

Editorial

Moving forward: policy priorities

OUR February *It's the Media, Stupid!* conference was an outstanding success. It vindicated our confidence in producing six issues of *ElectionWatch* during the election and our belief that media reform would become a key post-election priority. We have a full report on the conference in this issue.

We also have ambitious plans, although meetings are on hold during the Coronavirus crisis.

The book *It's The Media, Stupid! The Media, the 2019 Election and the Aftermath* will be published in April. It has contributions by people active around *ElectionWatch* and by speakers at the Leeds conference. We urge supporters of *MediaNorth* to promote the book and help build a broad-based media reform movement.

We will also publish a campaigning pamphlet later in May highlighting the key media reform issues we will be working on over the rest of this year.

We hope the pamphlet will be a joint effort involving other media reform groups as we are clear that the assault by the Tories on independent media requires the maximum cooperation if we are to be effective.
Granville Williams, Editor

BBC under attack by vindictive Tories

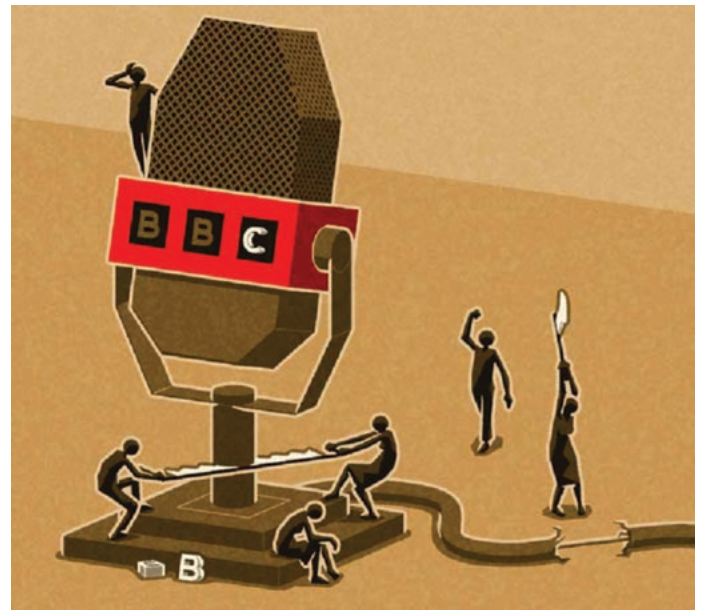
Deliberate act of sabotage, says NUJ

THE BBC was mentioned only twice in the Conservative election manifesto. One was a general statement in the *Britain in the World* section about working 'with our cultural institutions like the BBC and British Council to expand our influence and project our values'. Elsewhere, there was a declaration that the BBC should continue to offer free licences to the over-75s.

But now the BBC is a target. Johnson floated the idea of a licence fee review during the election campaign. It looked at the time like unobtrusive intimidation. But Nicky Morgan's final speech as culture secretary, before leaving the government in the recent reshuffle, showed that the government had the BBC in its sights: unless it stayed 'relevant', she said, it would be impossible to justify its existence in an era of YouTube, Amazon and Netflix.

She announced in early February a hurried consultation, to be completed by 1 April, into the decriminalisation of the BBC licence fee. This provided a focal point for right-wing groups like the Institute of Economic Affairs and the Taxpayers' Alliance to mobilise in support of decriminalisation.

The National Union of Journalists described it as a 'quick and dirty consultation' and 'a deliberate and ideologically motivated act of sabotage on the



Art: Matt Kenyon

part of the Tory government'.

The consultation is just one of the forays against the BBC. The new Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) Secretary Oliver Dowden suggested the BBC needed to be closer to, and understand the perspectives of, the whole of the UK and avoid providing a narrow urban outlook. One of his team is John Whittingdale, a former culture secretary and

Murdoch henchman.

Out too went Damian Collins as chair of the DCMS Select Committee to be replaced by a Tory hardliner Julian Knight. He took a not-very-coded swipe at his predecessor's investigations into 'fake news' and allegations around misuse of personal data in the EU referendum by promising to 'work on issues that matter out in the country, rather than what gets good write-ups in Westminster and the *Media Guardian*'. Knight also declared he wanted the committee to serve as an 'unofficial Royal Commission' on the future of the BBC.

