

## 21ST CENTURY FOX, INC. / SKY PLC MERGER INQUIRY

## SUPPLEMENTARY SUBMISSION IN RESPONSE TO THE ISSUES STATEMENT

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This submission is made on behalf of 21st Century Fox, Inc. (**21CF**) in response to the CMA's Issues Statement published on 10 October 2017 (the **Issues Statement**) in relation to 21CF's proposed acquisition of the remaining shares in Sky plc (**Sky**) (the **Transaction**).
- 1.2 21CF has made detailed initial submissions on 27 September 2017 explaining why the Transaction cannot be expected to operate against the public interest, whether in terms of the media plurality public interest consideration or in terms of the broadcasting standards public interest consideration. These submissions address the three theories of harm set out in the Issues Statement, and 21CF does not repeat its substantive case on these matters here.
- 1.3 Instead, the purpose of this supplementary submission is to comment briefly on certain aspects of the CMA's proposed approach to its investigation, as set out in the Issues Statement. Overall, 21CF agrees with many aspects of the analytical approach that the Issues Statement envisages, including the need to assess the media plurality public interest consideration by reference to the sufficiency of plurality (not merely the change brought about by the Transaction), and on the basis of the actual extent of editorial control exercised and exercisable over the relevant media enterprises pre-and post-Transaction. There are, however, several discrete points 21CF would make at this stage.
- 1.4 In summary, as regards the media plurality public interest consideration:
- (i) The Issues Statement correctly identifies that the relevant statutory question requires the CMA to assess whether plurality would remain sufficient following the Transaction; rather than merely assessing whether and, if so, to what extent, the Transaction reduces plurality. However, the two theories of harm regarding media plurality set out in the Issues Statement appear to be framed only in terms of the change brought about by the Transaction. As the Issues Statement recognises, it is essential that these theories of harm ultimately be considered in light of the statutory question of sufficiency.
  - (ii) The first theory of harm set out in the Issues Statement concerns whether the Transaction will reduce the range of viewpoints available and consumed in UK news and current affairs content. 21CF notes the following points about the articulation of this theory of harm.
    - (A) The Issues Statement sets out the CMA's intention to consider whether, as a result of the Transaction, the news and current affairs offerings controlled by Sky and News Corp could pursue similar editorial positions and story selection. It is important to recognise that there is in fact no one editorial position shared by the News Corp newspapers (*The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, the *Sun* and the *Sun on Sunday*) with which Sky News' output could even theoretically be aligned.
    - (B) The Issues Statement indicates that the CMA may be more concerned about a potential loss of diversity where the audiences of Sky News and News Corp's outlets overlap to a significant extent and do not consume news from many other sources. The data available to 21CF suggests that this is highly unlikely to be the case; not least given the extensive reach of the BBC. Of the 2862 respondents to Ofcom's 2013 news consumption survey (the most recent for which Ofcom published the full respondent-level data), only *one* consumed news from both Sky and News Corp and no other source.

- (C) The Issues Statement also indicates that the CMA may be more concerned about a loss of diversity if Sky News or one or more of News Corp's news and current affairs offerings has a strong reputation for integrity and trustworthiness. To the extent the CMA wishes to consider this, it should do so in a balanced manner, that also takes into account evidence indicating that readers of some of News Corp's titles – the *Sun* and the *Sun on Sunday* – trust those titles less (reflecting the titles' focus on lighter content such as celebrity gossip, rather than authoritative coverage of political issues, and the nature of the stories their readers choose to consume). Similarly, it should also take into account evidence that other providers' outlets may be even more trusted. It should also consider *why* any reputation for integrity and trustworthiness exists, and whether that would persist in the event external influence were exercised over the relevant outlet's agenda.
- (iii) The second theory of harm set out in the Issues Statement concerns whether the transaction would increase the influence or perceived influence of the Murdoch Family Trust (MFT) over public opinion. 21CF notes the following points in relation to this theory of harm.
- (A) The *actual* degree of influence may be a relevant consideration (although only to the extent an increase in influence would be so substantial as to result in insufficient plurality), but 21CF would submit that *perceived* influence is simply too vague and subjective a criterion to serve as the basis for an adverse public interest finding; in particular having regard to the standard of proof applicable in a Phase II inquiry. 21CF notes that the Competition Commission did not consider the perceived influence of the parties in *Sky/ITV*.
- (B) Without prejudice to this, in considering questions of influence or perceived influence, the CMA should rely only on up-to-date evidence, given the speed of change in the media landscape. As 21CF has set out in previous submissions, there is ample evidence from recent events – notably the 2017 General Election – showing that the influence and perceived influence of the press has declined sharply; including that of News Corporation's titles.
- (iv) The Issues Statement indicates that the CMA will consider the requirements of Ofcom's Broadcasting Code as a "*mitigating factor*" that might mitigate any potential adverse effects on media plurality. 21CF would respectfully suggest that the significance of the impartiality requirements applying to broadcasters is more than as a mitigating factor. The UK regulatory regime underpins a strong culture of editorial independence. This has created deeply-rooted audience expectations that broadcast news be independent and impartial. In combination, these factors mean that any attempt to exercise influence through broadcast news would be self-defeating (and also highly visible). Accordingly, the impartiality requirements of the Broadcasting Code, together with the associated newsroom culture and audience expectations, go directly to the plausibility of each theory of harm.
- 1.5 As regards the broadcasting standards public interest consideration, 21CF welcomes the CMA's acknowledgment that in considering the implications of compliance with regulation outside the field of UK broadcasting standards, it will need to consider the extent to which this is relevant to assessing a commitment to broadcasting standards. As set out in 21CF's initial submission on broadcasting standards, and consistent with Ofcom's approach, 21CF believes that the correct analysis is that such matters can only be of indirect relevance, and only insofar as they give rise to an identifiable risk in terms of Sky's future compliance with UK broadcasting standards. (Ofcom considered wider corporate governance matters comprehensively in the context of its review of whether Sky would remain fit and proper to hold broadcasting licences under full ownership by 21CF – which concluded that Sky would remain fit and proper.) Conversely, the most relevant evidence is 21CF's record of compliance with UK broadcasting standards, which Ofcom considers

good, as well as the fact that 21CF's current CEO has been CEO and Chairman of Sky during a period in which it developed and maintained its record of compliance, which Ofcom considers particularly good. On the facts, there is no plausible, let alone likely, risk that 21CF would not maintain Sky's commitment to broadcasting standards (as Ofcom itself concluded).

## 2. THE MEDIA PLURALITY CONSIDERATION

### The statutory framework and theories of harm

- 2.1 In relation to the media plurality public interest consideration, 21CF agrees with much of the analytical framework set out in the Issues Statement. 21CF particularly welcomes the CMA's clear recognition (at paragraphs 19 and 20 of the Issues Statement) that, in line with the judgment of the Court of Appeal in *Sky/ITV*, it should consider the actual extent of control or influence that the MFT may have over Sky, 21CF and News Corp pre-and post-Transaction, and that it will not "*start from a presumption that the MFT exercises full control over Fox and News Corp*" or "*by assuming that the MFT, Fox and News Corp are to be treated as a single entity*".
- 2.2 Similarly, 21CF agrees with the CMA that the overall framework of analysis for the media plurality public interest consideration requires an assessment of: (i) the current level of plurality in the UK; (ii) whether and the extent to which the Transaction reduces plurality in the UK; and (iii) whether the level of plurality which would remain after the Transaction would be sufficient (see e.g. paragraph 21 of the Issues Statement). In this regard, 21CF particularly welcomes the CMA's recognition that the media plurality public interest consideration concerns the *sufficiency* of plurality post-Transaction, not merely the extent of any change brought about by the Transaction. In 21CF's view (as the Issues Statement notes), in considering whether plurality would remain sufficient, the situation prevailing when the Communications Act 2003 was passed should be taken as a relevant benchmark, when plurality was considered to be clearly sufficient (since Parliament would not otherwise have passed legislation relaxing controls on media ownership).<sup>1</sup> The CMA may also wish to consider the situation prevailing in 2007, when the Competition Commission carried out an in-depth investigation into media plurality in the context of Sky's acquisition of a shareholding in ITV and found no adverse effects.<sup>2</sup>
- 2.3 However, although the Issues Statement elsewhere correctly identifies the statutory framework for its analysis of the media plurality public interest consideration, 21CF notes that the two theories of harm regarding media plurality set out in the Issues Statement are framed only in terms of the change brought about by the Transaction:
- (i) "*Theory of harm 1: The transaction reduces the range of viewpoints available to and consumed by members of the public*" (p. 13)
  - (ii) "*Theory of harm 2: The Transaction increases the influence of the MFT and, by proxy, the Murdoch family on public opinion and on the political agenda*" (p.14)
- 2.4 21CF recognises that the role of a theory of harm is to help focus the CMA's analysis of the possible effects of the Transaction, not to set out the entire framework for that analysis. However, 21CF would emphasise that, in considering these theories of harm, the CMA should not lose sight of the ultimate statutory question, which is whether plurality would remain sufficient post-Transaction.
- 2.5 21CF sets out below some more detailed observations on these two theories of harm.

<sup>1</sup> See paragraph 3.14 of 21CF's initial submission on media plurality.

<sup>2</sup> See paragraph 3.11 of 21CF's initial submission to Ofcom.

**Observations on theory of harm 1***Paragraph 42 – pursuit of similar editorial positions by Sky News and News Corporation titles*

- 2.6 At paragraph 42, the Issues Statement explains that concerns under theory of harm 1 might arise in particular if the Transaction meant that the news and current affairs offerings controlled by the Parties and News Corp “*could pursue similar editorial positions and story selection*” or “*could take a similar approach on specific topics or issues*”.
- 2.7 The reasons why such alignment is not plausible are set out in 21CF’s initial submission on media plurality,<sup>3</sup> and, as noted in that submission, 21CF has passed a board resolution that further guarantees the editorial independence of Sky News by requiring the approval of the independent directors comprising its Nominating and Corporate Governance Committee for the appointment, removal or changes to the authority or reporting relationships of the Head of Sky News, and for changes to Sky News’ Editorial Guidelines.
- 2.8 In addition, it is noteworthy that there is in fact no one editorial position shared by the News Corp newspapers with which Sky News’ output could even theoretically be aligned. Each of *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, the *Sun* and the *Sun on Sunday* (as well as the Scottish edition of the *Sun*) has its own editor. Moreover, the *Times* and the *Sunday Times* are the subject of undertakings which require that they be maintained as separate newspapers, each with its own editor, and which contain safeguards in respect of the appointment, independence and authority of the editors.
- 2.9 As set out in Annex 1 to 21CF’s initial submission on media plurality,<sup>4</sup> there are substantial differences between the approach and editorial lines pursued by individual News Corporation titles on a day-to-day basis. This extends to very different perspectives on issues of the highest political importance, and applies even between different regional versions of a title. To take two notable examples:
- (i) *The Times* and the *Sun* took diametrically opposed views on Brexit – the *Sun* in England and Wales publishing a front-page editorial strongly in support; the *Times* opposing Brexit. The *Scottish Sun* adopted a different approach to that of the *Sun* and did not carry the editorial. Even within Times Newspapers Limited (the News UK subsidiary which owns *The Times* titles), the positions of *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* diverged, the latter supporting Brexit.
  - (ii) At the 2017 General Election, the *Sun* endorsed the Conservatives, while the *Scottish Sun* backed the SNP.

