

Media North

CAMPAIGN FOR PRESS AND BROADCASTING FREEDOM (NORTH) • Mid-April 2020

Editorial

Debunking myths: we're not all equal

NEWSNIGHT presenter Emily Maitlis started the programme on Wednesday 8 April with a clear message. Referring to ministers' claims that the coronavirus can be beaten if its victims show Boris Johnson's 'fighting spirit', Maitlis said the language used by politicians, including acting prime minister, Dominic Raab, was misleading.

She said: "You do not survive the illness through fortitude and strength of character as the prime minister's colleagues tell us and that the disease is a great leveller, the consequences of which rich and poor suffer the same. This is a myth that needs de-bunking."

The poor are more likely to catch the disease because they are more exposed and because "they live in tower blocks and small flats. Those in manual jobs will not be able to work at home," she said.

Maitlis dismissed suggestions that the worst effects of the pandemic are impacting on everyone equally. While the Queen and her son Prince Charles live in castles, and Boris Johnson was treated at a well-run hospital full of highly qualified doctors and nurses who specialise in lung infections, millions of others are living

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Ailing media needs government support

Radical action is needed to prevent closures

ON 17 April all regional and national daily news titles ran the slogan 'Stay at home for the NHS, your family, your neighbours, your nation the world and life itself' as a cover wrap. The message also appeared on the home pages of online outlets.

On the back page of the wrap was a rainbow – adopted as a symbol of support for key workers – and the words: 'Staying at home for Britain'.

It marks the beginning of the Government's three-month 'All in, all together' newspaper ad campaign.

It's a welcome first sign of government support as newspapers continue to be under tremendous economic stress.

On 24 March Newsquest announced a 'significant number' of staff would be furloughed, with those remaining facing a wage cut 'to minimise wider job losses'.

On 25 March JPIMedia suspended a number of local print titles and then on 1 April placed 350 staff on furlough to 'control cash' during the pandemic.

The Mirror group publisher Reach furloughed 1000 employees on 6 April.

This dire situation makes a report by Enders Analysis published on 25 March, so important.

It opens with a dramatic statement: "Quality news media is a public good, and in the extraordinary circumstances of COVID-19 the sustainability of information and news provision should be ensured at all costs." It argues, "Government needs to shift the focus to managing an emergency; not just for our country's health, but our citizen's provision of quality news and information. Right now, we need to mobilise Government funding to make



Welcome support: The government-financed wrap round on all newspapers printed on 17 April.

the local Independent Community News Network

● This will allow news outlets to access necessary cash to keep going. We assume the Government will design measures to help industries like auto and airlines. It needs to do the same for news media

● Government to remove all ambiguity about funding journalists. Funding cannot be provided via the furloughed worker scheme, which would require journalists to stop working, exactly the wrong outcome

● Publishers do not want to stop working, they want 'key worker'—and essential service—status to be reinforced, and funding to support that status to be provided

The government support for the newspaper wrap round – costing in the region of £45m – is welcome but the proposals in the Enders report and those just published by the NUJ (see p3) need serious, urgent consideration and support too.

quality news a public service."

The document has five 'Key Asks' in the light of the government's commitment to 'do whatever it takes'. The first Key Ask is:

● An emergency fund for journalism: an emergency fund needs to be provided and co-ordinated immediately.

● The government should backstop an interest-free line of credit for accredited news media, including small and independent services, including, but beyond,

Challenging time ahead for union

By **Michelle Stanistreet**

PREDICTING the shape of our media once Covid-19 recedes must surely count as a known unknown. The challenges and fault-lines in the media industry have accelerated as this crisis has deepened – declining advertising revenue, the shift to digital, starved resources, and mounting pressure on smaller print titles whilst a funding crisis beckons at the BBC. One thing is undeniable – demand for dependable accurate news, and a thirst for information, has sky-rocketed.

Such uncertainty provides an opportunity for a refashioning of the news landscape. Shaping that process and reimagining a future media where quality ethical journalism is prized is an NUJ priority. Public bail outs for publishers today have to come accompanied by a commitment to serving the public in the future.