MediaNorth is clear that defending the status quo at the BBC is not an option. Reform is needed but not the kind envisaged by the Tory hardliners who seem intent on its dissolution.



AXE THE TAX: Right wing groups support Tory attack to BBC.

Local news matters – quality more important than clicks

By **Martin Shipton**

NEWS values have changed. A story is not judged on its own merits, but on how many page views it will generate. A piece about Wetherspoon's new menu (much the same as the old menu) is rated highly because of the number of page views obtained from the large numbers of people anywhere who, for reasons best known to themselves, have an insatiable appetite for trivia relating to the pub chain.

Reporters are under pressure to get as many page views as they can. Inevitably this frames the kind of pieces they will write.

But while people are, to one degree or another, consuming such material, they are becoming alienated from their local communities and the decisions that are being made in their name. A vacuum is created, and it's filled by unwholesome material from social media that pushes views that offer simplistic, and often racist, solutions to complex problems. Of course there are other factors involved in the



Photo: Pixabay.com

rising influence of far-right narratives, but I believe the decline of well-resourced local papers rooted in their communities has played a significant part.

I work in Cardiff for Media Wales, a Reach subsidiary. I have the good fortune to have been classified as a print journalist, which means I have escaped the click-chasing imperative most of my colleagues are driven by. I'm pleased to say that we have a talented team and that much high

quality journalism is created by my colleagues. But that's despite the click imperative, not because of it.

The great majority of my work on Welsh politics appears in the *Western Mail*, which the paper's largely ABC1 readership tend to be engaged with. Yet pure political coverage without some personal animus isn't favoured by our website because it doesn't get enough page views. This applies not just to all-Wales

political stories, but to local controversies, which are seen as too parochial.

Paradoxically the papers are lasting longer than many of us believed a few years ago, for the reason that digital advertising revenue hasn't taken off in the way expected. More than 80 per cent of Reach's revenue still comes from print.

But newspapers can't carry on with declining revenues and the worry is that, when they go, the digital offering we shall be left with will be a stripped-down model based on 'breaking news', sport, food reviews and stories tied into the commercial interests of advertisers – with even fewer journalists in employment.

We must keep making the case that quality local news matters. Otherwise the prospects for a well-informed democracy will be as good as dead.

Martin Shipton is chief reporter for the Western Mail. This edited piece was written for the NUJ Local News Matters campaign.

Tory response to Cairncross 'doesn't cut it'



Cairncross: 'We need to explore ways in which we can ensure that consumers in 10 years have access to high-quality journalism.'

By **Barry White**

THE government has finally responded to the recommendations of Dame Frances Cairncross's review into the sustainability of the UK news.

Whilst accepting most of the recommendations, it rejected the proposal to create an Institute for Public Interest News as part of proposals to support the news industry.

It also rejected proposals to extend charitable status to many struggling local news outlets, saying it would not be appropriate because they would be banned from supporting political parties, stopped from being 'for-profit',

and that much journalism does not work 'only for the public benefit'.

The NUJ condemned the government's response as a wasted opportunity to address the crisis facing local journalism. Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, said: "The response fails to address the need to bolster diverse and sustainable journalism in the UK. Calling for the BBC to fork out even more from the licence fee we pay for our public service broadcaster (for local democracy reporters) is not a solution to the problems the industry faces – this 'more of the same' approach is simply not going to cut it."

Polls by YouGov constantly remind us that the local press is the most trusted source for local news and information. When she launched her inquiry Dame Frances Cairncross said that her inquiry was: 'not about preserving the status quo. We need to explore ways in which we can ensure that consumers in 10 years' time have access to high-quality journalism which meets their needs, is delivered in the way they want, and supports democratic engagement.'

Clearly the government does not see serious public intervention as the way to reverse the well documented decline in local news coverage.