*Paragraph 43 – overlap between audiences of Sky News and News Corporation titles*

- 2.10 At paragraph 43, the Issues Statement explains that the CMA: “*might also be more concerned about a loss of diversity where the audiences of Sky News and the news and current affairs offering owned by News Corp overlap to a significant extent (for example, if a significant number of The Sun readers watch Sky News) and do not consume news from many other outlets*”.
- 2.11 In 21CF’s view, while there will be an overlap between the audiences of Sky News and News Corp (as with almost any two news providers), this provides no basis for concern (even before considering the modest share of consumption attributable to News Corp’s titles and Sky News<sup>5</sup>). For the reasons explained in 21CF’s initial submission, the Transaction will not lead to alignment between these

<sup>3</sup> See in particular paragraphs 4.31 – 4.36 of 21CF’s initial submission, and, in relation to the articulation of this theory of harm in Ofcom’s report to the Secretary of State, paragraphs 2.8-2.9 and 5.54-5.55 of Annex 1 to that submission.

<sup>4</sup> See paragraphs 4.26 to 4.34.

<sup>5</sup> See paragraphs 4.23 to 4.28 of 21CF’s initial submission on media plurality.

outlets, so even a person obtaining news from Sky News and News Corp would not experience a reduction in the diversity of viewpoints. That aside, given the reach of other news outlets (including the BBC), it is highly likely that almost anyone who consumes news from both Sky News and News Corp also consumes news from other sources.

- 2.12 Evidence for this can be found in Ofcom’s news consumption surveys. Looking at the data for the 2013 survey (the most recent survey for which Ofcom published the full respondent-level data), of the 2862 respondents, only *one* consumed news from both Sky and News and no other source. (This in part reflects the fact that 79% of all respondents consumed news from the BBC.) This degree of overlap does not suggest plurality concerns. Rather, it suggests that, post-Transaction, almost everyone who consumes news from at least two sources now will still consume news from at least two entirely unconnected sources post-Transaction.

Paragraph 44 – trust in news outlets

- 2.13 At paragraph 44, the Issues Statement says that the CMA “*might have a greater concern about a loss of diversity if Sky News or one or more of New [sic] Corp’s news and current affairs offerings has a strong reputation for integrity and trustworthiness, such that any reduction in diversity could have a more significant impact on news consumption*”.
- 2.14 In considering the potential relevance of providers’ reputation for trustworthiness, it is important that the CMA should take a consistent approach. The CMA should consider not only whether Sky News or one or more of News Corp’s offerings has a particularly strong position in this regard, but also take into account evidence indicating that readers of some of News Corp’s titles – the *Sun* and the *Sun on Sunday* – trust those titles less. This in part reflects these titles’ focus on lighter content such as celebrity gossip, rather than detailed and authoritative coverage of key political issues. It also reflects the stories readers choose to consume from these titles – on the day of the Brexit vote, for example, the six most read news stories on the Sun’s website were soft news (on topics such as Glastonbury and Michael Jackson). The Sun’s front page splash on Brexit only ranked #7. As such, even on the hypothesis that more trusted outlets are more important for plurality than less trusted outlets, the effects in terms of the overall importance of the news outlets relevant to the Transaction may be neutral, or indicate a lesser degree of importance than other metrics might suggest.
- 2.15 For similar reasons, the CMA should also consider the degree of trust in other news outlets. As set out in Annex 2 to 21CF’s initial submission on media plurality, there is evidence that multiple other outlets across media enjoy higher trust than Sky News, including the BBC, the Guardian and the Telegraph.<sup>6</sup>
- 2.16 Further, the CMA should consider the reasons *why* a given news source is trusted, and whether trust would continue in the event external influence were exercised over the relevant outlet’s output. In the case of Sky News, trust is likely to be linked to a reputation for impartiality – a quality which UK audiences expect from broadcast news. To the extent influence were exercised over Sky News’ output, resulting in a departure from rigorous impartiality, this would not only contravene regulatory requirements, but undermine that very trust in Sky News and drive viewers to switch to other channels. For these reasons, as noted in 21CF’s initial submission on media plurality, attempting to exert influence would be self-defeating.

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<sup>6</sup> See Figure 28.

**Observations on theory of harm 2***Paragraphs 45 – 47 – relevance of influence and “perceived influence”*

- 2.17 Paragraphs 45 – 47 of the Issues Statement set out a second theory of harm, concerning whether the Transaction “*will provide the MFT and, by proxy, the Murdoch family, with increased influence over public opinion or the political agenda, taking into account the level of plurality that remains following the Transaction*”.
- 2.18 As noted above, an increase in one media owner’s influence cannot in itself justify an adverse public interest finding. As the Issues Statement recognises, the relevant question is whether the Transaction would result in insufficient plurality. For the reasons set out in 21CF’s initial submission on media plurality, the Transaction will not increase the influence of the MFT.<sup>7</sup> But even were it to do so, this should not be of concern if there remains a sufficient range and variety of voices within the wider media landscape, as 21CF would submit is the case.
- 2.19 Paragraph 46 of the Issues Statement states that: “*We note that even if influence over public opinion is not exercised in practice, a perceived ability to exercise such influence could be sufficient to give some leverage over the political agenda... the ability of the MFT to potentially exercise its influence in relation to selected issues may still affect media plurality under this theory of harm*”.
- 2.20 It is far from obvious how any media owner, merely by having an increased ‘perceived ability to exercise influence’ – and without actually exercising influence over public opinion – could produce effects of such magnitude as to render the UK cross-media landscape insufficiently plural. It is essential that in carrying out an evidence-based and impartial review of the Transaction, the CMA’s judgment should rest on verifiable evidence. 21CF would submit that an increase in the ‘perceived ability to exercise influence’ is simply too vague and subjective a criterion to provide a rational basis for an adverse public interest finding.
- 2.21 This is particularly so having regard to the Phase II evidential standard, which requires that an adverse finding be made only if the Transaction may be *expected* to operate against the public interest (i.e. on the balance of probabilities, it will do so). Moreover, such a conclusion must be supported by cogent and relevant evidence. Given the problems inherent in measuring ‘perceived influence’ objectively – and the even greater challenge of measuring the change in perceived influence as a result of the transaction – it is difficult to see how adequate evidence could be adduced in this regard.
- 2.22 In any event, in considering this theory of harm, it is important that the CMA should focus on recent evidence. The media landscape has changed rapidly and dramatically, and a number of trends (largely linked to the shift of consumption online) have eroded the influence of owners over news outlets and news outlets over citizens.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, since any existing influence of the MFT must relate to its interests in News Corp, a newspaper publisher (as 21CF has no UK news outlets), it is particularly relevant that print news readership has dropped precipitously in recent years, with the *Sun*’s readership falling more steeply than any other national or leading regional title,<sup>9</sup> and that News Corp’s newspapers perform weakly online relative to other titles (meaning that the decline in print readership has not been offset by online readership).<sup>10</sup> As such, supposed evidence of influence from even a few years ago is highly unlikely to be relevant now.
- 2.23 Should the CMA wish to consider how the influence of the MFT is perceived (despite the points set out above), it is relevant to note the widespread perception amongst commentators that the 2017

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<sup>7</sup> See paragraphs 4.31 to 4.36.

<sup>8</sup> See paragraph 4.38 of 21CF’s initial submission on media plurality and sections 7 and 8 of Annex 2 to that submission.

<sup>9</sup> See Figure 8 of Annex 2 to 21CF’s initial submission on media plurality.

<sup>10</sup> See Figure 14 and accompanying text of Annex 2 to 21CF’s initial submission on media plurality.

General Election showed that neither the tabloid press, nor specifically the titles owned by News Corp, were able to exert influence effectively. Numerous examples supporting this point were provided in Annexes 1 and 2 to 21CF's initial submission on media plurality.<sup>11</sup> Further examples are provided as Annex 1 to this submission.

### **Regulatory requirements as a 'mitigating factor'**

- 2.24 Paragraph 49 ("*Mitigating factors*") of the Issues Statement sets out the CMA's intention to "*consider whether there are any factors, including regulatory constraints or internal plurality considerations, that might mitigate any potential effects on media plurality. These include, but are not limited to, the role that regulatory requirements such as the Ofcom Broadcasting Code play as a constraint on editorial control.*"
- 2.25 21CF welcomes the CMA's recognition of the need to consider regulatory constraints in assessing the Transaction's effects on media plurality. However, 21CF would respectfully suggest that treating these as a potential 'mitigating factor' tends to underplay their importance.
- 2.26 As well as exerting an important constraint in its own right, the UK regulatory regime underpins a strong culture of editorial independence. This has created deeply-rooted audience expectations that broadcast news be independent and impartial. In combination, these factors mean that, as noted above, any attempt to exercise influence through broadcast news would be self-defeating (and also highly visible).
- 2.27 Accordingly, the impartiality requirements of the Broadcasting Code, together with the associated newsroom culture and audience expectations, go directly to the plausibility of each theory of harm.<sup>12</sup> That is the primary context in which they should be considered.

## **3. THE BROADCASTING STANDARDS CONSIDERATION**

- 3.1 In relation to the broadcasting standards public interest consideration, the Issues Statement indicates that the CMA intends to consider not only the parties' record of compliance with broadcasting standards in the UK, but also their compliance record in other fields of regulation and in other jurisdictions. 21CF welcomes the Issues Statement's recognition that in doing so, the CMA "*will need to assess the extent to which the record of compliance in one field of regulation can read across into another*", and the extent to which such matters "*are relevant to assessing a commitment to broadcasting standards*". The Issues Statement states that "*this represents an appropriate point from which to start our analysis*".<sup>13</sup>
- 3.2 In order for the review to proceed in a focused and expeditious manner, 21CF would submit that the CMA should form a view as to the relevance of, and evidentiary weighting that should be given to, matters outside the field of UK broadcasting regulation at an early stage. In 21CF's submission (which is consistent with the advice of the expert regulator, Ofcom, during Phase I), the correct analysis is that such matters can be only of indirect relevance, and only insofar as they give rise to an identifiable risk in terms of Sky's future compliance with UK broadcasting standards.<sup>14</sup> (As noted in 21CF's initial submission, Ofcom considered wider corporate governance matters comprehensively in the context of its review of whether Sky would remain fit and proper to hold broadcasting licences under full ownership by 21CF – which concluded that Sky would remain fit and proper.<sup>15</sup>)

<sup>11</sup> Paragraphs 5.36 to 5.48 of Annex 1; section 8 of Annex 2.

<sup>12</sup> This was recognised by the Competition Commission in *Sky/ITV* (see paragraph 5.75).

<sup>13</sup> Paragraphs 53 to 56.

<sup>14</sup> See further paragraphs 2.4 to 2.7 of 21CF's initial submission on broadcasting standards.

<sup>15</sup> Paragraphs 2.4 to 2.7 and 6.1 to 6.2.

3.3 Conversely, 21CF would submit that the most relevant evidence is 21CF's record of compliance with UK broadcasting standards, which Ofcom considers good and in line with other comparable broadcasters,<sup>16</sup> as well as the fact that, as Sky itself has noted, 21CF's current CEO, James Murdoch, has been CEO and Chairman of Sky during the period in which Sky developed and maintained its record of compliance with UK broadcasting standards, which Ofcom considers particularly good.<sup>17</sup>

**Allen & Overy LLP**  
**24 October 2017**

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<sup>16</sup> See further section 4 of 21CF's initial submission on broadcasting standards.

<sup>17</sup> Paragraph 4.7(b) of Sky's initial submission.



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# Articles

## FT: Fake news in the post-factual age

The Financial Times

Lionel Barber

16 September 2017

Thank you for that kind introduction, and thank you for the invitation to speak at the Oxford alumni festival, a most prestigious gathering.

From the day I graduated from Teddy Hall, in the summer of 1978, I have been in the news business.

My father, Frank, left school at 14 and started as a copy boy at the Leeds Weekly Citizen. He later made it to Fleet Street and a top job at the BBC World Service.

