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Tory mindset sees enemies all around who need to be curbed or punished

Paranoid – or what?

By Granville Williams

BORIS JOHNSON'S mounting political problems are due to the fact that he is surrounded by a group of ageing Brexiteers who are fuelled by a 'mix of triumphalism and paranoia'.

This is the view of Adrian Wooldridge, the *The Economist* Bagehot columnist. He is spot on. Let's take the events surrounding the disastrous attempt by Johnson in the House of Commons on 3 and 4 November, when he cajoled his reluctant MPs to tear up the system of parliamentary oversight to prevent the suspension of Owen Paterson, a friend and MP.

The debacle, and the uniformly hostile response from a range of Tory-supporting papers, led to a swift change of course. Support for Paterson was pulled and he resigned.

How did it happen? Lord Moore, a former editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and fervent Brexiteer, played a pivotal role. Moore wrote columns in the paper supporting Owen Paterson, his friend for 45 years.

Boris Johnson flew back from Glasgow COP26 summit on 2 November in a private jet to attend a dinner of former *Daily Telegraph* journalists at the Garrick Club which Moore organised, and where he persuaded Johnson to back Paterson.

Hostile reporting in Tory-supporting papers forced Johnson to drop his support for Owen Paterson

The other insight into this 'triumphalist paranoid mindset' is the sequence of events which led Paul Dacre to withdraw from the second round of interviews for the chair of the media and telecommunications regulator, Ofcom.

His letter in *The Times* announcing this refers to 'ill-informed, increasingly hysterical speculation from the left-wing media'. He also attacks the 'Blob' – the civil service. If someone from the private sector applies for a job and 'you are possessed of an independent mind and are unassociated with the liberal left you will have more chance of winning the lottery than getting the job'.

Dacre's angry comments, presenting himself as the victim, fly in the face of the facts.

Familiar pattern

It wasn't just the 'left-wing media' who thought this wrong. Julian Knight, the Tory who chairs the Digital, Culture, Media and Sports select committee, was unhappy with Dacre being able to reapply. He wrote to the government to demand they make clear in the new job advert for Ofcom chair that previously unsuccessful candidates should not reapply.

Dacre's first interview was in late April, and, despite the fact that he was offered guidance on what to say in the interview and how to demonstrate that he met the requirements of the person specification, the panel unanimously decided Dacre was not appointable.

Boris Johnson ordered a second appointment process, based on a simple premise: if you can't get the result you want first time round, change the interviewing panel and the person specification for candidates.

These actions fit into a now familiar pattern where Johnson's government acts to curb the power of independent bodies which trouble it, whether it's the Supreme Court, Electoral Commission, Ofcom or the BBC. And then, of course, there is the plan to privatise Channel 4 motivated by the channel's robust coverage of Boris Johnson in the 2019 general election.

RETURN OF THE WINTER OF DISCONTENT? – PAGES 4 & 5

Musical chairs at the Mail group

Mail editor Geordie Greig's departure signals a new direction for paper

THE MAIL group has been through some turbulent weeks.

Paul Dacre departed in early November from his role as chair of the parent company Associated Newspaper, only to be reinstalled three weeks later as editor-in-chief of DMG Media.

The media group's proprietor, Lord Rothermere has dropped his 'hand's off' approach to the media group and is behind a number of key changes. Firstly, if he can get the shareholder support, he intends to take the media group private again.

But the dramatic departure of *Daily Mail* editor Geordie Greig after three years signals a new direction. Under his editorship the paper adopted a less strident tone than under Dacre and in recent months has become more critical of Boris Johnson's government.

Greig will be replaced by Ted Verity, editor of the *Mail on Sunday,* who will take charge of both publications. At the same time as Greig's departure a memo to staff said management were planning to create a 'modern digital/print media company'. This will elevate the position of *MailOnline* which Martin Clarke runs.

Greig's departure also coincided with a warning of job cuts after the substantial increase in the cost of producing newspapers.

