

I am quoted in the Fox submission as saying that the popular press campaign against Corbyn and McDonnell in the 2017 general election failed, revealing the demise of tabloid influence. This representation of my views is plucked from two sentences in a short letter to the *Guardian*,⁽¹⁾ and is presented as suggesting that old plurality concerns should be discounted.

This extrapolation misrepresents my views. Perhaps I can be allowed to say what my views – and the evidence for them – are:

The high-intensity Conservative press campaign against the Labour Party in the 2016 general election failed in the sense that Labour gained a substantial increase of the vote. This failure clearly had something to do with the press's falling sales, low credibility and shrinking youth audience. However, the academic evidence suggests that the influence of the press in general elections ever since 1959 (when TV became dominant) has been modest, and difficult to demonstrate conclusively.⁽²⁾ What happened in 2017 was not new.

Nature of Public Influence

However, this is not to suggest that the influence of the press is negligible or has disappeared. Measuring the impact of the popular press *over four weeks* of a general election campaign is an inadequate basis for gauging its influence. The press influences the public primarily through shaping news agendas and perceptions of society, which over time can modify political attitudes and voting behaviour. This influence is greatest when it activates latent views or taps into pre-existing resentments.⁽³⁾ But the key point is that press influence is generally cumulative rather than instant.

An example of the press's cumulative influence is the impact of its campaign against 'skivers' during 2010-2014. A torrent of newspaper articles conveyed the impression that the majority of the population – still suffering the consequences of the 2008 crash – were supporting a large, workshy underclass. The press campaign contributed to widespread misperceptions. In 2012, the public thought that the share of the welfare budget going on unemployment benefit was 41% whereas it was actually 4%.⁽⁴⁾ Respondents thought that, on average, 27% of benefit claims were fraudulent, whereas the official estimate was 1%.⁽⁵⁾ Respondents also estimated, on average, that 50% of new jobseekers were still signing on one year later:⁽⁶⁾ the true figure in 2011 was 10%.⁽⁷⁾

These misperceptions increased animosity towards the poor. In 2013, 54% said that the unemployed could find work if they really tried, compared with 27% who held the same view in 1993.⁽⁸⁾ In 2014, 52% thought that benefits for the unemployed were too high and discouraged them from working - much higher than the 30% who agreed with this in 1995.⁽⁹⁾ This shift of perception encouraged a more critical attitude towards spending on

the poor. Agreement with spending more on welfare benefits fell from 61% in 1989 to 30% in 2014.(10)

Other examples of the continuing popular influence of the press – as well as the limits of this influence – are provided in the 8th edition of J. Curran and J. Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility* (Routledge, May 2018).[An advanced copy can be sent]

Inter-Media and Elite Influence

There are two other ways in which the press matter, in addition to influencing directly the public. Research indicates that the press can influence the way television reports the news.(11)

The press also influences senior politicians. Recent political leaders have devoted large amounts of time and energy to courting the press, and have made some accommodations to secure or retain press support.(12) The Leveson Report was especially illuminating in shining a light on the incestuous relationship between senior politicians and journalists. Tony Blair himself admitted that ‘we paid inordinate attention in the early days of New Labour in courting, assuaging and persuading the media’.(13) David Cameron declared dismissively that No 10 felt ‘too much like a newsroom’, when he moved in as Prime Minister.(14) But despite this implied criticism, not much changed. In the first fourteen months of the Cameron government, twenty cabinet ministers met senior Murdoch executives 130 times.(15)

As long ago as 2006, Rupert Murdoch claimed that the internet was dimming his influence and that of ‘the old elite in our industry’.(16) Neither senior politicians nor Murdoch executives functioned as if they believed this.

Complexity of net and social media influence

A standard, self-serving line is that the internet and social media have superseded old media. Old plurality concerns should be therefore heavily discounted.

This disregards important facts. Legacy news organisations – established newspaper and TV organisations – dominate the most visited news websites in Britain.(17) Their strategy of giving away content free (with some exceptions) has successfully weakened competition.

Indeed, the rise of the internet has enabled old media organisations to extend their reach through colonising an important part of cyberspace: news websites.

The rise of Google also needs to be put into perspective. It provides an unprecedented access to a vast cornucopia of information. But when it comes to public affairs, traditional news media are prominent on Google's first page – and people tend not to read after the first page.⁽¹⁸⁾ [As a simple checking exercise look at any current issue, and see what – in addition to Wikipedia – gets prominence on Google listing].

The rise of social media is ambiguous. In general, social media – most notably Facebook – are used more for social than political purposes in Britain.⁽¹⁹⁾ This changes at election time when the political significance of SNS increases. But this is an intermittent form of political influence. Furthermore, legacy media are now prominent as news feeds on Facebook. So, to view SNS as a new sun that has eclipsed legacy media is vastly simplistic.

Conclusion

In this submission, I have merely sought to rebut Fox's misleading account of my views. Put simply, traditional news media still matter – and their ownership still matters.

Footnotes

1. *Guardian*, 12 June, 2017.
2. The literature on this is very extensive. For examples, see W. Miller, *Media and Voters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) and K. Newton and M. Brynion, 'The national press and party voting in the UK', *Political Studies*, 49 (2), 2001.
3. J. Curran, I. Gabeir and J. Petley, *Culture Wars* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2005), chapter 9.
4. J. Hills, *Good Times, Bad Times* (Bristol, Policy Press, 2015), p. 259-60.
5. Hills, *Good Times*, p. 263-4.
6. *Public Attitudes to Poverty, Inequality and Welfare in Scotland and Britain* (Edinburgh: Scottish Government, Communities Analytical Services, 2015), p. 5.
7. Hills, *Good Times*, fig. 4.8, p. 91.
8. P. Taylor-Gooby and E. Taylor, 'Benefits and Welfare' in R. Ormiston and J. Curtice (eds.) *British Social Attitudes: 32nd Report* (London: Natcen Social Research, 2015), p. 83.
9. *Ibid*, p. 91

10. Ibid, p. 74.
11. S. Cushion et al., 'Newspapers, Impartiality and Television News: Intermedia agenda-setting during the 2015 UK General Election Campaign', *Journalism Studies*, 2016.
12. M. Dean, *Democracy Under Attack* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2013), among others.
13. *An Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press Report* [Leveson Report] (London, Stationery Office, 2012), vol. 3, p. 1139.
14. Ibid, p 1209.
15. N. Fenton, *Digital, Political, Radical* (Cambridge, Polity, 2016), p. 182.
16. R. Murdoch, 'Speech by Rupert Murdoch at the Annual Livery Lecture at the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers', *News Corporation*, 3 March, 2006. Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.newscorp.com/news/news_285.html> (accessed 1 September 2010).
17. J. Curran, N. Fenton and D. Freedman, *Misunderstanding the Internet*, 2nd edition (London, Routledge, 2016).
18. J. Redden and T. Witschge 'A New News Order? Online News Content Examined' in N. Fenton (ed.) *New Media, Old News* (London: Sage, 2010).
19. R. Nielsen and K. Schrøder, 'The Relative Importance of Social Media for Accessing, Finding, and Engaging with News', *Digital Journalism*, 2(4), 2014.

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