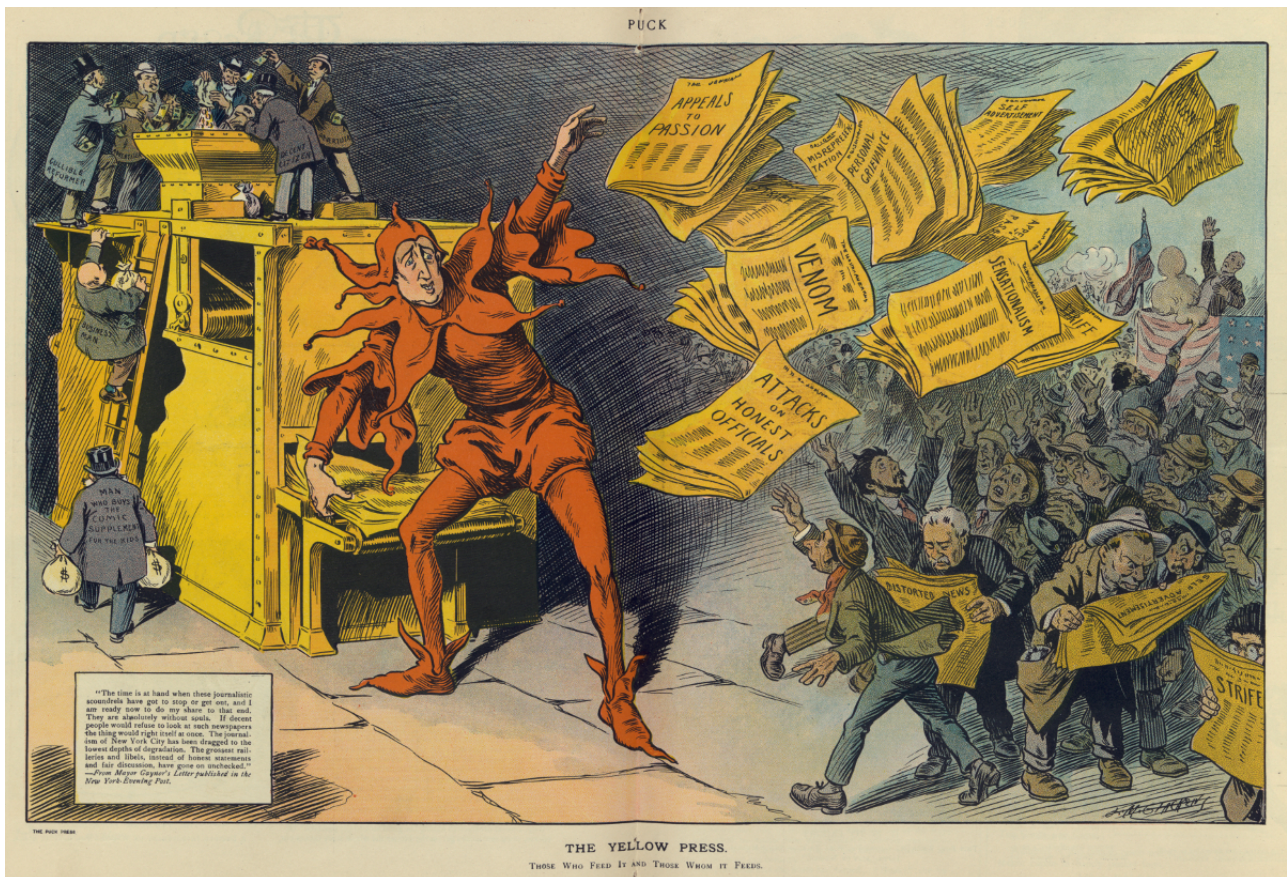


Sinister Interest - Reforming the Media



Rupert Read,
Molly Scott Cato and John Blewitt

August 2017



The **Green House think tank** was founded in 2011. It aims to lead the development of green thinking in the UK. Green House produces reports and briefings on different subjects. We do not intend to have a party line, but rather to stimulate debate and discussion.

“Politics, they say, is the art of the possible. But the possible is not fixed. What we believe is possible depends on our knowledge and beliefs about the world. Ideas can change the world, and Green House is about challenging the ideas that have created the world we live in now, and offering positive alternatives.

The problems we face are systemic, and so the changes we need to make are complex and interconnected. Many of the critical analyses and policy prescriptions that will be part of the new paradigm are already out there. Our aim is to communicate them more clearly, and more widely.”

Green House think tank is a company limited by guarantee, company number 9657878. Lorton Barn, Lorton Lane, Weymouth, Dorset DT3 5QH, United Kingdom.
+44 (0)1305 816514, thinktankgreenhouse@gmail.com

ISBN: 978-0-9933531-2-3

Cover image: *The Yellow Press* by L.M. Glackens depicting William Randolph Hearst as a jester tossing newspapers with sensational headlines. Available from Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2011647630/>

This report is also available via Green House think tank: www.greenhousethinktank.org/.
Published 2017 © Some rights reserved. Open Access. Some rights reserved.

Green House think tank wants to encourage the circulation of our work as widely as possible while retaining the copyright. We therefore have an open access policy which enables anyone to access our content online without charge. Anyone can download, save, perform or distribute this work in any format, including translation, without written permission. This is subject to the following conditions:

- Green House (and our web address www.greenhousethinktank.org) and the author(s) are credited
- The text is not altered and is used in full
- The work is not resold
- A copy of the work or link to its use online is sent to Green House.

Green House acknowledges the work of Creative Commons in our approach to copyright. To find out more go to www.creativecommons.org.

Contents

Introduction	5
John Blewitt and Rupert Read	
Why the media needs criticising and reforming - and why we still need the media	8
Rupert Read	
Operating properly and in the public interest? - The Green case for changes to media ownership and control	15
Molly Scott Cato	
Making sure we get what we deserve	22
John Blewitt	

Contributors

Rupert Read was a columnist with the *Eastern Daily Press* for five years. He has had articles in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *New Statesman*, *the Guardian*, *the Independent* and *Resurgence/Ecologist*. He is a former elected local Councillor, and has stood for European and national Parliaments. He is Chair of Green House.

Molly Scott Cato is a Green Party MEP, an economist and a founder member of Green House. She is currently on its Advisory Board. She has written widely on green issues in academic, political and professional publications. She has appeared frequently on radio and television news and current affairs programmes.

John Blewitt is a core member of Green House. He is an educator and writer. He co-edited, with Ray Cunningham, *The Post-Growth Project* (LLP/Green House, 2014) and edited *Green Politics and the Left* (Green House, 2015). He is currently writing a book on the libertarian socialism of William Morris.

Introduction

John Blewitt and Rupert Read

With the appointment of former Tory Chancellor George Osborne as editor of the *London Evening Standard*, the most important freebie in the country, it will have come as no surprise that the *Standard* was highly critical of Theresa May and of the Conservative Party's General Election campaign. The ex-Chancellor remains an ambitious and committed politician, which helps explain why the *Standard* did not actually endorse the Conservative Party in 2017 (although with Evgeny Lebedev as proprietor it would be more than surprising if the paper suddenly became pro-Labour or pro-Green any time soon). Of course, Murdoch's *Sun* did once support New Labour - but then, as Lady Thatcher remarked in 2002, Tony Blair and New Labour represented her greatest achievement.¹ Thus, when one considers Britain's independent and free press, it is important to ask exactly what it is independent and free of? Putting aside issues of state control, proprietary interference and the constraining influence of chasing ever diminishing streams of advertising revenue, which are migrating to Google or Facebook, the answer clearly is 'free and independent of political diversity and a courageous investigative journalism that challenges the shibboleths of the Centre-Right status quo'. Consequently, Britain's press - and to a large extent Britain's broadcast news media, i.e., ITN, BBC, Sky-News - is experiencing its own legitimisation crisis as social media and various digital-only news outlets seem to offer readers/users a more attractive and perhaps more legitimate alternative. Some even take climate change and post-growth economic policies seriously. There is certainly a degree of 'what-you-see-is-what-you-get' with the digital natives, and although for the mainstream press many of these players are deeply implicated in the hysterical screams of 'fake news' and their own de-legitimation, many well-known newspapers have not been immune from scandal either, as the Leveson Inquiry shows. Unfortunately, even the respectable titles - what Orwell referred to as the 'intelligent' papers - often seem so entranced by their own political importance that the narrowness of their own political window and the structures of their ownership and control are taken as a given. Or at least this was the case until recently.

If we see Britain's press as part of a wider mediascape constituting only one, albeit possibly still dominant, public sphere, then we need to fully understand why and how that classic liberal freedom, freedom of speech, remains so important to the maintenance and flourishing of a healthy democracy and the role of the fourth estate in it. But to complicate matters further, the freedom of speech is currently being compromised in ways other than by a newspaper industry owned by billionaires and edited by ex-Tory ministers. The BBC News desk has its eyes firmly on middle England and is fearful of Conservative Party Central Office and such bullying as the recent open letter to its Director-General from predominantly Conservative MPs anxious about the corporation's pessimistic and skewed reporting of Britain's exit from the EU.² It is being compromised by machines. The run-up to the Brexit referendum in June 2016 saw a flurry of pro-Brexit social media traffic. The 2016 US

¹ See: Conor Burns (2008) Mrs Thatcher's Greatest Achievement. ConservativeHome

² See Steven Swinford (2017) BBC risks undermining Brexit and damaging UK with 'pessimistic and skewed' coverage, 70 MPs warn. *Daily Telegraph*, 20 March.

presidential election saw something very similar, with a massive flow of Tweets from the president-to-be himself. But many of these messages, in both the US and the UK, were generated by ‘bots’ or software applications that regularly simply scripted automated messages. The frequency and similarity of these digital missives can give the impression of mass support for a policy, a person or ideology, false support that in reality does not exist, but nonetheless encourages others (humans) to respond, to critique and in many cases to concur and follow. They do have the power to persuade. Rational argument and discussion is not necessary, and when increasing numbers of people use their smartphones to get their news, bots and tweets become perhaps more worrying than billionaires owning Britain’s major newspaper titles. Who owns and controls the bots? Most probably other billionaires. Such massive changes to our communication environment profoundly affect the nature of political campaigning, leading increasing numbers of observers to fear for the future of the democratic process. The significance of social media in Britain’s surprising 2017 General Election adds yet another, and crucial, dimension, for although the influence of the rabidly Tory tabloid press seems to have been offset partially by the Labour Party’s sophisticated social media campaign and a number of highly effective and powerful interventions by independent, albeit highly-partisan, pro-Corbyn media sites such as The Canary, Another Angry Voice, Evolve Politics and Novara Media. As Tom Crewe has written, many articles on these sites clearly outperformed the online output of both the BBC and the mainstream press raising the prospect of a polyvocal, participatory, networked and subjective online public sphere renewing both the practice of politics and what purports to be objective journalism.³ The election campaign also saw the Conservative Party spending about £1million for its attack ads to appear on Facebook. Many of these ads plumbed new depths in terms of deceit, negativity and sheer malice unseen in previous elections.⁴ Moreover, we actually have no way of knowing about most of these ‘dark’ Facebook ads, which are invisible to and absent from the public sphere. We also do not know much about Labour’s use of social media and its possible use of ‘attack ads’. We simply don’t know, and there is no way of finding out short of hacking the entire net. The overt affront to democracy in the use of such private, personalised, unscrutinised ads plays so important a role in politics that it will be very hard for small parties to be heard. This is considerably worsened, as Carole Cadwalladr has argued, by existing election rules and standards, which govern broadcasters but do not apply to the Internet. Clearly, this needs to change.⁵ The Media Policy Unit at the London School of Economics has called for an independent review of political campaign regulations, to include spending limits, the impact of broadcasting and data protection.⁶ Any serious media-reform package must include the reining-in of the truth-free, privatised sphere of direct personalised social-media ads, ads that probably swung the U.S. election for Trump.