There's a fascinating section on Clarke and the creation of *MailOnline* in Adrian Addison's *Mail Men*. One person who worked with Clarke on *The Scotsman* said, "Everything that Clarke did was modelled on the behaviour of his hero Dacre. He believed that was the way you did it." Dacre, of course, was notorious for his abusive language and confrontational style with journalists when he edited the *Mail*.

What is the significance of these editorial changes? Relations between Greig and Dacre were always strained and with him gone and Dacre and Clarke in the ascendancy we can expect more attack journalism. One *Mail* insider, quoted in the *Financial Times*, said: "It's like *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. The good have gone, the bad have stayed – and it's going to get ugly."


Daily Mail

Glorious proof you can Carrie on as a style icon after 50

Liz Jones salutes the return of Sex And The City

As Boris bottles out of sleaze showdown, Mail reveals Tory grandee who was paid £1MILLION in year... and spent weeks in Caribbean while Commons was sitting

TOP MP EARNS FORTUNE FOR WORKING IN TAX HAVEN

EXCLUSIVE

Scots ministers urged to invest £9m to save journalism

A 14-STRONG working group of journalists from across the industry has urged the establishment of a Scottish Public Interest Journalism Institute. It should give out grants to support 'a diverse, pluralistic and sustainable Scottish public interest media sector', they said.

The group's report has now been published by the Scottish Government. News publishers' ability to meet the needs of their audiences would diminish 'without urgent intervention', the report warned.

The Scottish Government should give £9 million to help set up a new independent agency to prevent the 'collapse' of public interest journalism.

The group's members included executives from major news publishers such as Rupert Murdoch's News Scotland, Dundee-based DC Thompson and the Scottish Newspaper Society. There were also people from small independent publishers, including *The Ferret, Greater Govanhill* magazine and *Shetland News,* as well as three NUJ representatives.

Joyce McMillan, chair of the NUJ's Edinburgh Freelance Branch and a member of the working group, said the report "represents a powerful consensus among the very diverse media interests represented within the group."

She added: "NUJ members will now play an active part in ensuring the implementation of the working group's recommendations, which we believe are of vital importance not only to journalists, but to all those who care about our democratic future."

Shetland News: part of diverse media group producing report

● **You can read the full report at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-news-towards-sustainable-future-public-interest-journalism**

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An ambitious vision of a new media system

Michael Klontzas reviews new Media Reform Coalition publication

THROUGH its ongoing *BBC and Beyond Campaign*, the Media Reform Coalition published last month its promised *Manifesto for a People's Media* – the distillation of open conversations between academics, organisations and media users about future visions of the media system we want in the UK.

The timing could not be more appropriate. Ahead of its centenary, the BBC is negotiating the level of the licence fee for 2022-2027 with a hostile government. Channel 4's public ownership status is again under threat. The expansion of global streaming services fundamentally changes the media landscape dynamics. Local and regional media market concentration continues apace. Politicians and the public are increasingly concerned about polarisation, misinformation, online harms and privacy in digital communication.

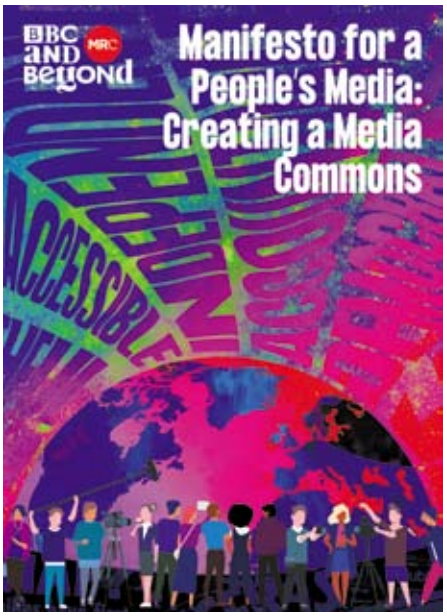
Public interest

The Manifesto proposes a reformed media system with a Media Commons at its heart alongside commercial media, akin to the way the NHS is at the centre of healthcare. Designed to serve the public interest and empower communities, this Media Commons would be built on two pillars: a People's BBC and Channel 4, that reimagines the cornerstones of public service broadcasting, and an Independent Media Commons comprising participatory content production and innovation that benefit from public funding.