Whether it's the BBC, the *Sun* or the *Mail*, we need to deluge IPSO and Ofcom with complaints

By **Duncan Heining**

WE lost any chance of media reform for the next five years on Friday 13 December 2019. However, grim as it felt on that grey December morning, we lost a battle not the war. We have five years to plan, to organise and build a constituency for media reform across Britain.

The bad news is that it is going to involve a lot of hard work. The good news is that we know that there is an active population desirous of change in the United Kingdom.

We can see it in the peace movement, in the hundreds of thousands who campaigned for a people's vote, in the millions concerned for the future of the planet, in opposition parties and trades unions. Winning the moral argument and winning over hearts and minds is one thing. We need activism and we need to start our campaign now.

The first step is to be clear on why we are doing this. This campaign is not about electing a Labour government. The overwhelming concentration of power and influence in so few hands in British media is an af-

Challenging media power – a call to action



USELESS: We can't rely on IPSO or Ofcom, but we must deluge them with complaints.

front and an obstacle to democracy. Our campaign starts from that understanding.

The British media misuses its power to block reform. It denigrates minority groups. It invades the privacy of individuals. It breaks the laws of this country. But it refuses to be held to ac-

count. Our campaign must unite all of those who are affected by and concerned about its abuses – from women, ethnic minorities, the LGBT community and the poor, as well as those already involved in working for social justice.

Our campaign will need to involve a range of activities from direct action to pamphleteering, use of new media to lobbying, public meetings and conferences. However, there are two actions we need to initiate as soon as possible.

The first of these is to complain. We know that IPSO and Ofcom are next to useless but this must not stop us using them. Whether it's the BBC, the *Sun* or the *Mail*, we need to deluge IPSO and Ofcom with complaints. If

nothing else, we need to show that these 'regulators' aren't fit for purpose.

But we must also reach out to communities, to opposition parties, trades unions, to churches and religious groups and to the next generation of voters. To do this will require a UK-wide network of volunteers prepared to go into schools, to speak to local constituency parties, trades unions, environmental groups, women's groups, LGBT groups and community organisations. It's about getting the message directly to voters, it's about creating a dynamic for change and building our campaign.

It won't be easy but if we can go into the next election with Labour, Lib Dems, SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Greens committed to implementing Leveson 2, backed by the TUC and hundreds of thousands of new voters, we will have the press barons running scared.

Duncan Heining is a journalist and author who has been writing about jazz since 1997. If you would wish to volunteer, you can contact Duncan through MediaNorth.

Andrew Norfolk: Clarification



Andrew Norfolk

IN the last issue of *MediaNorth* we reported on *The Times's* coverage of the aftermath of the child abuse cases in Rotherham. A sub-heading on the article said: 'Tim Gopsill on *The Times* reporter charged with racist and dishonest reporting'. We need to make it clear that Andrew Norfolk has not been formally 'charged' but simply accused of such reporting by a Rotherham community organisation.

Coronavirus crisis: 'Staggering demand' for trusted TV News

SOCIAL media and news outlets are flooded with ominous warnings about the coronavirus. People are understandably worried and confused – we need trustworthy information more than ever.

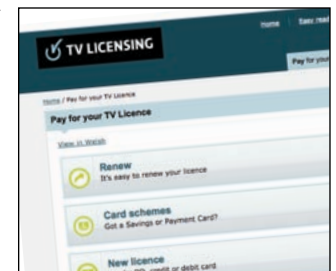
In mid-March as media coverage of the virus proliferated one key trend was that people turned to the news provided by the UK's public service broadcasters.

Channel 4 News editor Ben de Pear said on 17 March: "Our TV viewership has effectively doubled in the past ten days and we have the biggest social media following of any UK news pro-

gramme, illustrating a staggering demand for the news met by a staggering lack of government engagement." Audiences for ITN News have also been boosted.

At the same time the BBC News website has had its biggest week ever for UK visitors, with more than 70m unique browsers.

All of the ten most-read stories were about coronavirus. BBC News at Ten had an average of 4.1m adults, 22 per cent higher than 2019. BBC News at One and BBC Breakfast were also more than ten per cent up on last year's figures.