When lockdown began, our first priority was safeguarding members' income and livelihoods. Working with our sister unions in the creative industries and the TUC proved highly effective in joining forces to push for a fiscal support package for our freelance members. While there remain

Protecting jobs and income top priorities

disturbing shortcomings with both the employees' furlough scheme and the self-employed support, for many journalists these represent the difference between belt-tightening uncertainty and actual destitution.

Since the outset of the crisis, the NUJ has joined weekly phone conferences with the Secretary of State at DCMS, treasury officials and senior chief constables in the UK, with similar engagement in Ireland, Wales and Scotland.

Key worker status

Top of the NUJ's agenda has been ensuring that journalists can work unobstructed, despite the unprecedented controls on free movement. To date, this has been effective. At the union's insistence, reporters and other media workers were given 'key worker' status from the outset, enabling critical access to childcare and an acknowledgement that the role of journalists was going to be vital



NUJ General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet. The NUJ won 'key worker' status for its members

in covering the impact of this unfolding pandemic on our lives.

We also resisted proposals from Government and some publishers for a secondary form of press accreditation. The UK Press Card Authority (UKPCA) card remains sufficient to prove you are a legitimate news gatherer.

On a daily basis the NUJ's team of officials has been liaising with employers – many of whom were quick to adopt a 'never waste a crisis' approach and take advantage of the opportunities to avail themselves of government funding, and implement pay cuts to eke out their cash reserves. Working with our chapel reps, the message has been one of ensuring engagement and respect for collective agreements in challenging circumstances.

Government financial assistance notwithstanding, lockdown has hit many of our members hard. From the outset, the trustees of our charity, NUJ Extra, readied themselves for heightened demand. They did this against a backdrop of dramatic stock market turbulence affecting the investments on which the charity depends. Our message to members was clear – the NUJ has your back.

Lockdown has also had a profound impact on the NUJ's own work. All four union offices have been temporarily closed, and all of our staff are now working from home. They've collectively focussed on ensuring the union can keep working with as little interruption to services for members – at a time when calls for assistance is higher than ever – whilst we got new processes off the ground. Their efforts mean that members continue to receive gold-standard support at a time of great need.

We will survive this, the greatest public health crisis in living memory. Our aim should be to emerge with a media more resolutely oriented to serving the public interest than ever before.

Michelle Stanistreet is General Secretary of the National Union of Journalists

Editorial: Shambolic government response

● From Page 1

lives at the edge of disaster – in small flats and houses, some in tower blocks unprotected against fire let alone an invisible virus. In our starkly unequal society politicians and some sections of the media need reminding of this.

Instead of answering questions about accurate numbers of coronavirus deaths, the

shambolic government response to testing and providing PPE and the emerging crisis of deaths in care homes, we had fawning coverage of Johnson in hospital from the Tory tabloids (see pages 4-5).

When this crisis is over an independent public inquiry into the government's response to the coronavirus outbreak is essential. A key part must be

to focus on the performance of the print, broadcast and online media during the pandemic. The media's positive role in both informing people with accurate information and also holding the government to account will need to be highlighted, but also crucial questions about the failure of key sections of the media to fulfil this role must be addressed.

Danes take action to protect media

By **Mogens Blicher Bjerregård**

THE Danish parliament, with unanimous support of parties from the far left to the far right, backed measures to support the Danish media during the coronavirus crisis.

One of the packages was to support private media losing advertising revenue. Media which have lost between 30 and 50% of the revenues from ads will receive 60% of the loss from the state; media which lost more than 50% will receive 80%.

In addition to this support freelancers can receive up to €3000 per month if they can document a loss of income. It will be important to follow-up on this scheme to be sure that it works in the right way.

Don't dismiss staff

A deal has been agreed with private sector media to encourage them not to dismiss their staff. If they don't the state will pay 75% of the salary, the employers will pay 25% and the workers will pay with giving up one

week's holiday. The government knows very well that they need media support more than ever now and this agreement was quickly agreed a few days after 11 March, when the lock-down was announced.