Frank Barber spawned a family of journalists, all of whom went to Oxford. My twin, Stephen, is a banker and inveterate letter writer to newspapers. My brother Tony joined Reuters and the Independent and now works at the Financial Times.

My own journey into journalism was more circumspect. At Oxford, a young man by the name of Mark Thompson rejected an article I had composed for Isis magazine. Now I understand why people complain about editorial bias at the BBC.

The Barbbers have always considered journalism not just as a profession but as a vocation. To be employed as a journalist is a privilege but it also confers a special obligation: to attend to the facts and to pursue the truth.

This is why I am so concerned about the rise of fake news. We'll come to definitions in a minute. For the moment, let me say this:

Fake news damages public trust in news media.

Fake news undermines public confidence in our democratic discourse.

Fake news exacerbates economic pressures facing quality news organisations.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, fake news highlights issues of responsibility and regulation in our fast-evolving media ecosystem.

Now, fake news is hardly a new problem. As my old colleague John Lloyd, co-founder of the Reuters institute here at Oxford, wrote in the literary pages of the weekend FT earlier this year: "Lies, seduction, persuasion, flattery, and hypocrisy have always attended public life; alternative facts and fake news have been part of the feedstock of politics and journalism for centuries."

My own fake news item of choice comes from ancient Rome: the dodgy dossier obtained by Octavian which he used to discredit his imperial rival Mark Antony.

Octavian claimed that a document in his possession was Mark Antony's last will and testament. It appeared to confirm that Antony intended to leave legacies to his three children with Cleopatra, queen of Egypt. These gifts included large pieces of Roman-held territory in the Mediterranean. Octavian made the document widely available by persuading the Senate to issue a decree that was posted in the Forum. It was later dispatched via messengers throughout the empire. Not quite as effective as social media, but still a successful political stitch-up, circa 33BC. The rest, as the future Caesar Augustus might have said, is history.

Let me clarify one matter: fake news is not the same as mistaken reporting or lazy journalism that requires correction. Matthew D'Ancona has it right in his new book, *Post-Truth*. Fake news is the deliberate

presentation of falsehood as fact. Now the motivation may be political influence or financial return — or both.

My last example is literary: Honore de Balzac's denunciation of the trade of journalism in his great novel *Lost Illusions*. Written between 1837 and 1843, the novel portrays theatre reviewers as hired assassins and actresses who pay for disparaging write-ups because: "Silence is what they fear most of all." Polemics, laments one young writer, build a pedestal for celebrities.

What makes the pernicious phenomenon of fake news qualitatively and quantitatively different from the past is that technology — via search engines and social media platforms — has offered an unprecedented opportunity to spread it in real time and at scale.

The world had a foretaste of the power of modern technology in harness with fake news early last century.

On the evening of October 30 1938, a young actor and future director, Orson Welles, broadcast *The War of the Worlds*, an episode in the American radio anthology series *The Mercury Theatre on Air*.

The episode was an adaptation of HG Wells' science fiction novel *The War of the Worlds*. Welles' production became famous — correction, infamous. As narrator he used a news bulletin format to report a Martian landing in New Jersey, culminating in an invasion of New York. The radio broadcast that Sunday evening triggered hysteria and, some say, mass panic. Whatever the precise size of the programme's audience, the subsequent controversy secured Orson Welles' future as a dramatist.

Sadly, today's fake news equivalents lack the bravura and imagination of the man who later directed and starred in the movie *Citizen Kane*, a great movie incidentally about the newspaper business; but what these so-called news reports miss in style, they fully make up in reach.

Take, for example, the non-existent *Denver Guardian* which published a story on the suicide of an FBI agent suspected of leaking Hillary Clinton's emails. It was shared up to 100 times a minute on Facebook.

Another case involves "Pizzagate", the conspiracy theory that there is a global paedophile ring involving senior Democratic politicians, a set of food-related code words and a string of pizza parlours.

Edgar Maddison Walsh, a 28-year-old father of two, was arrested in Washington DC last December after firing an assault rifle into a pizza restaurant. Court documents said that as a concerned father he decided to drive six hours from his home to the restaurant and investigate himself (naturally shooting first and asking questions later).

And here's the killer fact about Pizzagate: a survey from YouGov and *The Economist* found that 17 per cent of Hillary Clinton supporters and 46 per cent of Donald Trump voters believe elements of the bizarre conspiracy theory are actually true.

So what is going on?

First, I believe the rise of fake news reflects a general decline in the terms of political debate and a related erosion of public confidence in our institutions.

Right now, the environment is uniquely conducive to fake news because:

We live in a world where there are no accepted facts.

A world where facts are secondary to opinion.

A world where the media landscape has fragmented.

A world which has become intensely polarised.

This is particularly true in western democracies, especially America. People who self-identify on the right are three times as likely to mistrust the media as those on the left (because they feel they are not represented).

At the same time, it is instructive to ask people if they trust their own sources of news.

Users of the Fox News and the Washington Post had similar scores of 53 per cent, according to Nic Newman who presented this year's Reuters Institute's Digital News Report.

Second, we are witnessing the consistent advancement of what might politely be described as alternative facts. President Trump himself is the arch exponent.

The New York Times has published a definitive guide to Mr Trump's falsehoods, including outright lies or demonstratively false statements, as well as a broader list covering exaggerations or misleading statements. It is staggering in its frequency and range.

Now every president has shaded the truth or told occasional whoppers, but there is no obvious precedent for the US commander-in-chief, the nominal leader of the democratic west, to spend so much time on the wrong side of the truth.

Outright falsehoods range from Mr Trump's position on the invasion of Iraq (He was for, then he was against it); the murder rate in America; the vetting of immigrants to the US; and the charge that President Barack Obama ordered his campaign HQ to be wiretapped, where there is no evidence to support such a claim.

Perhaps Mr Trump's most serious untruth is that "millions of people" voted illegally in the 2016 election, a charge that directly challenges the legitimacy of the electoral system which put him in the White House.

And yet: this is the same individual who virtually every day on Twitter or live TV accuses the mainstream media such as the New York Times, CNN and the Washington Post of fake news.

Mr Trump's war on the media makes Richard Nixon's tactics look tame by comparison. His goal is to neuter the independent journalism which offers one way — to be sure, not the only way — to hold power to account.

In so doing, Mr Trump offers succour to all the likes of Messrs Erdogan and Putin whose world views are directly antithetical to the principles of free speech and pluralism which America has defended for more than 200 years.

(I should add for the record here that President Trump was a good deal more courteous when I interviewed him earlier this year in the Oval Office, with two FT colleagues).

"Thank you for making time to see the FT, Mr President," I said, by way of introduction.

"That's OK," replied Mr Trump, "you lost, I won."

Now, before we become too complacent here in the shadow of the dreaming spires, let's not forget the pack of lies and half-truths which the Leave and Remain campaign propagated during the Brexit referendum campaign.

By my tally, the Leavers pursued the most egregious falsehoods.

The £350m weekly savings from Britain's budget contributions to the EU, to be reallocated to the National Health Service.

(No mention of the likely €50bn-plus net bill to settle our obligations once the UK concludes divorce proceedings with Brussels.)

Or the charge — by Leavers — that Turkey was about to join the EU, letting loose a flood of migrants into the UK.

Remainers were not much better. Inspired by George Osborne's Treasury, they ran a series of scare stories about the UK economy dropping off a cliff in the event the government lost the case for staying in the EU.

(Now, Brexit may still inflict a heavy cost on the economy, but as we now know: not overnight. Putting sole emphasis on the economy rather than the political case for membership was also misleading and misguided. but that's another story . . .)

The third factor in the rise of fake news is the fragmentation of news media. This is a phenomenon which I have witnessed first-hand since I became editor the Financial Times in 2005.

One of the relatively few things I share in common with Rupert Murdoch, whom I once worked for, is a love of print journalism. I like the feel, the serendipity of discovering interesting news and views in a well-designed, well-written newspaper.

And I don't happen to believe that print will disappear anytime soon, at least among established and trusted brands like the FT, New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Washington Post.

But the fact is that newspapers have been in decline for at least a decade, and the trend is only likely to continue, driven by the digital revolution.

The internet has dramatically lowered the barriers to entry in modern media and that has led in turn to dramatic shifts in consumer reading habits.

Newcomers such as Axios, BuzzFeed, Politico, Twitter and Vice Media have created new forms of storytelling. Others such as Ezra Klein's Vox and Bill Keller's Marshall Project specialise in political data analysis and monitoring of the US justice system.

Technology has vastly empowered individuals via the dissemination in real time of news, data and moving image. Everyone has a voice; everyone has the potential to be a citizen journalist.

But technology has also flattened the digital plain, creating the illusion that all content is equal. It has made it possible for everyone to produce and distribute content that looks equally credible. And when people think all content is equal, they assume that it's equally biased or credible. Their distrust encompasses everything they disagree with. Facts no longer matter in this parallel universe of alternative facts.

So what do I mean by this parallel universe?

Here is Scottie Nell Hughes, a Trump supporter and CNN commentator during last year's presidential campaign. "So one thing that's been interesting this campaign season to watch is that people say facts are facts — they're not real facts. Everyone has a way — it's kind of like looking at ratings or looking at a glass half-full of water. Every body has a way of interpreting them to be the truth or not true. There's no such thing, unfortunately, any more, as facts."

Well, unfortunate is certainly one way of putting it . . .

What Ms Hughes has correctly identified are "filter bubbles", self-reinforcing information channels made all the more dangerous when that information is false or inflammatory, that is to say, fake news.

Now, the news business has always catered to different cohorts of readers, often with opposing political points of view. Think Daily Telegraph and Guardian. And fragmentation leading to polarisation goes back 30 years when the US government deregulated cable TV, offering an opening which Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes brilliantly exploited with the launch of Fox News.

The key point to grasp today is the way the new ecosystem of digital media distribution has encouraged these self-reinforcing channels to flourish,

In the UK, almost 30 per cent of people use Facebook as a news source, according to the 2016 Reuters Digital News Report.

That figure is growing, and is heading toward the 40 per cent of US adults who use Facebook as a news source, according to a Pew Research report in 2016. Overall, some 62 per cent of American adults access news on social media.

Yet these networks are deeply flawed news outlets. According to a BuzzFeed News analysis, engagement with fake news on Facebook increased dramatically in the final three months of the campaign.

Top performing election-related news stories on Facebook generated more engagement — loosely defined via social media — than the top stories from major news outlets such as the New York Times, Washington Post, Huffington Post, NBC News and others.

US intelligence agencies have evidence, too, that Russia, using thousands of covert human agents and robot computer programmes, spread disinformation referencing the stolen campaign emails of Hillary Clinton, amplifying their impact exponentially.

This is the subject of separate congressional and independent counsel investigations into Russian interference in the US election which includes the bombshell question: did the Trump campaign actively collude with the Russians in the sabotage operation?

Regarding the 2016 campaign: Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's chief executive, has argued that the scale of fake news has been exaggerated, amounting to less than one per cent of what people actually see in the Facebook news feed.

But this misses the point. While the scale may be debatable, the sophistication of the fake news operation is not.

Sensational stories are now being crafted to maximise audience and traffic. Data analytics are being deployed to identify the subjects and themes that appeal to thousands of subgroups according to defining characteristics such as religion, political beliefs or taste in TV shows and music.

Algorithms can determine these groups' hot-button issues and identify "followers", pinpointing those most susceptible to suggestion. The network effect allows the news generator to capitalise most effectively on the scale, distribution and sharing systems provided by Google, Facebook and other platforms. Equally important is the role of "Bots" — automated systems designed to imitate people — which have become a powerful force in driving the fake news phenomenon.