BBC TV licences and over-75s

THE BBC's plan to charge those over 75 not on benefits for their licence fee has been put on hold due to the coronavirus situation. Originally due to come into effect on 1 June, the BBC statement, issued jointly with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, said, "Our current plan is to now bring it into place on 1 August. We will of course keep the issue under review as the situation continues to evolve."

Leeds conference is big boost for media reform

There was a packed, lively and involved audience for the *It's the Media, Stupid!* conference in Leeds on 8 February. Feedback from the conference was extremely positive. We have reports here from two student journalists at Leeds Beckett University with photographs by Caroline Ryan. Thanks to Adam Christie for coordinating this



Audience member, John Baruch, contributes his ideas on media bias

Morning sessions

Report by Eliza Lita

Session 1:

THE MEDIA AND THE ELECTION

Session 2:

THE PRESS: OWNERSHIP, REGULATION AND ETHICS

SURVEY director **Professor Dominic Wring** opened the conference with a detailed study by researchers at Loughborough University. He revealed that some UK media coverage entirely reflected political agendas before the election, with the right-wing focus on Brexit dominating the newspapers, although not consistently throughout the campaign.

He told the conference that, during the last five weeks leading up to the election, reportage on Brexit decreased, before coming back up on the news agendas just days before 12 December.

Media negativity towards Labour was six times more prominent than criticism of Tories before the general election.

The research also confirmed that negative coverage lacked balance, with six times as many stories critical of Labour than the Conservatives, Professor Wring revealed. The

survey also found that print media negativity towards Tories decreased since the 2017 general election, while criticism of Labour increased significantly.

THE second speaker **Dr Justin Schlosberg** argued that too many political journalists failed to look at their own backgrounds and the historical context of their work and consequently they were exploited by both elected and establishment sources determined to keep Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn well away from 10 Downing Street. He outlined how graduate-entry journalists, many recruited from Oxbridge with PPE degrees, often contemporaries of those in government, had created an imbalance in political reporting.

This was the result of journalists 'referring to political controversy' through 'an ideological filter'. The work of political correspondents, according to Dr Schlosberg, is driven by 'an imbalance in favour of the centre'. Reporting of political actions was mainly driven by a 'liberal consensus framework' which was disrupted once Jeremy Corbyn was elected as leader of the Labour Party in 2015. This, said Dr Schlosberg, created confusion among news media, as a leader of the opposition started to challenge that consensus in economic and foreign policies in a way that had never happened before.

FORMER BBC political and industrial correspondent **Nicholas Jones** opened the second session with an analysis of the blatant hostility of most of the UK's print publications towards Labour in general and Jeremy Corbyn in particular.

Some of the reasons for such unashamed bias were then discussed with, he said, questions of ownership and ethics issues within the British press greatly influencing the lack of centre-left voices in overwhelmingly Conservative coverage of political events.

He told the conference that social media platforms and the 24-hour news cycle have increased the media's reach and that is feeding the 'highly-politicised tabloid news coverage'.

He was also critical of today's producers and presenters, arguing that transparency is necessary regarding newspapers' political affiliations, which audiences need to be reminded of during TV press reviews.

Presenters need to find the courage to be fully transparent about the identity of the people they interview, instead of labelling them objectively as 'experts' or 'authors', when some of them actively contribute to the denigration of the Opposition, he said. Without doing so, radio and television programmes are failing their listeners and viewers, by misleading them into thinking some



Louisa Bull, UNITE National Officer for Media, Print and IT Sector



Author and former BBC correspondent, Nicholas Jones



Professor Dominic Wring, University of Loughborough



Dr Justin Schlosberg, Media Reform Coalition



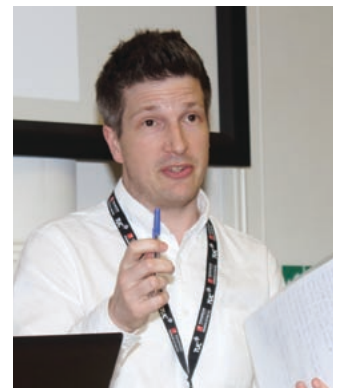
NUJ President, Sian Jones



Granville Williams, editor MediaNorth



BECTU/Prospect research officer, Tony Lennon



Dr Tom Mills, author of *The BBC: The Myth of a Public Service*

press reviewers are unbiased, independent writers, when they're not.