I think it is really important that the government is supporting media to be sure that all citizens can be well informed. This situation also shows how important it is to have sustainable professional media on all platforms - print, broadcast and online - because that's the only

way to ensure that most citizens will receive information.

The coronavirus has showed the importance of a pluralistic and reliable media market. With such a huge amount of information, only impartial media can balance the role of being both informative about the decisions from the government and also to be critical of their actions when necessary.

*Mogens Blicher Bjerregård
is President of the European
Federation of Journalists*

Reporting from the labour frontline

Mike Elk runs the US-based *Pay-Day Report*. He specialises in stories written from the front line on trade unions and the labour movement. The COVID pandemic has kept him busy.

On his website, *PaydayReport.com*, he has created a strike tracker, the COVID-19 Strike Wave Interactive Map. In the last month it has recorded 100 wildcat strikes.

He thinks, "Something fundamentally is changing in the country. And that's a big, big deal, especially with everything that's happening around the debate about how do we rebuild society in the wake of the Covid pandemic?"

What is distinctive about *Pay-Day*, which has been running for four years, is that Mike Elk survives on donations to support his work.

Mike has been covering the labour movement for 12 years. He gets his stories because 'people know my reputation, so workers know they can trust me'.

You can support his work:
<https://paydayreport.com/donate>



Detail from cover of *From Health Crisis to Good News*.

NUJ launches news recovery plan to reinvigorate industry

ON 17 April the NUI launched a News Recovery Plan for the UK and Ireland to sustain the press and media through the Covid-19 crisis and reinvigorate the industry into a reimagined future.

The union describes them 'as a bold set of measures and interventions to support and protect jobs and quality journalism'.

Michelle Stanistreet, NUI general secretary, said: "This is not and cannot be about the preservation of the status quo. The emergency intervention needed now can only be the first steps towards a news reimagined. We need a triage plan of intervention and invest-

ment. That will involve action to stem the immediate damage being wrought, and longer-term measures to heal historic wounds."

The short-term measures include:

- A windfall tax of 6 per cent on the tech giants, using the Digital Services Tax, towards funding a News Recovery Plan.
- Tax credits and interest free loans to support journalist jobs, for frontline reporters covering the Covid-19 crisis and recovery.
- No public money for firms making redundancies, cutting pay, giving executive bonuses

or blocking trade union organisation.

- Strategic investment in government advertising, including the hyperlocal sector, involving central and local governments and public bodies.

- Further funding by NESTA's Future News Fund of innovative, public interest journalism and a similar scheme in Ireland

- Free vouchers for online or print subscriptions to all 18-and-19-year olds and tax credits for households with subscriptions.

You can read the full report here: <https://www.nuj.org.uk/news/nuj-launches-news-recovery-plan>

Tabloids obsess over Boris and Carrie

Criticism of government sidelined by love story

By Nicholas Jones

FOR a critical two-week period, Boris Johnson's near-death escape from the coronavirus infection topped the news agenda diverting the focus of much of the daily coverage away from vital, searching questions that needed to be asked about the government's handling of the pandemic.

Day after day, the tabloid press became obsessed with the fine detail of a sensational personal drama, a touch-and-go moment in the life of a Prime Minister, alone in Downing Street, separated from his pregnant fiancée, Carrie Symonds, also infected by the virus.

But the end of March and early April was the very time the UK's popular newspapers should have been directing the full force of their front pages to demand why more was not being done to ramp up testing and increase the supply of personal protective equipment for health and social care staff.