Now, the quality of the most popular Facebook fake news items leaves plenty to be desired:

"Woman arrested for defecating on boss's desk after winning the lottery", courtesy of thevalleyreport.com with 1,765,000 shares, comments or likes.

Or try this, courtesy of empireherald.com, "Cinnamon Roll Can Explodes inside Man's Butt During Shoplifting Incident". This garnered 765,000 comparative shares and likes.

I agree: sharing is not believing.

But what compounds the problem is the way audiences — and therefore ad revenues — have shifted from print to digital platforms. An estimated 90 per cent of all new digital advertising goes to Google and Facebook, according to Digital Content Next, the media trade group.

Big Tech has achieved an unprecedented dominance in the advertising market, once the lifeblood of newspapers and news organisations.

Now, the FT is the first to tip our pink hat to innovative technology and new business models. Newspapers who failed to adapt to the digital revolution faced a choice: adapt or die. The FT survived — and thrived.

Over the past 10 years, we transformed our own business model, charging for content, raising prices and building a subscription business which allowed us to steadily reduce our dependence on ad revenue.

As a result, we have now developed a base of digital subscribers which accounts for more than 75 per cent of our worldwide readership of 870,000. And advertising revenues account for less than half of our overall business.

Yet the stark fact is that the new media ecosystem is far from a level playing field — either from a regulatory or commercial standpoint. Fake news highlights and exacerbates the problem.

Sensationalist stories manufactured by fake news operators capitalise on the automated advertising monetisation platforms provided by search and social media — and they divert revenues from real publishers.

As the FT wrote in evidence earlier this year to a parliamentary committee investigating the fake news phenomenon: “It creates a Gresham’s Law for media — with bad stories forcing out the good and funnelling scarce advertising to fake news producers.”

What sticks in the collective craw is that news publishers — especially in the UK where the libel laws are far more onerous — bear the considerable expense and risk relating to accuracy and fairness in the post-Leveson era.

As my one-time Oxford nemesis and now good friend Mark Thompson argued in a speech in Detroit this year: in professional news organisations, you can see who wrote the story and if you think it’s inaccurate or biased, you know who the editor is, and the publisher.

Mark, now CEO of the New York Times, added, pointedly: with the social media platforms and grand aggregators like Facebook and Google, “the ultimate provenance of content, and the algorithms that decide what we see and don’t see, lack this clarity.”

So what is to be done about the fake news phenomenon and the collateral damage to quality journalism?

First, the dominant technology sites must recognise they need to take more responsibility for the content which appears on their sites, not just fake news but also hate speech and extremist propaganda.

Second, they must drop the pretence that they are simply platforms and channels for publishers’ rather than media companies themselves. They have fast become the main source of news for significant portions of society. The reality is that they are influencing or even deciding via algorithms what information is consumed.

In this respect, it may be time to re-examine Big Tech’s privileged status under section 230 of the Communications and Decency Act crafted in 1996. This has allowed the tech firms exemption from liability for nearly all kinds of illegal content or actions perpetrated by their users (apart from copyright violations).

As my colleague, Rana Foroohar has written: this amounts to a get-out-of-jail free card allowing Big Tech both to remove or publish content without assuming liability. They are censor and publisher combined. Twenty years on from the original act, it is worth asking the question whether Big Tech should still enjoy that privilege.

In fairness, both the leadership at Facebook and Google appear to have recognised the gravity of the problem. In April, Google announced plans to improve the quality and reliability of its search results, following criticism that showed results for sites denying the Holocaust.

Google is now hiring humans — we used to call them editors — to train the company’s search algorithms to spot low quality and false content. Google users can also report when the Autocomplete feature yields poor results.

Facebook is also deploying a “related articles” feature which appears alongside popular articles, including made-up news articles. This is designed to limit the damage of fake news without entering into outright censorship.

Both Facebook and Google are also in talks with major news publishers to support paid-for content — to my mind, the best way for quality journalism to survive and thrive, barring philanthropy.

Among the measures under consideration are how to flag trusted sources to users (though trust, as with beauty, is usually in the eyes of the beholder).

But the uncomfortable fact remains that paid-for content is penalised under Google's search algorithms which prioritise free content, perforate pay walls and champion scale — though there are signs that Google is re-examining the terms of engagement of "first click free".

Similarly, Facebook favours free content through the terms and formats of its content such as Instant Articles, while the branding of publishers' stories on both sites makes it hard for readers to distinguish between trusted titles and fake news.

My firm belief is that it is time to level the playing field between Big Tech and the real news business.

Ladies and gentlemen, we may not have entered the post-factual era — that is a matter to be debated and determined by philosophers. But we are dealing with the serious threat of fake news.

This is a phenomenon which present a challenge to the business of serious journalism.

We who pursue that business must rededicate ourselves to an old task: that of aggregating and verifying sources.

We must go beyond providing the first intimation of significant events, the first analysis of those events; the first commentary on their meaning.

We must endeavour to put the imprimatur on those sources, assessing them for reliability, quality and context before passing them on to readers.

At the FT, we have a cast-iron rule: better to be right than first.

This is vital when opinion too often trumps fact. We need to keep the two separate.

In so doing, I believe we will not only survive and thrive as quality news brands.

We will have won a small victory in our daily battle against falsehood and fake news.

Thank you.



## FT: The Sun sets on tabloids' political influence in Essex heartlands

The Financial Times

David Bond

10 August 2017

In Canvey Island, newspaper is loved for sport and gossip but young readers go online

Carole Oliver moved to Canvey Island in Essex from London's East End 40 years ago, and has bought the Sun for just as long.

"I get it every Friday and Saturday," she says, drinking tea outside an amusement arcade. "But when it comes to politics I don't really take any notice. You can't always trust what you read."

With an average daily circulation of 1.5m, the Sun is the UK's biggest-selling newspaper, renowned for its headline puns, celebrity gossip and pictures of semi-naked glamour girls.

But since Rupert Murdoch bought the title in 1969, it has also enjoyed a reputation for making the British political weather, famously boasting on its front page after the 1992 general election that it was the "Sun wot won it".

Last year's Brexit vote was widely seen as an even bigger triumph for the rightwing press. The Sun's editor, Tony Gallagher, told the Guardian after the vote: "So much for the waning power of the print media."

And yet at this year's general election, the paper's strident campaigning against Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn appeared to have less of an impact.

According to YouGov, 52 per cent of the paper's readers did not bother to vote, prompting some critics to call time on the era of tabloid political dominance.

"Bullying front pages are a turn-off to voters," tweeted former Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger. "It's not a game any more. Grow up and do some real journalism."

One Sun executive confided that the newspaper was still "paying a heavy price" for that 1992 front page but added management were shocked by YouGov's findings.

"I was horrified," the executive said. "It was depressing that 52 per cent didn't vote. But then what was Theresa May offering Sun readers? We didn't misread the election. It was a dud campaign."

While Mr Murdoch is routinely accused of trying to use the Sun to sway politicians, some of its journalists dismiss suggestions that what they write can influence elections. They insist the paper's main purpose is to reflect the views of its readers rather than shape them.

For the Sun's editors, the views of the people of Canvey Island matter. More copies of the Sun are sold per person in this part of the south-east than in any other part of Britain.

Bhavesh Odedara, the manager of Nisa News, a newsagent on the island, said the Sun outsells its nearest rival, the Daily Mail, by 2.5 times at his shop.

Canvey Island sits in the Castle Point constituency, where 72.7 per cent of constituents voted for Brexit in last year's EU referendum and Conservative MP Rebecca Harris increased her majority in June.

But many people the Financial Times spoke to in the town last week said the Sun's staunchly pro-Tory and anti-EU line was failing to resonate. Most said they bought the paper for its sport or television and show business coverage, not its politics.

"Canvey Islanders are not easily swayed when it comes to politics," said Maurice Richmond, a former reporter for the island's newspaper, the Canvey Echo. "They see themselves as islanders, are very independent and know what they want. They don't see the Sun as the Bible."

But while few Canvey residents would admit to being swayed by the Sun, many expressed views on Brexit and Mr Corbyn that aligned closely with those of the paper.

"I would have loved to have voted Labour," said David O'Dee, a retired maintenance engineer who had just bought a copy of the Sun on the town's high street. "But Corbyn's an idiot."

Across the UK, there are other signs that traditional newspapers have not lost their political punch.

A YouGov poll published last week found that 45 per cent of the British public still gathered its political news during the election campaign from a newspaper. Seven per cent of respondents said the Sun influenced their voting choice, while 8 per cent said the Mail persuaded them which way to vote.

Some industry experts have argued that the Sun and the Mail are more powerful than the polls imply — and that their aggressive anti-Corbyn message merely backfired in June, encouraging leftwingers to vote in defiance of the mainstream media.

"The more the Sun, the Mail and others turned on Jeremy Corbyn, the more he became an anti-establishment figure," said George Pascoe-Watson, a former Sun political editor and now chief adviser at the PR firm Portland. "They actually made his case more attractive to Corbynistas."

But the more pressing problem for the Sun and the other newspapers is that younger people are more likely to get their news online.

According to last week's YouGov research, half of 18- to 24-year-olds said social media was influential in the election. Just 15 per cent said the same for newspapers.

The Sun, the Daily Mirror and the Daily Star "red tops" all saw print sales fall more than 10 per cent year-on-year in June, despite the general election.

The Sun, which grew its online audience of people between the ages of 15 and 24 by 1.4m, to 4.5m in the past year, according to ComScore, has started producing political coverage specifically for social media platforms, such as Facebook and Snapchat. The tone of some of its online-only political content is less partisan, with an emphasis on humour and explaining policies.

But experts argue that attracting clicks and shares online is not the same as influencing the British political agenda.

"When the Sun publishes a front page it knows it has control over what people in Canvey Island and elsewhere read," said Charlie Beckett, a media professor at the London School of Economics. "When Sun online does something political, it has no real control over how that is shared."

"If they want to have more impact, especially in a social media environment where there are lots of shouty people, they are going to have to become even more strident online."

## FT: Sky shareholders give Rupert's waning influence a vote of confidence

The Financial Times

By Matthew Vincent, Lombard

30 June 2017

Rupert Murdoch would be a better media mogul if he weren't so enamoured of tabloid hacks. This is not a pitch for the Guardian's "Comment is Free" page (not quite enough about gender/identity/Glastonbury politics). It's merely an observation on the ability of Mr Murdoch's red-top papers to queer the pitch for his TV deals.

A £8bn bid for Sky in 2011 had been cleared by the government and was going ahead . . . until it emerged that his News of the World tabloid felt a need to hack the phones of murder victims' parents and Kerry Katona's boyfriend.

His £11.7bn bid for Sky may be referred to competition authorities by a minister who once served in a strong and stable government . . . until the Sun tabloid urged voters "Don't chuck Britain in the Cor-bin". That ensured that they did the opposite: Jeremy Corbyn, the opposition leader, won enough votes to deny the government a majority, and authority.

So a politically weakened minister feels "minded" to order a probe into media plurality concerns - even though 21st Century Fox, the Murdoch business behind the bid, twice offered undertakings to safeguard the Sky News channel's independence. The focus of any probe will be on the Murdoch family trust's ability to influence the UK news agenda - despite 13m voters proving how little influence it actually has.

Fox shareholders appear to have reason to bemoan this tabloid ineptitude.

Analysts at RBC calculated that an approved Sky deal was worth \$4 a share - or 15 per cent - to Fox investors, based on year-one earnings accretion and a 100 per cent deal probability. But they reckoned a competition referral would cut the deal's probability to 50:50. Assuming some \$2-\$3 of that \$4 uplift was already in the price implies a 5 per cent downside if a full competition probe ensues. A delay beyond 2017 would cost the US media group £172m in special dividends.