The overarching principle in this 36-page document is that the media system is more important than a mechanism delivering content to consumers and passive audiences/citizens. It is vital in hosting political debates that hold the powerful to account, and foster culturally meaningful storytelling that should reflect the richness and diversity of empowered communities. Once this premise is established, the desirable shape of a reformed media system flows from there. It is not surprising that the Manifesto calls for a reversal of the top-down model in public communications where audiences have little say in what content is produced and how, or how it is funded. It follows that it rejects wholesale commercialisation, and sees government influence with suspicion. Instead, it favours bottom-up, democratic decision-making in how the media operate, content that represents all sections in society, diversity in who works in the media, participation in content production through community media and inclusive processes, and improved media literacy for the public.

One of the key concerns is that of independence from both government and the market. Notably, the Manifesto makes the case for radical changes in the governance and funding of the flagship public service broadcasters as well as the media in the Independent Media Commons. To reduce the ability of governments to exert pressure, it is argued that the status of the BBC should be debated openly in Parliament, the level of its public funding should be set and adjusted dynamically by an independent body, and senior appointments should be decided democratically. Channel 4 would be funded through a levy on UK cross-platform digital adverts, so that it would not have to pursue high ratings to remain sustainable.

Citizen Media Assemblies play a key role in a new independent regulator to replace Ofcom



Read the Manifesto here: https://www.mediareform.org.uk/get-involved/manifesto-for-a-peoples-media

A theme that cuts across the different sections of the Manifesto is that of democratisation. Citizen Media Assemblies play a key role in a new independent regulator to replace Ofcom in overseeing the BBC and Channel 4, but they are also central in commissioning and supporting a devolved, participatory, representative media system.

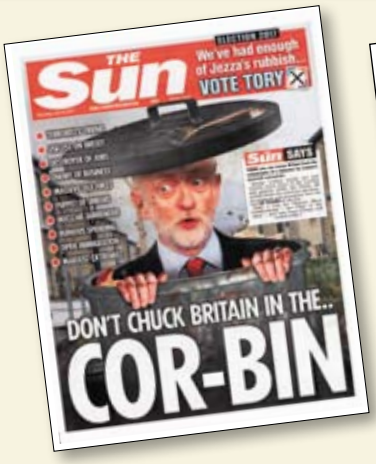
The proposed model puts emphasis on community media and the role independent media can play in revitalising failing local commercial newspapers in the public interest. The participatory, distributed structure of local media, as they are understood here, opens possibilities for partnerships and networks that facilitate exchanging knowledge, sharing content and pooling resources. The Manifesto insightfully acknowledges this when it refers to local authorities, independent content producers and universities working together. Media training is recognised as an area that would benefit from such partnerships, but given the rising importance of information and media literacy in the community, this could be flagged up more.

Privacy challenges

The Manifesto is clearly aware of the new challenges that datafication poses for privacy. It proposes mechanisms for the enforcement of privacy rights and using data for the public good. It goes further to address the implications algorithmic recommendations can have on our exposure to diverse media experiences, and calls for transparency in how they work.

This Manifesto encapsulates a far-reaching, ambitious vision of a new media system that challenges concentrated control of the media, be that in the hands of commercial entities, political elites or professional hierarchies. Without losing sight of the changing conditions in the digital era and emerging demands, it puts forward a set of proposals for a media system that is fit for the future.

Are we heading down Memory Lane for a repeat of 1978-79's Winter of Discontent?



THIS PAGE:
Relentless attacks on Jeremy Corbyn were often linked in with images of the 'winter of discontent'

FACING PAGE:
Since September a stream of negative news stories linking the 'winter of discontent' with the Tories have made uncomfortable reading for Boris Johnson

By Nicholas Jones

WHEN disruption and shortages started to get out of hand earlier in the autumn even loyal Conservative newspapers had to report the realities facing the country as ministerial competence was seen to be draining away.

No wonder the front pages began predicting a 'Winter of Discontent' – a handy headline for pulling together the horrors associated with the prospect of a beleaguered government losing control.