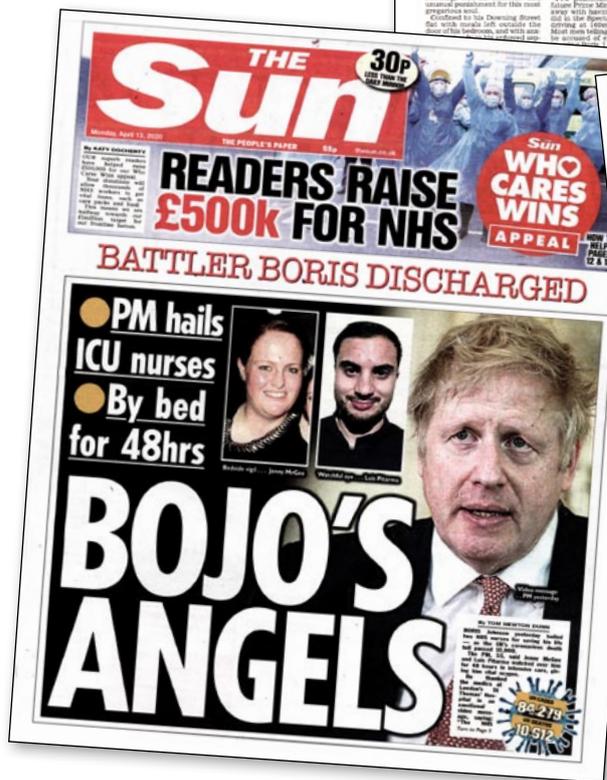
While the death total was rising towards almost 1,000 a day – and despite scandalous under-reporting of mounting fatalities in care homes – the saga surrounding the Prime Minister's predicament remained headline news, with page after page devoted to intimate trivia.

In the initial hiatus over his week-long self-isolation in Down-

ing Street, and later during his intensive care, the newspapers with the biggest circulations side-lined – and almost certainly helped to delay – the urgent need to challenge the government on why the UK's infection and death rates were already on their way to becoming the worst in Europe.

Johnson and his girlfriend understood – and exploited to the full – the tabloids' craving for personal colour.

Carrie's Twitter feed was an invaluable source; there was news of her pregnancy scans being for-



Bojo is the only story. No mention of doctors and nurses wearing bin bags for protection or the care home crisis.

warded to his bedside; and after his release from intensive care, Downing Street was said to have loaded an iPad with his favourite films and his family supplied much-loved books.

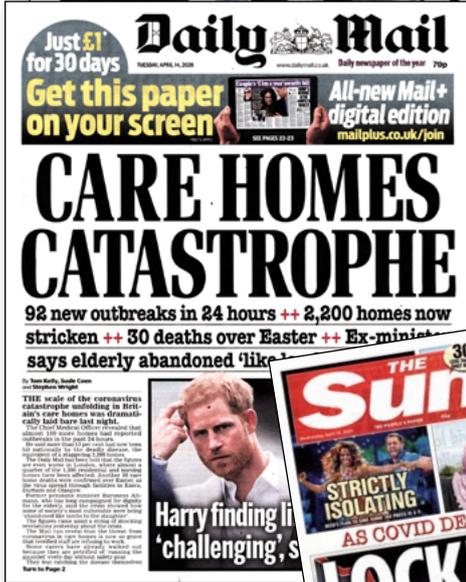
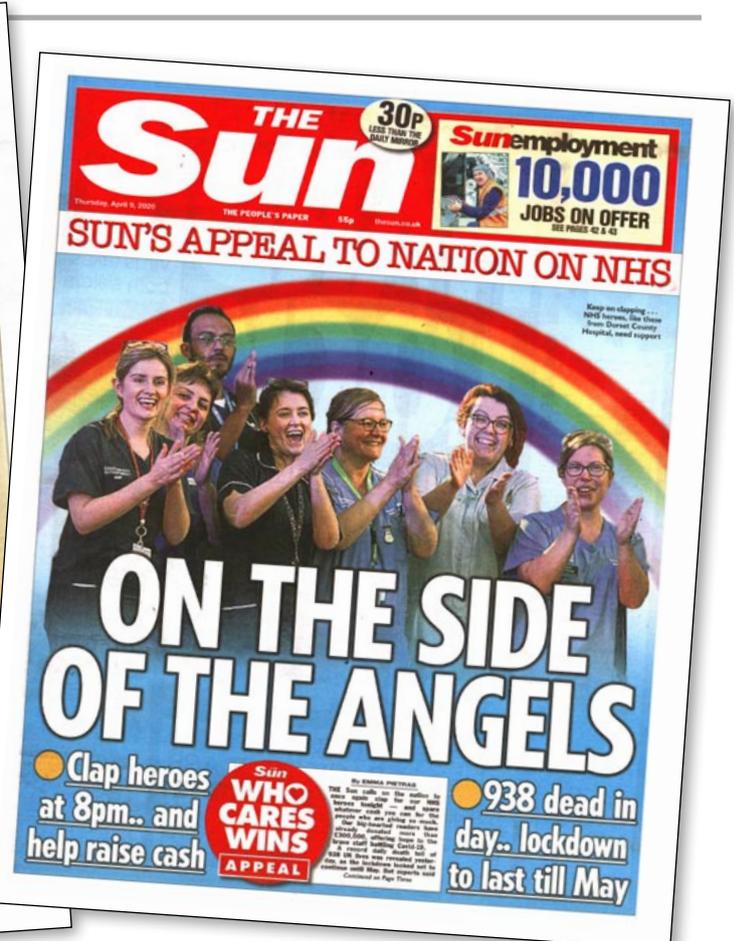
Made-for-TV love story