³ Tom Crewe (2017) A New Deal. *London Review of Books*, 17 August.

⁴ Robert Booth, Martin Belam and Maeve McClenaghan (2017) Tory attack ad misrepresents Corbyn views on IRA, says Labour. *The Guardian*, 2 June. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/02/labour-accuses-tories-of-fake-news-over-video-of-corbyn-ira-comments>

⁵ Carole Cadwalladr (2017) Who’s supposed to regulate elections in the 21st century? Apparently no one. *The Guardian*, 11 June. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/10/electoral-reform-needed-to-control-money-lies-online-world>

⁶ See: Goodman, E., Labo S., Moore, M., & Tambini, D. (2017) *The new political campaigning*. Media Policy Brief 19. London: Media Policy Project, London School of Economics and Political Science. Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/71945/>

Green House wishes to understand and seek remedies to these problems because without a healthy and flourishing democracy we all become vulnerable to destructive, reactionary and hideous prejudices that require no justification or evidence base for their expression and dissemination. Europe and America are witnessing a rise of authoritarian populism that needs to be confronted, and although rational debate and argument will not in itself be sufficient to do this, it remains nonetheless absolutely necessary to a free democracy. Democracy needs informed and active participants and a genuine diversity of views, opinions and ideologies to ensure full and inclusive political engagement. Democracy requires people to think and discuss, and not just to 'sound off'. It therefore needs a diverse news media and a public sphere, for without these democracy cannot function. Unless people think, talk and act democratically - that is, practise democracy - then democracy will succumb to robotic ignorance and fake news.

This pamphlet explores how Britain's news media and democracy can be renewed and strengthened. We hope that it will help stimulate debate and democratic change in areas which are vitally important to the proper functioning of our political system. For this to happen, we need to hear more - and particularly green - voices in discussions of media reform and the future of the public sphere.

Why the media needs criticising and reforming - and why we still need the media

Rupert Read

Summary: The mass media we have is bad, and reform is an urgent priority if we are to have a liveable - let alone a decent - future. But alternatives to the media that involve its elimination - 'dismediation' - are likely to be even worse; so we have little alternative but to stick to what we have and be serious - including in legislative priorities -- about making it better.

Our failing media

Media reform is a vital topic. It is typically neglected by politics,⁷ usually perhaps because of sheer fear: the media can easily exercise power without responsibility, and in my political experience they very often do. Politicians are terribly afraid of biting the hand that can punch them.

We can neglect this topic no longer. In terms of the historical build-up to where we now are, the corporate media has been clearly part-responsible for (and has part-constituted) the rise of neoliberalism.⁸ Most recently, and most obviously, media failure made more probable the way that 'Leave' won the EU referendum on the basis of little more than ludicrous 'promises' and 'alternative facts'.⁹ In the recent U.S. Presidential election, things got even worse: new internet-based media interacted with (anti-)social media platforms to produce viciously-ill-informed publics, taking in unprecedented quantities of 'fake news'. Above all, the media, old and new, has utterly failed to rise to the challenge of the ecological crisis, and (disastrously) the climate crisis. Anthropogenic climate change is sometimes said to constitute 'the biggest market failure in history'. I think it would be more accurate to describe it as 'the biggest media failure in history'.

If one compares the way that the media in this country treats (climate-denying) UKIP and the way it treats the Green Party, then, as John Blewitt's contribution to this pamphlet lays bare, there is no comparison. The media is far more interested in UKIP. But not only that: it is far more open to UKIP's agenda. I am not referring here only to the right-wing publications. I am

⁷ The urge to reform has of course arisen on a number of occasions, but action has rarely followed (there have been several of David Mellor's 'last chance saloon [for the media]' moments). There has been a sequence of enquiries since 1945 about press behaviour and ownership, of which Leveson was just the latest. (There has also been the Lords recent inquiry into investigative journalism and changes to the structure/governance of the BBC.)

⁸ The media have been central to the rise to dominance of neoliberalism - especially much of the so-called left-wing media, who largely came to accept this as 'the way things are'. Mike Berry from Cardiff University makes a similar point, though from the other end of the process, in Ian Sinclair's interview with him here: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourbeeb/ian-sinclair-mike-berry/bbc-and-financial-crisis-interview-with-dr-mike-berry> - that New Labour's acceptance of neoliberal economics played a crucial role in allowing the BBC to narrow their own economic coverage. All this has had serious consequences for the width of media and political debate, with especially problematic consequences in relation to / in the 'wake' of the financial and climate crises.

⁹ See especially the Loughborough study showing how Tory 'big beasts' tended to dominate media-coverage: <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/news-events/eu-referendum/>

referring too to what remains by far the most central media institution in this country: the BBC.

Why is this? The main reason is simply put. UKIP's agenda, although largely constituted by the fringe, the dangerous and the bizarre, is still far more compatible with the BBC's (equally dangerous) sense of where the mainstream is than is the Green Party's. For only the Greens challenge the hegemony of economic growthism. Only the Greens challenge the business as usual which is leading us rapidly towards terminal climate change. Only the Greens question the widespread complacent assumption that techno-fixes will be enough to save us.

The media has abjectly failed to rise to this great challenge of our time, the set of issues by which future generations will judge this one. Flawed notions of 'balance';¹⁰ a failure to challenge the original fake news, climate change denial; absurd relativistic/subjectivistic notions of everyone being 'entitled to their own opinion' however groundless or clearly false it is: these ideological constraints, derived (I would argue) from the 'liberal individualism' and consumerism of our time, have poisoned even those sections of the media that are not overtly anti-ecological against rationality, and have led to those same sections of the media - which one might have hoped to have relied upon - being soft on the nonsense of Brexiteers, Trump and UKIP. The consequences are extreme.

Green House is the recipient of very little media largesse. Thus we are relatively unafraid to speak out. Would that other intellectuals - and politicians - were as brave.

So let's briefly review some of the reasons for being profoundly unhappy with our media:¹¹

Climate change deniers such as Ruth Lea are frequently on programmes like Question Time (13 times) - more often than, for example, Jonathon Porritt (5 times), Tony Juniper (never) or George Monbiot (3 times).

The egregious 'sceptical environmentalist' Bjorn Lomborg is quite frequently on Radio 4; whereas when do you - ever - hear genuine international green luminaries such as Helena Norberg-Hodge, Clive Hamilton, Giorgos Kallis, or Serge Latouche on the BBC?

Leading conservative philosophers Roger Scruton and John Gray are constantly on Radio 4's "A point of view". They are very good; but where are the radical/Left/green voices on this programme?

Claire Fox and Melanie Phillips, rabidly, viciously anti-green libertarians/conservatives, are constantly on 'The Moral Maze' (, etc.). It doesn't even scale up to have Matthew Taylor or Giles Fraser on, on 'the other side'. How often are voices

¹⁰ On this and on the dire consequences of which, especially for coverage of climate, see Steve Jones's report on the BBC: http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/science_impartiality.html . See also Julian Petley's work: <https://inform.wordpress.com/tag/julian-petley/>

¹¹ For in-depth research that I think underscores the broad thrust of my semi-anecdotal account here, see the sources cited above.

which tear libertarianism, conservatism or climate denial apart allowed onto our broadcast media?

When is there EVER discussion, on the broadcast media or in broadsheets of:

Post-growth / De-growth

Voluntary simplicity

Permaculture

Radical localisation

The risk of runaway climate change/a Venusian scenario for our 'future'?

And yet these are the real key movements and issues of our time, if our time is to survive.

So, do I come only to dispraise the media; to bury it? After all, it is in serious trouble: print gets smaller every year, and the BBC is under siege from the government and would-be commercial rivals. Perhaps g/Greens should welcome the flying of their Minervan owl, the setting of their sun?

Here is where it gets complicated. My take is that we need to undertake a tricky balancing act: being honest about the dire level of quality of the media (and in particular about its anti-green bias); being clear about how things need to change; and yet being clear that things could get much worse. It would be a horrendous mistake for the radical critique outlined above to segue into an outright attack on the media, and a welcoming of its dissolution. We need more media and better media. It isn't good enough for greens and 'progressives' to simply complacently defend institutions such as the BBC and the *Guardian*; but it would be disastrous for us simply to attack them. The end of the media might be nigh; but this would be even worse than the status quo.

The end of the media? be careful what you wish for...

The media has been a hugely powerful set of institutions, for several generations, and especially in this last generation or so. It has achieved a level of influence and even dominance in contemporary culture that would have surprised most citizens of (say) the Victorian age.

But is it time to write the media's obituary? As I've mentioned, and as is increasingly widely understood, the media as a whole may be in decline - perhaps terminal. Its mediation of the messages that we receive is under threat. A process that we might term disintermediation (or simply dismediation) is seemingly underway.

What is happening is that the ostensible products of the media are being increasingly made available free via the internet, etc., and are simultaneously being broken down into bite-size chunks? (When one looks for a podcast, one need not look for the rest of the programme/of the series/of the paper; nor need one watch the adverts.) I say 'ostensible' products, for of course the real product of most of the media, the thing that media sells, is an audience, rather than a programme or a paper. But what is happening is that the ability of media to sell that product is failing; for consumers are going directly to the bite-size chunk that they desire. Without mediation.

Newspapers and channels are in danger of becoming at most simply platforms for chunks, for bites (bytes). And the platform in turn is in danger of being unfundable, of dissolving away into the internet. The new mega-platforms, such as Facebook, meanwhile exhibit of course both a profound irresponsibility about what they publish and a profoundly dangerous willingness to sell on everything about their audience (that's us, folks) to their advertisers,¹² including of course the wealthy and utterly unscrupulous.¹³

The process of dismediation, which might spell the end of the media, is fairly widely (though by no means universally) seen as inevitable. Those who think it is probable or inevitable typically worry about some of its consequences (such as the end of newspapers, unless they can find an alternative funding stream, such as philanthropy, or an alternative modus operandi, such as the inclusion of citizen-journalists and/or user-generated content), but typically welcome its vehicle: consumer-choice. It is widely seen as a good thing that media-consumers can bypass media to go directly to the stories/information/infotainments, etc., that they desire.

What I wish to do here is to offer a challenge to the assumption that the bypassing by 'consumers' of media, or of those media 'gatekeepers', is a good thing, and to the more general assumption of the goodness of consumer choice, that underlies the net heads' praise for the general process of 'dismediation'. While there is clearly something superbly democratic and levelling about the process of dismediation, something empowering and even thrilling about it, I wish to suggest here a powerful reason, that I think has not as yet been sufficiently aired, for why the end of media would be a bad thing.