Banner headlines said it all, 'It's panic at the pumps', 'National Grid's blackouts alert', 'Crisis talks over fears of food shortages within days' ... hardly the kind of coverage Boris Johnson might have expected from his cheerleaders in the Tory press.

For the last forty years the Labour Party has been scarred by repeated reminders of the chaos that led to the downfall of Jim Callaghan's administration after the 1978-79 'Winter of Discontent'.

Thanks to the creativity of the *Sun on Sunday* (19.9.2021) a photo montage of Boris Johnson, superimposed on heaps of uncollected rubbish in Leicester Square was an unexpected but telling reversal of political fortunes. Over the years Callaghan, Michael Foot and Jeremy Corbyn – to name but a few – have all experienced the same treatment with the very same images.

Fallout from the disruption of 1978-79 – and later the 1984 'Battle of Orgreave' – provide plenty of material for two of the most regularly used visual reminders of trade union-led strife.

Newspaper pictures and television footage of piles of uncollected rubbish, hospital patients being turned away, coffins waiting to be buried – along with the infamous 1979 Conservative poster 'Labour Isn't Working' – are often reproduced and rebroadcast in graphic form.

In terms of party propaganda, flash backs to the 'Winter of Discontent' reinforce memories of the chaos and disruption that helped Margaret Thatcher to victory in May 1979.

Conservative-supporting newspapers use these images again and again - and most recently in the 2019 general election to warn what Britain would have been like if the country had elected a Labour government led by Jeremy Corbyn.

Flash backs to the 'Winter of Discontent' reinforce memories of chaos and destruction that helped Thatcher

Corbyn was the target of sustained tabloid vilification from the start of his bid for the party leadership in 2015 and variations of the same photo montages were used repeatedly during the two subsequent general elections to ram home the message.

Volatility

Winter can be a treacherous moment for any government and the lead-up to autumn 2021 does have parallels with what happened in the final months of 1978.

Inflation is again running way beyond what was predicted, incomes are falling behind price increases, and there is heightened volatility in the labour market.

These pressures, and other unforeseen consequences for the economy, not forgetting that winter can bring its own surprises, have been preceded by almost two years of unprecedented turmoil resulting from the Covid 19 pandemic, months of lockdown, the bruising ongoing implementation of Brexit and widespread disruption in the supply chain.

For so long Johnson's popularity stood up better than he might have expected when set against a run of horrendous headlines that would have sunk many a Prime Minister months ago.

When his personal ratings dived after the resignation of Conservative MP Owen Paterson and in the wake of a renewed, virulent scandal over second jobs and Tory 'sleaze', the political weather suddenly changed.

Amid gathering storm clouds the Conservatives' opinion poll lead was reversed, some surveys put Labour ahead, and almost overnight Johnson's tenure of 10 Downing Street no longer seemed so secure despite his government's 80-plus Parliamentary majority.

Trying to predict a tipping point in the fortunes of a beleaguered government is always a futile exercise but we journalists did sense it was all over for the Labour government of Jim Callaghan in the winter of 1978-79, just as we did two decades later for John Major's government in 1997 after New Labour's media prowess in ensuring the words 'Tory sleaze' were well and truly hung around Major's neck.

In a few short months Johnson has managed to acquire a hefty back catalogue of damaging front pages. Although some were part and parcel of short-lived media frenzies, the government's mismanagement of such calamities does have a cumulative impact.

Too close to reality

Headlines and images about uncontrolled chaos in daily life tend to live on in the memory especially when they relate to the people's personal experiences.

September's crisis over petrol shortages generated pages of photographs and extensive TV footage featuring empty fuel stations with cars queuing round the block – images that remain too close to reality for drivers having to come to terms with rocketing prices at the pumps.

Almost overnight Johnson's tenure of 10 Downing Street no longer seemed so secure

Equally empty supermarket shelves and pre-Christmas scares about a shortage of festive staples such as turkeys and toys could not be ignored by Johnson's loyal supporters in the press.

When Brexit gets the blame the government's PR strategy is to push for an instant fix in the hope that any such 'crisis' can be closed down.

Emergency visas for EU lorry drivers or for trained butchers to prevent a slaughter of pigs might provide a short-term solution but only add to a damaging list of U-turns which can be reheated to suit the news agenda.