As the popular press helped to dramatise the Boris and Carrie love story – a script line that would have delivered a record audience for *Casualty* or any other TV drama – across the country, in hospitals and care homes,

a vast tragedy was unfolding as doctors and nurses were forced to wear bin bags for protection, and care staff were left without the resources to stop the spread of the virus among their elderly residents.

Like any true journalist, Johnson understood that his release from hospital had the makings of a scoop that topped any other in his career: he had a tale to tell which only he could deliver.

Only he had possession of the details of his bedside care and



So far Johnson has escaped personal criticism for his handling of the crisis.



treatment, and he was master of their presentation. He knew the importance of giving precise name checks and paying a personal tribute to the two intensive care nurses who had monitored his breathing and ensured his survival. With the flair and bravura that has made him a household name, he took full advantage of the opportunity to deliver his heart-felt message that the National Health Service was 'unconquerable ... powered by love'. However much one might sympathise with the plight of Johnson and his fiancée – and

this was the scariest moment in his life – countless thousands of families are facing the same testing times. This pandemic is shaping up to become as damaging and alarming as the trauma inflicted by both world wars and, unlike the censored news coverage of those conflicts, we benefit from a media environment which has

almost limitless powers of scrutiny, in which newspapers play a commanding role. Whereas ministers were shielded when Johnson was topping the news narrative, replete with gushing headlines, leading pro-Conservative newspapers have since become far more critical of the government's performance and their front pages are clamouring for a more effective response. In early April, readers of the Daily Mail were diverted by soap opera headlines: 'Carrie's Agony' and 'Mr Invincible' (7.4.2020).

On the warpath again
By the fourth week of the lockdown the Daily Mail was on the warpath and its front pages bristled with hostility: 'Fiasco of NHS safety kit flights from China' (13.4.2020); 'Care Homes Catastrophe' (14.4.2020); and '4,000 feared dead in our care homes' (15.4.2020). For the Sun, the shift has been slower. 'He stayed at work for you ... now pray at home for him' (8.4.2020) was topped by another Sun headline, 'Get Well Soon Babe' (11.4.2020), and then on Johnson's release from hospital, another classic

'Bojo's Angels' (13.4.2020). When not backing Boris, the Sun deployed its front pages to support the NHS, 'On the Side of the Angels' (9.4.2020). A sharper reaction followed the dire prediction that two million could lose their jobs, 'Lockdown Meltdown' (15.4.2020). So far, the Prime Minister has largely escaped personal criticism and that hands-off approach among his tabloid friends and supporters seems all set to continue while he convalesces at Chequers. Having succumbed to coronavirus and then survived intensive care, Johnson will be able on his return to speak with far greater authority because of his experience, and the popular press will afford him unprecedented leeway. But like other world leaders he is a hostage to events and a potential media backlash that might eventually topple his government.
Nicholas Jones was a BBC Industrial and Political Correspondent for 30 years and edited The Lost Tribe: Whatever Happened to Fleet Street's Industrial Correspondents?