Why, then, did Sky rise 3 per cent on the minister's "minded" decision?

Might it be that investors read between the lines of the regulatory report sent to the minister? It said Fox's undertakings would be assessed on whether they "prevent, remedy or mitigate" plurality concerns. Currently they only "mitigate". But Fox has been given until July 14 to make them sufficiently remedial or preventative.

With the minister already deeming Fox a "fit and proper" licence holder, the market thinks it can do this - and the referral, like a Sun headline or the Guardian's Comment page, is politically expedient window dressing.

## Guardian: Forget Murdoch. It's social media that's really pulling the strings

The Guardian

Peter Preston

2 July 2017

As Ofcom opens another chapter in the Murdoch bid saga, the European commission is looking forward, at Facebook and Google, not back

There's a certain weary, and very British, circularity to the saga of Sky TV (episode 97). A "quasi-judicial" culture secretary – once Jeremy Hunt, now Karen Bradley – arrives in the Commons looking distinctly queasy-judicial. She recites long chunks of an Ofcom verdict on a new Murdoch bid to buy the whole shooting match that either strings out the process or stops the clock yet again. Bradley, it seems, is minded to accept the Ofcom verdict on Sky and media plurality. Unless the Swizz Family Rupert give further binding oaths, she'll refer the merger to the Competition and Markets Authority.

Which is where that very British bit comes in. For who's chairman of the CMA, the mighty regulator (phase two) that will examine the findings of Ofcom, the mighty regulator (phase one)? Why, it's our old friend David Currie, now Lord C of Marylebone – the first and very dominant chairman of Ofcom. This parcel will duly pass back and forth inside a closed little circle of experts and chums as further time passes by. Of-comings and goings.

We're a long, long way from government doing Murdoch's bidding at the snap of an Australian-American finger; and an even longer way – see the last election – from Murdoch being able to deliver much that helps Theresa May at vote-losing times. But obfuscation is still the order of the day.

What comes next? Perhaps a quick mitigation deal that Ofcom and Bradley can accept, so letting the deal go ahead fast. More likely, a six-month wait while the CMA rakes over the same coals. Or, just possibly, an eruption that calls the whole thing off.

When the Murdochs, père et fils, plonked £11.7bn on the table last March to pick up the 61% of Sky they don't already own, they may not have seen many storm clouds gathering. But only last week Sky unveiled a radical shake-up of its sports channels, attempting to counter a significant slump in viewing and a clear slowing of subscription growth. Add Netflix and Amazon Prime in to that pot of trouble, plus the necessity to make big, expensive Rivas to compete, and the good UK times for Sky may be over.

Will Rupert – and especially James – want to pay top dollar next year when the CMA makes up its mind? Will there be any enthusiasm for spending more and more to keep the drag-anchor of Sky News in business? Will newspapers – even the loss-making Sun – be safe from sale or shake-out?

For nothing, in this helter-skelter world, is proof against the gales of change. Of course the toxic memory of phone-hacking lingers. Of course past wheeling and dirty dealing rankles. But there were, on both sides of the House, useful efforts to look forward, not back to the corruptions of 2004-07.

The European commission – the selfsame commission that waved the Sky bid through, as it happens – fined Google £2.1bn for finagling its shopping searches last week. And as for its giant rival, consider this gem from Adweek. Facebook "is introducing a new household audience feature that will let brands direct ads to entire families or to specific people within a household. The tool ... could help aim ads at people who influence purchasing decisions and other ads to the people making the actual purchases."

We're glutted with examples of fake news and election tampering on social media round the globe. We can see how search engines can be manipulated. We watch blankly as algorithms send different messages – on politics as well as shopping – to members of the same family while traditional newsgathering (local or national) slithers into debt.

What would the CMA say about plurality – or transparency – in the Google and Facebook age? We don't know, because we haven't asked yet. We're still playing weary wait-and-see in the ancient halls of the demon king.

# New Statesman: Thanks to social media, ordinary people can now influence elections more than tabloids

New Statesman

Amelia Tait

19 June 2017

The Conservatives spent £1.2m on online adverts – but the internet came up with anti-Theresa May memes for free.

Who or what spread the single most influential message of the 2017 general election? Was it Britain's top-selling tabloid, the Sun, which chose 7 June to chastise us all with: "Don't chuck Britain in the Cor-bin"? Was it Facebook, home to Theresa May's £1.2m anti-Labour adverts that pleaded: "Don't risk Corbyn in charge of Brexit"? Or was it Jennifer Agnew, a 21-year-old administrative assistant from East Kilbride?

You've probably heard of the first two. Since the newspaper first claimed as much in 1992, it has been a popular idea that it's the Sun that wins elections. This year, much has been made of "dark ads" on Facebook – paid-for messages that political parties can spread across the social network, beyond the gaze of the Electoral Commission. You've probably not heard of Agnew, but you might have seen her viral tweet.

After Theresa May disclosed the "naughtiest" thing she ever did on ITV's Tonight, Agnew took to Twitter to mock the revelation. "Never have I ever ran [sic] through a field of wheat," she wrote above a picture of May drinking from a glass of water, riffing on the student party game in which one drinker confesses to a misdeed and others take a sip if they, too, are guilty. Her tweet was shared more than 24,000 times and gained an additional 60,000 "Likes".

"It was just a joke, really, but also poking fun at the difference in classes," says Agnew, whose post went on to be retweeted by the pop star Ellie Goulding. "I can't say I've ever run around in a field of wheat as a child being chased by farmers. It seems rather middle class."

On 8 June, Agnew voted for the SNP. She didn't intend for her tweet to have political ramifications but describes herself as "a big fan of Corbyn", saying: "As far as politicians go, he's honest." Yet, regardless of Agnew's intentions, her tweet was political. It was a powerful anti-May message – and it didn't cost the Labour Party a penny.

Since Barack Obama's first presidential campaign, it has been widely understood that elections are fought across social media. Algorithms, some claim, boosted the fake news that propelled Donald Trump to office. By adding like-minded people as "friends" and deleting any dissenters, we all became entrapped in filter bubbles, unable to see the 2015 election result coming.

Facebook adverts that were micro-targeted to spread specific messages to specific people helped to bolster the vote for Brexit. All of these analyses are true, but each misses the most transformational aspect of social media. You know: the actual media part.

As of December 2016, the Sun had 1,611,464 readers every day. That's a lot. But nowadays, people don't need Rupert Murdoch and a printing press to wield political influence (they do, however, still need a witty pun). According to Twitter's analytics tool, Agnew's tweet reached over 2.9 million people. Everyone now has the potential to have the reach and influence of a tabloid.

Her tweet isn't remarkable. It is merely one of thousands of viral social media posts that have spread this election, many of which generated headlines ("This Facebook comment about Jeremy Corbyn is going -viral" read one on Indy100, the Independent's sister site).

Hannah Thompson, a 24-year-old PR officer from Surrey, is another meme-maker. When the concept was introduced by Richard Dawkins, a meme was "an idea, behaviour or style that spreads from person to person within a culture". Now, it most commonly means "funny internet picture". Yet memes might be just as influential as Dawkins's original definition implied.

"I pretty much exclusively use Twitter as an avenue for my lame political jokes," says Thompson, who tweeted a zoomed-in picture of Theresa May with the caption: "Nice wheat field you've got there. Would be a shame if somebody . . . ran through it" (7,243 retweets, 22,450 Likes).

"It would be helpful if more politicians understood the 'social' element of social media," she adds. "Then, instead of spending hundreds of thousands just getting views for their posts, they can create things that actually engage people and help shift the narrative in people's minds. I was really impressed by how Labour encouraged their members and activists to share things online. Seeing posts by actual human beings, rather than a party, is way more convincing than seeing a paid-for ad."

There is a chance that, by the next election, politicians will have realised that a picture is worth a thousand words. Astro-turfing, the practice of masking the origin of a message to make it seem like a grass-roots opinion, is already common online. Advertisers frequently create profiles for fake teenagers, who then tweet about how much they "love" a product in order to make it seem popular.

After the shock election result, analysis by BuzzFeed revealed that stories published on the websites of right-leaning news-papers (such as the Daily Telegraph, the Daily Mail and the Sun) failed to reach large audiences on Facebook and Twitter. BuzzFeed's headline read: "Not even right-wingers are sharing positive stories about Theresa May on Facebook". The most shared stories on social media were pro-Corbyn.

For all of the Conservatives' power and wealth, their social media campaigns did not take off. Why? Because they weren't inherently social. Theresa May relied on pounds to push her message, while Agnew and those like her relied on people.

As one social media user put it (receiving 8,790 retweets and 19,635 Likes): "Tories spent £1,200,000 on negative anti-Jeremy Corbyn social media adverts ... And the internet came up with anti-Theresa May memes for free."

# New Statesman: Labour's success shows the political hegemony of the right-wing press is ending

New Statesman

Jasper Jackson

10 June 2017

The shift to online readership means The Sun and Daily Mail will have a much tougher time influencing who ends up in power.

Is this the election The Sun finally became the one wot lost it? The Rupert Murdoch-owned newspaper has been renowned for its ability to pick an electoral winner, indeed, to create one, for decades. It has been on the right side of every election since Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979.

Only last year the newspaper's editor Tony Gallagher crowed about the continuing power of the press after the nation voted for the Brexit his paper had pushed for. "So much for the waning power of the print media," he told the Guardian's Jane Martinson.

The Daily Mail and the Telegraph have been less consistent at picking the parliamentary victory, because they have been very consistent in backing the Conservatives. They've both backed the Tories in every election since the Second World War (except for the Mail's endorsement of a Lib-Con coalition in 1974 against, shockingly, Harold Wilson's Labour).

But while those two papers have not been on the right side of history when a candidate from the left of politics enters Number 10, there has been little doubt about their power to harm the chances of any politician they turned their sights on.

And, along with The Sun and The Daily Express, they certainly turned their sights on Jeremy Corbyn. The right-wing press, now accounting for the vast majority of UK newspapers in terms of number of titles and sales of print copies, carried out a sustained and vicious monsterring of the Labour Party and its leader, before and during the campaign.

"It rivalled the attacks on Kinnock, Scargill, Foot, and Benn, and was probably greater than all [of them]," says former Mirror editor, City university lecturer and Guardian commentator Roy Greenslade.

By rights then, Theresa May should have had the cake walk many were predicting at the start of this election. But instead, her slim majority has been eliminated while Labour made stunning gains. Corbyn may not have won a majority or overtaken the Conservatives in seats, but the electorate jumped in the opposite direction from the one the right-wing press were urging them to.

"Spending basically two weeks demonising a man, a leader, and still they don't pull off a victory for their chosen one, suggests they are out of touch, out of touch with the electorate as a whole, though not necessarily their readers," says Greenslade. "It's the end of the hegemony of news print from the right."

There are a number of factors at play in the declining political influence of the UK's newspapers, and while Corbyn was ideally suited to take advantage of them, it is mostly down to long-term trends.

Most obviously, they are simply selling fewer newspapers. Print newspaper circulation has been on a downward trajectory for decades. The Sun and The Mail, the UK's two best-selling daily newspapers, barely



break 3m copies sold. They claim many more actual readers, but we are long past the point when print newspaper reading of any kind was a regular occurrence for the majority of the population.

And then there's the fact that the audience they do have in print tend to be older. More than half The Mail's readers are over 65, as is more than 60 per cent of The Telegraph's. Even The Sun's readers are on the older side, with more than 27 per cent over 65 and a further 34 per cent over 45. If Corbyn's campaign really does turn out to have been built on increased youth vote, it will underscore the limits of newspapers with a shrinking audience of older readers.