UNITE the Union national officer **Louisa Bull** picked up the argument, saying that the media, once aiming to fulfil the role of watchdog, have now 'moved away from taking a legitimate, critical stance in reporting to one of active opposition', and turned the outcome of the election through ridicule and demonisation of Jeremy Corbyn.

Following the Brexit referendum, Tory-supporting newspapers made active efforts to try 'to turn the country against anything that the European Union does,' she said. Unless the press starts to hold the Government to account, 'we can expect to see Johnson and his cabinet behaving in a dictatorial manner.'

The lack of regulation and control of content shared on social media, as well as the inability to shut down misleading, fake news websites, 'is in nobody's interest,' she added.

The UK media's corporate environment is one of the most concentrated in the world, with more than 80 per cent of national newspapers being under the ownership of only three companies. Arguably, political and corporate interests are overshadowing public interest in the current agenda of the UK press, she concluded.

In a lively discussion, one of those at-

tending said: "The very basis of journalism is in trouble. We live in a period of falsehood and anti-truth and until we deal with that (through) education, we're not going to change very much."

Afternoon Sessions

Report by Jacob Lyon

Session 3: BROADCASTING: REGULATION, AND IMPARTIALITY

Session 4: LOOKING FORWARD: POLICIES FOR MEDIA REFORM

DR TOM MILLS from Aston University and author of *The BBC: The Myth of a Public Service* opened a lively session on the future of the BBC by pointing out the Corporation is no longer fit for purpose in the 21st century. He blamed this on a decrease in the organisation's professionalism and integrity.

"There were several occasions over the election where blatant errors occurred," he said, "but they are symbolic of an institution holding the official opposition to account, rather than the government."

He also pointed out that, since the Gen-

eral Strike of 1926, the BBC had rarely been truly independent, but that it had been forced to change by the arrival of ITV (and, implicitly, ITN) in the 1950s.

By setting the BBC's income through the licence fee, the government retains effective control of the broadcaster. The hurried and secretive 2015 'deal' between then chancellor George Osborne and director general Tony Hall had, Dr Mills said, destroyed any claim the BBC could make to be truly independent.

The BBC, he continued, belongs to us, but it had gone through a process of being captured by the elite.

THE president of the National Union of Journalists **Sian Jones** pointed out, "The BBC has the potential to be so much better, but it must also be noted that the BBC does so much for us as well, local news, reaching hard to get places."

Ms Jones also told the conference that, between 2017 and 2019, the number of complaints to the BBC had trebled but, she asked, "Was the coverage three times worse?"

"When we are annoyed at the BBC, what are we really annoyed at? Is it the 6pm bulletin, *Politics Live*, *Newsnight*, *News at Ten*, *Question Time*?" she asked.

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Big boost for media reform (continued)

● From Page 5

Looking at the implications of transferring the cost of free television for the over-75s from general taxation to the licence fee, she told the conference that the price of this was 500 jobs being cut from BBC news and the World Service, with *Newsnight's* output of four investigative reports a week being reduced to two, 12 presenter posts being cut at Radio Five Live and five television news presenters also losing their jobs.

FURTHER substantial analysis of the BBC's predicament came from BECTU/Prospect research officer **Tony Lennon**. He said he'd first had to defend the BBC 35 years ago and 'the complaints were the same then as they are now'.

"Why not," he challenged the audience, "grab the bits that work and revise the bits that don't?"

It was, he said, an institution that could never be reproduced. Over the years it had been subjected to repeated investigations into its financing, such as those instigated by prime minister Margaret Thatcher's gov-

ernment and carried out by Professor Alan Peacock in 1985. (Despite the Peacock Committee conclusion that the licence fee was the 'least worst' option, it has remained under regular attack ever since.)