Where is our media when you want them?

By Len Holden

THE NHS has been starved of money for years, and at the bottom of the heap money has been savagely cut for emergencies such as this pandemic. Resources which could have been used to supply emergency equipment for NHS workers and carers in time of crisis has been criminally cut back or neglected altogether.

This neglect has led to the deaths of doctors and nurses and exposed front-line staff to the full effects of the virus. This would be seen as murder in any other context and a full enquiry launched.

With honourable exceptions, most media seem keen to evoke the Dunkirk spirit in the face of the epidemic. This is a time when the media should be holding the

government to account.

The inadequate response to the pandemic lies in Tory policies going back to Cameron's government ten years ago, when George Osborne unleashed deep and damaging austerity cuts.

The floods which devastated regions in the North and Midlands in the past winter were examples of austerity cuts - 'chickens coming home to roost'. Experts have been warning the government since the Pitt Review of 2007.

Simon Lewis-Wren states, "Tory governments are more interested in policy-based evidence than evidence-based policies."

While the floods were in full spate he wrote, "I have not seen any television report on the recent flooding that mentioned austerity. Informing the public



Johnson said the floods which devastated areas of Yorkshire were 'not a national emergency'. But the causes of flooding and the lack of resources to fight the coronavirus pandemic are because of a decade of brutal Tory austerity cuts

is invariably limited to showing us pictures of flood plains and submerged living rooms. When a minister is occasionally questioned about state spending, they roll out a prepared sound bite to put the government in the most favourable light."

The BBC are doing the same again with the coronavirus crisis, although they have made faint noises that not all is well in the Government's handling of the crisis, and acknowledged that, compared to Germany and Aus-

tria, our response to the crisis has been inadequate. I think 'pathetic' would be a better word.

But there has been little or no full background critique of the policies that have led to so much damage to the UK's life, health and economy.

I think the ultimate example of pandering by the BBC is that George Osborne has regularly appeared on the Today programme over the past 3 or 4 months. It's like letting Dracula loose in a blood bank!

Ofcom and misinformation

THERE has been a lot of media attention about the panic over the newest generation of the mobile network 5G, and the concept that it's the concealed cause of the coronavirus pandemic. 5G masts have been vandalised.

High-profile figures fuelled the spread of misinformation on social networking platforms, sharing links about the theory that 5G is harmful and linked to Covid-19.

Ofcom are warning British broadcasters that they face sanctions if they give airtime to false health advice about coronavirus. The broadcast regulator

has been proactive, assessing comments made by presenter Eamonn Holmes about 5G technology and coronavirus 'as a priority'.

Holmes told viewers of *This Morning* on ITV that as 'someone with an inquiring mind' he believed that the 'mainstream media' should not slap down the idea that coronavirus was caused by 5G 'when they don't know it's not true'.

A Sussex radio station was also given a severe warning for broadcasting baseless conspiracy theories that the pandemic is linked to the rollout of 5G phone networks.

Inquiry deadline changed

WHEN Julian Knight took over as chair of the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee he announced an inquiry into public service broadcasting with a tight deadline for written submissions of Thursday 30 April. CPBF(North) is preparing a submission, and we have written to members of the DCMS Select Committee suggesting that the deadline for submissions needs to be extended. We received the following response from Committee Secretary, Andy Boyd:

"The Committee is happy to extend the deadline and will be accepting written submissions well beyond the original 30

April date . . . but organisations may email submissions in Word any time if the online portal has closed. The Committee doesn't expect to begin (virtual) oral evidence in this inquiry until June at the very earliest."

