear is that broadcasters will continue to shy away from clarity for fear of losing guests and antagonising still further already hostile newspapers.

Nicholas Jones was a BBC Industrial and Political Correspondent for 30 years and contributed to all six issues of *ElectionWatch* during the 2019 election.

Corbyn was subjected to unprecedented vilification by the UK's dominant Conservative-supporting, pro-Brexit press

Long live the licence fee! Get rid of it!

The licence fee is under attack.
Are there better ways to fund the BBC?

By Tim Gopsill

THE former BBC investigative journalist Meirion Jones, forced out of his job on *Newsnight* for trying to tell the truth about Jimmy Savile, was asked why he thought the BBC was biased in favour of government and replied: 'It's the licence fee – stupid!'

Governments set the fee and appoint compliant bureaucrats to direct the BBC. Over the last decade the Tories have progressively reduced the fee in real terms and loaded it with extra costs, all with management co-operation.

The notion that truly independent reporting is likely from this regime is one of the myths of BBC independence highlighted by

academic critic Tom Mills in his recent work. But the licence fee system has become politically and technologically untenable and will likely disappear at the termination of the current BBC licence in 2027. It is after all a payment for using a TV set, and there could well not even be such a thing by then.

Politically? Well, it is a flat rate levy and more than 10 per cent of all cases in magistrates' courts are for non-payment - 129,446 in 2018 – and, while that is not an imprisonable offence, the failure to pay the consequent fine is. A few dozen people are jailed every year, and they are all poor and mostly women.

There are several potential replacements for the fee. Com-



A few dozen people are jailed every year for not paying the licence fee. They are all poor and mostly women.

mercial solutions such as the acceptance of advertising or a subscription system are obviously out as far as we are concerned - though subscription is frequently floated by ministers as the answer.

Direct funding from central taxation is an obvious alternative; in reality, that is what we have now, minus the public payment and penalties. The best answer is surely to make the myth a reality, to retain independent funding, via a fairer system of payment.

The level of the fee must be set by an independent regulator. This is Tom Mills's proposal, tabled by the Media Reform Coalition. He

proposes that a 'digital licence fee' should be collected by users' internet service providers.

It might be tricky to get the ISPs' participation and there is a better way: to make the fee a precept added to council tax – as police forces are funded. We could take the opportunity to graduate the amounts in line with council tax bands – and to exempt claimants altogether, as pensioners are.

This is how equivalent taxes are raised in France and Germany, where there is indeed a universal and obligatory digital use fee. Poor people and students are exempt. It can be done.

Systematic bias and the BBC

By Julian Petley

THE BBC did not have a good election, in that it was accused of political bias by both Left and Right. Should it be tempted to claim, as it frequently has done in the past, that this shows that the political balance of its coverage was about right, I would argue that its notions of balance and impartiality need completely rethinking (as indeed they have done for a long time). But I'd also like to suggest that, however tempting it may seem, the Left avoids accusing the BBC of deliberate and conscious bias against it, a position which sometimes threatens to turn into a mirror image of ludicrous right-wing claims that the BBC is a Marxist plot against the British people.

Accusations of bias by Left and Right are routinely dismissed by the BBC as conspiracy theories and met with the response that they take their commitment to impartiality very seriously. However, even Conservative (albeit independent-minded) journalist Peter Osborne claimed in the *Guardian*, 3 December, that, during the election, the BBC behaved 'in a way that favours the Tories' and 'put its thumb on the scale for the government'?

The answer, I would argue, lies in systemic pressures and problems as opposed to deliberate bias, and the BBC needs urgently to address these issues if its journalism is to retain any degree of credibility.

Firstly, the Tory party, as in the

Referendum and its three-year aftermath, fought an election campaign in which the ruthless spread of mis- and dis-information played a key strategic role. Like climate change denial, this poses severe problems for how the BBC interprets its commitment to impartiality and balance. In particular, should truths told by one side simply be 'balanced' by untruths from the other?

The BBC has featured fact-checking more prominently in its news coverage. But while fact-checking is a most welcome (and long overdue) journalistic initiative, the BBC needs to be much bolder and more adversarial in its use if it is effectively to counter 'alternative facts' and other manifestations of 'post truth'.