The approach over the years, said Tony Lennon, was that if a government is fed up with the BBC, it threatens to strangle its funding.

But, he revealed, the BBC had been saved by three unexpected accelerators.

The change from black-and-white to colour television in the 1960s and 70s had seen a rush to buy new sets – and pay substantially more for colour licences. The growth in the number of households in the UK, with a larger population and more single occupancy, had increased licence fee income as had improved enforcement. That, he pointed out, was now far less than in the 1970s and 80s.

In 1968, he added, the licence fee would have cost the equivalent of £175 today for two television channels, broadcasting for no more than about 12 hours each per day and four national radio networks.

IN the final session **Dr Justin Schlosberg**

started by recognising that as a result of the Tory election the movement for progressive media reform was 'back in the wilderness'. The job over the next five years was to build a media reform movement which transcends partisan politics and recognises that there is 'growing seething discontent' about a UK media that is not fit for democratic purpose. He pointed to a language issue and suggested the word 'reform' had been appropriated by the right. We should think about a 'campaign for media justice' similar to those for climate and social justice.

He also highlighted 'myth making' around media policy issues around 'digital disruption' which is promoted by Rupert Murdoch and used to justify media consolidation. In fact as print circulations have decreased evidence suggests that the influence and reach of the major UK publishers have been increasing in recent years. The Reuters Institute of Journalism had found that the loudest voices during the election campaign were not those of *The Canary* or *Squawkbox* but those of the *Mail*, *Express* and *Telegraph*; all legacy brands that dominated the print market.

● All the conference sessions are available to view on YouTube: www.coldtype.net/MediaNorthConference.html

BOOK REVIEW

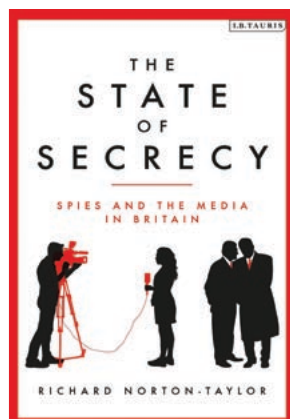
Formidable journalist of integrity

The State of Secrecy: Spies and the Media in Britain, by Richard Norton-Taylor, IB Tauris, £20.00

By **Stephen Dorril**

In the past I was asked about or informed of Richard Norton-Taylor's supposed links to the intelligence services. The general assumption by many on the Left was that he was himself a spook. A not unnatural assumption given that they did try to recruit him (detailed in this book) and he appeared to have very good sources inside MI5, MI6 and the Ministry of Defence, in particular.

The charge, however, was untrue. In the many conversations I had with him over thirty years it was abundantly clear that whilst he admired a few key individu-



als he held many in contempt, largely because of their own contempt for the public's right to know what is being done with the taxes they pay.

In a finely written memoir spanning forty years as a journalist with *The Guardian* Norton-Taylor rightly identifies secrecy as the British disease

which stifles and undermines democracy in this country. It's a classic of telling truth to power from a formidable journalist of real integrity.

Often faced with deliberate official obstruction and, sometimes, employer indifference and the anger of fellow journalists who feared losing their links to the spooks and MoD officials, he doggedly pursued stories when the media circus had moved on. In forensic detail and with controlled but real anger he revisits the stories, scandals and events which have now drifted back into history but which illustrate the enduring power of secrecy to deny citizens access to truth.

It's not the tell-all that we would get from a Seymour Hersh or a Bob Woodhead, simply because no journalist in this country has their kind of access to the

centres of power. They live in a country, which for all its many faults, does believe in freedom of information.

Norton-Taylor has spoken to the people who *really* know that our nuclear deterrent is an utter irrelevance. There is no *Great Britain* and the *special relationship* is just a desperate PR exercise by the intelligence services to save their jobs as they are so dependent on American resources.

Unfortunately, Norton-Taylor is not in a long tradition of fearless journalists battling against the Secret State. There were so few and now there are none at all. He was always pretty much a one-off.

Stephen Dorril is the author of MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations.

What about the media workers?