The new submission date is 21 May and we urge individuals and organisations to make submissions (3000 word limit) to the committee:

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/news/future-public-service-broadcasting-launch-19-21>

A tidal wave of lies and misinformation

By Gary Herman

THE coronavirus pandemic has been accompanied by a tidal wave of inadequate information, misinformation and plain lies.

State players from the Chinese and Americans to the British have all suppressed the truth, pushed bald-faced lies and exaggerated their abilities to the extent that they have obscured the truth.

For example, the British health minister Matt Hancock seems so needy that one really wants to believe him even when his inventions are so obvious. Hancock's cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die promise of 100,000 virus tests a day by the end of April was always an impossible target, not least because the figure was boosted by the inclusion of antibody tests that either didn't exist or did exist but were so unreliable that nobody would use them.

Hardly surprising that the social media attracted so many ordinary liars when our leaders have made lying seem too easy and so right.

Early on in the story of the pandemic, it was clear that something major was happening, but there was so little reliable information at large that speculation was rife.

In late February, John Brandon, the social media correspondent for *Forbes* magazine, raged about the spread of misinformation in social media. "In recent weeks," he wrote, "I've seen more and more posts on social media related to the coro-



Matt Hancock

navirus, many of them exaggerated claims about infections in the United States."

At that time, around 60 people in the US had been identified as suffering from what scientists called Covid19. Since the disease was previously unknown, easily transmitted and possibly incurable, the gossip mill was primed to act.

Batty rumours

Rumours about the origins of the virus (eating bats) and possible cures (eating garlic) were rampant early on, and Maria Bartiromo, an extreme right wing anchor for Fox TV, helped stoke the fire in mid-February when she suggested live on air that China had developed Covid19 as a biological weapon of mass destruction, attempting to infect US diplomats at the G7 meeting in Davos and during a White House visit by a Chinese delegation.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has tried to quell such rumours by itself taking to social media. Unusually, it has

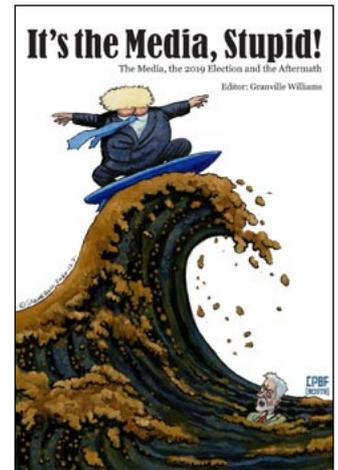


Donald Trump

been assisted to a degree by Facebook and YouTube directing users to the WHO for reliable information. Unfortunately, such action is certain to encourage more and more invidious rumours, most recently the groundless idea being spread by opponents of 5G telecoms that 5G masts either cause Covid 19 or that the virus is being used as a cover for radiation sickness caused by emissions from the masts.

The emergence of these rumours can't be separated from the fetid atmosphere surrounding the coronavirus. It doesn't need a conspiracy when the UK's health minister can't seem to distinguish truth from lies and the US President can greet Covid19 as a Democratic Party hoax, predict in February that "within a couple of days [the number of new cases in the US] is going to be down to close to zero" and now intends to starve the WHO of funds.

Gary Herman is a writer, editor and publisher based in Manchester



It's time to buy *It's the Media, Stupid!*

IT'S the Media, Stupid! The Media, the 2019 Election and the Aftermath will be published at the end of April. Sincere thanks to Steve Bell, *The Guardian* cartoonist, for the pungent cover cartoon.

Obviously plans for book launches are now on hold. So we will be relying on people buying the book directly from CPBF(North). Here's how you can do it:

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

- Or you can use BACS to transfer £11.50 to CPBF (North) Sort code 08-92-99 a/c No 65796090.

Please remember to email cpbfnorth@outlook.com with your name and address.

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This issue went online on 18 April, 2020.

Editor: Granville Williams

Design and Production: Tony Sutton, www.coldtype.net

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