In some ways a relentless and fully justified media focus on the national response to the Covid 19 pandemic has worked to the government's advantage because it has limited the duration of adverse coverage on other issues.

First-hand reports

Johnson's belief that with successful PR management media storms will pass quite quickly if journalists' attention can easily be diverted has also been aided and abetted by a drastic curtailment in the extent of regional and local reporting.

Newsrooms have been decimated in towns and cities across the country hollowing out local news gathering.

In previous years journalists would have collected and collated information and produced detailed accounts of local shortages and disruption, whether in road haulage, food distribution, pig farming or whatever.

These first-hand reports, together with the relevant data, would have made their way up the news chain, via local and regional offices, news agencies or freelance journalists, and would have reached the newsrooms in London.

A dearth of regional and local reporting works to the government's advantage and this is all too apparent given the pitiful lack of depth and insight in so much of today's coverage by national newspapers, radio, and television.

My personal flashback is to the decade of industrial conflict under Margaret Thatcher when BBC newsrooms and national newspapers were so well served by local and regional journalists who themselves were so well versed in industrial and trade union affairs.

Local reporters were out and about, visiting factories, talking to workers, calling in at union offices, while today, their much-depleted successors are so often tied to their computer screens, having to ring round their contacts or rely on social media for first-hand accounts.

Journalism is all the weaker without the backing of a strong supply chain that stretches back to the local reporters who for so long strengthened the backbone of national reporting.

Paul Richards on how Williams approached the modern media, his calls for a more democratic media and what his work says to us today

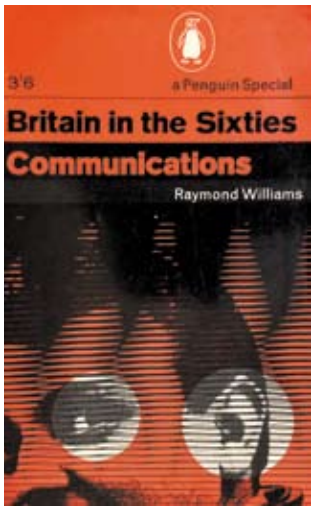
Raymond Williams and the popular press

RAYMOND WILLIAMS developed a robust critique of the central role of the media as a force which not only reflects, but also shapes our society. Williams' theoretical and historical writings consistently fuelled his political activism and demands for practical reform, such as newspapers owned as co-ops by their own workers not media barons.

Williams developed his thinking beyond the traditional Marxist perspective that the mass media was a crude tool of the ruling class. He saw it in more complex and nuanced terms, and believed it could be regulated, reformed and democratised within his own lifetime, rather than in some future post-revolutionary utopia. As such, Raymond Williams informed and inspired activists in his own times, and bequeaths his ideas and frameworks to subsequent generations.

Crucially, Williams came to view communications, including the media, as a productive force in its own right, in a process he described as 'cultural materialism'. He contested the orthodox Marxist idea that culture was merely a flimsy 'superstructure' built on the sound foundations of the 'substructure' of the means of production. He believed in 'the centrality of language and communication as formative social forces'.

Williams saw the media as an essential element of human development and progress, worthy of research and understanding, and a crucial tool in forging a new, democratic, classless and egalitarian society. Williams viewed the development of the press in Britain as a significant component of the development of popular culture, alongside other media such as radio, television, theatre and the arts. He wrote in *The Long Revolution* (1961): 'The development of the press in England, in particular the growth of the popular press, is of major importance in any account of our general cultural expansion.'



Two key works by Raymond Williams: *The Long Revolution* (1961) and the best-selling *Communications* (1962)

His long view of history, from the development of the printing press onwards, led to his desire for media reform, born of his conviction that the concentration of the ownership of the media in too few, capitalist hands was a barrier to social progress, and that the reverse was true: a genuinely popular press, democratically owned and controlled, with high standards of journalism, could serve as a means of educating and engaging the people in a vibrant, democratic society.