Media workers were once part of the challenge to Big Media. They need to be again

By **Tim Gopsill**

THE Media Democracy Festival 2020, set for March 14, was an early victim of the COVID-19 outbreak. The Media Reform Coalition (MRC), which promotes the annual event, prudently called it off before the government's national announcements.

It was to have explored 'an alternative media landscape built on cooperative and innovative values that serves communities, informs citizens and holds power to account as it seeks to build a diverse and powerful movement for media democracy'.

In the same week the National Union of Journalists conducted its annual Local News Matters campaign. This is a backs-to-the-wall exercise by the desperate rump of badly-paid hacks struggling to keep their communities informed, in the face of job cuts and the grim restrictions of local journalism, lacking time or resources to do the job they want to.

Participants in both would concur that it is the profit-driven corporate owners of commercial media that have reduced the industry to its sorry state. Beyond that and the calendar it would be hard to see any further link.

Jeremy Corbyn was to be the keynote speaker at the Festival but there was no planned participation by media workers. Individuals may have attended and there were speakers from alternative media, but none from the 'mainstream', nor their unions.

The subtitle of the event – 'a future beyond a failing media' – signifies that many media campaigners have written off the hated mainstream altogether and turned their attentions to more amenable alternatives.

Where does this leave media workers? In the past, progressive journalists, broadcasters, printers and others – and there were plenty of them – worked together with outside campaigners, most of them in other unions, to challenge the power of the big media companies. When unions took action there was solidarity from supporters.

Thatcher's deal

One expression of this solidarity was the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF), set up by the media unions in 1979 just as the expanding corporations were entering into a Faustian pact with the government of Margaret Thatcher. The deal was propaganda for legal favours – a series of employment acts that outlawed action and protected their market dominance.

This 1980s media coalition fought the notorious Wapping dispute, saved the BBC from privatisation or commercialisation and established democratic policies like the right to reply. The CPBF enjoyed the subscription-paying affiliation of virtually the entire trade union movement.

But Thatcherism persisted,



Photo: Avaz / flickr.com

Campaigners dressed as Theresa May and Rupert Murdoch protest outside the Department for Culture Media and Sport at the prospect of May dropping the promised Leveson Inquiry 2

in different guises, and the unions were gutted. With no collective workers' voice in the workplace the news media sank into a mire of corruption – the long-suppressed phone-hacking scandal – and 10 years ago we abruptly found ourselves in a state of shock that offered a chance for change. Even the Labour Party, which had cosied up to powerful publishers even as they subjected it to humiliating treatment, joined the demand for a thorough investigation followed by effective regulation of the news media.

We appeared to be making progress. But the outcome was a disaster and the cause of the divided movement we have become.

We got the Leveson Inquiry; which was brilliant, as far as it went. We never got the reform. It came down to a stand-off between the national press barons and the people; and the press won out, simple as that, thanks to government backing: the Tories refused to implement Leveson's complete programme.

In a forlorn hope that the publishers might

agree, Lord Justice Leveson set up a voluntary system they would comfortably ignore. The mechanism he proposed to incentivise them to fall into line was a devious and convoluted scheme of potential penalties in court that they could easily denounce as unfair and an assault on media freedom.

Looking tough

To make it worse, Leveson at the same time proposed tight requirements on the make-up of the various bodies that made up his proposed self-regulators: there were to be limits on the numbers of professional or independent personnel on all the committees and bodies they comprised.

Great store was set on these restrictions, though in reality they would have had little if any impact. Perhaps Leveson wanted to look tough – well, he did, because all this gave the media bosses the arguments they needed to keep their workers in line.



Profit-driven media have reduced the industry to its present sorry state

● Continued on Page 8

What about the media workers? (continued)

● From Page 7

Almost universally, journalists who may have been open to ideas of media democracy joined the paranoid backlash against Leveson and his works. What to most people was a moderate and considered means of ensuring more fairness in news reporting became a dire threat to press freedom – and a threat to their jobs.