The reason that this reason has not as yet, I believe, been sufficiently aired, is this: it is widely seen as a good thing that media consumers can increasingly bypass media to go directly to the objects of their desire because we now tend to assume without question that the maximisation of individual consumer choice cannot be anything other than a good thing. Insofar as media get in the way of such maximisation, we assume that media are a barrier, a part of the old dispensation merely waiting to be bypassed, made irrelevant.

But actually there is good reason to think that such maximisation of consumer choice is not a good thing. Excessive choice leads to extra unnecessary time trying to make such choices; it involves usually a net loss of information; it leaves us less able to negotiate our world, and indeed deeply unsure what to trust. And we have seen the upshot of this, in 2016.

There is a good reason then why many people regret and warn against the threats to media. There is a good reason, more than just nostalgia or such-like, why people warn against the loss of newspapers for instance. The loss of the *Guardian* or *The New York Times* or the BBC, etc., would be a genuine - a huge - loss. These mediators have a style; they hang together in a particular way; they help us know our way around. They embody a wisdom.

¹² It is of course in itself highly problematic, including for media agendas, that most media depend on advertising: see <https://ianjsinclair.wordpress.com/category/advertising/> . It is especially hard to square advertising-dependence with an ability to take a radical green agenda - of downsizing, an end to growthism, etc. - seriously.

¹³ Please see this utterly vital article by Carole Cadwalladr (2017) Robert Mercer: the big data billionaire waging war on mainstream media. *Observer*, 26 February. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/26/robert-mercer-breitbart-war-on-media-steve-bannon-donald-trump-nigel-farage>

Even the less wise of the mass-media outlets at least take a long-developed and accounted-for position, which is palpably not the case with many web-based outlets. True, they are insufficiently accountable - that is why what Molly Scott Cato is arguing in her contribution to this pamphlet is important. But compared, again, to many web outlets, they are still relatively accountable, shameable; they have reputations that they cannot afford to let blow in the wind. They help us view, navigate, know the world. In simple terms: they make us feel at home, for a reason. And, for all their flaws, they scrutinise. It's not for nothing that Trump has chosen to confront this media. It's not for nothing that Putin has suborned his.

The welcoming of disintermediation as something 'utopian' and 'obviously-to-be-welcomed' is catastrophic. It ignores a deeper truth: that the collective 'social mind' of communities is very frequently superior to the individual mind that consumerism as an ideology elevates for highest praise. The 'social mind' of something like the *Guardian* or the BBC may be flawed, even systemically flawed in the kinds of ways argued by the likes of Media Lens or Noam Chomsky or Serge Halimi; but it also contains much wisdom. And, obviously, alternative media can sometimes contain still more: look at something like *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

But could it not be said that my argument is one-sided; would it not be an unalloyed benefit to lose FoxNews, or Zero Hora, or the *Daily Mail*? No. It might be a good thing on balance, but even if that were true (which I actually doubt) it certainly would not be an unalloyed benefit; because even these help us know the world. They provide a lens, a gathering system. We come to know our way around them, and to understand something of their biases and so forth. Fox and the Mail are at least targets that one can critically focus on. Without media, there will only be the individual pitted against an incalculably vast array of sources of information and entertainment. An atom, in a free-for-all netscape. A place where fake news can simply run amok.¹⁴

For let's note that one danger of dismediation is that the reduction or disappearance of mediation might suggest to people that more 'directly' sourced news stories are less framed. This, I suspect, might be a powerful intuition of people, an intuition which is unfortunately both untrue and dangerous. For the absence of substantive mediation often means simply the reprinting of press releases, the issuing as news of blatant spin. Anyone who, like me, has been involved in seeking to get stories into the media in the last 20 years will be aware of how there are more press releases simply getting printed as news, less fact-checking, etc. . And that's before we even get to looking at the influence of full-on fake news sites, of 'news' emerging from hard-Right think tanks that have exited the 'reality-based community', etc., etc. Left and green critics of the media (such as Media Lens), with whom I am in strong agreement on some key issues, and utopian 'post-media' netheads might both dream of an end of media as we know it. But the reality is that there will never be an end to media.

Disintermediation will never be completed; because, were our existing media to fade into mere platforms, people would spontaneously create new media forms and vehicles, through their 'tribes', through creating new ways of linking together the bites that they were left with.

¹⁴ Meanwhile, in such a world the actual debates would then mostly no longer be conducted in public but in the private homes and offices of the powerful. Of course, one could already say this to some extent about today's public discourse...

The ultimate reason why it would be a bad thing for the media to end, and why it will never happen, is this: I don't know what I need. I don't even know what I want. And nor do you; nor do any of us. It is a gigantic illusion to suppose the individual to be always or even *prima facie* the best arbiter of their own wants and needs. The deeply-wonderful thing about an institution such as the *Guardian* or the BBC or openDemocracy or even Zero Hora, is that each in its own particular way brings me things that I didn't know I wanted or needed (to know), and even things that I resist or don't want (At least, at first).

They also - and this is an extremely obvious point but yet sometimes neglected - bring us things on a scale that is otherwise near-impossible to sustain. The kinds of series produced by Granada or the BBC or HBO: these would be a terrible loss. As would large-scale documentaries. It is clear that PUBLIC-service broadcasting still has a real role to play, when one reflects on this kind of thing. The media provides public goods that would not be paid for in the dystopia that would arise from an individualized, bite-size, dismediated world. Public goods such as public information. And some news, whether you like it or not. (It is a real worry that people can now live almost immune to news: by watching just Sky Sports, for example. Compared to Sky Sports, *the Sun* or even the *Daily Star* is in this respect a kind of goldmine).

As a colleague of mine put it recently in conversation: 'I was thinking about why I still like printed papers... and decided it's partly because they bring together all that they've decided is worth looking at in one place, and force me to be aware (at least briefly) of a lot of stuff I wouldn't have gone searching for on the web. They make me step outside my information comfort zone (a little)'. Exactly.

Mediation is not then *prima facie* a bad thing, insofar as it helps us to understand and navigate our way about, to a greater extent than we could ever do as isolated individuals. The media must not and will not end, for that reason. Because in the end we are wise enough to know that we are not, as individuals, wise enough to know all that we need to know about.

Conclusion

So, what is to be done? Leveson needs implementing. And we need Leveson 2. We need to speak about the unsayable: the dire need for reform of media ownership. I endorse the recommendations of my Green House colleagues Molly Scott Cato and John Blewitt, detailed in their contributions to this pamphlet. I want to particularly emphasise recommendation 2 of John's: we need a state-supported foundation for investigative journalism. We also need financial assistance for non-profit media, a sector that ought to grow drastically. It is clear that there are plenty of 'citizen-journalists' willing to work, to inform, in everything from hyper-local news to high-risk reporting of the Arab Spring.¹⁵ All they would need, in order to flourish, are things like some arms-length state support, and/or serious support from foundations, etc., and/or more access to mainstream media.

Is my contribution to this pamphlet still too optimistic? Am I appealing to a set of common purposes which might no longer be there? I have briefly made a case for the kind of

¹⁵ See e.g. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/anton-klepke-and-kajsa-olsson/on-frontline-citizen-journalism-in-syria>

purposes that must be preferred, if the truth and planetary survival is to be preferred, and thus one hopes that such claims would at minimum get fairly examined in the main platforms of broadcast media. A sad but pertinent question is: Are there such common purposes to be had now with regard to news media? (Or has atomistic individualism, plus commercial pressures) eroded the foundations of such commonality?)

If there aren't, then there is no alternative but a counsel of despair. We must assume that there is enough rationality, enough enlightened self-interest, enough potential for intelligent pressure to be brought to bear, in the system, for the kinds of reforms that the current pamphlet calls for to be potentially viable. Otherwise, it's game over.

My argument assumes that we can retain some degree of continuity of (hopefully, reformed) public/mass media providers. This is a realist-pragmatic agenda combined with calls for radical change leavened into that realism. I add to that a call for greater change around the existing media 'ecology,' such as through a rise of non-profit outlets to supplement and to some extent perhaps to take the place of the current giants so that the good aspects of the status quo can be kept through radical change.

We cannot afford to ignore media reform, for the reasons outlined earlier. It should be a central element of any 'progressive alliance' manifestos or government in this country. Our failing media is making political progress **impossible, at a time when, without such progress, the very continued existence of human civilisation is at risk, most obviously from climate chaos.**

I would only reiterate, in closing, that we need to be careful, as we pursue this agenda. The media must change. But the way that we argue for that change must not undermine the media altogether. For a further slide toward 'dismediation' would be a further slide toward disaster.

I'll end with an analogy to *Game of Thrones*, which I think a much deeper work than it is usually given credit for. A deep, repeated teaching of *Game of Thrones* is that it is deeply unwise to assume that one can afford to risk a great deal when things 'can't get any worse'. For things virtually always can get worse. A world with a comparatively powerless media, a world in which the (anti-)social platforms were dominant, and through them advertisers and dark money and horrendous 'Alt-Right' politics, would be a world much worse than our present world.

Milan Rai and Noam Chomsky have made a point similar to mine:

You have to protect the cage when it's under attack from even worse predators from outside, like private power. And you have to expand the floor of the cage, recognising that it's a cage. These are all preliminaries to dismantling it.¹⁶

We must fight to radically reform the media. And we must fight, too, to save it.¹⁷

¹⁶ http://peacenews.info/sites/default/files/OnCommonGround_2015.pdf

¹⁷ Thanks to Janosch Prinz, John Street and Ian Sinclair for extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft.

Operating properly and in the public interest?: the Green case for changes to media ownership and control¹⁸

Molly Scott Cato MEP

(Molly is writing as a member of the Green Party)

Introduction

In the first paragraph of his report, *Culture, Practices, and Ethics of the Press* published as long ago as 2012, Sir Brian Leveson restated the importance of a free press as a 'fundamental principle of a liberal democracy' and few if any would argue with that statement. However, he also noted that the press should be 'operating properly and in the public interest' in order to justify its role as 'one of the true safeguards of our democracy'. It seems clear that sections of the British press are no longer either operating properly nor in the public interest. Concerns go far beyond the issues of media, police, and political collusion unearthed by the Leveson Inquiry.

The media monopolies represent a wider threat to the functioning of our democracy and a radical challenge to the nature of media ownership in the UK is long overdue. Only this, I believe, can protect our democracy against the propaganda that emanates from some sections of our print media and is one of the central causes of the loss of confidence in democracy.

The way that the Conservative government is backing off from implementing the recommendations of the Leveson Inquiry can be taken as an object lesson in how media power works. There is no need for a consultation – especially such a biased one – to rerun the Leveson Inquiry. That process was undertaken in full public view and its recommendations should be implemented. We have no idea what pressure is being brought to bear behind the scenes, but the suspicion is that those who exercise political power on our behalf are giving way to the shady and more insidious power of the media barons. The Leveson process was divided into two parts because of ongoing legal action. Most important questions around collusion of police and press could not be addressed while courts cases were in process. It is essential these fundamental threats to the functioning of our democracy are examined fully now that the legal cases are concluded. The fading of memories over the exercise of vested interests in a way incompatible with a free society should not be allowed to prevent the vital changes we need to protect and enhance our democracy.

When is a Free Press Free?