Of course all these newspapers have digital operations - in the case of The Daily Mail's online sister title Mail Online, the largest English language news site in the world. But being part of a digital news consumer's varied diet of articles is very different to being a print reader's main, or sometimes only, source of information. And in search of digital readers, most right-wing newspapers have moved into more frivolous subject matter. It's entirely possible for a regular reader of The Mail's sidebar of shame to never see one of its Corbyn bashing front pages.

There is also evidence that the right-wing politics of the UK's newspapers simply doesn't travel well on social media. BuzzFeed News carried out a (much copied) project tracking news across social media which found that during the campaign pro-Conservative News stories were barely shared, even by right-wing readers. In fact, almost all the stories about politics that were being shared online were pro-Labour.

This is unlikely to be purely a function of age. Left-wing messages – increasing funding for nurses, pursuing peace and tolerance – are more easily presented in positive terms than the right's insistence on hard choices, austerity and security. If the "shy Tory" effect stops people telling pollsters they are planning to vote Conservative, imagine what it does when people are deciding what to share with their online network of friends and family?

Add to that the emergence of hyperpartisan, social media savvy left-wing sites – almost all active cheerleaders for Corbyn – and the right-wing press are fighting a losing battle online, at least when it comes to political messaging.

As BuzzFeed's political editor Jim Waterson put it on Twitter: "I think the Conservatives are going to have a serious media problem as audiences shift online. Currently cushioned by newspapers."

Following this election, it looks like that problem has already come home to roost, and the cushion provided by newspapers is looking pretty threadbare.

It's of course possible to overstate the declining political influence of print newspapers on the UK's politics. Theresa May will surely be hurt, both personally and politically, by the headlines following her party's embarrassing loss of seats.

Charlie Beckett, director of London School of Economics media thinktank Polis, says the furore over the Tories' "dementia tax", a story run by both left and right-wing newspapers that hurt May, shows the press still have cut through. Yet he also sees the online reaction to the front pages put out by the right-wing titles undermining their impact.

"Social media means that whenever The Sun or Mail comes out with something, there's thousands of people coming out saying 'oh go away'," he says. "People can see other people being much more sceptical. It's now cool to say 'get lost' to the mainstream press. I think generally people are much less vulnerable to that manipulation."

Whatever the combination of causes, Corbyn's success in the face of such vehement opposition from the media barons who have so successfully shaped UK politics – the Barclay Brothers, the Murdochs, the whirlwind of obscenity that is Mail editor Paul Dacre – seems hugely significant.

"It's a tipping point," says Greenslade. "No one will be able to take for granted their power again. It has leaked away, this election shows it at its lowest ebb."

It's a low watermark the right-wing press, and perhaps even the Tories, may find it very difficult to recover from.

## i: The election has been the clearest sign yet of the waning political influence of the UK press

i

Ian Burrell

10 June 2017

As he called for Theresa May's resignation on Friday morning, Jeremy Corbyn will have known that his better-than-expected election performance represented a bloody nose not just for Theresa May but for her allies in the right-wing popular press. When Mrs May called the snap election in April, the Tory-supporting papers had Corbyn's scent in their attack dog nostrils, predicting slaughter with headlines such as "Blue Murder" (The Sun) and "May Heads for Election Landslide" (The Times). The Daily Mail, with its bloodcurdling "Crush The Saboteurs", suggested the vote would be so emphatic it would allow the Prime Minister to silence "Remainers" in the House of Lords. But by the eve of the election that confidence had been weakened by a Corbyn surge. Though the news-stand declared almost unanimously for Ms May, there was a hint of desperation in the headlines. The Mail supported its "Let's Reignite British Spirit" slogan with 13 pages of vitriol directed at Corbyn and his senior colleagues.

The Sun sought to emulate its pivotal and iconic election day front pages of the past with a shot of Jezza in a trash can and the message: "Don't Chuck Britain in the Cor-bin". But its treatment had far more malice than the famous Neil Kinnock lightbulb splash of 25 years ago. Corbyn, it raged, was a "Terrorists' Friend", a "Destroyer of Jobs" and a "Marxist Extremist", among other slurs. Some Labour supporters burned copies of the paper on the streets (as was also the case with the Mail). But there is now another way to hit back. A spoof edition of the same Sun edition circulated on social media with publisher Rupert Murdoch in place of Corbyn and the headline "We Hate You And We Hate This Country". This was symptomatic of how this election played out in the media, as Labour supporters found alternative outlets to promote their messages. Since Barack Obama's successful use of social media to gain the White House in 2008 we have waited longer for these new platforms to obviously dictate the course of UK politics. But the outcome of this snap election was clearly decided online.

The Sun sought to emulate its pivotal and iconic election day front pages of the past with a shot of Jezza in a trash can and the message: "Don't Chuck Britain in the Cor-bin". But its treatment had far more malice than the famous Neil Kinnock lightbulb splash of 25 years ago. Corbyn, it raged, was a "Terrorists' Friend", a "Destroyer of Jobs" and a "Marxist Extremist", among other slurs. Some Labour supporters burned copies of the paper on the streets (as was also the case with the Mail). But there is now another way to hit back. A spoof edition of the same Sun edition circulated on social media with publisher Rupert Murdoch in place of Corbyn and the headline "We Hate You And We Hate This Country". This was symptomatic of how this election played out in the media, as Labour supporters found alternative outlets to promote their messages. Since Barack Obama's successful use of social media to gain the White House in 2008 we have waited longer for these new platforms to obviously dictate the course of UK politics. But the outcome of this snap election was clearly decided online. A striking rise of the alt-left (Pic: Getty Images) The rise of a new "alt-left" media has been striking. Jim Waterson, political editor of BuzzFeed News, has chronicled how this ideologically-connected network of blogs and websites has taught the established news industry a lesson in social media engagement. "The success of the British alt-left media is a creation of Facebook. Without the social network's enormous reach and algorithm there is no way that the sites could have reached critical mass and a core readership," Waterson has written. "Almost all the editors of such sites have a deep understanding of how to phrase headlines that will go viral on Facebook, framing topics in a far more attention-grabbing way than many mainstream outlets do." Corbyn has almost three times as many likes on Facebook as May, and he has the alt-left media, which produces not journalism so much as political marketing. The public seems to tolerate such propaganda more readily than it currently does from partisan newspapers.

## Traditional left-leaning titles can claim little credit

Thomas G Clark is a part-time English tutor from Yorkshire and author of the Another Angry Voice blog, whose skill in creating leftist content has seen him generate up to 1.5m views for a single post. “Chunky” Mark McGowan, aka “The Artist Taxi Driver”, has produced a succession of viral Tory-bashing videos filmed in the front of his cab. He has 77,000 followers on Twitter. Skwawkbox, a site run by a Merseyside office worker called Steve, appears well-connected to leading figures in the Corbyn project and is viewed with suspicion by some Labour moderates. Evolve Politics launched after Corbyn was elected Labour leader. One of its staff, Matt Turner, a student at Nottingham University, justifies its pro-Corbyn bias on the grounds that the Labour leader faces a hostile bias from the likes of The Sun. The Canary, which was founded in 2015 as a leftist online tabloid, is edited by Kerry-Anne Mendoza, author of a book called Austerity: The Demolition of the Welfare State. Traditional left-leaning titles can claim little credit for Labour’s resurgence. The Guardian and the New Statesman, just like many Labour moderate MPs, could not hide their doubts over the party leader’s appeal, and have been criticised by Corbyn supporters for supposed disloyalty. The Independent, now digital only, has most obviously reached out to Corbyn’s followers on Facebook. This election has been the clearest sign yet of the waning political influence of the UK press. At the EU Referendum, just a year ago, it was seen as having played a significant role in the Leave victory, but on 8 June it palpably failed to put Jezza in the bin.

## Independent: The right-wing press no longer wields absolute power in modern Britain. This election proves it

The Independent

Will Gore

9 June 2017

In this era of ever-greater media plurality, voters are better equipped to make political decisions because they can examine a range of views and sources

From “Cor-bin” to “Cor-win”. On this occasion, it was most certainly not The Sun what won it. Nor the Daily Mail, nor The Express.

Ever since Jeremy Corbyn became Labour leader he has been utterly dismissed by the right-wing media. When Theresa May made her disastrous decision to call an election, the right-leaning papers went to town in an all-out campaign against Labour’s leadership. This culminated in recent days with a Sun front page depicting Jeremy Corbyn inside a rubbish bin. The Mail, meanwhile, showed Corbyn alongside shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and former shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott under the headline “Apologists for Terror”. The Express told its readers: “Vote May or we face disaster”.

This morning it is clear that the Prime Minister badly miscalculated the mood of the country and got her electoral mathematics in a knot. She overestimated her own popularity; the degree to which Brexit would be the dominant theme of the election; and the likelihood that Ukip voters would only swing to blue.

By contrast, she underestimated Corbyn’s ability as a campaigner and the extent to which many voters feel thoroughly disillusioned with their lot under her Government. But if it’s true that May found herself out of touch with the public, the same can be said of her great allies in the press.

Of course, it is a perennial matter of debate whether the media can swing an election; I have written here before that I think its power in that regard is generally overstated. Yet that is largely because editors and proprietors read the runes, survey their readers and back the most likely winner (or make equivocal endorsements in favour of a candidate that is likely to lose but which the paper’s readers will nonetheless favour). The Sun backing Tony Blair is the obvious case in point.

This election was different because almost nobody expected – even when the opinion polls narrowed in the later stages of the campaign – that Theresa May would not win a majority of some order. The pro-May, anti-Corbyn headlines came with an underlying conviction of a significant Tory victory.

So what conclusion should we draw? One is that the readership of the right-wing tabloids has declined to the degree that partisan headlines simply don’t influence the number of people they once did. Another is that readers don’t make judgements purely on the basis of their preferred newspaper’s editorial line. In this era of ever-greater media plurality, people are better equipped to make political decisions because they can examine a range of views and sources.

Rupert Murdoch may be spitting this morning. But there is an irony in all this, which is that a hung parliament – and, most probably, a new period of political instability – is manna from heaven for the media, from an editorial point of view at least.

Brexit; Trump; and now the most indecisive general election result since 1974. These are events that will keep reporters, writers and editors busy for years. Or at least until the next election. Which will probably take place in October.

Will today’s stunning result, however, make the media think twice about Corbyn? It hardly seems likely. The antipathy is real and mutual and Labour’s enemies will note that Theresa May increased the Conservatives’ share of the vote to Thatcherite proportions.

But what about the tabloids reassessing their attack dog approach which, if it was designed to persuade people to back Theresa May, has obviously back-fired? After all, what should shine through most brightly

from the last seven weeks is that, for a very large number of people in the UK, there is an unsated appetite for something positive, for an optimistic outlook, for hope. Jeremy Corbyn embodied that desire for change; Theresa May, by contrast, was an empty vessel.

Maybe this is where May and her tabloid allies truly went wrong. Just as the Remain campaign last year misjudged the degree to which voters can be motivated by fear, so in this campaign the Conservative leader and her friends in the media wrongly assumed that attacks against Labour's leaders would be enough to secure a Tory win. It was, not to put too fine a point on it, the politics of hate. And it didn't work.

The Prime Minister this morning is weakness and wobbliness personified. But make no mistake, this is an extraordinary moment for Britain's right-wing press, which for so long has been perceived to have a hold over the electorate. The Express is on the ropes. The Daily Mail is bruised. The "Currant Bun" is crumbling.

## Guardian: DIY political websites: new force shaping the general election debate

The Guardian  
 Robert Booth  
 1 June 2017

With seven days until Britain goes to the polls, a new force is shaping the general election debate.