This was a precarious workforce. It had endured two decades of ruthless cutbacks as the publishers transferred the downturn in revenue from sales and advertising into asset-stripping profiteering. Media workers were constantly told that they had no future, the industry was doomed and their livelihoods with it.

This scaremongering was cynically presented as a doughty defence of press freedom! On top of all the crises they faced, here were Leveson and the lefties out to destroy the very basis of their working lives! Minds and ears were closed to reasoned arguments.

Divided camps

It worked. The NUJ had to draw back from its support for Leveson's plans in the face of a rebellion on national papers. Now there are few journalists working in corporate media and involved in radical media politics.

Leveson's legacy is a profession sharply divided, corralled into two camps: the baddies working in the mainstream, self-regulated by IPSO, the goodies for the more responsible smaller media regulated by the Leveson-compliant IMPRESS; sheep and goats. The media reform movement and the MRC are embedded with the goodies.

There are no commercial media workers on the MRC's 18-strong co-ordinating committee – in fact, there is only one journalist (Kerry Ann Mendoza, founding editor of *The Canary*), and a documentary film editor, Riaz Meer. The rest are academics and professional campaigners. Imagine a legal reform movement without lawyers!

At *MediaNorth*'s post-election

conference in Leeds on February 8 one of the audience, angry at the vile reporting of Labour in the election, suggested journalists on the right-wing press should be confronted on their doorsteps. Whatever people think of corporate journalists, the fact is that it is they who will have to bring about whatever improvements can be made. Journalists need support, not vigilantism.

Higher standards

What they need is the confidence to stand up for the standards of truth and fairness that they comprehend and still aspire to, standards they sign up to in the NUJ Code of Conduct. Over the years the union has fought to defend these standards, but it is a losing

battle.

During the Leveson process the NUJ ran quite a campaign for a mechanism to achieve this, through what it called a 'conscience clause': contracts of employment would include a provision stating that workers could not be dismissed for refusing instructions that they believe contradict such standards. Indeed, during the inquiry hearing, the union's barrister, John Hendy QC, put the suggestion to Rupert Murdoch himself when he gave evidence, and Murdoch said it sounded like a good idea.

It was widely supported as a strong basic demand, and media reformers took it up. But Murdoch's accidental approval was not shared by other bosses and it is

no longer on the media reform agenda. The CPBF's Media Manifesto included the conscience clause, but the CPBF closed down in 2018 and last year's manifesto from the MRC simply abandoned the idea; the NUJ has dropped it too (though it remains in the Code of Conduct).

It is a tough ask on the union to take on Big Media on its own. Workers in other vital services have support from civil society. If people really want to challenge and change the corporate media that dominate the national information agenda, rather than promote alternatives for discerning minorities, they should be getting behind the organised journalists' fight for higher standards, not ignoring them.

Coronavirus hits future plans for *MediaNorth*

THE coronavirus meant we had to cancel our 2 April event in Leeds. We are planning to hold it again in November. The Sheffield meeting Wapping: The Worker's Story on 7 May is cancelled too.

We have the following meeting planned for the South Yorkshire Festival in August which we hope will go ahead:

Resisting Press Vilification: The Challenge for Labour's new leader

Nicholas Jones, former BBC Industrial and Political Correspondent

Sunday 9 August 3.00pm Admission Free

Unison Room, Wortley Hall, Wortley Sheffield S35 7DB

PLUS book launch of *It's the Media, Stupid!*

NEW BOOK

We still plan to publish our book *It's the Media, Stupid! The Media, the 2019 Election and the Aftermath* in April. Sincere thanks to Steve Bell, *The Guardian* cartoonist, for the pungent cover cartoon.



Obviously any plans for book launches are now on hold. So we

are going to rely on people pre-ordering/ buying the book directly from CPBF(North). Here's how you can do it:

Send a cheque for £11.50 inc p&p, with your name and address, to CPBF(North) 24 Tower Avenue, Upton near Pontefract West Yorkshire WF9 1EE

Or you can use BACS to transfer £11.50 to CPBF(North) Sort code 08-92-99 a/c No 65796090. Please remember to email cpbfnorth@outlook.com with your name and address.

MediaNorth

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