This view reflects the predominant position across the left, from the 1940s to the 1980s, when Williams was researching and writing. For example, the Labour Party's paper on *The People and the Media* (1974) stated that: 'A well-informed population is a prerequisite of a genuine democracy. The concentration of power over mass media therefore is a cause of great concern ... the creation of semi-monopolies in newspapers and, as is increasingly happening, across a number of media creates a dangerous concentration of power and threatens freedom of expression.'

Williams' bestselling Penguin Special *Britain in the Sixties: Communications* (1962) called for a democratic approach to media and the arts. He joined the Arts Council from 1976-78, and was a founder of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) in 1979. By the 1980s Williams was concerned with the new satellite television stations, and called for their control by the public not corporations.

His ideas were always linked to his activism. Williams was keen, in *The Long Revolution*, to demonstrate that the expansion of the popular press was not caused by the spread of mass literacy, and in particular the effects of the 1870 Education Act, a widespread theory that he dismissed as 'nonsense'.

Instead, he pointed to three 'vital transforming factors': first, improved industrial methods of production and distribution of printed material; second, what he called 'social chaos and the widening franchise' (in other words the struggle for democracy), and third, the need for capitalist organisations to advertise new goods and services to newly emergent groups of consumers. Williams also pointed to the emergence of a 'new kind of speculator', the media owner, investing in the popular press from the 1830s onwards, a product of capitalist economic structures and systems.

In *The Long Revolution* Williams analysed the development of the press through the industrial revolution, and up to the 1950s, and asked the following question: 'Is it all come to this, in the end, that the long history of the press in Britain should reach its consummation in a declining number of newspapers, in ownership by a very few large groups, and in the acceptance (varied