Any attempt to open up a debate about the negative impact of the media is immediately shut down by those who defend the status quo by suggesting that freedom of the press is under attack. In the context of the current consultation about the Leveson Inquiry a recent blog by

¹⁸ This essay was first published by Green Party of England and Wales. Available at: <https://www.greenparty.org.uk/assets/files/molly-scott-cato-leveson-report.pdf>

Fraser Nelson at *the Spectator* (owned by the *Telegraph Group* – see Table below) is a case in point. The blog is a knee-jerk attack on the Section 40 process proposed by Leveson following his lengthy inquiry and his consideration of the statements of 184 witnesses. The inquiry itself is dismissed as ‘harassment of the press’. Five years have passed and the denizens of the Barclay Brothers assume it is time to forgive and forget. Hence they pay their house journalists to attack any continuation of the Leveson process.

Rather than using ‘freedom of the press’ as a weapon to close down debate, we need to take a step back and consider what we mean by freedom. Freedom is not licence. Freedom is about balancing the power and control of two parties. In the case of this discussion, the freedom we are concerned about is the freedom of ourselves, as citizens, to have reliable and true knowledge about the world and the freedom of those who control the media by which our knowledge is formed to convey information to us in a way of their choosing. The philosopher Isaiah Berlin sought to explore the operational meaning of freedom in his famous essay ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’¹⁹. He distinguished between negative and positive freedom.

When discussing negative freedom he wrote:

I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. . . . You lack political liberty or freedom only if you are prevented from attaining a goal by human beings. (Berlin, 1969: 122)

And on positive freedom:

The freedom which consists in being one’s own master, and the freedom which consists in not being prevented from choosing as I do by other men, may, on the face of it, seem concepts at no great logical distance from each other – no more than negative and positive ways of saying the same thing. Yet the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ notions of freedom historically developed in divergent directions, not always by logically reputable steps, until, in the end, they came into direct conflict with each other. (Berlin, 1969: 131-2)

The essential distinction he was seeking to draw was between the positive ability to exercise one’s free will and the absence of restraint on one’s choice to act. Berlin was sceptical about the idea of positive freedom which he identified as being used by the Left as an agenda to force choices onto people and hence, ultimately, to actually undermine freedom. His fear was of a totalitarianism of the Left, which flourished when he was writing. However, today he might be just as concerned about the potential for totalitarianism from the Right.

It is clear that if we have a false understanding of how the world really operates then we cannot be truly free. It is for this reason that demagogues like Putin and Trump rely so heavily on the manipulation of ‘news’. Isaiah Berlin was alert to this risk and makes it clear that freedom is impossible without a full grasp on the reality within which it is operating:

¹⁹ Published in Isaiah Berlin (1969) *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

To be ruled by myths, whether they spring from the vivid imaginations of unscrupulous charlatans who deceive us in order to exploit us, or from psychological or sociological causes, is a form of heteronomy, of being dominated by outside factors in a direction not necessarily willed by the agent. (Berlin, 1969: 142)

We contend that the creation of an artificial reality is increasingly impeding our ability to act as free citizens. Those who value freedom as an essential value of democracy need to consider how the construction of a false reality by those who own the media outlets through which people form their view of the social and political world they are operating within is limiting freedom. Freedom of the press is meaningless unless it enhances, rather than undermines, the freedom of the citizen.

In spite of the fact that lies are routinely printed in some of our more scurrilous but best-selling newspapers I am not arguing for control of the content of print or broadcast media. Rather, I would suggest that we move on to a third stage of Leveson: one which considers how the ownership of media in the UK is influencing the effectiveness of our democratic political structures and processes. The case for an inquiry into media activity with renewed vigour is based on concerns not about what is said, written or printed but who controls the organs through which this information reaches the public. And perhaps particularly why they choose to invest large public fortunes in owning these vehicles. This is a question of power rather than knowledge and a question of ownership rather than freedom.

The Growing Concentration of Media Ownership – and Power

Whenever media regulation is discussed we hear a great deal from powerful proprietors as well as journalists about the threat to the freedom of the press. Bizarrely, the loss of freedom as ownership of media becomes more and more concentrated is much less frequently discussed. There is a self-referential quality to these discussions and for those, like myself, who are so heavily dependent on journalists for news of my work to reach those I represent, making any criticism of the functioning of the media feels very risky. I know that I risk biting the hand that feeds. Given the year we have all just lived through, this risk seems to be worth taking in 2017.

Britain has one of the most concentrated media environments in the world, with three companies in control of nearly 70 per cent of national newspaper circulation and five companies in command of 81% of local newspaper titles. NewsCorp owns a third of weekly (Daily plus Sunday) national newspapers. (These data come from the Media Reform Coalition on which this section relies heavily.) Around a quarter of local communities have no daily local newspaper at all while in 35 per cent of communities, a single title has a 100 per cent monopoly. A single news provider (Sky) provides news bulletins for the vast majority of commercial radio. The biggest broadcaster in terms of revenue, by some distance, is Sky. The BBC is the largest of the PSB broadcasters with £5.1bn, of which around £3.7bn is provided by the licence fee.

Thus, for most people there is very little choice about how they receive their information about the world they live in. This not only limits perspectives, it also enhances the power of those who are owners or editors of these outlets, as those who are seeking to draw attention

to their political views or issues of importance are forced to court a shrinking number of powerful gatekeepers.

Table 1 below provides data on the market share of our leading newspapers. Murdoch's News Corp has a market share of nearly a third, with the Rothermere DMG media controlling another quarter. The Barclay Brothers' Telegraph group trailing in third place with 11%. I note these media moguls by name since it is worth considering the political impact of having two-thirds of the newspapers read in the UK owned by people who have no stake in our democracy. Murdoch is based in the US, Rothermere declares his residence as Jersey for tax purposes, while the Barclay brothers float between Monaco and Sark for the same reason. We believe it is long overdue to have a full public inquiry into exactly why these powerful men choose to dominate our print media and whether this has a positive or negative impact on the health of our democracy. In our view, this structure of ownership cannot be considered compatible with a media system 'operating properly and in the public interest'. The Media Reform Coalition found a similar situation when they analysed ownership of broadcast media:

while the majority of these broadcasters are owned either by UK-based companies, or are publicly owned in the case of the BBC and Channel Four, there is growing encroachment of large US-based corporations into UK Television ownership. Rupert Murdoch's 21st Century Fox (2014 revenue: \$31.8bn) owns 39.1% of Sky plc (previously BskyB)

The report was written before Murdoch – judging that the phone hacking scandal had been forgotten - renewed his bid for the remaining share of Sky.

The Media Reform Coalition has not reported on the ownership of social media. Here we think the issues are slightly different. As conventional media channels have become closed and exclusive, many have sought freedom through a range of other channels, either alternative media channels like Al-Jazeera and Russia Today or their own social media sources. This has led to the problem of the media 'echo chamber,' where we only hear views consistent with our own, reinforcing our own view of a particular reality. Democracy is built on the mediation of opposing views to achieve a shared view of the best future for society as a whole. The Habermasian concept of the public sphere is useful here: a shared societal space in which all citizens' are able to come together freely to identify problems, discuss views and ideas and influence political action deliberatively. Mass media is an imperfect approximation of such a public space so vital to democracy, but it is the closest approximation we have. The abandonment of shared media channels for personalised worldviews is thus itself a threat to democratic values.

Media and the health of our democracy

There are several ways in which the current operation of our media undermines the proper functioning of democracy in the UK. The most obvious way, and that to which the first Leveson Inquiry came closest, is in the relentless and cruel attacks on figures who seek to serve their country by entering the realm of public service. It is no coincidence that media attacks are more savage against those who challenge the status quo and the vested interests of the rich and powerful than those who defend or reinforce these interests.

In his evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown describes the 'very difficult and painful intrusion' into his family's personal life on two occasions: the death of his daughter and the revelation that his son suffers from Cystic Fibrosis. His own personal records on private matters concerning property and taxation were illegally hacked, as were his family's medical records. This is what you must self-consciously submit your family to if you are to seek to serve in high political office, and for many the price is just too high. In May 2015 the prominent Labour MP, Chuka Umunna, withdrew from the leadership race stating that he was not prepared to tolerate the 'pressure that comes with being a leadership candidate'. We are losing talented politicians because of the actions of the media, whether intended or accidental.

It might seem controversial to include Jo Cox MP in this list, but I think we should consider the extent to which the nationalistic frenzy of the referendum campaign was responsible for her death. The politically motivated murder was committed following months of tabloid headlines demonising migrants and immediately after the launch of UKIP's neo-Nazi 'Breaking Point' poster. The focus of many tabloid stories was that those who argued for the UK to remain in the European Union were traitors, exactly the words used by Thomas Mair during his committal hearing. Brendan Cox has been outspoken in his view that the murder was a political assassination that was covered up to protect the political establishment. The refusal by the *Mail* to deal with the story of Mair's conviction until p. 30 reinforces the view that the paper was implicated in manufacturing the atmosphere of hate and intolerance within which an attack on politicians was normalised, with eventual fatal consequences.

What is not visible in this debate is the many thousands of good and true citizens who have eschewed the public realm because of fears about their own reputation and safety, or the reputation and safety of those close to them. As an elected politician I am aware of many people who, when we suggest they might become the politicians of the future, tell us politely but firmly that this is not the way for them. And while we have to acknowledge that many politicians have deserved criticism and have fallen below the standards we should expect in public life, the relentless denigration of democratically elected representatives inevitably limits the pool of those prepared to weather this onslaught and hence diminishes the quality of our politicians.

It is not merely a question of personal safety; as a result of relentless smear campaigns by the media politicians are held in very low esteem. What was once, as Polly Toynbee notes, regarded as 'no ordinary calling' has now become debased in the public mind to a grubby, self-serving occupation. Interestingly, most people do not view their own MP – the only politician they are likely to have personal contact with – in this way. It is a false narrative in whose creation most people wittingly or unwittingly collude but which is undermining the power of democratic politicians.

There is another, more insidious and more damaging, way in which democracy is being undermined by the creation of false media narratives. Democracy relies on voters having a clear understanding of what they are being offered by different parties and choosing the party that best matches their preferences. If the policy platforms of the different parties are not clearly reported then voters repeatedly choose a party which operates against their interest. Over time they feel disappointed and disillusioned. They come to believe that voting never

chances anything and this undermines their confidence in democracy as a political system that works for them.

A stand-out example of this is the longstanding tabloid campaign against inheritance tax. It is a fundamental British value that you should have the right to pass on the fruits of your hard work to your children, and up to a point the Green Party agrees with this. But the point at which inheritance moves from being naturally just to becoming a support for growing inequality is the subject of political debate. J. S. Mill famously believed that inheritance encouraged a rentier economy and that all wealth should revert to the state on death. The Green Party would generally choose to have a lower threshold than the current one for the state to intervene and to make inheritance tax relate to the wealth of the inheritor rather than the inheritee. But the important point is that the vast majority of estates do not, and never have, been subject to inheritance tax (HMRC figures show that 'approximately 3.4% of all deaths in 2013-14 led to an IHT charge').

When the tabloids whip up frenzy against inheritance tax they are working in the interests of their wealthy patrons, not their loyal readers. When working people incline towards the Conservatives rather than Labour on the basis of the unfairness of inheritance tax they are being swayed to vote against their own interests by the wealthy proprietors and shareholders who should be required to share their wealth on their death but refuse to do so.