Highly partisan, semi-professional political blogs are being shared more widely online than the views of mainstream newspaper commentators.

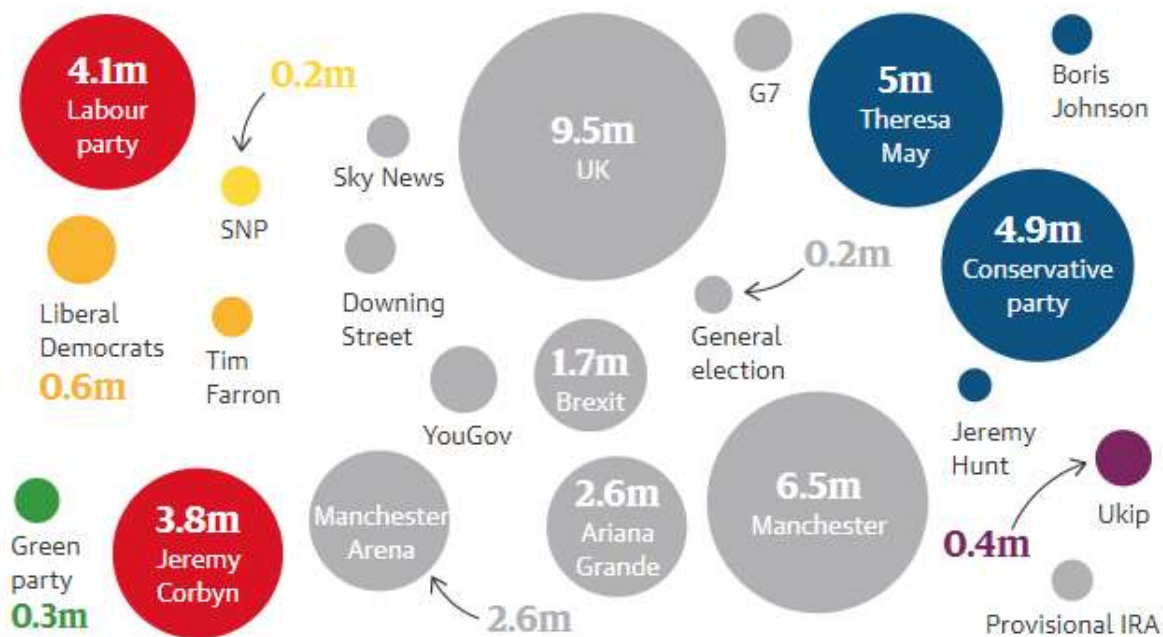
Websites run by a publicity-shy English tutor in Yorkshire, an undergraduate student in Nottingham and a former management consultant in Bristol are publishing some of the most shared articles about the UK general election, ranking alongside and often above the BBC, the Guardian and the Independent.

Alternative news sites are run from laptops and bedrooms miles from the much-derided “Westminster bubble” and have emerged as one of the most potent forces in election news sharing, according to research conducted for the Guardian by the web analytics company Kaleida.

Two of the three most shared articles since Theresa May called the election on 18 April remain those written by Thomas Clark, who publishes left-leaning articles from his Yorkshire home under the moniker Another Angry Voice.

Nothing from the BBC, the Guardian or the Daily Mail comes close to his greatest hit of the campaign so far, subheaded in typical conversational style: “If you insist on blibber-blabbering about how Jeremy Corbyn is so ‘unelectable’, could you at least tell us how many of his policies you disagree with and why.”

### Analysis by Kaleida shows that articles about Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn have been shared 8.8m times on Facebook since the start of the election campaign



It has been shared more than 102,000 times on social media so far, according to Kaleida. The most shared

pieces by the BBC and the Guardian trailed not just this, but two of Clark's other posts on "why you need to speak to someone who works in the NHS" and "30 things you should know about the Tory record".

The Canary, a pro-Corbyn Bristol-based site, claimed it doubled the number of visitors to its site to six million last month.

Evolve Politics, which is run by just two people in Nottingham and Peterborough, saw its story that the rapper Akala "just smashed the entire anti-Corbyn argument in seconds" shared 55,000 times on Facebook.

It was read at least 200,000 times. Whether such sites have the power to change voters' intentions or function largely as echo chambers is becoming an urgent question for politicians.

The websites explicitly offer a counter-narrative to what they deride as the "MSM" or mainstream media.

The ninth most shared election article came from the Canary on Tuesday when it fulminated at the lack of praise in newspapers for Corbyn's performance in an interview with Jeremy Paxman.

The headline ran: "What's happening across the front pages of the UK press today is nothing short of a whitewash."

The phenomenon is not unique to the left. Westmonster, a pro-Brexit "anti-establishment news" site set up only a few months ago by the insurance billionaire and former Ukip backer Arron Banks, has pushed its way into the top 40 most shared election stories.

Its story last week "Farron to open door to 50,000 Syrians" garnered 11,000 shares, according to Kaleida.

Breitbart London is the UK branch of the "alt-right" website in Washington owned by Donald Trump's chief strategist, Steve Bannon, and cited as a huge influence in Trump's win. It publishes a large volume of news about immigration issues in Europe and radical Islam.

But it had its biggest UK hit last week with: "Morrissey rips British politicians after Manchester attack: 'petrified' to admit Islamic extremism behind terror." It was shared 25,000 times.

The role of viral blogs comes under the microscope after abuse was levelled by some pro-Corbyn Twitter users at the BBC Woman's Hour presenter Emma Barnett, following her tough interview with Corbyn in which he forgot the cost of a key Labour childcare pledge.

Barnett was labelled a "Zionist" and a "pig", but these blogs did not join in. The Canary implored in one piece: "We should also be fair to host Barnett, because social media has been tearing strips off her."

The publishers of the partisan sites strongly deny they are echo chambers but they do believe their job is to rally support for their causes.

Another Angry Voice deliberately framed its viral hit, which set out 20 Labour policies, as a campaigning tool.

Clark urged readers: "If every Labour party supporter uses this as a reply every single time they see the 'unelectable' trope being wheeled out, maybe it might eradicate this."

Clark did not respond to requests for comment, but did say recently that his audience knew they were being misled by other media and "really like having a guy out there who can cut through the propaganda and put the counter-arguments into articles and infographics they can share".

Matthew Turner, 21, a third-year politics undergraduate at Nottingham University, has grasped that the shareability of the alt-media is what gives it political potential. In between studying for his finals, he helps run Evolve Politics.

"When something goes as viral as our Akala story, it is never just preaching to the choir," he told the Guardian.



One of his site's pre-election hits was "Shameless Tory student films himself burning £20 note in front of freezing homeless person." It received half a million views and sparked anger that "united the left and centre".

Evolve set up a charity appeal for a shelter in Cambridge, where the incident happened, and it raised almost £5,000.

"This kind of dynamic activism is new to the media," Turner said. "Stories that go viral are stories that you can rally around. I think the vast majority of readers like us because we light a fire in their belly.

"Readers of the mainstream media tend to not get that nowadays. We are the ones offering the fight."

Evolve pays fees of as little as £5 for a 1,000-word piece, but offers 50% of advertising revenue received from Google, which can vary from a few pence if the story only gets a few clicks to £200 if it generates half a million.

Critics say this creates a strong incentive to exaggerate or even falsify stories, but Turner insisted the site's editors were careful to fact-check contributions.

Raheem Kassam, a former aide to Nigel Farage who is now editor-in-chief of Breitbart London, believes the new sites have finally broken a media oligarchy.

"People see a massive disconnect between what is going on in their streets and town centres and what is on the BBC nightly news," he said.

Responding to the suggestion that alt-news sites are blurring fact and opinion, he said: "I do not mix opinion and news within stories. When I look at sites like the Canary and Westmonster, I almost feel like we are the grownups in the room now. They are mixing editorial in with news."

With Brietbart, the editorial stance is as much apparent in the story selection and headlines.

Take the following stories from one week last month: "Germany: Iraqi asylum-seeker convicted of raping Chinese students"; "Pakistani migrant faces terror charges in Germany"; and "Asylum seeker brutally tortures fellow migrant, gouges eyes over 50 euro debt".

Kassam edits the site from the US and posts international stories with themes that resonate with Trump's new nationalism.

"We are looking at global events and trying to protect the idea of nationhood," he said.

"We are bringing in examples of where others are doing things incorrectly. We are showing policies on migration, multiculturalism and welfare and where is good and bad."

Kerry-Anne Mendoza, the editor of the Canary, which has grown to a team of 20 freelance writers and editors, denies Kassam's claim it mixes fact and opinion, saying: "We write in a human voice. We are not attempting to be a paper of record."

Mendoza, 35, a former management consultant, joined the Occupy movement in 2011. She then went to report from Gaza during the conflict with Israel in 2014 before starting the Canary 10 days before Jeremy Corbyn was elected Labour leader in 2015.

"We wear our biases openly – social and environmental justice, racial equality and the right of men and women to live equally," she said.

"We have a crisis in our media. It is fundamentally too narrow in terms of ownership and the backgrounds of the people producing the news. Readers are presented with an astonishingly similar narrative."

The viral spread of posts by the new range of alt-news sites during the current election campaign suggests the appetite for something different is finally being sated.

## The 25 most shared articles about the UK election

Data based on Facebook shares from 17-April-31 May

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102,655

**Another Angry Voice**

How many of Jeremy Corbyn's policies do you actually disagree with? →

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85,045

**Another Angry Voice**

Why you need to speak to someone who works in the NHS →

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60,215

**HuffPost**

Jamie Oliver Slams Theresa May's Plans To Scrap Free Meals For Infants →

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54,006

**The Independent**

Theresa May to create new internet that would be controlled and regulated by government →

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52,659

**indy100**

People are putting up 'Strong and stable my arse' signs up across London →

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52,655

**indy100**

Since the election was called, 1.1 million young people have registered to vote →

## Guardian: Is Labour fighting 'shocking' media bias or does it need to get its act together?

The Guardian

Gaby Hinsliff

20 May 2017

Jeremy Corbyn 's party says it's losing the fight for fair coverage but others point out it has always struggled against press barons. How crucial is the battle for headlines?

"Can anything be done about the shockingly biased media?"

Judging by the cheers, it was one of the more popular questions posed at Labour's manifesto launch last week. Few seemed to mind the irony of its being asked by the man from the Morning Star, a paper once owned by the Communist Party of Great Britain. But then bias is perhaps always in the eye of the beholder.

It is no great secret that the British print press is, at least by weight, biased to the right. The biggest-selling tabloid, mid-market and broadsheet titles – the Sun, Mail and Telegraph respectively – all lean rightwards and their combined circulation is three times that of the Mirror, i and Guardian. Labour leaders have battled those odds for generations, but his loyal supporters argue none has had it as rough as Jeremy Corbyn – although given the treatment dished out to Neil Kinnock or Ed Miliband , it is perhaps more accurate to say few have had it as easy as Theresa May .

"At last, a politician who dares to be honest!" screamed the Daily Mail's front page, apropos the Tory manifesto. If anyone else had vowed to means-test pensioners and make elderly people pay more for care at home, it's hard to imagine editor-in-chief Paul Dacre being so thrilled, but May walks on water now. May's cap on energy bills, denounced as quasi-Marxist when Miliband suggested it , is now rapturously embraced; new rights to time off, once derided as burdensome red tape, are suddenly now a boon for families. One Cameron-era special adviser tweeted last week that running for office with the nation's most popular paper effectively taking dictation from No 10 – May's new press secretary, James Slack, is an ex-Mail political editor – resembles a gamer "playing Fifa on the easy setting". If it disconcerts even some Tories, imagine how Labour feels.