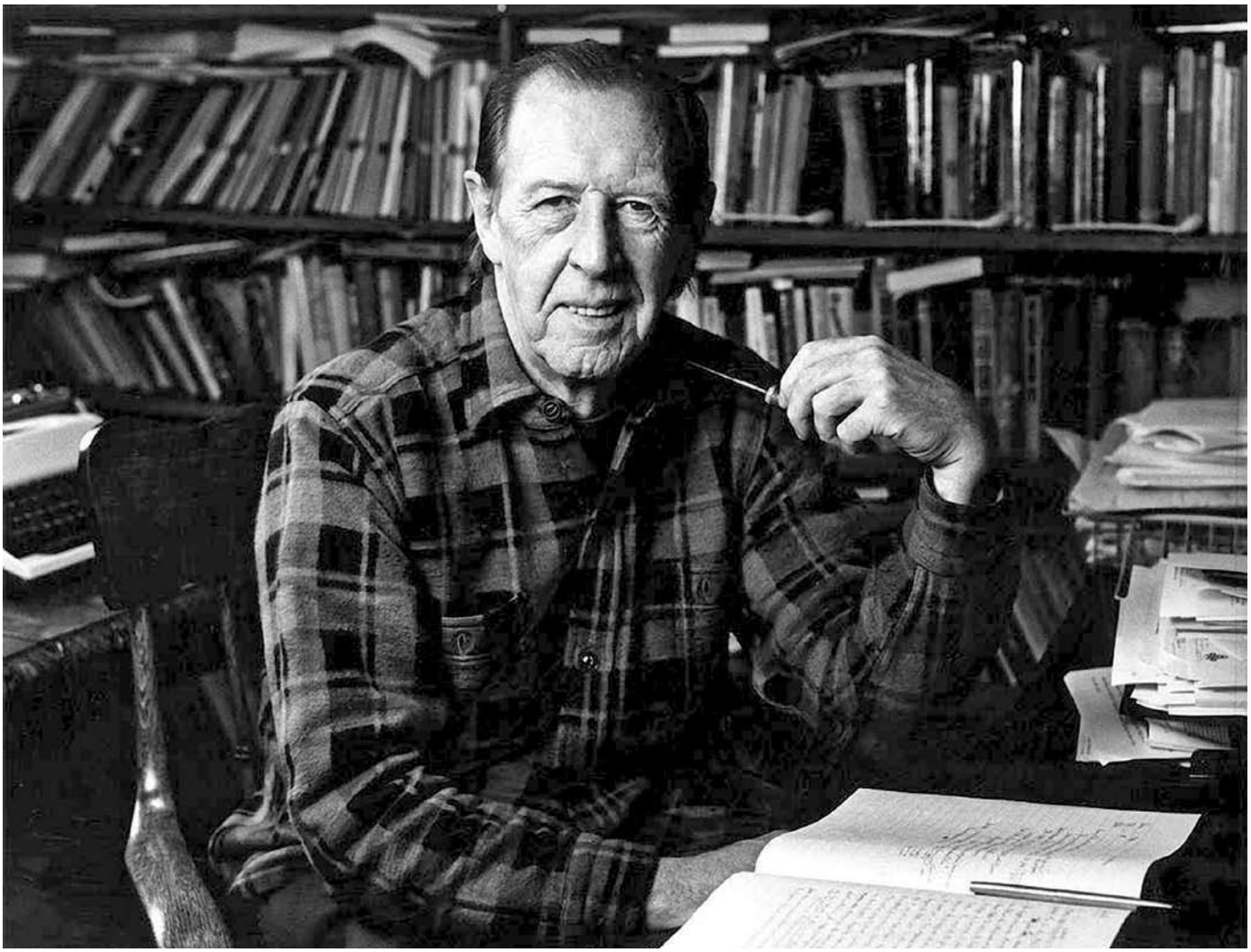


Photo: Mark Gerson / National Portrait Gallery, London

Raymond Williams in 1985

between social groups but evident in all) of the worst kinds of journalism?'

What then led Williams to this gloomy conclusion? Certainly, the 'popular' culture of the post-war era was dominated by tabloid red tops, American cinema, the elitist BBC, anodyne commercial television, and male-dominated activities such as football, horse-racing and the pub. You can hear the same pessimism creep into the rhetoric of the likes of Aneurin Bevan by the 1950s, after the fall of the Attlee government.

And yet, Williams kept the faith that another version of popular culture was possible, germinated from the seeds of institutions like the National Theatre, the Workers' Education Association (WEA), and the Open University, and rooted in the ideals of the radical press, the co-op and the trade unions.

Williams was always at pains to locate his work on culture in the context of the socio-economic realities of time and place. As he wrote in *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958): 'The history of our idea of culture is a record of our meanings and our definitions, but these, in turn, are only to be understood within the context of our actions.'

Williams grew up in an age when mass circulation newspapers were the dominant source of news and information, alongside the radio and cinema newsreels.

Williams was born in 1921, and by the time he was 18 just four men owned half of all national and local newspapers sold in Britain, as well as one in three Sunday newspapers. These four 'media barons' sold 13 million newspapers a day between them.

In the 1930s, two-thirds of the population read a newspaper every day, and the vast majority took a Sunday newspaper. George Orwell described the familiar scene of the pre-war, post-prandial reader, filled with roast beef and Yorkshire puddings, feet up on the sofa, spectacles settled on the nose, wife asleep, opening the *News of the World* to read about a grisly murder.

Williams dismissed the idea that the popular newspapers were filled with salacious gossip, lurid scandals and opinion masquerading as news purely because that's what an uninformed and ill-educated populace demanded

Williams lived and wrote in a world where the newspaper was as pervasive and ubiquitous as the internet is today. Williams dismissed the idea that the popular newspapers were filled with salacious gossip, lurid scandals and opinion masquerading as news purely because that's what an uninformed and ill-educated populace demanded. He grew up amongst the vibrant auto-didactic culture of the South Wales proletariat, with its self-funded libraries, choirs, theatres and evening classes. He had proven faith in the intelligence and intellectual curiosity of working-class people, whom he refused to reduce to 'the masses'.

As evidence, he pointed to the significant circulation of local newspapers, with their much higher standard of journalism, purchased by the same people as the 'popular' press. He was also sure to point out that the supposed correlation

Continued on Page 8

Raymond Williams on the popular press

From Page 7

of the 'popular' press with the working class and the 'quality' press with the middle and upper class, what he termed 'simple class affiliations' was not sound.