Many people voted Conservative at the last election because they believed in the message of economic competence that the Conservatives made central to their election campaign, and which was broadcast for them by the many newspapers who tend towards the Conservative Party. This opinion is propagated by tabloids and causes people to vote against their own interests. In fact the Tories increased the national debt by 50%, and performed paying off the debt while actually following first Darling's and then Balls's economic plans. This inability to match your interests with the political party you choose to vote for undermines democracy.

Five years ago, when Lord Leveson began his inquiry, few of us understood that we needed to be concerned not only about the publishing of lies to defame the character of public figures but the actual construction of false realities to distort the public realm. Yet it is now becoming clear that deliberate strategies to undermine a shared view of reality by creating false stories were influential in both the Brexit debate and the election of Donald Trump to the most powerful position in the world. One EU government – that of the Czech Republic – is sufficiently concerned about the way this is destabilising their democracy as to create a specialist unit to fight fake news.

In 2017 I believe that we need more of the Leveson Inquiry, not less. We need an Inquiry that explores how people form their view of reality based on which information sources they use. How narrow these sources are. How people deal with multiple news sources. To what extent the information they receive enables them to make informed democratic choices.

Conclusion

The Media Reform Coalition believes that media plurality is not a luxury in the digital age but an essential part of a media system in which vested interests are not allowed to dominate. The Green Party agrees. We want to see independent media that are able to hold power to

account and to serve their audiences and the public in general as opposed to shareholders, proprietors or politicians.

The Green Party is to tighten the rules on cross-media ownership and ensure that no individual or company can exercise excessive power in any media market. However, it seems that this is no longer enough to protect our democracy against deliberate distortions and we believe that we need proposals for a fully functioning and truly free media environment which can gain the confidence and support of all citizens of the UK.

For this reason I am proposing the establishment of a new judge-led inquiry to complete the work of Leveson. This builds on and extends the call in the original Leveson Report for the development of a new system for both measuring and reforming media concentration and ownership (pp. 1461-76). The questions for the Inquiry should include:

- Is the increasing concentration of media ownership compatible with a healthy democracy?
- Are voters able to make informed choices based on the information available to them through media outlets?
- How does the relationship between media barons and politicians undermine the free working of our democracy?
- Should those owning a significant UK media outlet be required to be resident in the UK?
- How can we protect our democracy against the manipulation of people's view of reality including by the creation of fake news?
- How can we ensure a shared understanding of reality in an era of social media?

Making sure we get what we deserve

John Blewitt

In 1946 the National Union of Journalists, concerned about the negative influence of owners and advertisers, urged the Attlee Government to establish a Royal Commission on the Press. This prompted one NUJ member to meditate on the state of Britain's newspaper industry. Writing in his column, 'As I Please,' in the left wing paper *Tribune* George Orwell noted that 'a nation gets the newspapers it deserves'.²⁰ Although he admitted this could not be the whole truth, and that public taste could not be as bad as it sometimes appeared to be, he went on to produce two numbered lists. The first list of ten newspapers had what Orwell considered to be the most intelligent papers at the top and the least intelligent at the bottom. The second list included the same papers but arranged in terms of their popularity. The most popular were placed at the top and the least popular at the bottom. At the head of the first list, that is the most 'intelligent' paper, was the *Manchester Guardian*, with *The Times* in second place. The illustrated weekly *Graphic* took the booby prize, coming in at number ten, with the *Express* being runner up at number nine. Orwell then noted that the second column was more or less 'the first turned upside down'. Given this, he wondered whether curtailing the influence of owners or advertisers would make much difference. He wrote,

What matters is that in England we do possess juridical liberty of the press, which makes it possible to utter one's true opinions fearlessly in papers of comparatively small circulation. It is vitally important to hang on to that. But no Royal Commission can make the big-circulation press much better than it is, however much it manipulates the methods of control. We shall have a serious and truthful popular press when public opinion actively demands it.

Today the most popular national newspaper, at least in terms of sales at the newsagents, is *The Sun*, and the most unpopular is *The Guardian*. Now, although both papers have an extensive Internet presence, and it would be rather presumptuous of me to state that *The Guardian* is 'more intelligent' than *The Sun*, I think it would be pretty safe to assume that in the seventy years since Orwell wrote his column not that much has changed. But of course in some ways it has changed, and radically, and today there is clearly a desire among certain sections of the population for a more serious and truthful press rendering the future of the fourth estate a site of fierce ideological and political conflict fought by at least three political tribes. These roughly equate to the Right, the Centre and the Left, with a number of non-affiliated guerrilla groups and individuals sniping away under the almost impenetrable digital cover.

Just a Question of Balance and Impartiality?

With the Right, or in US parlance the 'neocons', we have many screaming FAKE NEWS whenever the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Guardian* or the BBC publishes an article, broadcasts a report or asks a question questioning the rhetoric embracing 'the take back our country' mantra and such like. This scream is amplified by a number of established

²⁰ George Orwell (1946) As I Please. *Tribune*, November 22. Available at: <http://www.telelib.com/authors/O/OrwellGeorge/essay/tribune/AsIPlease19461122.html>

right-wing newspapers and journals which, when combined with a number of well-funded Internet sites such as *Breitbart*, turn this scream into a deafening howl, virtually suffocating any possibility of reasoned debate. The 'noise' created has not only wrong-footed established liberal media outlets and even some of the newer digital news media sites - Huffington Post, openDemocracy - but has led in turn to a critical questioning by others of their own liberal democratic credentials. For instance, the election and re-election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party in 2015 and again in 2016 unleashed a torrent of negative comment, criticism and 'fake news' that revealed a profound misunderstanding of the Corbyn phenomenon and the social movement behind it, as was clearly set out by Richard Seymour,²¹ and an apoplectic disbelief that a man and a set of ideological values so far outside the boundaries of political acceptability could actually find a way of being taken seriously - even if by only half a million Labour activists and supporters. Ironically, Corbyn's modest social democratic views - progressive taxation, public housing, welfare state, free higher education, bank regulation and opposition to Trident - were pretty mainstream consensus values not too long ago. Even former SDP Leader and Independent peer Lord David Owen positively acknowledged Corbyn's achievement in reaching out to various parts of the Labour Party, stating that as a result of the 2017 manifesto the party's credibility was set to improve markedly in the coming years.²² However, what is worrying is how the mainstream media helped amplify the relentlessly shrill attacks on Corbyn in particular and on moderate social democratic values in general. A report by the Media Reform Coalition and Birkbeck University²³ found

a marked and persistent imbalance in favour of sources critical of Jeremy Corbyn, the issues that they sought to highlight, and the arguments they advanced. This was the case across both the online and television sample. Online news stories overall were almost twice as likely to be written by, or focus on sources critical of Corbyn compared to those that were supportive. The BBC evening news bulletins gave nearly twice as much unchallenged airtime to sources critical of Corbyn compared to those that supported him (...). The most balanced outlets overall were those that do not or no longer operate on legacy platforms: the *Independent*, *International Business Times* (IB Times) and Huffington Post.

More pointedly, the authors of an LSE report on this topic concluded worryingly,

the degree of viciousness and antagonism with which the majority of the British newspapers have treated Corbyn is deemed to be highly problematic from a democratic perspective. If, as the British philosopher Onora O'Neill (2002) also argued, the high degree of media power needs to be accompanied by a high degree of media and democratic responsibility, is it then acceptable that the majority of the British newspapers uses its mediated power to attack and delegitimise the leader of

²¹ Richard Seymour (2015) *Corbyn: the strange rebirth of radical politics*. London: Verso.

²² Harry Taylor (2017) Former SDP leader David Owen backs Corbyn's manifesto and donates to Labour. *South Yorkshire Briefing*. Available at: <http://sybriefing.co.uk/2017/05/19/former-sdp-leader-david-owen-backs-corbyns-manifesto-and-donates-to-labour/>

²³ Schlosberg, J. (2016) *Should he stay or should he go? Television and Online News Coverage of the Labour Party in Crisis*. Media Reform Coalition/Birkbeck University. Available at: <http://www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Corbynresearch.pdf>

the largest opposition party against a rightwing government to such an extent and with such vigour?²⁴

The BBC has been party to this persistent misrepresentation, too. Many people have questioned the ‘impartiality’ of BBC political editor Laura Kuenssberg’s reporting and commentary, and in January 2017 even the BBC Trust acknowledged that she had misrepresented the Labour Leader’s views. In May 2017 it was found that the headline for one of her election reports published on the BBC’s News website (16 May), ‘Labour manifesto vision: More spending, spending, more tax, more borrowing,’ mirrored that of a Conservative party poster from 2015 with the banner headline ‘Same Old Labour: more spending more borrowing more taxes’.²⁵ For many critics of the BBC, this was far more than a simple coincidence. Rather, it is evidence that Kuenssberg and other BBC journalists are simply blind to their own prejudice and believe in a spurious objectivity that often denies the obvious and sometimes even the truth. And this is to ignore the fact that some BBC journalists have landed prestigious jobs with the Conservative Party, such as former BBC News editor Craig Taylor, who became David Cameron’s director of communications, and more recently Robbie Gibb, former editor of BBC’s *Daily Politics* (fronted by ex-Murdoch journalist Andrew Neil), who has the same role with Theresa May. Indeed, Justin Lewis of Cardiff University noted some time ago that BBC reporting and commentary does lean to the right because of the corporation’s dependence on key dominant institutions from the business world and the national print media.²⁶ With an exception proving the rule, The Canary’s editor-in-chief, Kerry-Anne Mendoza, appeared on BBC’s *Question Time* 29 June 2017 debating among other things the mainstream media’s lack of pluralism and overt bias. Providing balance on the same programme were Conservative Secretary of State for International Trade Liam Fox MP, LBC talk radio host and *Sunday Express* columnist Nick Ferrari, Zanny Minton Beddoes, editor-in-chief of *The Economist*, and Labour MP and Corbyn critic Stella Creasy. Just as revealing of the liberal media’s ideological proclivities is a recent exchange on BBC Radio Four’s flagship current affairs programme *Today*, which attracts up to seven million listeners per week. Peter Osborne, formerly the chief political commentator of the *Daily Telegraph* and the author of *The Rise of Political Lying* (Free Press, 2005), was interviewed by Justin Webb (*Today*, 17/2/17) as a follow-up to a report by Jon Sopel, the BBC’s North America correspondent, on President Trump’s attacks on the news media the day before. Osborne clearly did not share or accept Webb’s view that the political lying and abuse of the media is confined to the radical Right:

PO: The point I was making was that the characteristics of the Trump presidency, and in particular its media handling, the attempt to side-line the press, the complete contempt for the truth, there's nothing new here. It happened with the Clinton years, it

²⁴ Bart Cammaerts, Brooks DeCillia, João Magalhães and César Jimenez Martínez (2016) *Journalistic Representations of Jeremy Corbyn in the British Press: From Watchdog to Attackdog*. London School of Economics. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/pdf/JeremyCorbyn/Cobyn-Report-FINAL.pdf>

²⁵ Martin Odoni (2017) Laura Kuenssberg’s credibility-nosedive in a couple of pictures. *The Critique Archives*, 16 May. Available at: <https://thegreatcritique.wordpress.com/2017/05/16/laura-kuenssbergs-credibility-nosedive-in-a-couple-of-pictures/>

²⁶ Justin Lewis (2014) ‘How the BBC leans to the right’. In John Mair, Richard Tait and Richard Lance Keeble eds *Is the BBC in Crisis?* London: Abramis.

happened during the Blair years. Actually, it was worse during the Blair years, because the press was so reverential, and they sold us the lie about weapons of mass destruction and the Iraq war. And then they sold us – Cameron, the inheritor of Blair – sold us the lie about Libya and that catastrophe in north Africa. And the press and the BBC cheered him along. They didn't question it and now that they've got somebody they don't like, they're going after him....