In particular, interviewers

need to be much more robust in challenging such tactics. This also means that they need to be far better informed about the subject of an interview than they frequently appear to be. Interviews with repeat offenders should, ideally, be pre-recorded and then fact-checked, with dis- or mis-information being pointed out immediately after the broadcast interview.

Of course, one wonders if the BBC would ever dare to stand up to the Tories in such a fashion. And this leads us on to a second systemic problem, namely the BBC's apparent unwillingness to acknowledge, let alone to try to resist, the massive agenda-setting power of the Tory press, which daily defines 'what the

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Stories bounce way into news

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story is'. Thus if a story doesn't appear in the mainstream press, it's highly liable not to be considered newsworthy by the BBC. Conversely, press stories which owe their existence only to the editorial biases of Tory newspapers all too easily bounce their way onto the broadcast news agenda. It's no good the BBC arguing that they treat them impartially: they shouldn't be there at all.

One way of mitigating this form of systemic bias would be to stop all forms of on-air newspaper review, as these broadcast right-wing propaganda to a far larger audience than they would otherwise reach. Nor should press journalists be interviewed on air as accredited 'experts', since they routinely take this as an opportunity to editorialise. The only reason to invite them on to news programmes at all should be in order to interrogate them about the shocking state of 'journalism' in most of the UK national press.

I suspect the BBC would argue that most of the suggestions above are unrealistic. If so, that would cast considerable doubt on the Corporation's ability to hold power (including press power) to account in any meaningful way. And yet, with an authoritarian government dominating Parliament and the opposition parties (excluding the Scottish Nationalists) severely weakened, the need for such democratic scrutiny is as urgent as ever.

Perilous times ahead for BBC under Johnson rule

By **Granville Williams**

THE BBC's centenary is in 2022, the same year as a government ordered 'health check' will take place. This was one of the conditions included in the Charter settlement negotiated with the BBC by the then Culture Secretary, John Whittingdale, in 2016.

But the unexpected announcement by Tony Hall that he is to resign as Director General of the BBC has suddenly stirred a hornet's nest of discontent around the licence fee and the future of the BBC.

Commentators are confidently predicting that whatever happens in the next few years the BBC and the licence fee are secure under the Royal Charter until 2027, but

Dominic Cummings: BBC is 'mortal enemy'



Photo: YouTube screenshot

I'm not sure that confidence is justified.

Look at what previous Tory governments have done. It was the former Conservative chancellor, George Osborne, whose licence fee wheeze was to compel the Corporation to agree to shoulder the expense of the over-75s' free BBC licence out of its own £4bn licence fee income. We now have a government where hostile

ity to the BBC as a public service broadcaster is palpable. They believe the monopoly power of the BBC holds the private sector back.

Tory adviser Dominic Cummings is on record as seeing the BBC as a 'mortal enemy' of the Tories and supports the creation of a 'Fox News equivalent' in the UK.

And the lobbyists from Sky, Netflix, Amazon and the bloc of Tory-supporting newspapers would also love the BBC to have a severely restricted role.

MediaNorth is a critical friend of the BBC but on one thing we are absolutely clear: we need a reformed BBC, an organisation free from political and commercial pressures, now more than ever.

The DG's view of BBC is fantasy



Photo: Wikimedia.org

Tony Hall: Element of fantasy.

TONY HALL's speech announcing he would stand down as Director General of the BBC in six months' time when his successor has been found, had an element of fantasy in it, describing a BBC which doesn't exist. One statement stood out:

"I believe I'll be leaving the BBC in a much stronger place than when I joined. It feels a very different organisation – more innovative; more open; more inclusive; more efficient; more commercially aware."

Really? Internally BBC morale has been sapped by a series of avoidable pay and discrimination cases. Hall made his statement barely a week after Samira Ahmed won her equal pay claim against the BBC in a landmark case that lawyers say could leave the broadcaster facing a bill running into the millions for similar claims by other female staff.

There's also the big matter of the impact on the BBC budget of the free over-75s' licence fee.

What about local and regional newspapers?

THE Conservative Party outlined a commitment to 'support local and regional newspapers as vital pillars of communities and local democracy...' in its election manifesto.

For *MediaNorth* this is a key issue. We are strong supporters of local and regional media and highlight threats to them, such

as newspaper closures and the assault on jobs and conditions in local and regional papers.

It's a year ago since the Cairncross Report, *A Sustainable Future For Journalism*, was published. There were some positive proposals in the report. We need to see those translated into real policies.

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