Williams pointed out that the leading newspaper of the 'rich and well-to-do' was not the *Times* or *Telegraph* but the tabloid *Express*. Even today, the *Sun* has many times more ABC1 readers than the *Guardian* or *Independent*. In the *Listener* magazine in 1970, Williams describes the 'commercial' press as belonging to a 'vanished time': 'the family of England with its heroes, its black sheep and its leading ladies. A general air of below stairs: what the political master was overheard to say at the study window; who's in line for the inheritance; which young ladies are coming for the weekend, and what will they be wearing?' This is the 'worst kind of journalism' that he railed against for 40 years, and the antithesis of the emancipatory democratic culture he craved. In the same article he advocated 'what is now an urgent business: making a different popular press.'

HOW does Williams speak to us today? In his *Listener* article he wrote, with great prescience, 'I think we can be sure that if the world ever becomes an electronic village, there will still, while the popular press lasts, be a squire's lady at the hall.'

The 'electronic village' is where we all now live. The popular press is online, and as influential as ever, despite falling newspaper sales. The barons are still with us. Rupert Murdoch, owner of the *Sun, Times*, HarperCollins and Fox News, is worth $13 billion. In 2019-2020, the *Daily Mail*, with its heady brew of celebrity, xenophobia, and distorted reporting, still owned by a Rothermere, was read by over two million people a day, including 1.4 million ABC1 readers.

The popular press is joined by the new social media platforms that dominate our daily culture, fuel conspiracy theories, subvert our elections, and distort our social priorities. Writing today, Williams would have brought his customary rigour: a critique of the methods and motives of the new media owners like Zuckerberg and Dorsey and their voracious tendency to centralise and monopolise ownership and production; the absence of editorial or journalistic standards in the new Wild West of offshore ownership and factories producing 'fake news'; and the dangerous development of a seductive online world where black is white and up is down, and all critical faculties are dulled.

He would have denounced the Trumpian vilification of the 'mainstream media', and all populist calls to bypass the media altogether, seeing it as the first steps to fascism. Instead, we might have seen Williams proselytise for a social media which is enlivening not deadening, democratically-controlled, and part of a vibrant society where arts and culture are seen as more important than cat memes and the Kardashians.

He would surely have approved of the #metoo movement, and the organising potential of social media for tackling police oppression or the climate emergency. He would have well understood why the military in Myanmar closed down Facebook and other platforms where resistance and dissent were fermenting. We will never know for sure.

In the meantime, we can draw on Williams's fulsome writings on the popular press and the media, and do what above all he would want us to do: think for ourselves.

Paul Richards is a writer and former chair of the Fabian Society. This article, lightly edited, is reprinted with permission from a series of articles published by the Raymond Williams Foundation celebrating the centenary of the birth of Raymond Williams in 1921: www.raymondwilliamsfoundation.org.uk/

C4 Sell-off: Consultation got massive response

NADINE DORRIES is the new Secretary of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the tenth in 10 years. Out went Oliver Dowden and the broadcast minister John Whittingdale. It was Whittingdale who played the lead role in promoting the sell-off of the public service broadcaster C4 and he was clear: it was not whether C4 would be privatised but how.

Dorries took over in September but what she will do about C4 is not clear. At her first appearance before the DCMS Select Committee on 23 November she was questioned about this.

The high-profile and energetic campaign to oppose the sale of C4 was extremely successful. She revealed that there had been a staggering 60,000 responses to the consultation, many of them very detailed, and that her staff were still working through them.

Dorries repeatedly rejected questions about whether she is minded to sell: "What's the point of having a consultation which 60,000 people respond to if I've already made my mind up. I'd like to see what 60,000 people have to say first."

At one point in the session she suggested that C4 was in receipt of public money, and a member of the committee, Damian Green, had to correct her and point out that the channel is publicly owned and funded solely through advertising.

Photo UK Parliament

Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries at the DCMS Select Committee. A video of her stumbling after she stated C4 was 'in receipt of government money' and was corrected went viral

One other threat to C4 is on the horizon. C4's current chair, Charles Gurassa, opposes the government's plans to privatise the broadcaster. His successor, jointly appointed by Ofcom and the government, will probably be someone more open to the idea, if the government follows its normal practice.