JW: [chuckling]

PO: But when you had liberal leaders who you loved - Iraq, Libya and so forth - you cheered them on.²⁷

Whereas Osborne characterised the BBC as revealing 'superficial, arrogant smugness', Media Lens suggested the BBC was being little more than overtly propagandist. What the BBC journalist Webb and the institutions of 'the establishment' liberal media cannot see, and are perhaps incapable of seeing, is that they automatically delegitimise, ignore or attack most things that are beyond their own rather narrow range of centrist political values - which the old radical Tariq Ali has characterised as a variant of extremism itself.²⁸ Of course, as the cultural theorist Stuart Hall wrote in 'A World at One With Itself' (an article first published in *New Society* in 1970), 'the operation of unwitting bias is difficult to either locate or prove'.²⁹ The problem lies not so much with the questions journalists like Justin Webb or Jon Sopel ask but the fact that they do not probe their own or others' underlying assumptions or see anything much beyond the frames of their own Overton Window, that is their narrow range of acceptable values and opinions. Referring to Irish republicans, militant trade unionists and feminists of the 1960s, Hall (1973: 90) continued:

We are now at the crunch. For the groups and events upon which, increasingly, the media are required to comment and report, are the groups in conflict with this consensual style of politics. *But* these are precisely the forms of political and civil action which the media, by virtue of their submission to the consensus, are consistently unable to deal with, comprehend or interpret.

What goes around comes around. Today the liberal media failed to understand Corbyn or Momentum or Trump, the Tea Party and, until too late, Brexit. Media coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum and Brexit has generated a considerable degree of critical analysis, too. Reports from the universities of Loughborough, Cardiff and Oxford show that although five of the ten national daily papers gave roughly balanced coverage of the referendum, the five tabloids, which attract 82% of Britain's newspaper readership, were strongly for the Leave campaign. Broadcasters have also been criticized, not least by journalistic luminaries such as John Simpson, but the BBC insists - and academic researchers seem to confirm - that the

²⁷ Transcript from Media Lens: <http://www.medialens.org/index.php/alerts/alert-archive/2017/839-the-superficial-arrogant-smugness-of-bbc-news-peter-oborne-delivers-some-home-truths-on-bbc-radio-4-today.html>

²⁸ Tariq Ali (2015) *The Extreme Centre: A Warning*. London: Verso.

²⁹ Stuart Hall (1973) 'A World at One With Itself'. In Cohen, S. and Young, J. eds *The Manufacture of News: deviance social problems and the mass media*. London: Constable/Sage, pp.85-94.

BBC did adhere to its legal requirement to present political stories with 'due impartiality'. The interesting rider to that was that although the Leave and Remain camps perhaps did get fair treatment, a Loughborough University analysis of the main News bulletins reveals that broadcast journalists for the BBC, ITV, Channel Four, Channel Five and SkyNews tended to go to Conservative Party spokespeople from both camps rather than those from Labour, LibDems or the Green Party. As for social media, Instagram and Twitter were dominated by Leave messages. It is conceivable that many of these were generated by bots to purposively create a false public impression. David Cameron registered 357 appearances, Boris Johnson 275, George Osborne 143, Nigel Farage 109, Michael Gove 101 and Jeremy Corbyn 52.³⁰ Caroline Lucas or Natalie Bennett's appearances go unrecorded, but neither managed to get on Loughborough University's top 20 political media stars. The Greens and issues relating to environmental sustainability have historically suffered, too. They have been frequently ignored, sometimes ridiculed and invariably marginalised. Climate sceptic scientists in the pay of the fossil fuel industry were until recently given as much credence as climate scientists working with the IPPC. Things are changing somewhat now, and thanks to the media friendly face of Caroline Lucas, the Green Party and Green politics generally is perhaps taken a little more seriously than in previous years. Indeed, Caroline Lucas does not exactly conform to the stereotypical image of a radical green, socialist or communist where 'the mere words,' to paraphrase George Orwell, draw 'towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, "Nature Cure" quack, pacifist, and feminist in England.' But then Caroline Lucas is a strong advocate of the idea of a progressive alliance which aims to re-establish a centrist coalition to displace the (neo) Conservatives in the 2020 General Election.

There is also another dimension to all this. MEPs have detailed knowledge and experience of EU institutions and its operations, but few pro-EU MEPs seemed to make it on to the BBC's news and current affairs programmes. One audience member concerned about the BBC's EU Referendum coverage filed a Freedom of Information request seeking information on exactly how many pro-EU MEPs were invited to appear BBC Radio Four's *Today* programme, The World at One, the 6 o'clock news on BBC One and *Newsnight* on BBC Two. The BBC replied that it believed the request fell outside the terms of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and would therefore not comply with the request. To be clear, the BBC is a public authority for the purposes of the Act 'in respect of information held for purposes *other* than those of journalism, art or literature'. This is known as Schedule 1 derogation, and Channel Four and the Gaelic broadcasting service Sianel Pedwar Cymru are similarly exempted from the Act. Concerns about the BBC's perceived political bias go back at least to the 1926 General Strike, but since 2000 the FOIA has added another dimension. In 2004, following hundreds of complaints about the BBC's pro-Palestine news coverage, Richard Sambrook, a former BBC Director of News, commissioned journalist Malcolm Balen to investigate the corporation's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This report was internal and has never been made public, although many felt at the time and since that it would clearly be in the public interest if it was. This led Steven Sugar, a London solicitor, to appeal to the Information Commissioner for the report to be released. The Information Tribunal ruled that the report was not held by the BBC for the purposes of journalism and so should be made public. The BBC appealed against the decision in the High Court, which ruled against the

³⁰ Jackson, D., Thorsen, E. and Wring, D. eds (2016) *EU Referendum Analysis 2016: Media, Voters and the Campaign*. Loughborough University. Available at: <http://www.referendumanalysis.eu>

Tribunal decision; and over the next seven years the case went as far as the Supreme Court, which upheld the ruling that in this case the BBC was within its rights because of the Schedule 1 derogation. Ironically, BBC and other journalists frequently use the FOIA to gather information for stories, but it has repeatedly opposed FOI requests where its own news coverage is concerned. In 2012, as a result of another FOI request, this time by the right-wing media site *The Commentator*, it was revealed that the BBC had spent £332,780.47 in legal costs to prevent the Balen Report's publication.³¹ In May 2016 the *Daily Telegraph* reported that the BBC failed to grant 3,110 out of 9,076 FOI requests between September 2011 and March 2016.³² For a publicly funded public service broadcasting institution, this is clearly a cause for concern. The difficulty here for everyone concerned with the freedom of expression has been highlighted by Conservative MP Chris Grayling, then Leader of the House of Commons, who argued in 2015 that some journalists misuse the FOI simply in order to 'generate stories'.³³ They certainly do; but many journalists do not, fearing the process to be too complex and time-consuming. The issue perhaps is not so much journalists using the FOIA but whether the Act is sufficiently liberal in its scope, given that its main purpose is to nurture public understanding of key issues and events by ensuring the accountability and transparency of government and other public institutions .

Nothing New About Fake News

Of course, fake news, disinformation and dissembling is nothing new. It was the stock-in-trade of the Yellow Journalism in nineteenth century America, or the New Journalism pioneered by W.T. Stead in Britain at the same time. William Randolph Hearst used his *New York Journal* to pump up support with fake news for a war with Spain, prompting Charles Foster Kane (as played by Orson Welles) to state on celluloid forty years later, 'Dear Wheeler: you provide the prose poems. I'll provide the war.' And, as Robert Darnton shows in a recent article in the *New York Review of Books*, fake news reached a peak somewhat earlier in mid-to late-eighteenth century London.³⁴ In 1788, London was awash with ephemeral publications - ten daily newspapers, eight tri-weeklies, nine weeklies, and sundry broadsheets and cartoons. Many stories in these publications consisted of only one paragraph, and 'paragraph men' would frequent coffee houses to pick up whatever gossip they could before writing a few lines which would then be hastily taken to a printer-publisher. A few of these paragraph men received payment, but many were apparently quite happy to manipulate public opinion for or against a public figure or a recently published book or play. This was a pre-echo of our very own twitter sphere, and quite different from the politically

³¹ See: <https://www.scribd.com/document/103847705/RFI20120780-Final-Response>. The figure was widely commented on in the press and as Gabe Fisher of the *Times of Israel* (26/8/12) noted the actual sum quoted excluded VAT and came at a time when the BBC's finances were, as Director-General Mark Thompson noted, 'getting very, very close to the edge'.

³² Lydia Willgress (2016) BBC in transparency row over refusal to answer more than a third of FOI requests by using specialised excuse. *Daily Telegraph*, 30 May. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/29/bbc-in-transparency-row-over-refusal-to-answer-more-than-a-third/>

³³ Rowena Mason and Nicholas Watt (2015) Freedom of Information Act misused by media to create stories, says Grayling. 29 October, *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/oct/29/freedom-of-information-journalists-chris-grayling-foi>

³⁴ Robert Darnton (2017) The True History of Fake News. *New York Review of Books*, 13 February. Available at: <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/02/13/the-true-history-of-fake-news/>

charged counter public sphere that emerged during the turmoil of the English Civil War, when the world was genuinely in danger of being turned upside down. However, the current problem is that the 'intelligent' news media is ill equipped to comprehend or interpret the groups attacking the liberal consensus and by extension liberal democracy itself. The self-serving nature of this consensus and the liberal elite which has benefited from it in many ways have been architects of their own failure. What some on the Left, and the Right, seem to have in common is a hatred of democracy and its 'free press'. Their weapons of choice are varied but importantly focus on some algorithms few people understand or are even aware of. A recent piece of excellent investigative journalism by Carole Cadwalladr³⁵ shows how big money is combining with state of the art software applications or 'bots' to douse the media sphere with rightwing propaganda, which may take the form initially of long-form investigative journalism (Breitbart), PR cum Psyops operations like Cambridge Analytica, and machine-generated twitter and other social media feeds that demand, demand, demand to give the little guy a fair deal. And it's working. Public sentiment has changed. When White House aid Kellyanne Conway replied to reports in America's media that the crowd at President's Trump's Inauguration was not as big as the administration claimed, she offered the US media, and by extension the world, some 'alternative facts'. And why not? Who can people believe when politicians can't be trusted and journalists are held in such low esteem that even second-hand car salesmen are having a bonanza ... which they are apparently. In January 2017, the UK Parliament launched an inquiry into 'fake news'.