Newer recruits to the movement especially worry, says the shadow foreign secretary Emily Thornberry, that it is up to them to "put out the alternative vision" on the leader's behalf. But in their zeal to do so, some seem to have missed the memo about a kinder, gentler politics. Favoured targets such as the BBC's political editor, Laura Kuenssberg, face rivers of online abuse from activists claiming bias and journalists are now routinely booed at press conferences for asking questions.

And all this has serious implications not just for the election, but Labour's future direction. The idea that the establishment is out to destroy him is such an article of faith for many Corbyn supporters that if he is defeated, some will doubtless argue it wasn't his fault; the ideas were popular, they just didn't get heard.

"I think a lot of the press, particularly the rightwing papers, haven't taken Jeremy seriously," says Matt Zarb-Cousin, who recently quit as the leader's spokesman. "When Jeremy won the leadership for the second time, [the BBC presenter] Nick Robinson tweeted that 'we must now take Jeremy Corbyn seriously as leader of the opposition' and I just thought – well what've you been doing until now? He's leader of the Labour party. That should come with a bit of credibility. But he doesn't fit within what they consider acceptable ideological parameters."

Thornberry, who was also a frontbencher under Ed Miliband, agrees. "We've never had a level playing field, but I do think it's got worse."

Too many interviewers, she argues, frame questions on an assumption that either Labour can't win or doesn't know what it's doing. The ubiquitous current trick – following an LBC interview that trapped Diane Abbott with a basic question about the cost of a pledge on policing – is lobbing highly detailed technical questions at frontbenchers to wrongfoot them.

"It's effectively to say 'Oh you lot aren't up to the job of government, you can't answer any of my questions, you don't know what you're doing,'" says Thornberry, who was mildly exasperated to be asked on Radio 4 to name the precise speed of superfast broadband Labour was promising in its manifesto (she didn't know).

Frustration at what frontbenchers see as discriminatory questioning compared with what the Tories get helps explain why her shadow cabinet colleague Richard Burgon snapped when Newsnight's Kirsty Wark asked him to express the deficit as a percentage of GDP, dramatically accusing her of putting him "on trial".

It's hard to imagine Ed Balls, say, struggling with that question. Corbyn leads an unusually inexperienced shadow cabinet, shorn of many of Labour's best talents. Could there be more than one reason it's getting a kicking?

Donald Trump got short shrift last week for complaining that "no politician in history has been treated more unfairly" than him, apparently forgetting the way he once challenged Barack Obama to produce his birth certificate.

And yet it's true that few presidents have been so criticised. A study of major American news outlets by the Harvard Kennedy School's Schorenstein Centre on Media, Politics and Public Policy found 80% of the coverage of the president's first 100 days in power was negative, significantly greater hostility than Obama, Bill Clinton or George W Bush encountered.

Then again, none of their presidential careers began with having to deny being in Russia's pocket. Bad press is sometimes bad for a reason.

The British equivalent of that Harvard study is arguably the weekly election reports produced by a team at the University of Loughborough, tracking negative and positive coverage for the main parties. It found Labour's coverage last week was "overwhelmingly negative" (the Tories' good and bad coverage almost cancelled each other out), but both cause and effect of that hostility are harder to decipher.

The "It was the Sun wot won it" myth of the all-powerful media is invariably overdone. Sadiq Khan won the London mayoralty despite the London Evening Standard championing Zac Goldsmith; the Daily Mail's backing in 1997 didn't help John Major and in the 2005 Tory leadership contest it backed Ken Clarke only for David Cameron to win. The Sun, meanwhile, tends to spot winners, not make them. James Stanyer, professor of communication and media analysis at Loughborough, says the most likely impact of campaign coverage on voters is "to reinforce what they've already decided rather than really alter their opinion in any radical way".

But the slow drip of information over a longer period can, he thinks, affect closer contests. "Someone said to me the other day, 'Oh, Brexit, we didn't see that coming', but if we'd looked over the last 25 years of unremittingly negative stories about the EU, we might have." Corbyn's attempts to establish credibility have, he says, been hampered from the start by "continuous negative coverage".

There are undoubtedly questions here for journalists, and in an age of social media, reporters are held sometimes aggressively to account.

The Channel 4 News presenter Cathy Newman – whose challenging of a squirming Tim Farron over whether he considers gay sex a sin divided Twitter – thinks journalists are becoming caught up in a bigger backlash against conventional politics. Voters are drawn to insurgent parties who increasingly label the media part of the establishment – and, in some ways, she argues, they are right. “The media became too complacent – both Brexit and Donald Trump came as a surprise to many. So we have to redouble our efforts to listen and learn, stick to the facts, and remain rigorously impartial even if that means taking criticism from all sides.”

But it’s hard for reporters to maintain that facts are sacred when rival outlets seemingly trample them. Many on the left seem to long for a liberal press that champions Corbyn just as unswervingly as the rightwing papers do May, and online propaganda sheets like The Canary are springing up to fill that gap. But this is activism rather than journalism, and the idea of being pushed into a hyper-partisan world where truth is the casualty worries many reporters.

At the manifesto launch, Corbyn answered the Morning Star by advocating tougher press regulation (including implementing the second phase of the Leveson inquiry) and plurality of ownership. But that requires actually getting elected, and getting elected means engaging with the media as it is.

There are now two competing arguments in Labour about how to do so; drive headlong at the wall or reach around it?

“Given a choice of a Labour party that’s malleable to the interests of the rightwing media or a manifesto that’s going to change the country and redistribute wealth, the members would always choose the second,” says Zarb-Cousin. “The question then becomes how do you deal with the context. What I’d like to come out of this campaign is more of a recognition of just how institutionally biased the media is. There is this conventional wisdom that we should have a strategy to deal with it, but can we just work on the premise that it’s biased against Labour?”

After all, he argues, Miliband’s efforts to build good relationships got him nowhere. “They’d get a page lead in the Daily Mail maybe and then come election time all the papers would throw the kitchen sink at them.”

He sees Facebook campaigning as one way to reach voters in an unfiltered way, encouraging them to question the way things are reported. Yet as Ayesha Hazarika, a former aide to Ed Miliband, points out, Facebook messages tend to be shared among the likeminded, they don’t necessarily reach new supporters. For that, she argues Labour still needs a press operation capable of telling its story in the mainstream media. After all, she argues, Labour is rising in the polls now it is actually unveiling policy and getting more air time – suggesting there is still no substitute for getting out there.

“If people don’t think we have to persuade the public, and the readers of newspapers – I mean, they’re not Sun readers, they’re voters. They’re the people, and if you want to seek to govern you seek to win their trust. Even if some read newspapers you don’t like.”

## Guardian: Murdoch is no longer the big man of this multimedia age

The Guardian  
Peter Preston  
12 March 2017

Since his first Sky bid in 2011, the old print mogul's news holdings have become outstripped in reach and influence by others far ahead on the digital curve

The Murdochs, father and younger son, are rather like Marmite (or, more accurately, its thick, brown Australian rival, Vegemite). You either shrug benevolently as they come back for the rest of Sky or wrinkle your nose. They're either an acquired taste or one you can never learn to love.

But Ofcom has other considerations on its plate, once – after submissions this week – Karen Bradley confirms her ministerial inclination to call in the regulators to consider the bid to buy the whole of something already effectively (39.1%) controlled. It's five years since Ofcom recommended five-yearly reviews of the criteria by which it judges media plurality – and plurality (aka diversity) is really at the heart of its task now. The hard bit isn't having an opinion on Murdoch Inc. The hard bit is working logically through an uncertain rulebook.

So remember what the regulator decreed in that first 2012 template. "Ofcom believes the features of a plural news market include the presence of a diverse range of independent news voices; high reach and consumption of multiple news sources; low barriers to entry and competition to encourage innovation; economic sustainability, with no single organisation holding too large a market share."

And, perhaps crucially, from even earlier (2010): "Online news, in a wide variety of forms, is used by a significant and rapidly growing proportion of the UK population. It is a dynamic and diverse sector. Online should be included in a plurality review."

So, see how one thing interacts with another. See how the passage of years brings great change.

The Guardian and Telegraph combined produce 44 million readers. The Daily Star boasts more than the Times

In 2011, with the phone-hacking crisis at its height, the Sun sold 2,815,991 copies a day. Today you can make that 1,666,715. There's been a collapse in print sales over that period, and the Sun has suffered badly. It is a weaker force on the newsstand. It is also a current loss-maker, posting £62.8m of red ink last year as legal costs and restructuring piled in on top of an ad slump.

What about that "dynamic and diverse sector" online? There, as we know, the Sun has made useful progress. But so have its competitors. If you add the latest National Readership Survey figures (print plus digital) for the Sun and the Times together, they reach 31.9 million UK readers a month. Big numbers, but by no means big enough. The Mirror is almost level with the Sun. The Guardian and Telegraph combined produce 44 million readers. The Daily Star boasts more than the Times.

Consider the online market, moreover, and the nostrums of five years ago seem increasingly frail. In one raucous antechamber of media debate last week, the reach and power of the internet dominated everything. Cue fake news, Facebook and Google. Cue paedophilia anger mushroomed across BBC bulletins. Cue MPs inveighing against the "threat to democracy". A Daily Mail editorial writer captures the

mood: “How much longer can the arrogant, filth-spreading, fake-news-mongering, small-firm-destroying, terror-abetting internet giants remain above the law”?

But when we move into a separate room that says “Murdoch Sky bid” on the door, that whole controversy suddenly fades. We’re back to the legendary clout of five years ago. We’re supposed to forget about online and its influence. We’re invited not to note how – in readership and advertising reach – print and digital are becoming one category, not two. We’re definitely not reminded of the 50% of young people who get most of their news off the net: the selfsame net operators who have laid print revenues low.

Such compartmentalisation begins to seem too damned convenient. And Sky News itself – regulated and obliged to follow public service guidelines – exists in this wider world of expanding plurality. The latest Barb audience figures show it winning just 0.66% of the total TV market. Maybe 1.9 million viewers will click on for a while or a moment during that day. It’s a useful service that keeps winning prizes awarded by its peers and praise from Ofcom, but it is no sense dominant – merely one voice among many.

All of which leads to one simple conclusion. Ofcom may have compelling reservations about Murdoch’s suitability to own the big Sky. It may rigorously question son James’s sad blindness to bad things happening around him. The old reservations of five years back may remain. It may further wish to argue for a Leveson 2 to see what a further inquiry into police-press relations can reveal. “Fit and proper” behaviour is a separate issue that the regulator can treat on their merits.

But on the main event of referral – diversity – the sands of time are creating a new landscape, one where the big bad giants of the future come from Silicon Valley, not Manhattan. A landscape largely devoid of meaningful regulation. And meanwhile the only regulator in town, Ofcom, has its five-year review schedule to keep.

So there’s every good reason for Bradley to refer – and for Ofcom to grapple openly with a fast-altering media hegemony. One curse of media regulation is that it’s always five (or in this case 15) years behind the times. One boon of a Sky inquiry is that it would have to make the dusty imperatives that rule us fit for 2017 purpose.

- One not very elevated point of Treasury pre-budget leaks (or, as the BBC’s Kamal Ahmed calls them, “briefings”) is to suss out potential political potholes and avoid them. So what are we to make of the “fury” etc over raising self-employed national insurance rates that saw Philip Hammond “trapped” right across the Guardian’s front page on Thursday? A measure specifically “mooted” everywhere from Mail to Times before Hammond reached for his spreadsheet? Either no one reads these briefings or no one trusts them enough to bother reacting. In which case, can we have our old veil of budget secrecy back, please? It makes it more interesting on the day.