But the problems with the media and the current mediascape go way beyond what the papers say. Ubiquitous computing has led to ubiquitous surveillance and ubiquitous propaganda, not to mention ubiquitous advertising where every Facebook 'like' can conjure up a must-have goodie you cannot do without. Post-truth politics is not simply a topic for academic hand - wringing and blame games but something more sinister. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Netflix has made available series two of its adaptation of Philip K. Dick's fascist dystopia *The Man in the High Castle*, or that the BBC has recently screened its own fascist but quite convincing nightmare drama *SS-GB*. It may be too glib to see parallels between the 2010s with the 1930s, but 'The Great Moving Right Show' and the authoritarian populism Stuart Hall saw as integral to Thatcherism has finally revealed itself to be potentially more than a temporary swing of liberal democracy's electoral pendulum. For many, this seems to be just fine. For others, it doesn't really matter. When texting and selfies dominate the digital landscape and celebrities like Kim Kardashian and the man and woman on the street produce autobiographies with titles like *My Life in Selfies* on Tumblr, Instagram or anywhere else, is it any wonder that vox pop interviews broadcast on radio and television often reveal 'ordinary people' saying 'you cant believe what any of them [politicians] say' or 'they are all the same' with a confident but uninformed scepticism masquerading as 'common sense' or an ironic savviness?

The creation of an off-world virtual reality is impeding our ability to act as free citizens. Those who value freedom as an essential prerequisite of democracy need to consider how the construction of this reality by those who own, control *and* use social and news media sites is denying the possibility of critical political engagement. Freedom of the press is meaningless

³⁵ Carole Cadwalladr (2017) Robert Mercer: the big data billionaire waging war on mainstream media. *The Observer*, 26 February. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/26/robert-mercer-breitbart-war-on-media-steve-bannon-donald-trump-nigel-farage>

unless it enhances rather than undermines the freedom of the citizen. It is perhaps worth taking a moment to consider the term 'freedom'. Isaiah Berlin famously made the distinction between 'freedom to' and 'freedom from,' but there are other ways of considering what freedom means. Republican theory offers an interesting alternative. The political philosopher Philip Pettit suggests that, 'domination' is the antonym of freedom.³⁶ This means that a dominating power, say the press, has the capacity to interfere (which they clearly have, and which is invariably presented as an absolute right), on an arbitrary basis (which they clearly do, as the manic ravings of the tabloid press over Brexit demonstrate), in certain choices that others may wish to make (voting, political allegiance, etc.). For Pettit, interference is arbitrary if it is subject only to the judgement of the interfering agent (the press, or more specifically its editors and proprietors) without taking due consideration of the interests of those being affected by this interference. Of course, newspaper editors argue that they operate purely in the public interest, but it is they who decide what the public and its interests are. One argument against this is that newspapers would not sell if the public didn't like what they read, but it is also well known that readers tend to adopt that newspaper that best confirms their pre-existing values and prejudices. Every nation gets the newspapers it deserves. Consequently, consent to interference is not a sufficient check against domination, which is why Britain needs not just a free and diverse press but a free and diverse mediascape of which the news media (print, online and broadcast) are just constituent elements.

As Orwell noted in his 1946 *Tribune* column, the concentration of media ownership is only part of the problem; but it is nonetheless still a problem. The group Reporters Without Borders, who produce the annual Press Freedom Index, ranked Britain 40th in 2017, slipping from 38th in 2016. The EU Media Monitor, which examines media plurality in the EU, shows that media pluralism is not actually free from risk in any western European country. Denmark, Germany, France and the UK have low/medium risks to media pluralism, but the highest risks in the UK are economic, legal and regulatory (<http://monitor.cmpf.eu/en/results-2014/uk/>). But then the whole media ecosystem is owned and controlled by relatively few huge corporations. Although, given the wide range of social and independent news media sites on offer, it may be difficult to argue there is a lack of media diversity in the UK, it should be remembered that the dominant search engines like Yahoo and Google are big corporations who willingly serve up user information to governments for security purposes and to businesses for commercial ones. Also, the mainstream media, including public service broadcasters such as the BBC and Channel Four, frequently set the agenda and terms of national political debates (although some critics of BBC News have suggested that news editors sometimes get their steer from Paul Dacre, editor of the *Daily Mail*, who even David Cameron wanted to see out of his job). Roy Greenslade (*Guardian*, 5/12/16) suggested that the *Daily Mail* called the tune in a furore over the dominance of anti-Brexit judges during the legal action brought by Gina Miller concerning the right of Parliament to approve the triggering of Article 50. Also, the BBC does not always avoid the temptation of crass sensationalism either as the child sexual abuse scandal reached frenzied proportions, a police raid on the home of Cliff Richard was covered live on BBC TV with a camera operating from a helicopter hovering over the star's property.

³⁶ See: Phillip Pettit, P. (2001) *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. and (2012) *On the People's Terms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Changing Mediascape

However, the current mediascape is actually quite diverse. At least there are many Internet sites and TV channels one can click on to. But it is also quite fragmented and fractured, with more and more, especially younger, people tending to use social media quite heavily. However, as Emily Bell³⁷ has written, social media has swallowed journalism like it has swallowed everything else. Social media is now a major distributor of news, with companies like Google, Apple and Facebook filtering what is important or relevant to its users through algorithms that remain beyond public inspection and accountability. These algorithms are the new gatekeepers. The new digital-only news companies have taken advantage of this, with news feeds being sent directly to readers by their app of choice. Increasingly, media companies are publishing news articles directly to apps like Discover (Snapchat), Apple News (Apple) or Instant Articles (Facebook). The traffic generated exceeds early expectations and there is a possibility that the tendency to publish directly to an app will increase the creation of both a different form of journalism from that which many older people are currently used to as well as a costing model that still needs to settle. Journalists get much of their information about the success or otherwise of a story from page views and whether or not the story has interacted with or been integrated into social media sites.³⁸ Many young people who have an interest in politics and sustainability get their information from independent news sites such as Counterpunch, Media Lens, News Hub, openDemocracy, Huffington Post, Corporate Watch and the websites of campaigning NGOs rather than from *News at Ten* or a traditional newspaper. In *Something Old, Something New*, James Painter and his co-authors³⁹ shows that most of the people in the UK who self-identify as 'highly interested' in environmental news tend to go to the BBC web pages and after that Huffington Post or other indie sites which prioritise environment and sustainability in their editorial policy. What is also interesting here is that Painter shows that big events such as the 2015 Paris Climate conference see mainstream journalists producing articles very similar in approach and interpretation while the articles published in Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, etc., reveal clear differences in their tone, use of images, immersive personal narrativity and thematic content to traditional media. Huffington Post frequently focused on the opportunities available to take positive action on climate change, publishing discussions on the economic advantages of investing early in renewable energies and a 'green economy'. BuzzFeed and Vice frequently made fun of climate scepticism. For Painter et al., this is a welcome contribution to a free, informed and democratic debate on important issues, and they come no more important than climate change. However, as a recent report demonstrated, the cultural and political climate environmental journalists inhabit globally has become increasingly hostile in recent years because the environment, particularly global warming, is a political and economic issue.⁴⁰

³⁷ Emily Bell (2016) Facebook is eating the world. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 7 March. Available at: http://www.cjr.org/analysis/facebook_and_media.php

³⁸ See Joseph Lichterman (2016) The FT is launching a new analytics tool to make metrics more understandable for its newsroom. NiemanLab, 17 March. Available at: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2016/03/the-ft-is-launching-a-new-analytics-tool-to-make-metrics-more-understandable-for-its-newsroom/>

³⁹ Painter, J., Erviti, M.C., Fletcher, R., Howarth, C., Kristiansen, S., León, B., Ouakrat, A., Russell, A. and Schäfer, M.S. (2016) *Something Old Something new: digital media and the coverage of climate change*. Oxford: Reuters Institute.

⁴⁰ Reporters Without Borders (2015) *Hostile Climate for Environmental Journalists*. Available at: https://rsf.org/sites/default/IMG/pdf/rapport_environnement_en.pdf

Mark Zuckerberg, the perennial teenage mastermind behind Facebook with its 1.86bn monthly subscribers and \$2.38bn income, has been publicly critical of 'fake news' and wants to do all he can to make things better. Facebook, he says in his open letter 'Building a Global Community,' has immense potential to do good. The company stands 'for bringing us closer together and building a global community'. The letter continues,

In times like these, the most important thing we at Facebook can do is develop the social infrastructure to give people the power to build a global community that works for all of us.

The aim is to build supportive, safe, informed, civically engaged and inclusive communities across the globe at the same time as offering Facebook users more personal control over their data and, thanks to advances in AI, more protection from objectionable content.

Our job at Facebook is to help people make the greatest positive impact while mitigating areas where technology and social media can contribute to divisiveness and isolation.

This invitation is difficult to argue with, except for the fact that Facebook is a private corporation with immense power without governmental oversight or accountability, using and developing an algorithm no one is allowed see. In April 2017 Jimmy Wales launched WikiTribune which, by drawing on the experience and governance processes of Wikipedia, seeks to reboot 'evidence based journalism' and in the process help to vanquish the spread of fake news.⁴¹ After all, as Carole Cadwalladr⁴² wrote in *The Observer*, 'Facebook is a corporation doing what corporations do: making money, grabbing market share, maximising profit.' Indeed, it is Facebook and Google's financial model that has sucked up so much advertising that formerly went to finance the fourth estate, undermining its capacity to commission in-depth investigative journalism. Both companies have also been important purveyors, although not necessarily generators, of fake news. In 2016, a Pew Research Center survey discovered that 62% of Americans get their news from social media and 18% do so frequently. Facebook is the site of choice for 44%. A 2016 Ofcom report on *Adults' media use and attitudes* showed that 70% of Internet users search for news items and 73% of Facebook users will share news items. The device of choice now seems to be the smartphone. A recent report by the Reuters Institute⁴³ noted that - not surprisingly - the younger you are, the more likely you are to source your news online, and least likely from TV and print media. With older age groups the opposite is the case, though interestingly 51% of those in the 55 years plus category get their news from TV and 11% from printed newspapers. This of course makes possible bias within the news outlets of public service broadcasters acutely important as elderly people have traditionally been more likely to cast

⁴¹ See: <https://www.wikitribune.com>

⁴² Carole Cadwalladr (2017) Mark Zuckerberg says change the world, yet he sets the rules. *The Observer*, 19 February. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/19/mark-zuckerberg-says-change-world-he-sets-rules>

⁴³ Nic Newman with Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, David A. L. Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2017) *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017*. Reuters Institute/University of Oxford. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web_0.pdf?utm_source=digitalnewsreport.org&utm_medium=referral

their votes during elections than people in other age categories. Relying on huge unaccountable corporations to operate in the interests of an open and transparent democracy is becoming increasingly untenable.

Media diversity must therefore mean more than more of the same. The media sphere needs to be a public space where a variety of voices can be heard and listened to, where debates occur among and between many different groups and classes. In the late nineteenth century, the emergent socialist movement in Britain faced a similar problem. In the 1880s a number of new political publications - *Commonweal*, *The Link*, *Justice*, *Freedom*, *Labour Leader*, *Clarion* and later in the next century the *Daily Herald* and the *Daily Worker* - were produced; but because of their politics, they did not exactly hit the newsstands but were sold at political meetings, on street corners, at lectures, during cultural and other events. Sometimes these were subsidised by wealthy benefactors. William Morris bankrolled *Commonweal* for five years, as its circulation, rarely exceeding 3000 copies per issue, and a cheap cover price of 1d did not cover production costs. *Commonweal* is interesting because it became an instrument in an attempt to create a social movement that aimed, as Morris put it, to 'make socialists'. The paper printed poems, news items, political comment, serialised books (including Morris's utopian romance *News from Nowhere*), sponsored and advertised lectures, and theatrical events. Robert Blatchford's *Clarion* was slightly different because it was more in tune with the non-political likes and preferences of its socially diverse readership. The *Clarion* published human interest stories, covered sports events, and took commercial advertising, which allowed its circulation to reach 74,000 copies in 1907 when it was associated with the newly formed Labour Party. This success was at the cost of socialist purity; but like many other socialist papers it closed down (in 1931) because it lost circulation and revenue. Interestingly, the unofficial organ of the Labour party and Momentum launched last autumn is also called the *Clarion* in homage to its illustrious forebear. The *Daily Herald*, originally a syndicalist strike sheet appearing for the first time in 1912, and from 1922 the official organ of the TUC, suffered the same fate, becoming *The Sun* in 1964 after a precipitous decline in circulation and advertising revenue. In 1946, Orwell had ranked the paper 5th in terms of intelligence and 2nd in popularity. Apart from giving voice to political views, these attempts at creating a socialist press were intended to nurture a critical media presence and counter publics which the established political elites might engage freely with and eventually succumb to. Their failure is not an historical anomaly. Radical publications today, whether socialist or green, rely on a considerable amount of voluntary labour and are continuously in need of financial support. *The Ecologist* and *Resurgence* magazines merged in 2012 and are now available as a single quarterly publication with an online only edition. In September 2016, *Red Pepper* launched an appeal for £10,000 to secure its future as an independent socialist presence in the mediasphere. Similarly, *openDemocracy* has launched a campaign for funds stressing the need for a free and open media in an era when 'the toxic power of a media that only chases clicks and profit margins' is all too apparent. It posits a Europe-wide investigation into press freedom to be an urgent priority, with supporters including Paul Mason, Caroline Lucas, Brian Eno, Yanis Varoufakis and Peter Osborne. Indeed, virtually every independent news site carries a request for donations and financial support. However, as media theorist Christian Fuchs⁴⁴ has argued, a critical media needs to vigorously challenge dominative society, corporate media power and centralisation of wealth, and for that to happen effectively a media pluralism must go way beyond ensuring that a multiplicity

⁴⁴ Christian Fuchs (2011) *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*. London: Routledge.

of voices are available to be heard when only a few will actually be heard, and then only by the specific tribes from which they emerge. Thus, media pluralism does not mean media democracy, and neither does it automatically create a free (non-dominating) and cooperative society. As the critical theorist Marcuse suggested, pluralism can easily coexist with a 'repressive tolerance' that reproduces the same old illiberal liberalism. For Fuchs, what is needed is relatively few widely accessible and widely consumed critical media outlets rather than a myriad of small and largely fragmented special interest media groups.

Reforming the Media

The need for a genuinely diverse news media with a free flow of information, debate and comment is therefore the very stuff of democracy. The existing imbalance, which is so evident, in political power in the established media institutions needs to be both challenged and transcended. Media democracy and freedom is recognised as essential to peace and justice. One of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 16) states that 'a free press is closely linked to access to information and the protection of human rights'. So, perhaps a start would be to ensure that our media system, and especially its news outlets, meets the following normative criteria:⁴⁵

1. It must provide a rigorous account of people who are in power and people who wish to be in power, in the government, corporate and nonprofit sectors.
2. It must regard the information needs of all people as legitimate, perhaps if anything favouring those without property, as those with wealth invariably have the means to secure power and influence.
3. It must have a plausible method to separate truth from lies, or at least to prevent liars from being unaccountable and leading nations into catastrophes.
4. It must produce a wide range of informed opinions on the most important issues and challenges of our times, and these may not necessarily coincide with those deemed important by the power elites.

Within the UK, a wholesale rethink of public service broadcasting and the future of the BBC is also required, and this must go far beyond the terms of the recent Charter Review. Sociologist Tom Mills suggests the BBC is (and historically always has been) constitutionally incapable of being anything other than the voice of the essentially right-wing political establishment⁴⁶. Consequently, I⁴⁷ offer further recommendations for media reform:

- 1 The creation of a public digital space or commons subsuming that of the BBC and including those produced by libraries, museums and other institutions. This must be, as Tony Ageh, the controller of the BBC's archive strategy, has argued in

⁴⁵ Christians, C.G., Glasser, T.L., McQuail, D., Nordenstreng, K. and White, R.A. (2009) *Normative Theories of the Media: journalism in democratic societies*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

⁴⁶ Tom Mills (2016) *The BBC: The Myth of Public Service Broadcasting*. London: Verso.

⁴⁷ See also: John Blewitt (2015) *Green Politics and the Left*. Green House. Available at: http://www.greenhousethinktank.org/uploads/4/8/3/2/48324387/green_politics_and_the_left_1.12.pdf

openDemocracy, 'equally accessible by everyone, universally equivalent and unconditional. It must be dialogic, open and protective of the rights of all participants and contributors. It must be available at all times and in all locations, it must expect contributions from every member of our society and it must respect privacy. It must operate only in the best interests of the people that it serves; absent of overtly political or commercial interests. And it must endure'.⁴⁸

- 2 A system of public commissioning of independent investigative journalism funded from tax revenues, industry levies and a reformed licence fee on established corporate media companies. Daniel Hind⁴⁹ argues that such a scheme could transform the mediascape by engaging the public directly in the commissioning of investigative journalism as well as supporting forms of 'citizen journalism' which can produce some remarkable stories but because of their politically sensitive nature may not get a wide audience.
- 3 The encouragement and support of local community media provision to enhance local democracy and media plurality geographically as well as politically. The Media Trust's and the Community Channel's *Do Something Brilliant* campaign has facilitated the development of a range of community voices encouraging diversity and empowerment. Such projects need to be extended and developed further.
- 4 Ownership and control of national and local print media should be more tightly regulated by Ofcom, and no company or individual should be allowed to own more than 20% of the commercial media market. Any publisher with more than a 15% market share should be subject to a public interest test which would include a critical approach to the potentially negative democratic impacts of cross-media ownership.
- 5 An independent review of the future of public service broadcasting should be undertaken which should also encompass examination of the use of social media in the publication and dissemination of party political advertising and related communications during local and general election campaigns. It will need to establish clear rules governing fairness and transparency.
- 6 Algorithms should be audited by an independent and publicly accountable body for their accuracy and fairness in enabling a wide diversity of views to be expressed and made democratically available on the Internet. Algorithms can be audited in a number of ways - using code, employing evaluators, or creating fictitious users as part of a research evaluation exercise.⁵⁰
- 7 Following the calls from the Media Reform Coalition, there should be full transparency relating to, and clear restrictions on, the undue influence of the lobbying industry on

⁴⁸ Tony Ageh (2015) The BBC, the licence fee and the digital public space. 3 March, *openDemocracy*. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourbeeb/tony-ageh/bbc-licence-fee-and-digital-public-space>

⁴⁹ Daniel Hind (2010) *The Return of the Public*. London: Verso.

⁵⁰ A very useful review of the current state of research of big data, algorithms and politics can be found in Samantha Shorey and Phil Howard (2016) Automation, Big Data, and Politics: A Research Review. *International Journal of Communication*, 10, pp.5032–5055. Available at: <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/6233/1812>

Westminster and the devolved governments. The Coalition's *Manifesto for Media Reform* states,

'Clandestine lobbying should then be outlawed and a fund established to allow civil society groups to carry out research in the public interest. There should be restrictions on the ways that politicians, former civil servants and media executives move effortlessly and influentially between different parts of the industry, making a complete mockery of the regulatory process.'

It should be self-evident that in a democratic polity the media needs to be varied, free, serious and truthful if it is to exercise its power responsibly and gain public trust. Diversity will contribute positively to making a dynamic public sphere, which may in turn help make socialists or ecologists, but it will not be sufficient to realise the fundamental political changes that are required to address climate change, social inequality, corporate power and the rise of authoritarian populism. In 1970, Stuart Hall asked a simple question: can the media help us to understand significant real events in the real world? Today we may not be able to answer in the affirmative with confidence. For Orwell, this clearly relates to the need for an intelligent news media; and by intelligence Orwell meant 'a readiness to present news objectively, to give prominence to the things that really matter, to discuss serious questions even when they are dull, and to advocate policies which are at least coherent and intelligible.' That, I think, is not too much to strive for, although I think he could have added questioning cherished and established assumptions, too. Finally, a word of warning from the French philosopher Jacques Ellul,⁵¹ who commented that the intelligentsia's desire to read widely, and to form opinions independently and rationally based on information and real facts, often does not make them immune from propaganda's appeal - read 'fake news'.

The reader of a number of newspapers expressing diverse attitudes - just because he is better informed - is more subjected than anyone else to a propaganda that he cannot perceive, even though he claims to retain free choice in the mastery of all this information. Actually, he is being conditioned to absorb all the propaganda that coordinates and explains the facts he believes himself to be mastering. Thus, information not only provides the basis for propaganda but gives propaganda the means to operate; for information actually generates the problems that propaganda exploits and for which it pretends to offer solutions. In fact, no propaganda can work until the moment when a set of facts has become a problem in the eyes of those who constitute public opinion. (Ellul, 1973: 113-14)

⁵¹ See: Jacques Ellul (1973) *Propaganda: the formation of men's attitudes*. New York: Vintage.

Other publications from Green House include:

Post-growth localisation

Localisation is a process. We need to start moving away from dependence on the global system to source resources closer to points of use. Truly localised systems are no guarantee of social or environmental protection but they are inevitably more benign, more convivial. They also allow us to see more clearly the impact of our decisions and actions on the real world. This short 20-page pamphlet outlines the fundamental features of economic globalisation and localisation, how a shift towards the local might be accomplished, and what it asks of us in terms of action. Its authors are Rupert Read and Helena Norberg-Hodge and is produced in conjunction with Local Futures.

A Green Transition for the Isle of Wight

This Report, created for the Green European Foundation and with support from the Polden Puckham Charitable Foundation, develops a mathematical model for calculating the potential for new job creation from the introduction of a green economic and social transition at the local level. It will be of great interest to everyone involved in or thinking about local economic policy from a green and/or global perspective. Its authors are Jonathan Essex and Peter Sims.

Tackling our Housing Crisis

Everyone agrees housing is in crisis. This timely report from Green House challenges the conventional policy wisdom of 'just build more homes.' It argues that the most significant cause of the affordability problem is not shortage of supply but a high level of inequality combined with a dysfunctional financial system. Housing has become the preferred investment, rather than simply somewhere to live. Savings going into housing, and unsustainable mortgage lending have pushed up prices. Instead of relying on a huge and environmentally costly building programme, we should ensure that the existing housing stock is better used; control rents and increase security in the private rented sector; discourage the purchase of housing primarily as an investment; reduce regional inequalities; and provide more affordable homes. Its authors are Tom Chance, Anne Chapman and Maya de Souza.

These publications and many more are available at: <http://www.greenhousethinktank.org/publications.html>